

# Banya Family Placement Agency

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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**Date of last inspection** 09/03/2013

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## Service information

### Brief description of the service

Banya Family Placement Agency (Banya) is an independent fostering agency which is run as a private limited company with two directors. The agency meets a range of placement needs for children and young people, including sibling groups, and parent and child arrangements. At the time of the inspection, the agency had 141 fostering households and 111 children in placement.

### 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

Children thrive and blossom within nurturing placements. The agency successfully gives them 'a sense of belonging'. They develop secure primary attachments with their foster carers and feel part of a family. Their resilience and improved confidence and self-esteem make them aspirational for the future. They demonstrate improved health and educational outcomes. They benefit from very stable placements with well trained and supported foster carers. The implementation of a specialist database has been instrumental in the agency's ability to regularly monitor, review and track their individual progress. This enables the agency to swiftly address concerns.

Children feel safe and they benefit from effective safeguarding arrangements. A manager takes the lead on child protection, which ensures efficient oversight. Children learn the importance of keeping themselves safe. This includes on-line safety and the dangers of child sexual exploitation. Currently there are no serious issues in relation to children going missing. Children learn to manage their mood and take responsibility for their behaviour. They are helped by their foster carers

being trained in research-based therapeutic crisis intervention.

Children benefit from strong leadership and management arrangements. The agency has significantly grown since the last inspection. The agency has heavily invested in their relationships with local authorities, resulting in them having contracts with 33 local authorities nationwide. There has been a substantial drive for improvement since the last inspection. Staff are well supported and they benefit from continuous personal development. The agency is a learning organisation; they have developed a leadership and management academy for all supervisors. The organisation also has an international presence through their charity, which advances good health and education in Southern Africa and the UK.

Recommendations are made to enhance good practice and provide a more child - focused service. Children would appreciate more workshops in relation to adult life, employment and further education. Records in relation to children's progress and why they were matched to a specific foster carer need improvement. The agency decision maker does not send their written decision to applicants within five working days. Monitoring reports do not include information regarding consultation and improving the quality of care.

## **Areas of improvement**

### **Recommendations**

To improve the quality and standards of care further the service should take account of the following recommendations:

ensure children are supported to prepare for the world of work and or further or higher education; develop financial capability, knowledge and skills; and know about entitlements to financial and other support after leaving care, including benefits and support from social care services (NMS 12.1 c, f and g)

ensure the prospective foster carer is informed orally of the decision maker's decision within two working days and written confirmation is sent to them within five working days (NMS 14.10)

ensure the fostering service only suggests foster carers to local authorities as a potential match for a child if the foster carer can reasonably be expected to meet the child's assessed needs and the impact of the placement on existing household members has been considered. Where gaps are identified, the fostering service should work with the responsible authority to ensure the placement plan sets out any additional training, resource or support required (NMS 15.1)

ensure management of the service ensures all fostering activity is consistent with the 2011 Regulations, in particular Regulation 35 (NMS 25.3)

ensure information about the child is recorded in a way which will be helpful to the child when they access their files now or in the future. (NMS 26.6)



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

Judgement outcome: good

Children on the whole thrive and blossom within nurturing placements. The agency successfully gives them 'a sense of belonging'. Children describe their fostering experience as 'good and state that they are 'happy''. They highlight how fostering has helped them mentally, emotionally, educationally and socially. Children proudly showcase their room, new clothes, books and toys. Schools express amazement at children's progress, their improved appearance, social and communication skills. Children demonstrate resilience and improved confidence and self-esteem, which helps them to be aspirational for the future. The agency highlights famous people who have been fostered, which helps to normalise the looked after experience.

Children develop secure primary attachments with their foster carers. They feel part of a family and affectionately call their female foster carer 'Mum', 'Aunty' or 'Grandma'. Relatives form the majority of back-up carers, providing good continuity of care and familiarity to children. Banya offers a high number of placements where brothers and sisters can live together. If this is not possible, it helps that they are placed with other Banya foster carers. This helps to perpetuate their sense of family. Children benefit from the agency's active promotion of contact with their families. They are able to have sleepovers or go out on activities with their siblings. They are escorted to contact centres.

The agency has a placement breakdown rate which is lower than the national average. Children benefit from care and support, as long as they need. Placing authorities comment on their foster homes as being the child's 'most permanent place for a long time'. The agency provides permanency through the significant number of long-term placements and 'Staying Put' arrangements. In some cases this also extends to them being adopted by their foster carers. Children also benefit from carers who are able to successfully move them onto adoptive placements. The agency additionally provides a 'Shared Lives' schemes for vulnerable adults who are unable to live independently in the community. This provides good continuity of care for children with high dependency needs.

Children have an 'active voice' within the agency, influencing documentation, staff and foster carer recruitment, foster carer reviews and staff appraisals. A good example of their input being the 'welcome pack' which now includes more external contact details for children. They have their own participation officer who creatively consults with them during fun events and in regular telephone calls. Children state they enjoy 'being able to express views and give feedback'. The agency's plan for a children's committee could further formalise their input. The Registered Manager takes a keen interest in children's quotes and has been collecting them for over 30 years. The aim is to produce a book which showcases children's thoughts and experiences, giving them an even wider voice.

Children understand how to complain; however, they report there is 'nothing Banya can do differently'. They highlight that their foster carers are 'always there for you'.

Children live within foster homes which strongly promote their diverse needs. There is a good understanding of religious and cultural differences. The agency celebrates and raises awareness through specific events, an example being Black History Month. Muslim children are provided with prayer mats, halal food and supported to fast during Ramadan. Children attend their places of worship and take pride in who they are. Life story work further helps them to reflect on their lives and collate meaningful memories.

Children receive the necessary support to lead a healthy lifestyle. Where there is a delay in providing mental health services, the agency is able to provide therapy sessions for children. This includes access to art and play therapy. Exercise is part of their weekly routines, which includes swimming, trampolining, dancing, playing football and going to the gym. The agency's mentor helps to instil confidence and contributes to building children's self-esteem.

Children are achieving their educational potential and in some cases exceeding expectations. They receive awards from school for 'excellent work' in specific subjects. They also receive recognition from their placing authority, an example being the 'best improved young person since being looked after'. The agency rigorously monitors school attendance and educational outcomes. They also creatively use the pupil premium and have helped to joint-fund a teaching assistant. A high number of children go on to further education, including university. The agency is proud of children's achievements. Children qualify in a variety of professions, which includes a doctor and physiotherapist.

Children have the opportunity to pursue their hobbies and interests; they enjoy playing musical instruments and trying new activities such as horse riding. They engage in activities which are mentally stimulating, for example visiting museums. They also learn to appreciate cultural activities, such as going to the theatre. The agency is able to fund specific individual activities and routinely pay for group events. Children, foster carers and their family members look forward to the annual summer outing and a seasonal party in December. Family support workers can also take children out on leisure and recreational trips.

Children learn the skills necessary for independence and undertake age appropriate daily living tasks. They would appreciate more workshops, particularly in relation to adult life, employment and further education. Foster carers encourage them to save and prepare for the future. Young people open bank accounts, take driving lessons and secure part-time jobs. They also have the opportunity to access agency courses, an example being first aid training; this is a valuable skill they can take into adult life. The agency helps with children's transition into adulthood, through providing a leaving care grant.

## Quality of service

Judgement outcome: good

Children describe their foster carers as 'nice' and 'very good'. Teachers describe foster carers as 'lovely' and birth parents are thankful that their children are placed in 'a good home'. Children benefit from a service which is continually evolving to better meet their needs. Placing authorities say the agency has made 'significant improvement' since the last inspection. They appreciate the fact that the agency is both 'helpful' and 'responsive'. They highlight positive outcomes, with the exception of one authority who commented on an outcome that was 'patchy' due to an 'inexperienced foster carer'. The agency are aware of the need to provide additional support to new carers and have introduced a mentoring scheme for them.

Foster carers feel they receive 'excellent support and guidance'. They feel that training is 'very sound' and 'staff are great'. The agency has a large pool of foster carers nationwide, which includes carers from all walks of life, diverse cultures, and religions, single, heterosexual and same sex couples. The recruitment strategy is based upon children's referral needs. The agency is aware of the gaps and are actively recruiting couples, persons with experience of fostering, White British and single male carers. Recruitment methods include stalls, advertisements and innovative 'match parties'. The latter take place in a foster carers home and enables small groups to hear first-hand about fostering.

The preparation, assessment, support and training of foster carers focuses on children's needs. All foster carers are being trained to provide therapeutic care. This includes crisis intervention and other specialist training from a long-established professional training and counselling centre. The latter enables foster carers to explore and solve problems and become more skilled and confident in their role. Foster carer's vocational training is in progress, which includes obtaining the training, support and development standards in foster care within one year of approval. Foster carers benefit from comprehensive training in their regional areas. On-line and external training is also available. The agency facilitates learning through a buddy system, which enables peers to support each other.

Foster carers and their families value the agency's support. They have their own forum where representatives meet with management. Directors are available at their monthly coffee mornings. Foster carers can also attend support groups and they benefit from regular supervisory meetings with their social worker. They receive equipment and cash advances to enable them to provide for children in emergencies. In addition, they benefit from the services of a family support worker who can assist with child care and other practical tasks.

Foster carers say their own children are 'made to feel part of fostering'; they appreciate this 'equal balance'. Birth children are included in social activities; they also receive birthday money and vouchers. The agency also provides individual counselling for foster carers and their families. Other perks include a discount card for a wholesale shopping outlet, a discount on home insurance and a specific holiday park.

Foster carers are treated as professionals and the agency actively uses their skills. Foster carers are involved in staff appraisals, fostering training, recruitment and the production of policies and procedures. An example of the latter is writing the



mentoring programme for carers. Foster carers highlight that the agency are 'willing to listen' and 'open to changes'. They are part of the team around the child and understand the process of delegated authority. They work well with placing authorities, which positively influence children's progress.

Foster carers are very resourceful and they take pride in their role. They highlight that they 'like to nurture' children and describe them as 'a joy'. Foster carers are strong advocates for children; examples are assisting with their immigration, educational and health issues. Support extends beyond the placement; foster carers visit young people in prison. They maintain their relationships through to adulthood and the next generation. Foster carers highlight that they 'miss them when they go' and they appreciate being the 'rock' and 'strength' for their foster child.

The agency only suggests foster carers as a potential match to a child if they can meet their assessed needs. Exemptions are applied for when numbers exceed the fostering limit. Placing authorities highlight that 'the ideal cultural match should not be pursued over the right placement'. Children benefit from good, nurturing placements but the strengths and appropriateness of the initial match are not always apparent. There is not sufficient matching information to inform children in the future why they were placed with a particular foster carer. Also, matches do not take into account the impact on existing household members and any additional training, resource or support required. The agency acknowledge this is a pivotal part of a child's life and needs better clarification. Foster carers' profiles highlight the strengths to the placing authority; however, information is not recorded in a meaningful way for a child to understand.

The quality and consistency of assessments and annual reviews continue to improve. Children benefit from an effective, child-focused fostering panel. Members come from a range of ethnicities, genders, religions and professions. The fostering panel benefits from adults who have an experience of being in the care system. Legal and medical expertise is available. The highly experienced panel chair brings a wealth of knowledge to their role having run their fostering agency. There is purposeful, honest dialogue with the agency, with the emphasis on continual improvement. Alongside the rigorous quality assurance function, the fostering panel makes a positive contribution to the agency through training and their annual review. The panel makes decisions in a timely manner. However, the agency decision maker takes several weeks to send their written decision to applicants and does not meet national minimum standards which recommend this is done within five working days.

## **Safeguarding children and young people**

Judgement outcome:

good

Children feel safe and they state they 'can speak to my carer and Banya' if they have any issues. The agency professes 'safeguarding is at the heart of everything we do' and seen this as 'everyone's responsibility'. Children benefit from effective safeguarding arrangements which are supported by an extensive range of policies and procedures. The safeguarding procedure comprehensively covers definitions of abuse, bullying, domestic violence, safeguarding disabled children, missing from placement and child sexual exploitation. Fostering households have safe caring guidelines and risk assessments provide foresight in identifying possible hazards or risks of harm.

The agency effectively manages child protection allegations; this includes ensuring the safety and removal of children in addition to appropriate counselling and support. The whistleblowing procedure highlights the avenues to report poor practice. The agency appropriately manage quality of care issues and if necessary will de-register foster carers. The agency highlight that they wish to 'generate a culture of transparency and trust'.

A manager takes the lead on safeguarding which ensures efficient oversight. Staff are kept updated on changes in safeguarding-related legislation and they learn from high profile cases. The agency has links with their host borough's safeguarding personnel. They routinely send their policies to the safeguarding team for external verification. Foster carers, staff and panel members have regular safeguarding training, which ensures they are clear on the issues and their responsibilities.

Children learn the importance of keeping themselves safe. This includes on-line safety and the dangers of child sexual exploitation. Currently, there are no serious issues in relation to children going missing. The agency take these matters seriously, attending strategy meetings and endeavouring to get to the root of issues. For example, they obtaining a recovery order to remove a child who kept returning home and worked with the child's parent to facilitate a planned return. This close partnership working with placing authorities assists with reducing the risk and protecting children. The agency has a rating system to measure placement stability; this enables them to closely monitor specific children and provide appropriate support.

Children learn to manage their mood and take responsibility for their behaviour. Their foster carers benefit from research-based therapeutic crisis intervention training. This provides foster carers with skills and knowledge so that they can be a catalyst for change. Children are enabled to change old habits, destructive responses and maladaptive behaviour patterns. Their increased maturity enables them to develop new responses.

The recruitment, assessment, preparation, supervision and training of foster carers has a strong focus on safeguarding and child protection. Supervisory visits are very child focused and children are regularly seen without their foster carers. Supervising social workers monitor placements through regular health and safety checks and unannounced visits. If necessary, placements are put on hold to ensure repairs are undertaken or current disclosure checks obtained.

Children receive protection from the safe recruitment practices. Staff and panel member recruitment and vetting is robust and meets regulatory requirements. The necessary checks are undertaken to ensure unsuitable people are not involved in the agency and do not have an opportunity to harm children. The agency also check persons are competent and are registered with the necessary professional bodies.

## Leadership and management

Judgement outcome:  
good

Children benefit from strong leadership and management arrangements. The Registered Manager is also the founder of the agency. The agency was founded with her husband, who is also a director and the responsible individual. Senior leaders feel the key to their success is the quality of their foster carers. The Registered Manager describes foster carers as 'silent heroes' and sees their work as 'priceless'. The agency is well staffed, with strengthened administration and management support. The passionate enthusiasm of the business development manager is a dynamic driver in the agency's ongoing success. The use of their qualifications and skills and the agency's recent review is a key factor in the agency's inspiring development.

The agency has significantly and organically grown since the last inspection. They have innovatively set up regional virtual bases to meet the needs of the foster carers throughout England. They are no plans to open offices outside of London. Foster carers find that although the agency has grown it 'still has the personal touch'. The agency has a good business development plan and set goals which are regularly reviewed. Workers are champions, taking lead responsibility in a wide range of outcome areas.

Leaders and managers develop highly effective working relationships with placing authorities, schools, health professionals, the police and youth offending teams. The agency has heavily invested in their relationships with local authorities. Leaders and managers appreciate that local authorities have 'walked with us'. Local authorities highlight that 'Banya has made significant progress with the development of the organisation'.

Foster carers report that the agency 'would have been satisfactory' a few years ago and they now rate them 'good to excellent'. Staff comment that the Registered Manager is 'an enabler and very responsive'. They enjoy working for the agency as it is 'family orientated' and 'always here for foster carers'. They describe their work as being 'very satisfying'. Commissioners comment that they like the fact that the agency 'work with you'. They describe them as a 'nice agency' with 'nice people'.

The implementation of a specialist database has been instrumental in the agency's ability to regularly monitor, review and track individual children's progress. Quality assurance is ongoing through a series of staff and management meetings. Monitoring reports are completed. However, these do not include consultation with foster carers, children or placing authorities and do not comment on improving the quality

of care. The agency do collate this information but it is not interwoven in the regulatory report. The agency are clearly able to identify and address trends and patterns, through their monitoring of key performance indicators. Senior leaders highlight that they 'now know what each child is doing' and have 'a snapshot of what a child is up to'.

The agency is sufficiently resourced and financially sound. They pride themselves on offering 'good value' for local authorities. Foster carer's allowances are higher than the minimum government guidelines and they are paid on time. Although the salary is reviewed on an annual basis the amount has remained the same for several years. Foster carers are divided in their response regarding this issue. Some state they are 'happy with the salary' and 'do not mind not having an increase'. Others highlight that 'finances should be addressed'.

The comprehensive statement of purpose details the agency's aims, objectives and working practices. Interested parties can access this document and further information from the agency's clear and accessible website. The agency also has a social media presence through their Facebook page. Children benefit from their own age-appropriate guide which concisely highlights what they can expect from the agency. This document is translated if English is not a child's first language.

The agency actively seeks feedback from children, foster carers, placing authorities, staff and other involved parties. Complaints and concerns are welcomed. The response to a recent complaint confirms no further action. The placing authority are happy and they highlight that the 'placement has been excellent'. Social workers conduct good, child focused supervisory visits and summarise this information in child progress reports. At times these records are repetitive and do not report on new information. Records are not meaningful enough for when children access their records in the future. The agency appropriately notifies Ofsted of significant events, in accordance with regulations.

Local authorities comment that staff are 'very driven, enthusiastic, positive and happy about their experience of working for Banya'. Staff and managers are appropriately qualified, experienced and supervised. Social work staff benefit from reflective supervision which addresses their caseload, development and also their emotional well-being. Social workers appreciate these meetings, stating that they 'feel lighter afterwards'. The effective staff appraisal system includes the views of children and foster carers. Staff feel they are 'well-supported'.

Staff benefit from continuous personal development through a wide range of training. This gives them a good foundation in essential skills, necessary for their role. The agency sponsors staff to undertake their social work training and they also provide placements for social work, doctorate and business students.

There has been a substantial drive for improvement since the last inspection. Effective action has been taken in relation to the previous requirements and recommendations. This results in improved quality assurance, staff training, supervision and appraisals.

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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.