

Foster Care NCH (North)

Inspection report for Independent Fostering Agency

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Inspector	Stephen Smith
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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 outcomes for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and the relevant National Minimum Standards for the service.

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

Foster Care NCH (North) is an independent fostering agency based in Middlesbrough. The agency has regional office bases in Sheffield and Hull and is developing an office in Bradford. The agency assesses and supports foster carers to provide specialist foster placements for children with more complex needs. It also provides foster carers within a joint Multi-dimensional Treatment Foster Care Programme operated by a local authority.

At the time of the inspection, the agency was providing a family placement service to around 30 children and young people with approximately 35 foster carers. In addition to the registered manager the agency employs two team managers, fostering social workers and administrative support staff based in each office.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This was an announced inspection of the fostering agency. The purpose of the inspection was to assess how the agency complies with all the key National Minimum Standards and to consider whether actions and recommendations made at the last inspection had been addressed. Achieving Economic Wellbeing was not inspected.

Foster Care NCH provides a good service to fostered children. It provides children with foster placements with carers who are very well matched to meet their needs. Children and foster carers receive excellent support which helps to keep children safe. This support also helps maintain placements and promote stability in children's lives.

The agency meets children's health needs well. Children's health is monitored and the agency works with carers to ensure that any treatment or health support needed is provided. Carers receive training in health matters but not all carers have an up-to-date first aid qualification.

The service is good at arranging planned placements for children and making sure that foster carers receive full information about the children they are caring for. Good arrangements to promote health and safety and safe caring help keep children safe. However, arrangements to provide carers with child protection training are not always effective enough. Fostering social workers and managers know children and foster carers well. They supervise placements effectively but the monitoring of significant events relating to children's well-being is not consistently developed across the agency. Fostering panel is properly constituted and procedures for its operation are robustly applied.

The agency ensures that each child's individual needs are identified and supported. Children receive very good support from the agency and its supported carers. The agency has been effective at recruiting carers from black and minority ethnic backgrounds. Children's education is supported well by the agency. Fostering social workers work well with schools, placing authorities and foster carers to ensure children get the support they need. The service is good at consulting with children and ensures that they are able to express their views about their care and their foster carers.

Foster carers receive very high levels of support and management from the agency. They are provided with good training and excellent support and supervision. Assessments of prospective foster carers are very thorough and the agency is rigorous in checking out applicants' suitability to foster. The agency works well with children's placing local authorities and communication between all parties is good. Generally detailed information is retained about children and this helps ensure that their needs are properly met.

Improvements since the last inspection

The agency has addressed all the issues identified at the last inspection.

Action was required regarding the agency's fostering panel and its operation. In addition, two good practice recommendations relating to the panel were made. The agency has responded effectively to these and panel is now working within robustly applied procedures that improve the decision making process and help ensure children's wellbeing.

A required action relating the agency's staff recruitment process has been addressed. The process of checking applicants' employment background is now appropriate.

The agency has also responded to a recommendation made regarding its training provision and has provided countering bullying training for foster carers.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

The fostering agency provides children and young people with good health care and support.

The agency carefully considers children's health needs as part of the process of matching children with foster carers. It makes sure that it gets good information about children's health needs when placements are made and is careful to match children with carers so that their needs can be met. The arrangements regarding who has the authorisation to give consent for children's medical treatment are identified and made clear to foster carers. Medical consent is clearly identified and agreed for very short respite placements as well as the main placement.

The agency works with carers to make sure that fostered children are registered with doctors, dentists and opticians in the community. Children are provided with advice about being healthy and foster carers are supported to help children to attend any appointments necessary. The agency ensures that children receive any specialist health care they need. For example, the organisation has developed a Virtual Therapeutic Team to help children access any support needed and is developing training and support for the provision of 'Theraplay' therapeutic interventions for children.

The agency liaises closely with placing authorities to ensure that children have annual medical checks and arranges regular health reports for children. It provides foster carers with training including first aid, attachment, autism and sexual health. However, a significant proportion of its carers do not have an up-to-date first aid qualification.

The agency operates a system by which health, along with the other 'Every Child Matters' (ECM) outcomes is monitored monthly to ensure that children are receiving the support necessary.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The agency makes sure that foster carers' homes are suitable and safe places for children to live. Foster carers receive health and safety training when they are assessed and this is updated periodically. The agency provides carers with health and safety information in the foster carers' handbook. It carries out health and safety checks of carers' homes when they are assessed and updates these regularly. Checks include motor insurance and foster carers' driving licences. Checks are also carried out regarding pets in the foster home to ensure that they are safe with children.

The agency takes great care when arranging placements to ensure that children are placed with foster carers who are well matched and able to meet their needs. The agency makes sure that foster carers usually receive very good information about the child being placed with them and the matching process is careful with full information about the carers and children being shared. Placement agreement meetings take place and signed foster placement agreement records contain detailed information about the child. This is further supported by the information collected when referrals for placements are made. The agency takes great care to ensure that foster carers are appropriate before it will agree to a placement being made. For example one carer said, 'I was supported through the matching process all the way and I would have been supported to say "no" at any time if we had not thought the placement was right.' Children have introductory visits to carers and the agency makes sure that careful decisions are made before children are placed.

The agency is rigorous in checking carers during the assessment process. It has a structured programme of updating Criminal Records Bureau (CRB), local authority

and medical checks on carers regularly. The agency also takes up references on foster carers periodically, throughout their fostering career.

Children feel safe and well cared for in their placements. For example one young person said, 'I feel comfortable, welcome, cared for and I am able to talk to foster carers and their family. I personally think that my foster carers are doing an excellent job at caring for me. I get treated equally and get on with everyone I live with. My foster carers are great at what they do and are the best carers that I have come across.' Children know how to make a complaint and who to speak to if they have a problem.

Foster carers are well managed and supported to meet children's needs. For example one carer said, 'We have discussions around areas I need to improve.' All foster carers have safe caring policies in place that are updated as necessary to be relevant for the child in placement. Carers receive training in behaviour management, bullying, safe caring and child protection but a number of carers have not undertaken recent child protection training.

The agency's procedure for recording and monitoring any accidents, illnesses, complaints, incidents, restraints or allegations made about carers has not been consistently applied throughout the agency and, as a consequence, has not been robust as it should have been. This has potentially placed children at increased risk. The agency's interim manager has identified and begun to address this.

The recruitment procedure operated by the agency is rigorous. New staff members are checked thoroughly to make sure they are suitable to work with vulnerable children.

The fostering agency has an effective panel in operation that is correctly constituted with members with suitable backgrounds. The panel gives careful consideration to the matters presented to it and makes clear and specific recommendations to the agency's decision maker. The agency's panel procedures are thorough. They ensure the quality and completeness of information presented to panel and also that panel operates within the relevant regulations and agency procedures.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The service provides foster carers with good information about promoting equality and diversity within the foster carer handbook. Issues surrounding this are covered in foster carers' approval training and equality and diversity training takes place periodically. The service undertakes very thorough assessments of potential carers to ensure they can meet children's diverse needs. The agency provides support and advice to foster carers looking after children from different ethnic backgrounds. The agency has been particularly successful in the recruitment of carers from black and minority ethnic backgrounds in the area of its Sheffield office. Currently the agency's panel does not include a member from a black or minority ethnic background but the

agency has well developed plans in place to address this.

The agency considers the diverse needs of each child at the point of matching and gives carers as much information as possible to help them meet children's needs. Good individual training is available for carers working with children with disabilities. For example, foster carers have undertaken training in autism. The agency provides foster carers with any specialist equipment needed by children. Staff training is being provided as part of work the agency is doing to transfer foster carers for children with disabilities from another NCH project as part of a reorganisation.

Foster Care NCH works effectively with the local authorities who place children with its foster carers to ensure that their educational needs are met. It works with all professionals involved with children to ensure that they receive the educational support they need. Supervising social workers communicate well with placing social workers to ensure that children all have up-to-date Personal Education Plans in place. The agency works very effectively to maintain the stability of foster placements and this helps children's education as it reduces the number of school changes experienced by children.

The service and its carers promote children's educational achievement and support them in school. One carer said, 'My support worker has been very helpful. Together we have both phoned people to get help and advice for my foster child's education.' Children are helped to plan for their future education and independence. For example one young person said, 'I am talking to foster carers about college, finance and moving into independent living.'

The agency provides carers with training and information about the promotion of children's education. Educational equipment is provided for children in foster care where needed and additional educational help is sought where appropriate. The agency and its carers encourage and support children to undertake activities in the community. Children's personal achievement is recognised and celebrated, whether this is academic or more personal achievement. For example, a recent achievement awards ceremony has taken place at which a Member of Parliament presented foster children and the birth children of foster carers with awards.

Children's files contain good information about their educational achievement and the support provided to them. Children's academic achievement and progress is monitored within the agency's monthly Every Child Matters (ECM) monitoring system.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The agency works effectively, from the point of referral, to plan placements in such a way as to facilitate any contact arrangements. Detailed information about children is sought in the initial referral. Comprehensive foster placement agreements are drawn up that include information about contact arrangements and how they are to be managed. These arrangements are taken into account when children are matched

with foster carers.

Children's files contain clear information about any arrangements for contact and any legal basis for the arrangements. Children receive good support to have contact with their families wherever this is appropriate. Foster carers often work closely with children's families.

Foster carers keep records that include the outcomes of contact and children's reactions. Regular placement reviews take place with written updates being supplied to the placing social worker. These reviews include the consideration of contact arrangements and outcomes as part of the agency's monitoring of ECM outcomes for children. Training in attachment is provided to carers which helps them work with issues relating to contact.

The agency and its foster carers support children to have good networks with friends and within the wider community. Children are supported to make and keep friends and to take part in activities in the community.

The agency consults with children about the care they receive. Children all feel that their carers listen to them and take notice of their opinions. Supervising social workers regularly meet fostered children to seek their views and children are supported to have their voices heard in their planning meetings and reviews. Children know how to complain and who to speak to if they have a problem. The agency provides children with a young person's guide telling them about being fostered and young people have been involved in redesigning this guide. Young people have also been involved with the development of some publicity and foster carer recruitment material.

The agency seeks children's views for their foster carers' reviews and treats these views seriously as an important part of the review process.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The fostering agency has a Statement of Purpose in place that is given to foster carers which has recently been fully updated. Children are given a young person's guide to the agency.

The agency operates from three office bases with overall management being provided from the registered branch. Effective staff supervision and appraisal systems are in operation and the manager and supervising social workers are able to

access the training they require. The registered manager is currently on extended sick leave and the agency has appointed an interim manager to ensure the service continues to operate effectively.

The staff team is effectively managed and the agency has very good links and working arrangements with the local authorities that place children with them. Children benefit from good joint planning when placements are made, in their reviews and ongoing basis. Joint visits to foster carers and children take place as appropriate. Good working relationships help promote good outcomes for children.

The agency is very careful and thorough in the way it assesses prospective foster carers. It carries out checks on applicants' suitability with CRB; local authority; children's schools; birth children; previous partners; employers; and other referees. Once approved these checks are repeated on a regular basis. Foster carers are visited frequently as part of the assessment process and their suitability is considered further during their 'Skills to Foster' training. Referees are visited as part of the process of checking on applicants' suitability. Detailed records are made of these visits. However, as the accuracy of the records of these visits is not verified with the referees, their value is reduced. Assessments of foster carers include the consideration of their competencies in relation to fostering.

Foster carers for the agency receive very good support and management. The agency ensures that foster carers are visited every two weeks and receive formal supervision monthly. Supervising social workers meet with children in placement regularly. Foster carers are very satisfied with the help provided to them and their fostered children. For example one foster carer said, 'I always feel supported in a multitude of ways having all the right people in the right place at the right time.' The agency operates an effective 'out of hours' support service. Staff members operating this service know foster carers and their children well and, as such, can offer individual support. For example a foster carer said, 'In an emergency I felt totally, totally supported.'

The agency runs monthly foster carer support groups that include a training element. Supervision is provided to foster carers and all placements are monitored on a monthly basis to ensure that children are receiving the correct support in line with the ECM outcomes for children. Unannounced visits to foster carers' homes take place appropriately.

Foster Care NCH is very thorough in the way it manages foster carers' reviews. It ensures that they take place within their set timescales and provide a detailed consideration of carers' continued suitability to foster children. Reviews monitor the appropriateness of the foster carer's terms of approval and ensure that any updates to the original assessment or changes in terms of approval take place. They consider how well carers continue to carry out the fostering role and meet children's needs. As part of the preparation for foster carers' reviews the agency seeks the views of the fostered children and their social workers, the foster carers and the carers' own children, if any. Foster carers' reviews are presented to the agency's fostering panel for consideration before being agreed by the decision maker. The robust nature of

this review process helps to safeguard children.

Foster carers' training needs are discussed in their supervision and foster carers' review meetings. The service provides foster carers with a good range of training. It offers mandatory training in topics such as health and safety, first aid, safe caring and child protection, bullying and behaviour management. It also provides training based on carers' wishes or needs identified by the service. For example, recent training has included attachment, recording skills, drug awareness and sexual exploitation. However, not all foster carers have completed first aid or child protection training recently enough. The agency is revising its training programme to ensure that such mandatory training is prioritised.

The agency makes sure that it gets full and up-to-date information regarding the children placed and liaises effectively with local authorities to gain information it needs about children. Foster carers have full information about the children they care for and children's files generally contain all the necessary documentation required by the Looked After Children system. Children's records held by the fostering agency help support the care provided. The agency supplies good information for children's reviews and in the regular updates it sends to children's social workers. It has an effective process for monitoring children's progress and the care provided to them, which is structured into the ECM outcomes for children.

The agency has generally effective administrative systems that ensure that records of foster carers, children and miscellaneous matters are well maintained. Records are in place containing key information relevant to the running of the service. The agency's system for monitoring the significant events set out in the regulations is not fully effective but the agency is working to rectify this and improve the process.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Recommendations

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

- ensure that each carer is provided with first aid training (NMS 12.5)
- ensure that all carers receive regularly updated child protection training (NMS 9.2)
- ensure that the monitoring of the matters set out in Schedule 7 of the Fostering Services Regulations 2002 is fully and consistently implemented across the agency (NMS 9.3 and 25.13)
- ensure that records of visits to referees are verified as an accurate record (NMS 17.6).