

# National Fostering Agency Limited

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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## About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to assure children and young people, parents, the public, local authorities and government of the quality and standard of the service provided. The inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000.

This report details the main strengths and any areas for improvement identified during the inspection. The judgements included in the report are made in relation to the outcome for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and relevant National Minimum Standards for the establishment.

## The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding:	this aspect of the provision is of exceptionally high quality
Good:	this aspect of the provision is strong
Satisfactory:	this aspect of the provision is sound
Inadequate:	this aspect of the provision is not good enough

## Service information

### Brief description of the service

The National Fostering Agency is an independent fostering agency that operates on a National basis and has over a 1000 approved foster carers. This inspection relates to the work carried out by the London area office based in Uxbridge. The National Fostering Agency has additional branches in East Anglia, Wales and Scotland. These are managed separately, however the human resources department for the agency is based in the Uxbridge branch. The Uxbridge branch is situated in an office building close to Uxbridge town centre. The agency currently occupies two floors of this building and is set to acquire further office space to meet the needs of the agency as it has expanded. There is open plan office space and smaller offices and meeting rooms available. The agency provides short term and long term placements and within its range of fostering services the agency includes the placement of unaccompanied young people seeking asylum and children with special needs. The National Fostering Agency operates a 24-hour on-call duty and emergency service. Link workers are on call to their foster carers on the same basis.

### Summary

This was a key announced inspection that looked at all the key National Minimum Standards. Economic well-being was not judged during this inspection as there are no key standards under this outcome heading. Two actions have been set as a result of this inspection relating to notifications and recordings of visits to foster carers. Both of these actions were also made at the last inspection. The agency has developed and improved management systems, training and staffing since the last inspection and continues to provide a good service. Staff feel supported by the management team and their colleagues. Foster carers are supported by their supervising social workers and are committed to meeting the needs of the children and young people in their care. The agency has good administration, recording and monitoring systems in place, however, these are not always adhered to. There are clear lines of accountability within the agency.

The overall quality rating is good.

This is an overview of what the inspector found during the inspection.

### Improvements since the last inspection

Following the last inspection the agency was asked to ensure that all relevant significant events are notified to the regulatory authority. Records demonstrate that there has been an improvement in reporting, however, some events are still not being reported. In particular accidents that have resulted in hospital treatment for fractures have not been reported. The records relating to visits to foster carers were also not always completed and this is still the case. However, the agency is in the process of introducing improvements to its database which will include closer monitoring of these records. Minor changes have been made to the panel procedures and checks for panel members so that these are now satisfactory. The agency has continued to improve and develop the agency over the last 12 months. Improvements have included the introduction and development of a new staff appraisal system, expansion of the quality assurance department and expansion of the training provided and staff employed to manage this. More foster carers have been recruited and additional social work staff employed to ensure workloads remain manageable and standards are maintained. Improvements have

also been made to the agency's computer systems and policies and procedures have been reviewed and updated.

### **Helping children to be healthy**

The provision is good.

Foster carers are provided with as much information as possible about the health needs of children and young people prior to placement. Additional information is provided as it is known to ensure that foster carers are able to meet the health needs of children and young people placed with them. The agency has introduced a health record form so that healthcare issues can be monitored. Foster carers are given guidance on health issues in the Foster Carer's Handbook such as information on registering with a General Practitioner, first aid and medication, sexual health, drugs and substance misuse. Foster carers demonstrate that they are aware of their role and responsibilities with regard to meeting the health needs of children and young people by monitoring them, taking them to appointments, following the advice of healthcare professionals and appropriately recording relevant information. Foster carers are also provided with some training around the health needs of looked after children and young people. These include promoting healthy lifestyles, therapeutic needs of looked after children, conduct disorders in childhood and adolescents, therapeutic thinking and management of maltreated children and young people alcohol, drug and solvent misuse. The agency does not provide first aid training as previously attendance at this training has been poor. However, the agency has provided some information regarding first aid treatment at foster carer support groups. Accidents that result in significant harm of a child or young person are not always reported to Ofsted as required. Discussing health issues also forms part of supervision visits made to the foster carers' home and their annual review to ensure that any identified issues are followed up and monitored.

### **Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe**

The provision is good.

Robust systems are in place for the recruitment of staff that include verification of references, renewal of Criminal Record Bureau checks at appropriate intervals and clear records are maintained and monitoring systems in place. The agency has an excellent Human Resources department in place and has developed systems that ensure that there is a clear audit trail of recruitment processes and monitoring of staff. Qualified social workers carry out assessments of prospective foster carers and they are given training and supported to ensure they have the necessary skills and knowledge to complete this task. Children and young people are placed with foster carers who have been thoroughly assessed and can provide a safe and comfortable environment for them. An annual health and safety assessment of foster carers' homes takes place and forms part of the annual review process. This includes a detailed assessment of any pets in the home to ensure the health and safety of children and young people placed with foster carers. The Foster Carer's Handbook contains information on health and safety including car safety, hygiene, alcohol, smoking and pets. This guidance ensures that foster carers have clear information to enable them to minimise any risks to the health and safety of children and young people. Children and young people are carefully matched to foster carers so that their needs can be met and to help prevent placements breaking down. Where there are gaps in the matching process as a result of a shortage of more suitable foster carers the agency supports foster carers to ascertain information and take action to address these gaps. Foster carers are provided with appropriate guidance and training on safer caring and child protection issues.

Information is also provided on behaviour management, bullying and how to respond if a child or young person is missing. Good systems are in place for reporting and recording allegations and complaints. The systems in place allow close monitoring of incidents and any patterns or trends arising. Records show that complaints and allegations are responded to promptly and appropriately by the agency and foster carers are aware of their responsibilities. Not all significant events relating to the harm of a child or young person are reported to Ofsted as required. However, this has improved since the last inspection. The fostering panel is well managed and effective and its members understand the needs of children and young people. The panel consists of individuals with a wide range of knowledge and experience including an adopter and ex care leaver. There are clear procedures in place for the panel and the panel fulfils its quality assurance function ensuring a high standard of assessment is maintained at all times. Foster carers and social work staff understand the function of the panel and feel that constructive comments are made by panel members. New panel members receive an induction to the panel and all panel members receive annual training.

### **Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do**

The provision is good.

The agency recruits foster carers from differing backgrounds to meet the diverse needs of looked after children. Diversity issues are explored during the assessment process to identify any difficulties and ascertain foster carers attitudes to looking after children and young people from different backgrounds from their own. The referral system used provides evidence that the agency attempts to make appropriate matches on the basis of the cultural, religious and language needs of children. This is not always possible especially as the majority of placements made with the agency are emergency placements. Foster carers and the agency encourage children and young people to explore individual interests they may have and the agency has introduced a new magazine for children and young people targeting five to 16 year olds. This magazine covers a range of topics and children and young people are encouraged to contribute, for example by writing poems and producing art work. The agency has an education policy in place and has formed links with the National Teaching and Advisory Service to help promote outcomes for children and young people in education. Foster carers are issued with clear guidance regarding meeting the educational needs of children and young people. Foster carers demonstrate a commitment to meeting the educational needs of children and young people by providing adequate space to study, liaising with schools and other educational establishments and supporting children and young people with homework. The agency celebrates the achievements of children and young people in the foster carer's quarterly magazine 'Linklines'. The agency does not provide a short breaks service to birth parents but does provide a respite service for foster carers who require it.

### **Helping children make a positive contribution**

The provision is good.

Foster carers are supported to help children and young people maintain relationships with their families and understand the importance of this. The Foster Carer's Handbook contains guidance on contact and information about what to expect and the importance of contact. Foster carers are able to demonstrate how they have supported children and young people to maintain contact with their families by providing transport and encouraging telephone calls in line with their placement plans. This includes observation and monitoring changes in behaviour of children and young people and responding to difficult situations with birth parents. The agency consults

with foster carers and children in various ways to ensure that their views are heard and responded to. For example, the agency has regular foster carer support groups and a foster carers forum where representatives from foster carer support groups meet with members of the management team three to four times a year. This enables foster carers to explore difficulties they are facing, discuss any issues and put forward ideas for development. Foster carers feel listened to by the agency. The agency has also developed 'sons and daughters' groups for the birth children of foster carers and foster carers, children and young people are encouraged to complete questionnaires prior to annual reviews. However, these are not always completed.

### **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is not judged.

### **Organisation**

The organisation is good.

There is a very clear statement of the aims and objectives of the agency and the practice of the management and staff of the agency reflects the Statement of Purpose. This document is regularly updated to reflect any changes in the operation of the agency. The agency has an informative Children's Guide that is in a child friendly, colourful format. The guide is written in plain English and based on the five Every Child Matters outcomes. It includes information on children's rights, school, bullying, internet safety and complaints and contains useful contact numbers and addresses and includes space for children and young people to write down items they wish to discuss with the agency. The agency has a clear management and staffing structure that ensures there are clear lines of accountability throughout the agency. Staff receive support from qualified and experienced managers who are available on a formal and informal basis to discuss all aspects of their role and their workload. Good monitoring systems are also in place to ensure that assessments, approvals and reviews are managed effectively. Good administrative support systems are in place and the agency has ample computer equipment to meet the agency's needs. The agency has expanded over the last twelve months and recruited a large number of staff. A robust induction process is in place and staff feel that they are introduced to their work gradually to allow them to get used to the agency's processes and procedures. Staffing numbers are adequate to meet the needs of the agency. The agency steadily recruits foster carers through advertising and word of mouth at a pace that ensures standards are maintained. The agency has introduced an incentive scheme which rewards foster carers who introduce someone to fostering. The agency carries out comprehensive assessments of prospective foster carers that cover all areas of competency needed to ascertain if an individual is suitable to become a foster carer. Clear systems are in place for working with and supporting foster carers. They are given a comprehensive Foster Carer's Handbook that they find helpful as a reference guide and have access to regular support groups. Foster carers receive annual reviews and reports are prepared and presented to the fostering panel as required. The agency provides 24 hour support for foster carers from their supervising social worker and foster carers feel they can approach the agency any time they have a query or concern. Foster carers receive regular visits from their supervising social workers and written records of these visits are maintained so that any issues can be followed up. However, these records are not always kept up to date. Any complaints or allegations made are dealt with promptly and sensitively to ensure that the appropriate outcome is reached to safeguard children and young people in placement and support foster carers. Good recording systems are in place to ensure that complaints and allegations can be appropriately monitored by management and the agency's dedicated quality assurance team. There is a comprehensive ongoing training programme in place for foster carers

that helps ensure they are adequately equipped to meet the needs of the children and young people in their care. Foster carers take part in three days pre-approval training that informs them about what the fostering task entails and explores their views and attitudes. Further training is provided on a wide range of topics including working in partnership, safer caring, managing challenging behaviour and allegations. The courses are split in to three groups, core, intermediate and advanced courses. The intermediate courses include health and safety, promoting education, promoting healthy lifestyles, bullying and separation and loss and the advanced courses include conduct disorders in childhood and adolescents, recognising and responding to anger and aggression and understanding teenagers. Other courses are also offered and the agency has a training development manager and training officers that monitor the content and quality of training. Foster carers are expected to attend three training days per year and training needs are identified during visits to foster carers and discussed during the annual review process. Records relating to each child and young person whilst living with the agency's foster carers are kept on the agency's database and foster carers also keep copies of local authority documentation and their own records of any significant events and the day to day lives of the children and young people they care for. Foster carers are clear about the expectations regarding keeping records and can demonstrate how they are recording memories as a part of life story work for children and young people, for example, taking photographs and keeping souvenirs from trips and activities. Robust administration systems are in place for the maintenance of all records. All records are kept securely and are generally maintained to a good standard. Monitoring systems are in place so that any issues regarding recording can be identified and addressed. Improvements to the recording systems were in the process of being introduced at the time of the inspection.

## What must be done to secure future improvement?

### Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions, which must be taken so that the registered person meets the Care Standards Act 2000, The Fostering Services Regulations 2005 and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider must comply with the given timescales.

Standard	Action	Due date
12	ensure that any serious illness or accident suffered by a child or young person is notified to the relevant authorities (Regulation 43(1)(2))	31 January 2008
22	maintain satisfactory records for all visits to foster carers (Regulation 35(3)(b))	15 February 2008

### Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further the registered person should take account of the following recommendation(s):

- should consider providing first aid training for foster carers (NMS 12)
- ensure that foster carers and children and young people are encouraged to contribute their views during the review process (NMS 11)



## Annex

## Annex A

### National Minimum Standards for independent fostering agency

#### Being healthy

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service promotes the health and development of children (NMS 12)

**Ofsted considers 12 the key standard to be inspected.**

#### Staying safe

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- any persons carrying on or managing the service are suitable (NMS 3)
- the fostering service provides suitable foster carers (NMS 6)
- the service matches children to carers appropriately (NMS 8)
- the fostering service protects each child or young person from abuse and neglect (NMS 9)
- the people who work in or for the fostering service are suitable to work with children and young people (NMS 15)
- fostering panels are organised efficiently and effectively (NMS 30)

**Ofsted considers 3, 6, 8, 9, 15 and 30 the key standards to be inspected.**

#### Enjoying and achieving

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service values diversity (NMS 7)
- the fostering service promotes educational achievement (NMS 13)
- when foster care is provided as a short-term break for a child, the arrangements recognise that the parents remain the main carers for the child (NMS 31)

**Ofsted considers 7, 13 and 31 the key standards to be inspected.**

#### Making a positive contribution

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service promotes contact arrangements for the child or young person (NMS 10)
- the fostering service promotes consultation (NMS 11)

**Ofsted considers 10 and 11 the key standards to be inspected.**

#### Achieving economic well-being

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service prepares young people for adulthood (NMS 14)
- the fostering service pays carers an allowance and agreed expenses as specified (NMS 29)

**Ofsted considers none of the above to be key standards to be inspected.**

#### Organisation

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- there is a clear statement of the aims and objectives of the fostering service and the fostering service ensures that they meet those aims and objectives (NMS 1)
- the fostering service is managed by those with the appropriate skills and experience (NMS 2)
- the fostering service is monitored and controlled as specified (NMS 4)

**Annex A**

- the fostering service is managed effectively and efficiently (NMS 5)
- staff are organised and managed effectively (NMS 16)
- the fostering service has an adequate number of sufficiently experienced and qualified staff (NMS 17)
- the fostering service is a fair and competent employer (NMS 18)
- there is a good quality training programme (NMS 19)
- all staff are properly accountable and supported (NMS 20)
- the fostering service has a clear strategy for working with and supporting carers (NMS 21)
- foster carers are provided with supervision and support (NMS 22)
- foster carers are appropriately trained (NMS 23)
- case records for children are comprehensive (NMS 24)
- the administrative records are maintained as required (NMS 25)
- The premises used as offices by the fostering service are suitable for the purpose (NMS 26)
- the fostering service is financially viable (NMS 27)
- the fostering service has robust financial processes (NMS 28)
- local authority fostering services recognise the contribution made by family and friends as carers (NMS 32)

**Ofsted considers 1, 16, 17, 21, 24, 25 and 32 the key standards to be inspected.**