

# Safehouses Fostering

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

---

<b>Unique reference number</b>	SC066668
<b>Inspection date</b>	06/07/2015
<b>Inspector</b>	Ms Lovie
<b>Type of inspection</b>	Full
<b>Provision subtype</b>	

---

<b>Setting address</b>	The Fleece, 41 Oldham Road, Denshaw, OLDHAM, OL3 5SS
------------------------	--

<b>Telephone number</b>	01457 829 111
<b>Email</b>	fostering@safehousesnorth.org.uk
<b>Registered person</b>	Safehouses North Limited
<b>Registered manager</b>	Mrs Pamela Talbot
<b>Responsible individual</b>	Miss Jayne King
<b>Date of last inspection</b>	19/08/2011

---

© Crown copyright 2015

Website: [www.gov.uk/ofsted](http://www.gov.uk/ofsted)

This document may be reproduced in whole or in part for non-commercial educational purposes, provided that the information quoted is reproduced without adaptation and the source and date of publication are stated.

## Service information

### Brief description of the service

Safehouses Fostering is a small independent Foster Care Agency. The service recruits, approves and supports a range of carers providing short and medium to long-term care for children of all ages. They also have carers who can accommodate mother and baby placements.

### 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 service is managed effectively with visible and strong leadership and management. There are robust arrangements for recruiting, assessing and training foster carers. These ensure that carers are suitable and that they have the knowledge and skills they need to support young people to achieve positive outcomes. Staff in the service take great care in matching children and young people with carers who are best able to meet their needs. They also provide excellent ongoing support to maintain placement stability and a large number of children and young people enjoy long term settled placements with their carers. As a result they thrive in their placements and feel safe and well-cared for.

Children and young people live with foster carers who actively promote their education, health and heritage. Carers facilitate positive contact with children and young people's birth families. They help them in kindly, effective ways to manage and change troubled behaviour that can develop as a consequence of their histories. As a result, children and young people make exceptional progress from their starting points across all aspects of their development. As one independent reviewing officer commented: 'They are very good at advocating for the children, especially around

securing permanency options. I find them to be very flexible and responsive in meeting the children's needs. In particular, they are very good at one to one support to the children. I am confident that the agency ensures that the carers know what to do to keep the children safe. The supervising social workers have gone above and beyond in supporting the local authority so that children's needs are met. They have promoted life story work and family tree information so that children are really confident in their identity.'

Safeguarding arrangements are robust and the agency works to ensure that relationships with partner organisations are constructive. This helps to ensure that individual children and young people are protected and their needs met without delay. One breach of regulation is identified in relation to appropriate notification of relevant agencies about significant events including allegations and serious concerns. This shortfall has no impact on safeguarding or promoting the welfare of children and young people. Three recommendations are made to improve practice concerning procedures and supervision of panel members.

## Areas of 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.

Requirement	Due date
If any of the events listed in column 1 of the table in Schedule 7 takes place in relation to a fostering agency, the registered person must without delay notify the persons or bodies indicated in respect of the event in column 2 of the table; with specific regard to any serious complaint about any foster carer approved by the fostering agency. (Regulation 36 (1))	10/09/2015

### Recommendations

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

Allegations against people that work with children or members of the fostering household are reported by the fostering service to the LADO. This includes allegations that on the face of it may appear relatively insignificant or that have been reported directly to the police or Children and Family Services (NMS 22.6)

All staff, volunteers and the registered person are properly managed and supported

and understand to whom they are accountable; with specific reference to clear supervision arrangements for panel members (NMS 24.2)

There are clear and effective procedures for monitoring and controlling the activities of the service; with regard to revision of the agency procedures in general, and specifically those in relation to substance mis-use and allegations management. (NMS 25.1)

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

Judgement outcome: Outstanding

Feedback from children confirms that they feel well-cared for, safe and at ease with their foster carers. Where possible, they are provided with easily accessible and helpful information about their potential carers prior to moving. If they are not able to live with their brothers and sisters, they are sensitively supported to keep in touch so that those vital relationships are maintained. Children and young people feel part of their foster families and are able to develop significant attachments within secure long term placements. This includes remaining under Special Guardianship Orders where appropriate. Consequently, they feel very valued and welcomed. As one birth parent commented: 'My son has been in their care since he was 18 months old. He's now 14. I am happy with the progress he is making. He is turning into a lovely, mischievous young person. I couldn't have asked for better foster carers. The agency picked the right family for me and my son. I've no worries at all about their ability to keep him safe. He is happy there. That makes me happy and gives me peace of mind.'

Children have access to a wide range of leisure activities which helps them to enjoy their interests, develop self-confidence and maintain good health. Foster carers encourage children to participate in normal activities in the same way that any reasonable parent would. Every child is involved in at least one community club such as brownies, drama and cadets. This helps them to develop social skills, make new friends and promotes their integration into the local community. The agency also provides an exciting array of activities, especially during the school holidays. This gives children and carers the opportunity to meet and have fun together. At Christmas, staff and carers did a pantomime with the children and young people. The process of rehearsals and working together as a team helped children and young people to get to know each other, improve their social skills, support each other, and learn cooperation. It demonstrably increased their confidence. As a result, several young people have now become involved in school drama groups which have given them the chance to shine in something. As one school confirmed: 'He has snowballed in his interest in the performing arts and he has blossomed as a result.'

The agency ensures that children have excellent access to support and help to enable them to achieve their best possible outcomes. This includes interventions by specialist services in the community in relation to sexual and emotional health. For example, one child has had support from a bereavement agency. His carer has also

undertaken training with this resource so that she is able to manage and understand his needs better. As their supervising social worker commented: 'His communication skills have improved, he is more confident in social settings and he is better able to play in groups. He is sleeping a lot better now. He used to make random allegations linked with flashbacks to his very abusive past – this has all subsided now.'

Children and young people benefit in particular from the in-house teacher who provides exceptional support for every child in the agency with a view to raising their attainment and achievement. She ensures that all new children have an assessment of their educational needs using key stage material so that subsequent interventions are based on well-informed, base-line criteria. This helps to keep a focus on each child's individual needs and informs the agency tracking of their progress. Her role includes liaison with community education professionals to support children and young people in their school placements and address any extra tuition needs. This helps to raise their aspirations. For example, the teacher has helped one young person raise her sights from a hair and beauty course to instead deciding to become a teacher. This young person asked for and received extra tuition to achieve this ambition. The teacher also provides direct teaching sessions to children and young people where needed, including independence work around practical and emotional life skills. She tries to help children and young people enjoy their learning so that they become attached to it. She also works with carers to help them to navigate the education systems so that they are confident in advocating for the children and young people. As one social worker confirmed: 'I have worked with the agency for a number of years. I think they are one of the best ones. They give their all to the young people and the foster carers. They are really good at working together with me. They put in additional one to one educational support when it is needed. This has helped to improve young people's GCSE results. They support young people in looking at future college and university placements. They call meetings when things may not be going well. They are always proactive.'

All the children and young people attend school or other educational provision. Their attendance is excellent with the large majority of them attending at least 98% of the time. Agency progress reports over the last two years demonstrate much improved attendance and attainment for almost all the children from their starting points. For example, three siblings had previously struggled to maintain school attendance prior to coming to the agency but are now doing very well. This reflects their settled foster home circumstances which have enabled them to relax and enjoy school. A number of young people are on track to achieve good GCSE grades and to have realistic aspirations to attend university. As one social worker said: 'The agency has 100% helped my young person to make progress. He has a fantastic relationship with the supervising social worker – better than with me. He has made massive progress since he came into the agency. He now goes to school, has made an attachment with his carer and has been in a stable placement for a number of years. He has matured. The carers have given him a stable home and have helped him to start to prepare for the future.'

Children and young people have many opportunities to express their wishes and feelings. They have at least four individual sessions a year with the agency support worker. They also talk alone with the supervising social workers. Children and young people are encouraged to attend panel meetings and to involve themselves in the

dialogue. Their views contribute towards the carer reviews and their input is valued. They have also played a significant role in re-designing the digital information about the service that is made available to every child who comes into the agency. This new children's guide includes children and young people's voices, ideas and drawings to make the guide more current and accessible. Carers' own children are also included in a lot of activities. The agency offers first aid courses to any young people in the fostering household as well as expecting both carers to do this training. The agency thus demonstrates genuine commitment to valuing and acting upon children and young people's views.

## Quality of service

Judgement outcome: Outstanding

Foster carers at Safehouses are carefully chosen. They are welcoming, protective and proud of children that they care for. Recruitment, vetting and approval processes are robust and rigorous. They ensure that carers are chosen who have the personal attributes to provide kind, caring and reparatory family foster care for children who have often been subject to difficult, and sometimes, traumatic experiences. As one birth parent enthused: 'I'm over the moon with the care my daughter is getting. I couldn't have asked for better people.'

The agency uses external independent assessors with appropriate qualifications and experience. Managers have provided external expert training with the assessors and the panel so that their practice is informed by current research and is fully up-to-date. Quality assurance feedback confirms that the assessments are thorough with an appropriate focus on analysis. As one panel member commented: 'Assessments presented to the panel are exemplary.' The panel chair has been experienced and knowledgeable, and provided effective leadership in encouraging members to challenge and rigorously consider approvals, reviews and deregistration. That chair has recently left and managers are in process of considering some strong candidates to take up the role. The panel administration is very efficient and members receive the papers in good time so they can give them their full consideration. Decision making is similarly prompt and effective.

Matching processes represent a significant strength of the agency. Carers comment that they are under no pressure to take placements, and all the supervising social workers have a detailed knowledge of the carers when considering new referrals. They take careful account of carer issues alongside the stated needs of the children and young people. They have profiles for each carer that they can send out to placing authorities. There is no push or pressure on carers to have to take referrals. It is a shared information-based process in which carers have the final say. The agency has refused placements when information provided was insufficient. They pride themselves on not being finance-driven as their emphasis is about placing the right children with the right carers. This has contributed towards an historically very low level of placement breakdowns.

On the rare occasion that a placement ends prematurely the responsible authority and the fostering service convene a no-blame 'reflection meeting' in order to review what has happened. Consideration is given to the fostered child's background history (prior to the placement), how and why the particular foster family was selected for the child, how they were introduced and how the placement proceeded. This enables all involved to learn from events as they occurred and not to apportion blame. These lessons are then used to help make plans for the fostered child's future, and to inform subsequent discussions about the foster carers' professional development.

Foster carers are given all the information they need to enable them to care for the child or young person. This always includes information about their previous experiences including any challenging behaviour in other placements. Carers are given the maximum flexibility for taking decisions relating to children and young people placed with them which is consistent with their care plan and placement plan, taking account of their legal status and the wishes of their parents. It ensures that foster carers are clear about what delegated authority they have. This minimises delays in decision-making and maximises the child's opportunity to enjoy their childhood and a full family life. As an independent reviewing officer confirmed: 'The carers have a really good understanding of the child's needs. They support contact with birth family very well. They advocate on his behalf. They have had a massively positive impact in all areas of his life. For example, in the unconditional emotional support they offer him.'

Supervising social workers make monthly supervision visits to foster carers with an additional support visit during the month as well. The formal supervision has a clear purpose, with focussed records being agreed and shared by both parties. All meetings are structured and provide the foster carer with an opportunity to reflect on their work and the effect that fostering is having on them and their family. The supervising social workers make sure that foster carers are familiar with the requirements of the regulations, statutory guidance and national minimum standards as well as local policies and procedures that are relevant to their role, and that the foster carers understand and agree to adhere to these. Supervising social workers are watchful for, and responsive to, indications that placements may be under strain. Foster carers are open to advice and fully engaged in discussions about how to avoid situations escalating. At least two unannounced visits are made each year to check on standards of care provided. This provides extremely robust oversight and support of the carers so that children's welfare and safety is promoted. As one external professional endorsed: 'I think this agency is one of the best. They always attend every meeting and support contact with the child really well. They go that extra mile. They provide excellent activities. My young person feels massively part of the foster family. They definitely keep him safe. He is doing excellently in school and that is down to the support from the agency and carers. They are more like a real family than a foster family.'

Foster carers are genuinely core members of the team working with a fostered child, and are recognised and respected by social workers for the knowledge, skills and experience they bring to their role. As one carer confirmed: 'We are treated like professional people.' The agency has carers who can offer placements to children with complex needs. It provides exceptional support and training in response to



these needs for as long as it is required. This is delivered via a comprehensive daily and out-of-hours service which carers find invaluable as it is responsive and effective. As some carers confirmed: 'Every time we've had an issue, the agency has always been there. They have assisted in every possible way even to the point of providing day care when we couldn't.' Respite is only used when it is in the child's best interests.

In order to further support and develop the carers, the agency provides a wide range of training which includes Webster Stratton group programmes, internet safety, child sexual exploitation, autism and grief and bereavement, together with a whole host of other relevant topics. Carers report that training has helped them to understand the reasons behind some behaviour so that they feel confident in how to respond to them. As one carer commented: 'Attachment and Webster Stratton training has equipped me with the skills to manage behaviour. When our child came to live with us we were unable to go into a shop or for a meal without him becoming angry and aggressive and shouting and screaming. By taking things slowly and at his pace, and by praising good and ignoring bad behaviour, we are now able to go out for something to eat on a regular basis.' The service recognises that some carers have difficulty in getting to courses during the weekday so provides training in the evenings and at weekends. This is particularly valued by working foster carers.

The agency provides frequent formal carer forums which are sometimes attached to training events to encourage participation. The new office premises enable them to host large meetings comfortably. These meetings discuss service development and practice issues with carers. The agency also always involves carers in the recruitment of staff. This demonstrates that carers' views are sought and taken seriously as part of the professional team.

Foster carers are excellent at working with members of the birth family and demonstrate significant empathy. As a result, the children and young people they care for have a better understanding of their situation. This includes sensitive attention to religious and cultural needs in trans-racial placements so that children and young people retain a strong sense of their heritage and identity. For example, in one case, some Asian Muslim carers have supported children from a different religion and ethnic background to actively practise their faith by attending church and associated religious ceremonies. The carer has worked closely with the children's faith school to be confident in what she needs to know. As she commented: 'It means a lot to me to respect their religion.' These children are very well integrated with the carers' immediate and wider family, and are admirably supported to keep contact with brothers, sisters and other birth family members. As one external professional observed: 'If you could bottle what the carers are doing with the boys it would stop wars.'

## **Safeguarding children and young people**

Judgement outcome: Good

There are strong arrangements in place to ensure that children and young people are safeguarded and their welfare is promoted. These include rigorous systems for checking the suitability of foster carers and staff, effective training and excellent arrangements for supervising and supporting carers.

Children and young people are helped to understand risk and be able to make safe lifestyle choices. The agency has invested in the services of an independent safeguarding trainer who will provide bespoke training for carers and children and young people to further raise awareness of risk. Over the next year she will be providing training in sexual exploitation, self-harm and substance abuse. Carers have safeguarding training every year so that they maintain a good base of safeguarding knowledge. Supervising social workers are clear with carers that attendance is obligatory. On the rare occasion that carers fail to attend, supervising social workers remind them about their contract and will withhold placements if they do not attend. Ultimately they would take them back to panel for review. As one commissioner said: 'The agency has a real professional feel to it. I have no hesitation that they do everything to ensure that carers are appropriately trained and supported in safeguarding the children.'

Supervising social workers ensure that foster carers have all the information they need to safeguard the children and young people. Placement plans and risk assessments take into account the impact of any abuse or neglect, and identify the actions required to protect and support the children and young people. Those plans and assessments are regularly reviewed and up-dated as necessary so that all possible areas of concern for carers and children are addressed. Internet safety has been a big topic of discussion with carers. Even though carers may not be able to keep up with the technical pace of information technology and social media, carers are clear that it is about developing honest and open relationships so that children and young people will talk to them about what they are doing, and about anything that worries them. In some situations, this approach has been useful in helping carers to recognise bullying emanating from a school setting so that they could take appropriate action. Carers are clear about what to do if a child discloses abuse or may be at risk in some way. Foster carers develop a safe care policy for their household which incorporates the specific needs of individual children and young people in their care. These are regularly reviewed by supervising social workers along with health and safety matters in each household. This helps to ensure that plans provide effective protection for children, young people, carers and their families.

The managers and staff have a very good knowledge of each child and young person who is looked after by the agency. Supervising social workers routinely speak to children and young people on their own, and every child and young person has at least four one to one sessions with a support worker as an opportunity to share any worries or concerns. Supervising social workers conduct at least two unannounced visits to fostering households per year. This promotes effective safeguarding. Agency recruitment processes are robust so that unsuitable individuals are deterred from having access to children and young people.

Very few children go missing from home or are considered to be at risk of sexual exploitation. On the rare occasion that they do go missing, adults take action to

protect them and to review plans where they continue to be at risk. As one social worker said: 'Carers work well with young people who go missing, though these occasions are very infrequent. The agency provides a lot of support to carers to manage any risks. Agency staff have even driven out to collect my young person when they have found out where he is.' The agency works effectively with relevant agencies to ensure that risks are managed robustly. Where necessary, individual risk management plans are put in place which identify specific strategies to protect and support children and young people.

The agency has demonstrated thorough and sensitive management of a very serious allegation against a carer. Managers have done everything they need to do, including taking appropriate legal and expert advice to guide their decision-making. As the local authority designated person confirmed: 'The agency has worked brilliantly with us. They are very open and open-minded. They have attended all meetings. They work really well with other professionals. They are very knowledgeable about fostering regulations which has helped the process here. They have done everything asked of them. I have no concerns whatsoever. They have acted instantly and appropriately. They have been as supportive as they can be to the male carer.' That said, agency practice in relation to a more minor allegation against another carer did not meet all the expectations of the national minimum standards. In this situation, the agency failed to notify all relevant parties, though did otherwise take completely appropriate action to safeguard the children and young people involved. Failure to refer even minor allegations prevents safeguarding agencies from discerning potential patterns in abusive behaviour and taking action accordingly. Similarly, failure to notify Ofsted about such matters is a breach of regulation and does not allow the regulator to provide an appropriate level of scrutiny of the agency's safeguarding practice.

Policies and procedures in general need reviewing and up-dating. The agency plans to up-date them fully and put them on-line so that carers can have easy and immediate access. However, more clarification is required in the safeguarding policies about the management of minor allegations and the expectations of carers in dealing with possible drugs on their premises, both legal and illegal, and the monitoring of young people who may have ingested harmful substances.

## **Leadership and management**

Judgement outcome: Good

The Registered Manager is highly experienced and suitably qualified. She has good networking connections in the fostering world which enable her to keep abreast of current research and practice. She has appropriate management qualifications and is aiming to enhance these by undertaking a more advanced leadership and management course in the coming year. She is supported by an extremely experienced Responsible Individual who is also one of the directors, and is very

involved with the agency. She is very accessible to everyone within the agency. This helps to promote positive morale as carers and staff get to see her as an individual and not as a faceless person in a large organisation. This means that ideas can be acted upon swiftly which is very motivating and makes people feel valued. As one member of staff commented: 'It is very much an inter-dependent model here, not a pyramid. I can speak to anyone in this agency at any time. Everyone is approachable. We all interconnect and are inter-dependent. This minimises barriers to decisions getting made and supports foster carers and young people.' The Registered Manager is further supported by a new quality assurance manager. This manager has been previously a registered manager and brings a very good understanding of the regulatory framework to his position. As managers, their styles are very different but are complementary, and together with the Responsible Individual, they make a very strong but approachable management team.

Managers demonstrate forward-thinking in the development of the service. They recognised they needed to enhance their outdated infra-structure and systems. They accordingly brought in a new information technology system that has significantly improved their recording processes and has the facility in the future to provide systematic outcomes tracking. This has given more structure and confidence to the supervising social workers, the administrators and the managers as systems are more streamlined and coherent. However, the new system is still bedding in as data inputting has not been fully consistent and managers are still learning how to get the best out of it. Policies and procedures in general need reviewing and up-dating. The agency plans to up-date them fully and put them on-line so that carers can have easy and immediate access. However, more clarification is required in the safeguarding policies about the management of minor allegations and the expectations of carers in dealing with possible drugs on their premises, both legal and illegal, and the monitoring of young people who may have ingested some substances.

The agency faces current challenges with increasing the diversity and numbers of their carer base. The age mix tends to be more towards the older age group and this has caused some recent problems as a number of carers have chosen to retire. At the point of the inspection, the agency had 32 fostering households. As one senior manager commented: 'Growth is vital to maintain our place in a very competitive market'. The Registered Manager acknowledges that they have not achieved that growth as well as they could have up to now as she was unable to meet targets set last year. Leaders and managers understand that this is not tenable in light of the age demographic of their carer base. They have changed their approach with new marketing strategies and a new recruitment officer post to try to improve the situation this year. They have advertised in local mosques and temples, in the Asian press, and have made their presentation more multi-cultural on their website. They have approached the North West Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual and Transgender Group with a view to increasing the diversity of potential new carers. Managers are also considering approaches to youth club leaders and teachers who may be interested in fostering older children with complex needs in line with the needs of their catchment area local authorities. It is too soon to say how effective these strategies will be but the direction of travel, intent and activity is positive. Leaders and managers are completely confident about their financial viability and have insurance and business

continuity plans in place should the planned growth not materialise.

Leaders and managers monitor the quality of the service provided and conduct a thorough review of the fostering agency annually. This is informed by feedback from children, young people and carers. The Registered manager has recognised that they need to build their skills base in relation to working with teenagers with challenging behaviour. To this end, she has brought in specific training to promote parenting skills and understand attachments issues for this age range. The training enables carers to work together and nurture each other and is helpful in addressing complacency of experienced carers. It helps experienced carers to admit to making mistakes and encourages their reflective skills. The aim is to get carers to a point where they feel confident in themselves, have built their family supports and have a good understanding about de-escalation techniques. This demonstrates that the agency is proactively driving continuous improvement in service provision and is looking to meet the commissioning needs of their local area.

The manager acknowledges that it has been a tough year for the agency with introduction of the new systems, changes in the staff team, changes in the panel, recruitment of new staff, and the impact of requiring one supervising social worker to take voluntary redundancy. It has amounted to a lot of change in a short time, albeit of a positive nature with a view to refreshing their practice and processes. She has been able to call on a lot of additional support as needed from known, highly experienced independent practitioners to mitigate against too much adverse impact of the staff changes. However, all the new staff need to settle in and managers have to ensure that all staff remain fully motivated and buy into the service development. Staff feedback in Ofsted surveys earlier in this year was very mixed and reflected some resentment about the nature and pace of the changes at that time. At the point of the inspection, all staff appeared to be very positive and morale was high.

Supervising social workers are all qualified and appropriately experienced. Staff report that they feel well supported by good quality supervision and relevant training, including input from external acknowledged experts in the fostering world. As one supervising social worker said: 'My training needs have always been met. It is one of the quite remarkable things about the agency. They are always supportive of me doing whatever training I feel I need.' Performance management processes are robust and appraisals are completed annually with colleague, carer and young people feedback. This helps to obtain a wide picture of individuals' performance. The manager is able to address difficult issues firmly and fairly, including use of disciplinary processes as necessary.

---

## About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to inform 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 and 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.