

National Fostering Agency

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector	Rosemary Chapman / Sharon Treadwell
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Date of last inspection	23/10/2013

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Service information

Brief description of the service

This independent fostering agency is one of the three English branches of the National Fostering Agency, which operates across England, Scotland and Wales. This registered office is based in Solihull and covers the Midlands area. It provides a range of fostering placements, including parent and child, emergency, short term and long term.

As of 31 March 2014 the branch had 328 foster places, of which 201 were filled. At the same date it had 294 foster carers in 170 fostering households. It approved 34 foster carer applications between 1 April 2013 and 31 March 2014.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding: An agency demonstrating and exceeding the characteristics of a good judgement where children and young people are making significantly better progress and achieving more than was expected in all areas of their lives.

Good: An agency where children and young people, including those with the most complex needs, have their individual needs met and their welfare safeguarded and promoted. They make good progress and receive effective services so they achieve as well as they can in all areas of their lives.

Requires improvement: An agency that may be compliant with regulations and observing the national minimum standards but is not yet demonstrating the characteristics of a good judgement. It therefore requires improvement to be good. There may be failures to meet all regulations or national minimum standards but these are not widespread or serious; all children's and young people's welfare is safeguarded and promoted.

Inadequate: An agency where there are widespread or serious failures which result in children and young people not having their welfare safeguarded and promoted.

Overall effectiveness

Judgement outcome: **good**.

This is the first inspection of this branch, which was registered in October 2013. However, it had previously been operating under the auspices of another branch of the agency, thus most carers and children have been receiving a service from the National Fostering Agency prior to that date.

This branch is judged as good overall, although there are a number of shortfalls in the quality of service. However, as significant improvements and progress have been made following a visit by Ofsted in February 2014, it has demonstrated both

commitment and capacity to improve and move forward, although some changes are not yet fully embedded. Despite the shortfalls in the quality of service, the experience, progress and outcomes for most children and young people are good, and for some they are outstanding. The branch places children with complex needs, including disabled children, and they thrive and make good progress in stable families. One young person said: 'I wouldn't be where I am now without my foster carers; they are just the best.' Placement stability is good; 5% of placements ended in an unplanned way between October 2013 and March 2014, which is below the national average of 7% for independent fostering agencies.

The branch has improved its systems for the recruitment, preparation and assessment of foster carers to make this process more consistent and speedier. Assessments are generally of good quality and prompt, resulting in carers who can meet the needs of the children requiring placements. Foster carers feel valued members of the team around the child and are active participants in care planning. There have been occasions when supervising social workers have not been as challenging to foster carers as the situation required, but recent changes have resulted in more robust supervisory visits. Foster carers generally have good relationships with the agency and with the local authority social workers and feel well supported.

Training is an area where improvements have been particularly noted, thus providing foster carers with improved knowledge and skills to meet the needs of the children placed with them. The take-up of training by foster carers has improved from 36% to 83%. A foster carer commented: 'Training has improved a lot in the last three years. The new trainer delivers well-structured and activity-based training. Also, there are more varied subject areas of training provided at more venues.'

The branch engages well with carers and is developing its engagement with children and young people as it recognises this as an area for improvement. Nonetheless children and young people, including birth children of foster carers, are currently involved in influencing the service, albeit on a more informal level. There are good and effective working relationships with partner agencies, including commissioners and local authority social workers. Commissioners comment on the branch's willingness to be flexible and innovative, as well as its prompt information sharing and good communication. This results in positive placements which are sustained over time.

The responsible individual is particularly effective in exercising his role, and is a visible and accessible presence to managers, staff and foster carers alike. The Registered Manager is continuing to develop her role to ensure foster carers know who she is and that they can come to her with any issues.

There are three breaches of regulation identified as a result of this inspection. However, they have not had an impact on the safety or well-being of children and young people and are being addressed. They relate to the timeliness of foster carer annual reviews, the children's register and the provision of the local authority care plan to foster carers and the agency. There are a further six recommendations to

improve practice which relate to record keeping, the timeliness of foster carer training, foster carer attendance at annual reviews, risk assessments for bedroom sharing, and the more robust pursuit of missing local authority documentation.

Areas for 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 person(s) must comply with the given timescales.

Reg.	Requirement	Due date
17 (2011)	ensure that the foster parent is given such information, which is kept up to date, as to enable him to provide appropriate care for the child, and in particular that each foster parent is provided with a copy of the most recent version of the child's care plan provided to the fostering service provider under regulation 6(3)(d) of the Care Planning Regulations (Regulation 17(3))	26/09/2014
22 (2011)	ensure the fostering service provider maintains and keeps up to date the records specified in Schedule 2, with particular regard to the children's register (Regulation 22(1))	26/09/2014
28 (2011)	ensure that a review takes place not more than a year after approval, and thereafter whenever the fostering service provider consider it necessary, but at intervals of not more than a year. (Regulation 28(2))	26/09/2014

Recommendations

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

- ensure that the fostering service provider follows up with the responsible authority where all such necessary information has not been provided by the authority (NMS 3.9)
- ensure that the decision-making process and outcome of the assessment are recorded in writing where bedroom sharing is agreed (NMS 10.6)
- ensure that foster carers and prospective foster carers are given the opportunity to attend and be heard at all panel meetings at which their approval is being discussed and to bring a supporter to the panel if they wish. This relates to annual reviews (NMS 14.5)
- ensure that the Training, Support and Development Standards are attained within 12 months of approval (NMS 20.3)

- ensure that all foster carers are able to demonstrate how they are meeting the skills required of them by the fostering service, including training in first aid (NMS 20.4)
- ensure the records of supervisory visits to foster carers are maintained in line with the service's policy. (NMS 26.2)

Experiences and progress of, and outcomes for, children and young people

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Children and young people generally make good progress, have good experiences with their foster carers and their outcomes are positive. For a small number of children, this has not been as positive, but for others, their progress has been impressive. One social worker commented of her child: 'There has been fantastic progress in all areas of life.' An independent reviewing officer reported of another young person: 'Excellent outcomes for young people here; the foster carers meet the young person's needs to a high standard. There is good progress academically, and socially the young person is doing really well.'

Where possible, children and young people receive a child-friendly carer profile prior to moving in to the foster home, which gives information about the foster carers and their home. This enables them to settle in and provides some reassurance about what is expected of them and what they can expect.

Children's needs are well met, they feel safe and they attach well to their foster carers, some of whom become their primary attachment. Placement stability is good and unplanned endings are prevented wherever possible, resulting in stable and long-term placements where this is the plan, thereby promoting a sense of belonging. Children are also assisted to move on to adoption and have excellent memory books of their time in foster care so they maintain a full record of their history.

Children and young people have a wide range of experiences, many of which are completely new. For example, they learn to swim, horse ride, ride bikes, and undertake new sports such as karate. They develop self-care and social skills which help them become more independent, more confident and improves their self-esteem. They are fully part of the foster family and go on holiday with their carers, take part in family events and have days out. Many children and young people are able to live with their brothers and sisters in foster care because foster carers are able to accommodate large sibling groups. If not, they maintain positive contact with family members, either in the foster home or elsewhere. This ensures they have a good understanding of their history and identity.

Children and young people make really good progress at school. For some children, who have missed large periods of schooling prior to coming in to foster care, this is really significant. Children now talk about loving school and they have 100% attendance. Children's behaviour also improves which enables them to spend more

time at school and thus achieve better outcomes. Some young people, with histories of lengthy exclusions for poor behaviour are now very rarely excluded. Again this is significant progress, and to quote a foster carer, 'he has exceeded all expectations'.

Children and young people make good progress in relation to their health. They access universal as well as specialist services as appropriate. Very few young people engage in risk-taking behaviour such as going missing or taking drugs; when this is an issue it is fully addressed through accessing appropriate community services. Their behaviour improves as they feel more settled and gain a better understanding of why they behave in certain way. Some young people have developed a far better understanding of their emotions and can now identify how they feel and why.

Children and young people express their views about their care and the branch in a variety of ways, thus promoting their self-esteem as they feel their opinions are valued. For example, some young people are involved in their own local authority's children in care council, others take part in their reviews, they contribute to the foster carers' reviews and have contact with advocacy and their independent reviewing officers. They also engage in events organised by the branch and contribute to the magazine.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **requires improvement.**

Although there are a number of strengths in the quality of the service, there are also weaknesses, including breaches of regulations, which have resulted in this area being judged as requiring improvement.

The branch has a diverse range of foster carers who are able to offer a variety of placements to looked after children. These include disabled children, children with more complex needs and large sibling groups. Good matching has resulted in successful and sustained placements across the whole range. Matching has been strengthened by the appointment of a specialist placement team which includes a social worker as the placement team manager. Not only has this added consistent and professional input to matching, it has also improved workload management for the supervising social workers, as the frequency with which they are called upon for their advice has diminished. Written risk assessments now identify any risks associated with the potential match and how these are to be managed. However, the written risk assessments do not include the decision making associated with bedroom sharing. The children's register is not fully completed and information such as the child's previous address or the address to which they leave is not consistently available. As a result, their information is incomplete, should they choose to access it in the future.

The process for the preparation, assessment and approval of foster carers is prompt and professional. It has been enhanced by the appointment of a dedicated worker who undertakes the initial visits, ensuring consistency and a prompt response. Foster carers speak highly of the Skills to Foster training and comment that it has been very

useful in helping them understand the fostering task. Assessments are generally of a good quality and support the approval of good carers.

The fostering panel consists of a range of members who offer a diverse range of personal and professional experiences to inform their consideration of the work presented to them. It offers a good quality assurance function, feeding back any areas of weakness. The administration of the panel is efficient to enable panel members to undertake their role effectively by ensuring they read the papers in advance. However, foster carers are only invited to attend the fostering panel meetings for their approval, not for their annual review. This limits the effectiveness of the fostering panel in reaching a sound recommendation as information may be limited. Additionally, not all annual reviews have taken place within a year of approval, resulting in the agency not assessing carers' capabilities in a timely way. The agency decision maker is prompt in her decision making and ensures full consideration is given to all the relevant information so that decisions are based on complete information.

Foster carers are adept at helping children settle in to their family; for example, children go on family holidays, attend family events and have days out. Foster carers facilitate contact with parents and other family members, including welcoming them into their homes if appropriate. They demonstrate empathy and an awareness of how important this relationship is to the foster child, whatever the circumstances.

Training and support have improved considerably in the last few months. A support worker has recently been appointed to work directly with families on a time-limited basis. This is proving an effective means of support to foster families. There is a comprehensive training programme delivered by an enthusiastic trainer who is committed to ensuring that foster carers access as much training as possible. This includes doing one-to-one bespoke training if necessary, as well as sending links by email for relevant courses and information to meet the needs of the children being fostered. The take-up of training has improved considerably. However, not all foster carers have completed the Training and Development Standards or other relevant training such as first aid or safer caring within the necessary timescales. This shortfall may result in children not being provided with appropriate care and support.

Foster carers are supervised on a regular basis; however, the record of this supervision does not reflect the depth and content of the visits as described by the social workers and carers alike. It is therefore difficult for the manager to monitor the appropriateness of supervision and support and fully assess the quality of the service. Foster carers feel well supported and welcome visits from their social worker and the out-of-hours support which is available. One carer commented, 'I cannot fault them', and another said, 'nothing is too much for them'.

Foster carers understand their role and work in partnership with local authority social workers and independent reviewing officers. They attend the child's statutory reviews and other meetings and contribute effectively to them, either verbally or by way of a written report, supported by their supervising social worker. However, not all foster carers have the local authority placement plan to guide them in caring for

the child placed, and the branch cannot demonstrate that it has pursued the local authority as vigorously as it could for this information. Thus there is a potential weakness in the provision of good quality care and support, although there are currently some excellent matches and good placement stability.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The importance this agency places on safeguarding is demonstrated by the commitment to having its own safeguarding committee which considers all internal safeguarding matters. This provides an additional layer of scrutiny to further protect children and young people. Additionally it has proactively carried out its own internal audit of the arrangements to promote safeguarding. It has reviewed its safeguarding and reporting procedures as a result of shortfalls in practice, and there is now an expectation that all prospective foster carers complete online safeguarding training prior to their approval. A further safeguard is the recent implementation of a formalised initial risk assessment in the referral and matching process so that any risks are highlighted at an early stage and can be addressed.

All fostering households start to consider safeguarding and child protection during Skills to Foster training, which includes thinking about their safer caring policy. This is then personalised when children are placed and reviewed when there are any changes, or at least annually. This ensures it is appropriate and up to date. Carers are very clear about reporting any safeguarding issues, and feel well supported by the independent service which the agency commissions if there are allegations made about them. The agency works well with the local authority when safeguarding issues arise to ensure children and young people are protected. One Local Authority Designated Officer found them 'helpful and cooperative'.

Young people feel safe in their foster homes. One young person commented: 'It is a safe and caring environment where I can be myself.' Another young person when asked what she liked best about the foster parent replied: 'She keeps me safe.'

Unannounced visits take place to foster carer households, and the frequency of this has recently been increased to two a year. The manager has now developed a better system for monitoring whether these are taking place as required, as there has been at least one occasion when the recording misrepresented what had actually taken place. Similarly, there is an expectation that children and young people are seen without their carers; although this does take place, the recording does not reflect this consistently. The manager is addressing this as part of the general drive to improve recording across the service to make it more accountable.

Staff and panel member recruitment is robust and complies with statutory guidance for safer recruitment. This is further supported by taking up any professional work references over the last three years, rather than just the last employer, providing additional safeguards to prevent unsuitable people having access to children and young people.

Clear policies and procedures support practice in relation to children who go missing, although this is not a major issue for this branch at present. Any incidents have been reported appropriately and there has been good partnership working with relevant agencies when there have been particular concerns. When children and young people have unsafe behaviours the branch is proactive in ensuring specialist training is available to the foster carers so they are equipped with the skills to manage this confidently and support the young person appropriately, for example, in relation to self-harm. To quote a carer: 'It is a proactive agency which looks ahead so that we are armed with the necessary tools to do the job.'

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Leaders and managers at all levels demonstrate a passion and commitment to this service and are ambitious for it to be the best. This can be seen through the progress it has made in a small number of months, when, to quote the manager, it received a 'wake-up call'. Ofsted carried out a visit in February 2014 in response to concerns raised by a stakeholder. As a result of that visit, three requirements were set to address the shortfalls. The branch has responded robustly both to that visit and to the requirements. The requirements have been met and further improvements have either been implemented or are planned to be developed.

Foster carer training is a significant area of improvement, which had been highlighted as a requirement. The take-up of training has significantly improved and the training officer is particularly enthusiastic and innovative in her methods so that foster carers have easier access to courses and information. Although a recommendation in relation to training has been made as a result of this inspection, this does not detract from what has already been achieved and is made to further support the improvements.

Notification of significant events is also an area which had been highlighted for improvement and which has been fully addressed so that all relevant agencies are provided with information as soon as possible in order to monitor the agency's practice and response. Similarly, foster carers' terms of approval have been fully reviewed and procedures tightened up so that children are not placed with carers who cannot meet their needs. Thus the agency has demonstrated a responsive attitude towards the concerns raised and has improved its practice so that children are safe and their needs are met.

Another area where the agency has recently implemented improvements is in tracking the progress of children to make this more systematic. Although this has previously been done through supervisory visits and reviews, it is now being undertaken on a monthly basis to make clear what the children's baseline is and how children progress, in order to tackle areas where progress is limited and prevent drift.

A need to improve some of the monitoring arrangements to make them more effective has also been recognised and implemented. The manager receives specific data on a monthly basis so she has first-hand knowledge of areas such as training and unannounced visits. Carers feel well consulted and their views are canvassed through a formal annual survey in addition to bi-annual conferences with the responsible individual. Formally obtaining the views of children and young people is an area under review, but their views are gathered at every opportunity on an informal basis. They influence staff recruitment, for example, as they have devised questions to ask applicants which are used at interview. They have also undertaken a piece of work on what makes a good foster carer, and directly been involved in writing the children's guide.

Partnership working is well developed and there are good working relationships between social workers, commissioners and independent reviewing officers so that positive placements for looked after children and young people are facilitated and sustained. One stakeholder commented: 'This is a really good value for money agency that puts children first and provides comprehensive and clear responses to placement requests.' An increasing number of placements for one local authority, many of which are long-standing placements of over three years' duration, indicates that this branch has the capacity to develop to meet the changing placement needs of that authority. Another stakeholder commented that the branch is responsive to their requests and considers how it can adapt and innovate to provide the service needed. The service is constantly looking at ways it can improve its response to local authorities, such as through parent and child placements, implementing a carer academy for carers to take more complex placements and bridge to foster placements. Commissioners comment that the placements are of a good quality and placement stability is good.

The Statement of Purpose and children's guides are readily available on the agency's website. They provide clear information about the service and what can be expected. This is further supplemented by a comprehensive foster carer handbook and the Foster Carers' Charter, which is discussed on the Skills to Foster training so that new foster carers are aware of what the agency has committed to providing.

Everyone who works for the branch is appropriately qualified, experienced and supervised. Staffing levels are under constant review as the service develops, and there has been a recent increase in the numbers of staff and new roles which have made the service more effective. For example, the service now has a placements team, a support worker and increased administrative resources. Staff have access to relevant training, including that provided to foster carers. The manager has also implemented training at every team meeting so that staff are fully apprised of new developments and practices. Staff comment that the agency as a whole is forward thinking and invests in their development. There has also been a considerable investment in foster carer training this year which indicates that the agency is financially viable and committed to good outcomes for children and young people.

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 to assess the effectiveness of the service, to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards and to support services to improve.

The report details the main strengths, any areas for improvement, including any breaches of regulation, and any failure to meet national minimum standards. The judgements included in the report are made against the inspection framework and the evaluation schedule for the inspection of independent fostering agencies.