

# Nexus Fostering

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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## Service information

### Brief description of the service

Nexus Fostering is an independent agency that provides fostering services in London, the Home Counties, South East, South West, Anglia and Midlands areas of England. It operates under one registration from its main office in London and has satellite offices in Birmingham, Gloucester, Norwich, Cambridge and Upminster.

The agency specialises in providing foster care placements for short term, task centred placements; long term; parent and child; sibling groups; children and young people with disabilities; enhanced 'Care Plus' placements, Staying Put and post 18; asylum seeking children and young people and Special Guardianship and/or adoption support.

The agency's statement of purpose identifies one of the service's key aims, 'To provide fostering placements for 'looked after' children and young people, that offer a stable and consistent experience of family life, to enhance and maximise their life opportunities.'

At the time of the inspection, the fostering agency has 175 approved fostering households, with 283 children and young people in placement. A small number of young adults are in placement under the agency's Staying Put initiative.

### 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: **Outstanding**

The fostering agency at its last full Ofsted inspection in 2011 received a rating of outstanding. Since this time, the service has continued to make significant strides in improving its service provision and the quality of care is excellent. This results in exceptionally positive outcomes, progress and experiences of children and young people in placement.

The fostering service negotiates and maintains highly successful and stable foster care placements. Unplanned endings are extremely rare and are well below the national average. Children and young people are safe and have a strong sense of belonging. They thrive in secure placements and share strong attachments with their foster carers.

The recruitment and preparation of foster carers is robust and thorough. The fostering agency approves skilled, experienced foster carers who are able to offer quality placements that meet the diverse needs of looked after children.

Staff complete detailed assessments of potential foster carers. These are consistently comprehensive and analytical in nature and identify key safe caring competencies. The review of approved foster carers is comprehensive and ensures they remain suitable to offer safe, quality placements.

Foster carers work in close collaboration with other professionals and made valid contributions to planning and decision-making for children and young people. They benefit from professional, supportive and challenging relationships with the fostering service and field social workers. Staff work effectively with external partners to ensure services meet the needs of children and young people's and that they receive safe care.

The fostering service places high value on the views and opinions of children and young people. The agency considers this a priority and its strong consultation efforts help shape agency developments and strategic thinking.

The management and leadership of the service is strong and ambitious. Leaders are creative and innovative and are highly visible to all stakeholders, including children and young people. They manage the fostering service efficiently and effectively and continuously strive to improve service provision. This results in excellent outcomes and experiences for children and young people.

## Areas of improvement

### Recommendations

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

- Consider recruiting a representative of child health to the fostering panel. (NMS 14.6)
- Ensure foster carers achieve the Training, Support and Development Standards within 12 months of approval. (NMS 20.3)

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

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

Children and young people receive informative information about their prospective foster carers prior to moving into the placement. The service provides easy-read, age-appropriate information about the service. This is supplemented by individual foster care profiles, so children and young people have a sense of the family they are about to join. This helps settle them into their foster home and understand how their foster carers will look after them. Currently the Young People's Participation Group are developing a new, creative welcome box to support the transition into foster care. One young person told the inspector, 'I want to put things in the box that I never received when I first came into foster care. Useful, fun things, so that it's not so scary.'

Children and young people looked after receive quality, individualised care tailored to meet their needs. Staff devise comprehensive placement plans that identify specific needs and how the service intends to address these. Placement plans are relevant to the individual and are conducive with local authority care planning objectives.

Children and young people feel very safe and secure and develop strong, healthy attachments with their foster caring family. One young person told the inspector, 'I love my family and I know they love me.' The fostering service is skilled in supporting and nurturing stable, long-term placements; they have an excellent record of providing children and young people with successful permanent placements. This includes Special Guardianship Orders and through adoption arrangements. Unplanned endings are rare. Placing authorities are appreciative of this. One social worker states, 'The carers could not have welcomed X into this family any more than if he was a blood relation.'

Children and young people make exception progress from their starting points. They experience a wide range of opportunities to support and help them maximise their achievements and promote their general development. This is a clear strength of the service. Staff have excellent knowledge and insight of individual children and young people and their progress. Where progress is slow, staff and foster carers are proactive in taking remedial action. This is particularly evident in relation to children and young people's health and education.

Children and young people's educational and learning outcomes are positive. The fostering service's 'education ambassador' takes the lead within the agency for ensuring young people's educational needs are met; that policy, practice and agency development actively promotes young people's learning outcomes and that education remains a high priority at all levels.

The fostering service celebrates academic and more general achievements and this

acts as an incentive to promote educational and other attainment. The fostering service has effective tracking systems to chart attendance, exclusion, and educational progress and target projections. School-aged children very regularly attend school, while older children are keenly engaged in further education or vocational studies. Some progress to go on to university. Children and young people benefit from the service's creative initiatives that encourage children and young people to enjoy learning. For example, the service's book club is a programme that facilitates children and young people to receive free books. Social events and other activities routinely include the exchange of books, most selected by children and young people themselves.

Staff and foster carers are intently involved in the education of those they care for. They routinely attend parent consultation events, personal education planning meetings and celebratory school events. Foster carers are particularly skilled in advocating for the appropriate use of pupil premium funding. This ensures that finance available to support learning is maximised. A local authority social worker comments, 'The carers are excellent advocates for D and I am aware they support him totally in terms of his education.'

Children and young people live in a healthy environment and the service promotes their physical, emotional and social well-being. A senior member of the service is the 'health ambassador' and takes the lead on ensuring health care issues remain high on the agency's agenda for continual improvement.

Young people's healthcare outcomes are very good. They have good access to primary health care services and receive advice and support from specialist services where this is required. Staff and foster carers encourage young people to take responsibility for their own health. For example, the fostering service supplies each child and young person with his or her own personal record book. Young people or their carers complete the sections. The file contains a range of pertinent information relating to education, finance and health. The record book charts health care information such as childhood illnesses, medication and immunizations records. As children and young people move on, the record book remains in their possession.

This is an effective way to chart health issues, while involving children and young people in their own health care. A local authority social worker comments, 'Both emotionally and physically, the carers ensure that X has a healthy diet, although he can and does choose not to accept this. The carers have encouraged D to join a 'child friendly' gym.'

The fostering service's support to children and young people living with disabilities is also very effective and they receive excellent care that meets their needs. Foster carers receive appropriate training such as gastric feeds and information about the safe management of HIV and epilepsy. Foster carers are first aid trained and are able to administer young people's medication safely.

Children and young people's emotional and psychological well-being is a high priority for the agency in acknowledgement of the high degree of trauma most looked after

children have endured. The service expertly supports this aspect of children and young people's development through the work of the agency's psychotherapist.

The psychotherapist has developed the service's unique Care Plus programme, a therapeutically enhanced placement initiative. Families have access to this professional support that primarily offers guidance and practical strategies to address risk taking or challenging behaviour. There is a strong focus on attachment, with a three-day training component. All staff and foster carers complete this training. The programme is hugely successful and has had a significant impact on supporting challenging placements to continue and offer children and young people safe, stable and often permanent placements. The Care Plus initiative is further illustration of the high quality of care the service provides.

The fostering service values and places high priority on the views and opinions of children and young people. Managers and staff proactively seek to obtain the wishes and feeling of young people in an effort to inform individual care planning and shape the future of the service. Staff routinely obtain young people's feelings and wishes during interviews conducted during supervisory visits. Other avenues include consultation via foster carers' reviewing process and statutory Looked After Children's reviews. Since the last inspection however, the fostering service has further enhanced its consultation efforts with children and young people. The initiative is both innovative and effective.

The service has developed a functional young people's participation programme and Youth Council. There is a 'participation ambassador' in place. The initiative encourages children and young people to volunteer themselves to assist staff to work on projects they jointly identify as being a priority. Recent projects include developing the welcome box for young people new to fostering; participation on the skills to foster training; policy development, working on key consultation documents and the recruitment of new fostering panel members. Young people's contribution to the development of the service cannot be understated and the service is commended for this practice and ethos.

The fostering service's preparation of older young people for adulthood is effective and is also commended. Young people benefit from the input of their foster carers and staff of the service that help prepare them to manage their lives more independently. The 'preparation for independence ambassador' takes the lead on developing policies and initiatives to support young people's transition to adulthood. This recently includes distributing the Care Leaver's Charter, researching relevant research and practice materials to share with young people, producing newsletter ideas, developing, and supporting the agency's Staying Put policies and practice. Young people clearly benefit from having designated staff work on their behalf to enhance their transition to adulthood. Some very vulnerable young people make remarkable progress as they continue to live with their former foster carers through the agency's Staying Put scheme.

Children and young people enjoy access to their parents, brothers and sisters when it is safe for them to do so. This is to ensure that they maintain a sense of their



heritage and to promote a positive sense of identity. The fostering service ensures that foster carers adhere to contact arrangements and that these arrangements remain in the best interest of looked after children.

## Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

The quality of care provided by foster carers is exemplary. Staff and foster carers are genuinely committed to supporting young people reach their full potential. This inspection notes numerous examples of foster carers exceeding the agency's high standard of care in order to achieve the very best outcomes for those they care for. Consequently, young people feel secure and loved and there are significant changes in how they present and behave. A social worker comments, 'In 21 years of social work I cannot think of another agency I have been so impressed with. It is clear that the carers I have worked with are of a high quality in terms of not only what is expected of them, but the training they must have received.'

The fostering agency recruits a range of foster carers, in line with their statement of purpose, who can meet the very diverse needs of looked after children. The fostering service has clear and successful marketing strategies in place to attract potential foster carers. The use of the agency's website, social media, and blogs and search engines is innovative and effective. Where 'word of mouth' and more traditional recruitment strategies are successful, these methods are used. Designated marketing staff have excellent insight into the needs of the head office and the six satellite offices and respond effectively. For example, recently there has been an increased demand for parent and child placements in the Gloucester area. The marketing team is responding accordingly to meet this need. The service has in place an 'ambassador' for parent and child placements to address related issues across the service.

The preparation, assessment, support and training of foster carers is excellent and the needs of young people is a consistent and strong theme. Indeed, children and young people are involved directly or indirectly with all these processes.

Prospective foster carers receive clear information and training to prepare them for their fostering role. Feedback from foster carers is overwhelmingly positive about their experiences and they enjoy participating. A foster carer's feedback form states, 'They were brilliant and extremely clear and communicative about the support they could offer. My initial enquiry was treated with warmth and I was welcome to ask questions throughout.' Another foster carer's feedback form read, 'During my Form F, Nexus really made me think and make sure that fostering was right for us.'

Foster carers' support, supervision and training is highly effective. This ensures that young people receive a quality standard of safe care that meets their needs. Foster carers, staff, managers and young people all comment on the fostering service

functioning more as a family, where people care about each other and share openly concerns, issues and success. The inspection finds many examples of this being exactly the case.

Foster carers receive an impressive range of training that helps them care safely for some very vulnerable young people. Managers' continual monitoring and evaluation of this training ensures its effectiveness. Training subject matter is diverse and relevant to the fostering task. In recent months, training has included issues such as life story work, child sexual exploitation, safe caring and autism awareness. This year there has been significant focus on offering the three-day 'Understanding Attachment, Regulation and Resilience' training. The agency's psychologist offers the programme to all staff and foster carers, in an effort to better equip the entire work force with skills to address primarily issues of attachment and its impact on family life.

Training is highly effective and participants are appreciative of the agency's investment. A foster says of her training, 'I absolutely love it. It is so good and we get to re-visit things we need to. The training is always spot on, informative and useful. I always leave having enjoyed the course; the trainers are quality. The first aid training is to die for. Brilliant!' The majority of approved foster carers have completed the Training and Development Standards as required. Some however have not completed this training within the 12-month timeframe as specified in the national minimum standards.

Staff's supervision of foster carers, their practice and monitoring of placement progress is outstanding. Typically, supervising social workers visit placements on a fortnightly basis. Staff may reduce the frequency of visits, only once the placement is stable and there are no concerns. Staff ensure they frequently interview young people in private to ensure they have an opportunity to discuss any placement issues. Staff records of supervisory visits are comprehensive and consistently explore the experiences, progress and protection of young people, placement issues and the impact of fostering on the foster family.

The support of foster carers is equally excellent. Foster carers overwhelmingly indicate that this, for them, is strongest feature of the fostering service. Staff arrange and facilitate support groups for foster carers; attendance at these across the agency is variable. Some foster carers prefer to meet each other informally without the input of staff, while in other offices attendance is not high. In yet other offices, attendance at support groups is good.

Support via supervising social workers is exceptional. All foster carers interviewed comment on the quality of support staff offer them. A foster carer subject to a safeguarding allegation told the inspector, 'Support from the agency was fantastic.' This is also the view of shared with inspectors of a foster carer struggling to come to terms with the ending of a placement as the child moved on for adoption. More generally, foster carers' feedback on support received is extremely positive. Typically, foster carers mentioned feeling 'part of a family'; that staff are 'always there when you need them.' A foster carer said of the out of hour's service, 'They pick up the

telephone immediately. They seem pleased that you have called and offer you really good support and advice.'

This strong support of foster carers helps strengthen the stability of placements, as foster carers understand and appreciate the fostering service's commitment to them and the young people they look after.

The fostering service has two fostering panels in operation. The service has clear policies and procedures in place to support panel practice. The fostering panels operate effectively and promotes safe and stable placements. Panel members are from a diverse range of backgrounds and have diverse fields of expertise. Currently however, there are no representatives from child health. This will be of particular benefit when considering the re-approval of foster carers and children and young people in placement.

The two panels undertake clear and appropriate analyses of the work presented at panel meetings. There is communication between the two panel chairs and two agency decision makers, but minimal liaison between the two panels. The fostering service will benefit from closer communication and liaison between the two fostering panels to enhance the consistency of practice and panel development. The administration of the fostering panels is effective and there are periodic training opportunities for those on the central list to support practice.

Young people and foster carers benefit from staff's comprehensive completion of foster care assessments. These are analytical and identify the competencies and strengths foster carers have or need to develop. Staff complete all assessments and approvals in a timely manner; foster carers are clear about their roles and that of the agency and local authority. Foster carers' reviews are robust and ensure foster carers remain suitable to care safely for young people.

The fostering service's matching process is vigorous and efficient. A centralised team ensure that careful matching meets individual identified needs well. Foster carers are very much involved in this process. Care plans are well adhered to by all parties. This helps promotes permanency and minimise unnecessary placement drift.

Foster carers understand explicitly the importance of working in partnership with the fostering service and other professionals and do so well. Foster carers confirm and case files evidence the effective partnership working between staff, foster carers and other involved professionals such as the child's social worker, health and educational experts. Involved professionals are aware of placement progress and issues, and participate in decision-making about children's lives.

Placing authorities hold the service's quality of care in high regard. A local authority social worker says the following, 'I genuinely could not have wanted better carers for Y and feel sure that Y's experience of living with M and R will be with him for the rest of his life and will have provided a very positive foundation for Y as he moves into adolescence and then adulthood. They are that good.'

## Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

The fostering service staff team and foster carers ensure that the safety and well-being of children and young people is paramount. The recruitment, assessment, preparation, supervision and training of foster carers has a very strong focus on safeguarding. The fostering service's protection of children and young people is robust at all levels and is effective in keeping young people safe. This is another clear strength of the service.

Young people benefit from the agency's clear and comprehensive safeguarding and child protection policies. Managers review policies regularly to ensure their continued effectiveness. The registered manager is the 'safeguarding ambassador' for the agency. A designated lead for safeguarding is soon to be in place at all satellite offices. This is to ensure there is effective and consistent protocols and systems in place to ensure the protection of young people. Currently, the registered manager is responsible for the promotion of child protection within the agency; to share and cascade pertinent research and trends and to monitor and report on all safeguarding issues within the service. The registered manager works in conjunction with the senior management team to ensure young people are safe. For example, the quality assurance manager recently has been instrumental in highlighting issues of radicalisation via the agency wide quality assurance bulletin issued to all staff.

Foster carers receive clear written guidance and excellent training to assist them to keep children from harm and abuse. Recently managers, staff and foster carers have shifted the focus of safeguarding to explore current concerning trends such as missing from care and child sexual exploitation. Where these concerns are evident, staff and foster carers take prompt and effective action to enhance the young people's safety. Young people consistently say they feel safe with their families, feel loved and are secure.

All fostering household have family safe care policies in place, and staff conduct at least one unannounced visit every 12 months. This is to promote further the safe care of young people.

Young people have access to clear and creative information about making complaints. The service receives few complaints, when this does occur, managers deal with issues sensitively and appropriately. Staff are proactive in securing independent advocates for young people if required. Occasionally, this is to help them express dissatisfaction with key partner agencies, or the fostering service itself. The agency has an open culture that supports the reporting of concerns. This is important to promote the safety of young people.

Staff devise comprehensive and relevant placement plans and risk assessments. These alert staff and foster carers to known and potential risks and offer strategies

to curb risk-taking behaviour. Placement plans are individualistic and highlight placement purpose and strategies to address identified needs. Managers ensure the monitoring of plans is regular and staff update these to account for any changing needs and emerging new risks or concerns.

The fostering service is proactive in ensuring there is effective partnership working with regard to child protection enquiries. There is purposeful and consistent liaison with involved professionals such as the designated officer, placing authority and the police. Staff attend and make valuable contributions to professional and strategy meetings that explore child protection issues.

Allegations against foster carers are infrequent. When these occur, staff manage these appropriately and with sensitivity. Young people who make allegations receive compassionate support from staff who also encourage them to contribute to the decision-making process. Foster carers, subject to allegations, similarly receive appropriate support both within and external to the fostering service.

The agency has sound systems in place for the safe vetting and recruitment of staff and others working on behalf of the service. These processes are comprehensive and vigorous. The service ensures that appropriate checks are carried out which confirm that staff and members of the central list are suitable to work with vulnerable children and young people.

## Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

The leadership and management of the fostering service is exceptional. Leaders and managers are inspirational and highly visible within the organisation. This allows them good opportunity to meet with all stakeholders, including children, young people, foster carers and their families to hear their ideas first-hand about the effectiveness of the service. Managers welcome and encourage feedback and they routinely act upon suggestions to enhance further the quality of the fostering service. Managers and leaders made themselves available to all interested parties. A foster care said of the responsible individual, 'Grace? She's everywhere!'

The last inspection resulted in no requirements or recommendations. This has not halted significant growth and progress within the service. The development of 'ambassadors' in key areas of the agency's function and operation is illustration of the creativity and innovation leaders utilise to improve service provision. The service's development plan is ambitious and identifies for example, the development of outcome tracking systems, increased use of IT technology; the review of foster carers' training opportunities and the review of career development opportunities for the staff team.

The fostering services monitoring systems are highly efficient and effective. This is to the benefit of young people. The agency has excellent insight into the quality of its

operation and function on all levels. The quality assurance manager is responsible for the overview of key areas of the service. This recently included the pilot of a new outcome tracker to chart young people's progress. The post holder conducts the regular review of policies and procedures to ensure they reflect current legislation and are fit for purpose. Other areas of the service subject to regular monitoring include file auditing, review of foster carer and staff training, safeguarding procedures and practices including runaway, complaints, allegations and restraint. The service's strong and efficient monitoring systems ensure all those involved in the agency are aware of the strengths of the service and areas identified for action. The agency invites stakeholders, particularly children and young people to contribute to help resolve any identified areas for improvement.

Leaders and managers ensure that children and young people have fun, engage with their communities and have influence on their day-to-day care. As illustrated elsewhere in this report, the agency views the experiences, outcomes and progress of children and young people as a priority. Consequently, staff make substantial efforts to engage all young people with the service and listen to what they have to say. The agency routinely invites young people to attend senior management forums and young people have led an annual agency away day. Children and young people enjoy receiving regular newsletters designed especially for them; the agency regularly facilitates social and consultation events for them to participate with and there are regular celebrations, competitions and trips arranged. These events are hugely popular, and act to enhance the overall experiences of looked after children.

The Registered Manager and responsible individual are highly skilled, very well qualified and experienced to manage the fostering service efficiently and with positive effect. Stakeholders both within and external to the fostering service overwhelmingly identify their strong skill, compassion and advocacy for looked after children as being exceptional. This is the view of staff and foster carers. A staff member said to the inspector, 'What keeps me here? John and Grace. The team and managers are absolute stars. Its 24/7 with them, I can seek them out whenever I need to and they are there 100% for children.'

The staff team in the majority of the offices have worked for the fostering service for a significant length of time. Despite the agency's considerable size, most staff members spoken with, describe the agency as having a 'family' feel. This is similar to comments made by foster carers. The staff group are qualified, experienced and extremely committed to providing good support to children, young people and their fostering families. They receive effective and consistent training, supervision, appraisals and reflective practice. The fostering service encourages staff's active participation in the development and improvement of the service. Staff are very highly valued by managers and leaders.

The statement of purpose is a detailed, comprehensive document that accurately outlines the aims and objectives of the fostering service. The two children's guides are well-written, creative summaries of services provided. These are informative easy-reads, geared towards the use of children and young people.

This fostering service is outstanding. It is very well organised, and is highly functional. The service has a clear vision for its developmental path and demonstrates a strong, continued commitment to ensuring the outcomes for children and young people are positive. The service has ambitious yet realistic plans in place to support its efforts to continue to offer exceptional quality care, ensuring the experiences and progress of children and young people continue to be exceptional.

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## 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.