

National Fostering Agency Limited

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector	Muhammed Harunur Rashid
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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

The National Fostering Agency is an independent fostering agency that operates on a national basis. This inspection relates to the work carried out by the South-East area office based in Uxbridge. 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. Supervising social workers are on call to their foster carers on the same basis.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This is a good service with some aspects judged as outstanding. The general organisation around working practices is good and the fostering agency is functioning well. There are excellent arrangements in place for consulting with children and young people in foster care. The service is proactive in ensuring children and young people's educational attainments.

Children and young people's individual needs are recognised and plans are in place to address them. Children and young people live in healthy and safe environments. Staff and foster carers are well supported by the Registered Manager, who is committed to promoting the welfare of children and young people and focusing on improvement.

Four areas for improvement have been identified following this inspection. These relate to notifying relevant agencies, including Ofsted, about significant events in a timely manner, updating the children's guide with Ofsted's details, ensuring foster carers are aware of training opportunities, and providing social workers with updated training on the new national minimum standards and regulations.

Improvements since the last inspection

The fostering agency was required to notify relevant agencies of any serious illnesses and accidents affecting children, and maintain records for all visits to foster carers. It was recommended that the fostering agency provides first aid training for foster carers and ensures that foster carers, children and young people are encouraged to contribute their views during the review process.

The fostering agency has acted upon these. These steps help to promote standards of care and welfare of children and young people in foster care.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Children and young people's health care needs are well assessed and these needs are well met. Children and young people's files provide good information about their health care needs. The National Fostering Agency has various policies and procedures in place to promote the health needs of children and young people in foster care. The agency maintains links with looked after children's nurses from the various placing authorities and local community health services and seeks advice and support from them about meeting children and young people's health care needs. The fostering agency has access to child and adolescent mental health services, and social workers make referrals to this service as needs arise.

Foster carers receive training in health issues, for example, first aid, sexual health, and drug and alcohol awareness. This helps to develop their knowledge and skills to meet children and young people's individual health care needs.

Foster carers' homes are warm, comfortably furnished and decorated. Children are accommodated in single rooms and have a range of leisure and recreational resources available to them. Foster carers encourage and support children and young people to eat healthily. They are encouraged to take part in various activities to keep them physically fit and active.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

Children and young people live in homes where foster carers provide them with nurturing, stable and safe family environments. Children and young people say that they feel safe in their fostering placements. Foster carers are provided with child protection and safer caring training to promote their awareness of how to protect children and young people in foster care. The fostering agency works with a large number of local authorities in accordance with Working Together To Safeguard Children and follows child protection procedures when safeguarding concerns arise. The fostering agency maintains good relationships with the Local Safeguarding Children Boards and seeks advice if the need arises. Foster carers receive guidance and training for e-safety issues and protecting young people from cyber bullying.

The fostering agency has a policy for dealing with children who go missing from care and there are guidelines to follow when a child goes missing from their placement. Carers were aware of the procedures to follow in the event of a child going missing and their care needs when a child returns. Foster carers confirmed that the agency has a help line which is open out of hours and stated that supervising social workers come out during the evenings and weekends when emergency help is requested. This provides children and foster carers with good support.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Children and young people enjoy very good relationships in their placements and say they feel safe and happy. They are relaxed in the company of foster carers, who in turn view the children positively. The fostering agency provides training and support for foster carers on behaviour management. Children and young people have individual risk assessments and these outline strategies for foster carers to implement. Foster carers provide an environment and culture that supports positive behaviour and they effectively manage challenging behaviour in a calm and professional manner. The fostering agency's carer agreements are explicit that no corporal punishment can be used with any foster child under any circumstances.

The fostering agency provides caring and stable placements to children and young people by giving them an informed choice about their care through quality fostering services. This enables children and young people to strive towards achieving best outcomes through an education policy that covers all aspects of a child's education. The agency actively promotes education for children and young people to a very high standard. Children and young people have personal education plans. These give foster carers a clear understanding of the local authority's educational aspirations for the children and young people. Foster carers are clear about their responsibilities and liaise with schools. Foster carers encourage and support children and young people to attend schools and help them with homework. The levels of exclusion from school are low. The fostering agency recently signed a contract with an employment company in order to provide learning mentors, tuition and additional support to children and young people who have complex needs, to improve their educational outcomes. The fostering agency encourages and supports children to write various articles about their achievements at school and within higher education, and reaching goals in pursuits, such as the performing arts and sports. It encourages young people to actively take part in the editorial board. This promotes young people's self-esteem and confidence in their abilities and achievements.

Children and young people take part in various activities and pursue their interests and hobbies. Foster carers encourage and support children and young people to attend after-school activities. Children and young people have opportunities to play various games in the gardens of the carers. Age-appropriate toys and play equipment are provided to children. The fostering agency encourages and supports children and young people to take part in various competitions to develop their creative skills. Examples include story writing, a doodle competition to create a National Fostering Association logo, and Cooks and Kids, where children create recipes, and meet with celebrity chefs to cook with them, which not only increases their culinary skills, but also their sense of achievement. One foster child commented: 'There is a lot more going on here than I had at home.'

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

The National Fostering Agency has a very strong commitment to seeking and listening to children and young people's views. There are excellent arrangements for consulting with children, young people and others involved in their care. For instance, the fostering service consults with children and young people through care reviews, foster carers' supervision, placement supervision visits, and meetings with the children. Quality assurance questionnaires are sent to children and young people to ensure that they can share their thoughts with the fostering agency and influence the way the service needs to develop. The agency produces a number of magazines which provide information about various events and services available to children and young people. Young people and foster carers have opportunities to contribute to these magazines. The fostering agency genuinely engages children and young people in the consultation process and their recommendations are always taken into account. The fostering agency also supports children and young people in making positive contributions to national policy initiatives.

Children and young people in foster care receive individualised care that meets their holistic needs. Foster carers receive children and young people's placement plans prior to their admission. Children and young people develop attachments with their foster carers. They support children and young people to promote their social and emotional development. Friends and family carers support children and young people to develop positive images of their parents.

Children and young people are gradually introduced to placements; these begin with a brief meeting with the foster carer then the opportunity is given for a tea visit. During the tea visit, foster carers ask about the child's expectations of the placement and also discuss the house rules. This process ensures that children and young people are introduced to suitable foster carers who are able to meet their needs.

Contact is well promoted for looked after children. The fostering service makes sure that children and young people in foster care are encouraged to maintain and develop contacts as set out in their placement plans. Contact meetings take place under supervision at various local places and also at foster carers' homes. This ensures that meetings are comfortable and a successful experience for all relevant parties.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is outstanding.

The fostering service has innovative ideas and an excellent policy on preparation and planning for adulthood. The fostering agency provides training and support to foster carers to enable them to provide effective support and guidance to young people preparing to move into semi-independent or independent living. Foster carers work closely with the local authorities in developing pathway plans for young people. They

are actively involved in the pathway planning process and understand that they can act in the role of personal advisor for foster children and young people. The fostering agency has recently developed an initiative with a major high street bank to open savings accounts for all young people in foster care. As a result, each young person automatically receives £10 a week into their saving accounts from the foster carers' allowances.

The agency helps young people to write their curriculum vitae and prepare for job interviews and apprenticeship opportunities. The partnership with a recruitment company offers various opportunities for young people such as birth children would have. The fostering agency also supports young people at the point of transition to independence through a starter pack scheme and the agency pays the carers to provide continued support to young people for six weeks with no cost to placing authorities.

The fostering agency supports young people financially at the commencement of their independent living. For example, they purchase electrical goods and other household items for their new accommodation.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The general organisation around working practices is good and the fostering service is functioning well. The fostering service has updated its Statement of Purpose which states the aims and objectives of the service. The fostering service has also developed a children's guide that is in a child-friendly format. The guide provides information about the facilities which are available to them. However, this document does not include the correct address, telephone number and email address of Ofsted, should they wish to contact the external regulator directly.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Evidence supports a consistent commitment to improving equality and diversity in practice. Children and young people receive an individualised service which is designed to meet their personal needs. Staff and foster carers have completed equality and diversity training. Fostering service staff and carers have a good understanding of children and young people's dietary, religious, social and cultural needs. Staff support children and young people to make personal choices and to access community resources.

The fostering service has a clear management and staffing structure that ensures there are clear lines of accountability throughout the service. Staff receive regular supervision and ongoing support from the Registered Manager, who is available on a formal and informal basis. Caseloads are monitored and the service employs social workers who are registered with General Social Care Council. The staff team and fostering panel are well supported by the administrative staff. However, social workers feel that they would benefit from attending training or seminars on various practice issues, such as understanding new national minimum standards and regulations. This will develop their knowledge and understanding about the new

standards and regulations for achieving better outcomes for children and young people in foster care.

The fostering service recruits foster carers through various advertising methods according to the researched needs of children and young people in different localities. It carries out comprehensive assessments of prospective foster carers that cover all areas of competency needed to ensure children receive a good quality of care. Foster carers take part in pre-approval training; this informs them about what fostering entails and helps them explore their views and attitudes.

Good systems are in place for working with and supporting foster carers. The foster carers' handbook is being updated in line with new regulations and national minimum standards to ensure that foster carers are fully aware of the changes. Foster carers have access to regular support groups. The fostering agency conducts foster carers' reviews to determine whether they are suitable to continue as foster carers and their household continues to be suitable. The service provides 24-hour support for foster carers, 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 are followed up.

Complaints and allegations against foster carers are well monitored. Any complaints or allegations made are dealt with promptly and sensitively. This ensures that foster carers are supported and the appropriate outcome is reached to safeguard children and young people in placement.

An ongoing training programme is in place for foster carers which helps ensure they are well equipped to meet the needs of the children and young people in their care. Training needs are identified during monthly visits to foster carers and discussed during the annual review process. However, occasionally some foster carers do not receive information about accessing courses.

Matching children with foster carers is carefully considered to ensure that children are placed with foster carers who have the necessary skills to meet foster children's needs. Where there are gaps in the matching process, the agency supports foster carers to obtain information and take action to address these gaps.

The fostering panel is well managed and its members understand the needs of children and young people. Foster carers and social work staff understand the function of the panel and panel members attend regular training to ensure that they can effectively fulfil their roles. Detailed minutes are kept for the panel meetings held. The panel consists of individuals with a wide range of knowledge and experience.

A detailed electronic record is maintained of each child and young person to ensure that all records are easily updated and securely stored. Foster carers are clear about the expectations regarding record keeping. Foster carers demonstrate how they are recording 'memorabilia' as a part of life story work for children and young people.

This includes taking photographs and keeping souvenirs from trips and activities. This contributes to an understanding of the child's life.

Each carer has a foster care agreement in place and they are well supported by their supervising social workers through regular supervision in order to care properly for children in foster care. The fostering agency maintains records of children's activities, incidents, achievements, allegations and abuse, for safeguarding and monitoring purposes.

The fostering service has clear procedures for monitoring and controlling to ensure the quality of service. This is achieved by having clear lines of communication, sound financial standing, robust financial procedures, and an agreed charge for fostering services. The management team advised that the fostering service is financially viable. Foster carers receive their weekly allowances on time, which enables them to budget for household expenditure and pay children's allowances on time.

The fostering service has developed a tracking system which helps to ensure that statutory reviews are held at the appropriate times. Other monitoring systems are in place to ensure that statutory checks such as Criminal Records Bureau checks, medical, local authority checks and health and safety checks are also completed within the required timescales.

The fostering agency sends notifications of significant events to the relevant agencies including Ofsted. However, notifications are not always sent promptly in order to safeguard the welfare of children and young people in their care.

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/s meets the Care Standards Act 2000, Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider(s) must comply with the given timescales.

Reg	Statutory Requirement	Due date
3 (2011)	include Ofsted's address, including email address, and telephone number in the children's guide	31/08/2011
36 (2011)	notify all significant events without any delay to relevant agencies including Ofsted.	31/08/2011

Recommendations

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

- ensure that foster carers receive information about the available training for their professional development in order to meet the needs of children placed with

them (NMS 20)

- ensure that fostering staff are provided with training to fulfil their roles which will enable them to understand the new national minimum standards and regulations effectively. (NMS 23)