

Nexus Fostering

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

Unique reference number	SC066400
Inspection date	15/07/2011
Inspector	Seka Graovac
Type of inspection	Social Care Inspection

Setting address	1 Grace House, Harrovian Business Village, Bessborough Road, Harrow, Middlesex, HA1 3EX
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Telephone number

Email

Registered person

Registered manager

Responsible individual

Date of last inspection

Nexus Fostering Ltd

John David Collins

Grace Mary Wyatt

24/12/2007

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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

Nexus Fostering is an independent agency that provides fostering services in London, the Home Counties, South East, Anglia and Midlands area of England. It operates under one registration from its main office in London and affiliate offices in Birmingham, Norwich, Cambridge and Upminster. The agency recruits, assesses, approves, trains and supports foster carers from a range of backgrounds to provide foster placements and care for children and young people who are looked after by local authorities.

Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

This was a full announced inspection. The main aim of the visit was to assess the quality of the fostering service provided by the agency. The inspection was carried out in line with the recently updated legislation, underpinned by the Every Child Matters guidance.

The main finding is that Nexus Fostering offers an outstanding fostering service. The agency is highly effective at keeping the well-being of children and young people at the heart of its activity. Through excellent support provided by the agency's foster carers, the agency makes a real, tangible difference to the lives of foster children and young people. The agency supports positive outcomes for foster children and young people exceptionally well.

Improvements since the last inspection

The last inspection was carried out in December 2007. At that time, the overall quality of the service was judged to be good with some outstanding outcomes for children and young people being achieved. The main weakness identified related to the timeliness of the reviews of the approval of the foster carers. The management was asked to ensure that all reviews of foster carers take place on an annual basis. This has been achieved. The information provided by the agency clearly demonstrates that the reviews of foster carers take place annually.

Ofsted also made four recommendations: to review monitoring of long term medication that is given to foster children and young people; to review monitoring of incidents; to review administrative records kept regarding respite placements for children and young people who are already fostered within the agency and to obtain references for members of the fostering panel consistently. The agency has taken on board all the recommendations made and achieved significant improvements in all areas highlighted.

The monitoring has been significantly strengthened. A clear reporting process ensures that all incidents and any medication prescribed to a child or young person are reported to the head office, without delay. The agency has created separate central logs for medication and incidents. Those logs are reviewed by the management on a regular basis. Better organised administrative records are held. The agency consistently records respite placements on the files for foster carers with whom the child or a young person usually lives and also on the respite carers' records. Through consistently obtaining references for all the fostering panel members, the agency has achieved more robust recruitment.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

The agency supports foster carers exceptionally well to enable them to promote health in their homes. Supervising social workers consistently provide excellent guidance, advice and support to foster carers on how to provide a healthy environment. The agency ensures that foster carers have the relevant skills and knowledge to be able to meet health needs of children and young people in their care. Foster carers receive good training on first aid, health and hygiene, drug and alcohol awareness, sex and sexuality and other topics linked to health promotion. Those carers who look after children and young people with complex health needs receive additional specific training that is relevant to them; for example, tube feeding.

The agency works in close relationship with placing authorities and health services to ensure that children and young people have their general health appropriately monitored and promoted. The placement plan for each child or young person describes their health needs clearly. It specifies the support needed from the foster carers. It also identifies a clear delegation of responsibility for health and medical issues given to the carers and the agency. Foster carers ensure that foster children and young people are registered with a general practitioner and have prompt access to various other professionals, such as dentist and optician. Children and young people's good health is well-promoted. They receive additional specialist health support when they need it. When children and young people are prescribed medication, foster carers follow a safe medication procedure that includes secure storage and precise record keeping.

In addition to regular and frequent supervising social worker's visits, the agency inspects each foster home annually, without appointment. These visits contribute to ensuring that the foster children and young people's needs continue to be met. Children and young people live in a healthy environment. They have excellent opportunities to learn about healthy living and adopt healthy lifestyles. Through the agency's newsletters, they receive regular and up-to-date information on various health issues. This has recently included the celebration of success of some foster carers and the agency's staff who stopped smoking. The same programme for cessation of smoking was offered to all children and young people who smoke.

Children and young people are aware of the importance of having a healthy diet. They receive excellent support to develop healthy eating habits. Through the Ofsted written survey, many children commented positively about food provision in their homes. Children and young people also receive excellent encouragement to engage in a range of activities. This impacts positively on their physical and emotional health.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

The agency has a very strong culture of safeguarding children and young people. It has many clear and comprehensive strategies in place to ensure that their welfare is promoted effectively. At the beginning and throughout their fostering career with the agency, foster carers receive appropriate training about safeguarding children and young people. This includes specific training about social networking and internet safety, so that they stay up-to-date with the developments in electronic safety. On approval, all foster carers receive a copy of the agency's Foster Carers Handbook and also the 'Safer Caring' book produced by the Fostering Network. This gives them access to clear written information and guidance on how best to promote children's welfare. They all know what to do if they suspect that this is compromised. Each foster care household agrees to follow their own written family policy for safer caring that is the most relevant to their household. This policy is reviewed on an annual basis and for each placement made.

Supervising social workers review the standard of care provided and the impact of the foster carers' support on the welfare of the child or young person, at each of the very frequent visits that they undertake. The agency emphasises the importance of foster carers' ability to create a caring and nurturing environment. The agency's foster carers are highly successful in developing authentically warm and trusting relationships between themselves and children and young people in their care. Children and young people benefit very much from the arrangements in place. Many of them comment about feeling well cared for. Some wrote in the Ofsted survey that they loved their foster carers and felt loved. The care and support they receive, as well as clear rules and boundaries that are in place, minimise the risks that they will engage in unsafe behaviours.

Children and young people report feeling safe. They live in a safe environment. They have excellent opportunities to learn how to keep themselves safe in a range of situations. At the same time as being supported to acknowledge their past experiences and anxieties, they are appropriately encouraged to take age-appropriate risks as a normal part of growing up. Children and young people are helped to understand the dangers and risks of leaving the foster home without permission or engaging in other unsafe, illegal or criminal behaviours. Foster carers follow a clear reporting procedure if a child is absent without authority, is missing from the placement or if they have any other concerns about their health and welfare.

The agency works together with the children services, the Local Safeguarding

Children Board (LSCB), the police and the health services to protect children and young people. The effective partnership working ensures that children and young people are safeguarded and continue to have their welfare promoted regardless of the circumstances that they have found themselves in. Children and young people know that there are a number of people within the agency and externally, who are available to help them with any difficulties they have.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Foster carers are able to create an environment that inspires positive behaviour, development of high expectations, confidence in oneself, learning and achievement. Children and young people are consistently encouraged to take responsibility for their behaviour and empowered to shape their future. Foster carers receive training on how to best manage challenging behaviour. They know the children and young people in their care well and understand how past experiences can manifest in present behaviour. They have good insight in the vulnerabilities of children and young people in care. Nexus Fostering provides them with easy access to expert advice and therapeutic consultation.

The agency's approach to care minimises the need for police involvement to deal with challenging behaviour. The impact of this is that children and young people are not criminalised for their behaviour unnecessarily. In the last 12 months, only one young person fostered by the Nexus Fostering, has been convicted of an offence. Foster carers are able to help children and young people to develop positive coping strategies, assertiveness and resilience, to start or continue with their education or return to it. The agency clearly demonstrates the importance it places on learning and education throughout its processes. This is evident from the approval of foster carers with positive attitudes, through consistent support, monitoring and working together with schools and educational professionals, to celebrating children and young people's educational achievements. At the time of this inspection, apart from one young person who received individual tuition at home, all other children and young people of appropriate age were in full-time education. Children and young people are exceptionally well supported to learn and achieve their potential.

The agency appropriately celebrates children and young people's achievements. The children and young people receive certificates of achievements and get mentioned in the agency's newsletters. Recent achievements included the following: swimming without arm-bands; excellent behaviour in the church; being brave during a medical examination; being very kind to a neighbour; voting for the nation's favourite book and for improved school attendance.

Children and young people live in a physical environment that is safe, well maintained, clean, comfortably furnished, appropriately equipped and stimulating. They enjoy having a high standard of accommodation. They have their own bedrooms, unless they choose to share with their sibling. They have access to appropriate toys, books, games, video, audio and electronic equipment. They are

given opportunities to play with and learn how to look after pets, such as dogs, cats, rabbits or chickens. Children and young people have excellent opportunities to engage in a wide range of activities of their choice. In addition to the activities organised by their foster carers, on a termly basis the agency organises activity days for all foster carers, children, young people in their households, staff and management. These events are very well attended and very much enjoyed.

Children and young people are given excellent opportunities to develop friendships, feel a part of a family and a part of the community. The agency has developed a policy on overnight stays that emphasises the need for robust, but proportionate and balanced risk assessment process. The agency is working in partnership with foster carers and the children's services to ensure that this process safeguards children and young people effectively, while giving them the same opportunities that children and young people who live with their birth families have. Foster children and young people go on holidays with their foster families; for example, one of the foster families that the inspector visited were preparing to take a foster group of three siblings to a villa in Portugal. These foster children have never been on a holiday.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

The agency has a clear referral procedure, an excellent matching process and very effective policy on participation of children and young people. Each foster carer has a written profile that is sent to the children's social worker to inform their and the child/ young person's decision. The foster carers receive full information that has been given to the agency about the planned placement. If this information is not available, the agency keeps clear records of their attempts to seek and obtain the information from the placing authority.

The children and young people report feeling very much welcomed into the foster home. They are treated in the same way as the foster carers' own children living in the household. They are given free access to all the facilities in their new family home. They report being a part of the family. They benefit from living in stable placements that encourage safe, reliable and realistic attachments. The agency is highly successful in facilitating stable placements for children and young people. Almost 70% of placements are permanent or long-term. Children and young people are provided with highly personalised care and support that promotes all aspects of their individual identity exceptionally well. They have excellent opportunities to fulfil their potential, contribute to their lives and achieve positive outcomes.

Children and young people are encouraged effectively to communicate and express themselves. They are given choices and they report being listened to. Their wishes, feelings and views are fully acknowledged and taken into account. They are actively helped to understand the reasons when their expressed views are not acted upon. They are encouraged to contribute fully to the reviews of their care. The supervising social workers see the foster children and young people on their own on a regular basis. They can also use a dedicated website area and a specific email address for all

children and young people in fostering households.

Nexus Fostering has been recently awarded a LILAC (Leading Improvement for Looked After Children) certificate in an inspection that was carried out by care experienced young people. They write in their report that the agency's care planning and review documentation, that was developed with children and young people's full involvement, 'impressed assessors as the most attractive they had seen'. The agency continues to develop its consultation processes and act on good practice proposal and recommendations made to further involve and consult with children and young people. The recently established Children's Consultation group and the day-event organised and run by children and young people for foster carers and staff have been a great success. This contributed further to the development of already excellent relationships between the agency, foster carers and children and young people.

The agency has effective arrangements in place to support and promote children and young people's constructive contact with their families, friends and other people who play a significant role in their lives. The agency's offices provide safe and familiar contact venues, in agreement with the placing authority. The agency has outreach workers who are specifically trained to supervise and facilitate contact.

Children and young people are aware of their rights. They are members of 'A National Voice' and have easy access to a wide range of other advocacy services. This enables them to seek and obtain support outside the agency or their social worker. They are aware of the agency's complaints procedure and have confidence in the process. The children and young people have a clear understanding about the agency's role in their lives. When asked to make a judgement on the quality of the support they receive from the agency, they judge it as, 'the best possible'.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is outstanding.

The agency is very effective at preparing young people to leave care and reach independence. Children and young people are cared for in a way that helps them to prepare for independent living and to continue to achieve economic well-being. Foster carers provide excellent opportunities to each child and young person in their care to develop self-esteem, to establish positive relationships, to gain educational achievements, to prepare for the world of work or further and higher education and to develop practical life-skills that are consistent with their age and abilities.

The agency works in close partnership with the placing authorities to plan sensitively and prepare skilfully the young people's transition to adulthood. Nexus Fostering has developed clear policies on preparation for independence and has implemented a successful leaving care scheme. At the age of 15, each young person receives comprehensive information from the agency about leaving care, including information about finance, pathway plans and personal advisors. This includes a specific booklet that covers leaving care process that has been developed by the

agency on the suggestion from young people and with their participation. The support given to children and young people by foster carers and the progress they make on their path to full independence are regularly monitored by the supervising social workers. Young people receive regular pocket money and other allowances. Foster carers support young people to save some money on a regular basis to enable them to start their new homes successfully. At the time of the inspection, apart from one person who was a full-time carer, all young people over 16 were at college, or attending sixth form.

Under the Government's 'Staying Put' agenda, the agency has made successful arrangements with the placing authorities to enable some young people to remain with their foster carers into legal adulthood. This gives the young person additional time and opportunities to develop appropriate life-skills before moving to more independent accommodation. It means that young people do not have to leave care until they are fully ready to do so. At the time of the inspection, almost 6% of fostering households had a young adult who had been placed in that particular household as a child.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

The agency is very successful. It has a proven track record. It is a highly flexible service that is able to quickly respond to market changes, the needs of the children's care sector and changes in legislation. By increasing significantly in size since the last inspection, it has clearly demonstrated its outstanding capacity for growth. The number of referrals received has increased by over 500%. The number of actual placements has more than doubled. That, together with the fact that Nexus Fostering won all the tenders with the placing authorities that it applied for, is testimony to the quality of the service it offers and the excellent value for money it provides. The newly developed roles of Business Operations Manager, Information Technology Manager and Contract Manager add to the agency's great business acumen. The foster carers report that they receive all the allowances and fees on a regular basis. The agency has a clear written development plan and also a business continuation plan.

While achieving amazing quantitative growth in a constrained financial climate, the agency continues to keep children and young people at the heart of its practice. All foster children, young people, foster carers and children's social workers who responded to Ofsted's written survey, painted an exceptionally positive picture of their experience of Nexus Fostering. Their responses describe an exceptionally high quality service. Amongst other things, they write that the agency is, 'brilliant', 'excellent', 'wonderful', 'fantastic', and say that, 'one would be hard pressed to find another organisation that reached their professionalism and support package'. Many people describe Nexus Fostering as a highly professional, family friendly agency with a personal touch. They say that it is an agency that always puts children's welfare first.

The agency is exceptionally well managed. All members of the management team have appropriate qualifications and experience. The Director, who is the Responsible Individual, the Deputy Director who is the Registered Manager and the Assistant Director are qualified social workers with exceptionally rich social work experience. They also have relevant management qualifications. In addition to the area managers, all of whom have over 10 years of post-qualifying social work experience, the agency employs many other highly experienced qualified social workers. As an agency that highly values learning, Nexus Fostering has established a secondment programme to support its unqualified staff to obtain a qualification in social work.

Staff retention is high. The staff recruitment process and the recruitment of foster carers is thorough. It includes a social network check. The robustness of the recruitment arrangements contribute to the effective safeguarding of foster children and young people and the quality of care they receive. Both the staff and the foster carers report excellent support, supervision and training. A comprehensive framework of group and individual meetings contributes to excellent communication within the agency. The outstanding leadership is able to create a culture that firmly focuses on achieving the best outcomes for each individual child or young person. Staff and foster carers are inspired to embody and implement the best social care practice in their work.

The fulfilment of the agency's clear Statement of Purpose is supported by comprehensive written policies and procedures that are available to staff and foster carers. The Children's Guides are age appropriate and provide accurate information to children and young people about the service. All stakeholders know what to expect from the agency and what is expected from them. The agency is effective at working in close partnership with children's social care services, education, police and health services. It is successful in fulfilling its aims and objectives. It makes a real difference to the lives of many children and young people it fosters. The agency uses a tracker process to follow up the progress of each child and young person. The agency ensures that they are achieving positive outcomes.

The agency's fostering panel is appropriately constituted. It discharges its functions effectively. The agency has effective arrangements for carrying out detailed assessment of prospective foster carers. The panel contributes to the robustness of the approval process. Decisions are made appropriately and efficiently. Foster carers report that they understand and subscribe fully to the comprehensive and tightly managed process. Many commented that they joined Nexus Fostering on a recommendation from a friend and are very happy that they did. They also said that the agency's courteous and efficient response to their initial enquiry helped them decide to continue with the process.

The agency's staffing levels are appropriate. The supervising social workers have sufficient expertise, time and other resources to provide consistent and wide-ranging advice and support to the foster carers. During the first year of a placement, the foster carers are visited on a fortnightly basis and after that period, every three weeks. The arrangements for out-of-hours cover are excellent. One of the comments that many foster carers made is, 'they are always there for you'. In addition, one

foster carer wrote: 'They advocate for us and they protect us. They are open and understanding and offer guidance when we need it. They are excellent in supporting us with children. They always put children first. They also provide regular training and activities for children, including our birth children.' The other reason the foster carers value the agency so highly centres around the excellent matching process. This is one of the comments made by a foster carer who judged this aspect of the service to be outstanding: 'They will not make a placement unless they know that we can help and deal with all the needs of the child'.

In addition to the placing authority documentation, Nexus Fostering has developed its own placement plan format to help integrate the information and clarify the foster carer's role in supporting a particular child or young person. Foster carers understand the reasons for keeping appropriate records. They sensitively encourage and help children and young people to keep memorabilia and reflect on their past and present lives. The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. It is integral to the agency's practice and threaded through all its policies, procedures and processes. Children and young people receive support that fully addresses their needs related to gender, religion, ethnic origin, culture, language, nationality, disability or sexuality orientation, and any other individual need they have. Some children and young people commented that being respected was the best thing about their placement. Trans-racial placements are rarely made, as the agency has a large pool of foster carers with the backgrounds corresponding well to the communities they serve. Foster carers are very positive about the specific equality and diversity training they receive, as well as having other opportunities to learn about and celebrate the values of equality and diversity in their work. Foster carers who look after children and young people with communication difficulties receive specific training to enable them to facilitate their progress effectively.

An experienced social worker works for the agency as a reviewing officer. This person carries out annual reviews of the approval of foster carers. The process also includes the evaluation of the training received. A personal development plan is agreed with each foster carer for the coming year. The agency has developed clear systems for secure keeping of accurate electronic and paper records. The information is appropriately shared. Nexus Fostering works in close partnership with the LSCB to ensure that any allegations and suspicions of harm are handled in a way that provides the most effective protection and support for children, young people and anybody else involved. The agency has developed robust but proportionate risk assessment processes to consider individual circumstances. The agency keeps Ofsted appropriately informed of all major events through an effective process for sending notifications and updates on significant events.

Comprehensive record keeping enables excellent monitoring to take place. In addition to the management's regular involvement into day-to-day practice and the quality assurance function of the panels, the agency has employed an experienced Quality Assurance Manager. This is to strengthen the agency's commitment to being a reflective organisation with a drive for continuous improvement. The agency has fully embraced the recent amendments to legislation and the ethos enshrined in the new National Minimum Standards. It keeps up-to-date with legal, professional,

practice developments and research. The Director of Nexus Fostering is very much on the forefront of the network of the independent agencies steering progress and better practice in this sector.