

National Fostering Agency

The National Fostering Agency Limited

920 Birchwood Boulevard, Warrington WA3 7QS

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

This privately owned independent fostering agency was registered in July 2016. The agency provides the following types of foster placements:

- emergency
- short term
- long term
- respite
- parent and child.

At the time of this inspection, the agency had 129 approved fostering households. These families were caring for 182 children.

The registered manager has been in post since May 2020.

This inspection involved both on-site and off-site inspection activity. Foster carers and children were enabled to take part by video calls.

Due to COVID-19, at the request of the Secretary of State, we suspended all routine inspections of social care providers carried out under the social care common inspection framework (SCCIF) on 17 March 2020. We returned to routine SCCIF inspections on 12 April 2021.

Inspection dates: 15 to 19 November 2021

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account	good
How well children and young people are helped and protected	good
The effectiveness of leaders and managers	good

The independent fostering agency provides effective services that meet the requirements for good.

Date of last inspection: 26 June 2017

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Children make progress through living with foster carers who can meet their needs.

Carers work proactively with schools and colleges. As a result, children have increased their attendance, attained higher than expected exam results and increased their working levels. These achievements are celebrated by both the foster carers and the agency.

Older children are encouraged to think about their futures, aspire to achieve and reach their potential. One social worker commented that a child's life chances had 'dramatically improved' as a result of being with the foster carers.

Children benefit from living with foster carers who are experienced and well prepared. One child commented: 'I can't put into words how much she has done for me.' Foster carers help children to become emotionally resilient and over time to address previous life traumas.

Children are welcomed into their foster families and quickly become part of the family. They establish trusting relationship with their foster carers and develop a sense of belonging. This underpins the progress that children make.

The agency enables brothers and sisters to remain together. This supports their sense of identity and reduces potential experiences of loss. For one large sibling group, however, assessments regarding the sharing of bedrooms are not individualised and do not specify the sharing arrangements.

In line with their plans, foster carers encourage and promote children's contact with their families. Through periods of national restrictions, foster carers were inventive and embraced new technologies. This helped children remained connected to people who are important to them.

Children with highly complex medical needs are being cared for by foster carers who are dedicated to enhancing children's experiences of life. They work well with other professionals and are highly regarded for the commitment they show.

Children are regularly consulted about their care and the agency encourages participation in decision-making. For example, the agency has trained two 'young inspectors' to help with the scrutiny of the agency and has also appointed two care-experienced young people to the fostering panel, who they have assisted in developing questions to be asked of foster carers at panel.

How well children and young people are helped and protected: good

Children become safer as a result of living with their foster families. Foster carers act promptly and take appropriate action when there are concerns about children's safety. They access additional support and advice and know who to contact.

Foster carers understand children's individual vulnerabilities. They provide nurturing care that enables children to develop their understanding of risk and how to make safer decisions.

Foster carers receive appropriate training and support in safeguarding children. This gives them the confidence to act if there are situations of concern. The support from the agency also enables foster carers to continue caring for children in challenging circumstances. For example, carers are offered counselling, in addition to social work support. Foster carers who access the service describe it as 'invaluable'.

When children go missing from their homes, foster carers follow plans and share information in a timely way. They demonstrate a good understanding of their responsibilities and make a positive contribution to keeping children safe.

Overall, managers have responded appropriately to allegations and complaints. However, inspectors found one allegation that had not been appropriately referred to the designated officer or notified to Ofsted. This was as a result of the allegation being classified as a complaint. Children were not at risk due to this omission.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

Foster carers and children benefit from a stable workforce who are enthusiastic and committed. The management team is knowledgeable and keen to develop the service given to children.

A particular strength of the agency is the training that is available to social workers and foster carers. Foster carers say they like the variety and flexibility of training. It enables foster carers to complete training online at a time of their convenience and also offers valuable time for discussion through face-to-face events. The agency's social workers and support workers also value the training offered. They cited this, alongside managerial support, for their long service.

Foster carers and staff feel valued by the agency and speak highly of the advice and support they receive. Staff say that the agency listens and acts upon any concerns or ideas they have. Similarly, foster carers say they can share their ideas and have seen the agency improve as a result. However, not all workers have received monthly supervision. This is recognised by managers and has been addressed.

Foster carers have timely annual reviews, and the independence of the reviewing officer provides appropriate scrutiny and challenge. However, on one occasion, managers did not fully explore the reviewing officer's recommendation regarding placing children on an emergency basis with newly approved carers.

The fostering panel is established and effective. It provides robust recommendations and when shortfalls are identified there is a clear mechanism for reporting back to the agency. On one occasion, managers did not act on recommendations by the panel to conduct a learning exercise following a safeguarding investigation. Although children were not affected by this, managers have missed an opportunity to explore possible improvements in practice.

Commissioners and social workers spoke highly of the agency, its staff and carers. A commissioner felt the agency offered a good specialist service to children who benefit from opportunities to live in family environments. Children in these placements also benefit from the long-term relationships that the agency's support workers establish and maintain.

Monitoring systems are in place to enable managers to have oversight of the service. Overall, these are effective, however there is currently no evaluation or analysis of police call-outs to foster carers' homes. There are, therefore, missed opportunities to improve care to children and offer support to foster carers. In addition, there is no discrete means of collating all information relating to allegations or complaints. This frustrates the auditing process and is time consuming.

What does the independent fostering agency need to do to improve?

Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions that the registered person must take to meet the Care Standards Act 2000, Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the national minimum standards. The registered person must comply within the given timescales.

Requirement	Due date
The registered person must ensure that the procedures under paragraph (1)(b) must, subject to paragraph (4), provide in particular for the prompt referral to the area authority of any allegation of abuse or neglect affecting any child placed by the fostering service provider and notification and outcome of any child protection enquiries involving a child placed by the fostering service provider, to the Chief Inspector. (Regulation 12 (3)(b)(c))	31 January 2022

Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that sharing of bedrooms is agreed by each child's responsible authority and each child has their own area within the bedroom. This relates to agreements and assessments being specific to each child. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 10.6)
- The registered person should ensure that a clear distinction is made between investigation into allegations of harm and over standards of care. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 22.10)
- The registered person should ensure that a clear and comprehensive summary of any allegations made against a particular member of the fostering household, or staff member, including details of how the allegation was followed up and resolved, a record of any action taken, and the decisions reached. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 22.7)
- The registered person should ensure that they take action to address any issues of concern that they identify, or which are raised with them. This relates to actions recommended by the reviewing officer and panel. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 25.8)
- The registered person should ensure that the approach to care minimises the need for police involvement to deal with challenging behaviour and avoids criminalising children unnecessarily. This relates to analysis and evaluation of those incidents to improve practice and identify any patterns and trends. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 3.10)

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people using the 'Social care common inspection framework'. This inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000 to assess the effectiveness of the service, how it meets the core functions of the service as set out in legislation, and to consider how well it complies with the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the national minimum standards.

Independent fostering agency details

Unique reference number: 1234377

Registered provider: The National Fostering Agency Limited

Registered provider address: Atria, Spa Road, Bolton BL1 4AG

Responsible individual: Pamela Larsen

Registered manager: Gillian Gilgun

Telephone number: 01925286850

Email address: GGilgun@nfa.co.uk

Inspectors

Pauline Yates, Social Care Inspector
Dawn Parton, Social Care Inspector
Sarah Oldham, Social Care Inspector
Rosemary Chapman, Social Care Inspector

The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) regulates and inspects to achieve excellence in the care of children and young people, and in education and skills for learners of all ages. It regulates and inspects childcare and children's social care, and inspects the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass), schools, colleges, initial teacher training, further education and skills, adult and community learning, and education and training in prisons and other secure establishments. It assesses council children's services, and inspects services for children looked after, safeguarding and child protection.

If you would like a copy of this document in a different format, such as large print or Braille, please telephone 0300 123 1231, or email enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk.

You may reuse this information (not including logos) free of charge in any format or medium, under the terms of the Open Government Licence. To view this licence, visit www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence, write to the Information Policy Team, The National Archives, Kew, London TW9 4DU, or email: psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk.

This publication is available at <http://reports.ofsted.gov.uk/>.

Interested in our work? You can subscribe to our monthly newsletter for more information and updates: <http://eepurl.com/iTrDn>.

Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
W: www.gov.uk/ofsted

© Crown copyright 2021