

National Fostering Agency

The National Fostering Agency Limited

1750 Solihull Parkway, Birmingham Business Park, Solihull, Birmingham B37 7YD

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

A large national provider of children's services operates this independent fostering agency, providing short- and long-term care. A suitably qualified and experienced manager leads the agency. The manager registered with Ofsted in January 2022.

At the time of this inspection, the fostering agency was providing homes for 344 children living across 211 fostering households.

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

Inspection dates: 6 to 10 March 2023

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: 15 October 2018

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Warm and attentive foster carers provide good care to children. They know the children well and provide care that is specific to the needs of each child. Foster carers give children positive experiences and support them to make good progress in different aspects of their lives.

The quality of the relationships between foster carers and professionals is good. Feedback from placing authorities is positive. They like the agency's contribution to meetings and their availability to carers. There are good, trusting relationships between carers and children. Children are aware that their foster carers care about them, and one child said, 'I love everything about my foster family.'

The agency celebrates diversity and is inclusive of all children. The diversity of foster carers and staff in the agency ensures that children's religious and cultural needs are understood well. Many children are able to live with foster carers who share their culture, religion and/or ethnicity. Biracial placements are managed well, and foster carers have a good understanding of children's individual cultural needs. This enables children to practise their faith and observe traditions, which helps them to develop a positive sense of themselves and others.

All children are registered with doctors, dentists and opticians. Foster carers have access to tailored therapeutic support as and when is needed. All children enjoy a range of healthy activities, such as swimming, horse-riding and after-school clubs. The agency's activity days provide an additional opportunity for children to have fun with one another and get to know the staff. Children feel respected and cherished.

The agency staff and foster carers work exceptionally well together to support the children. All children are in education. The agency and foster carers advocate well to ensure that any child who is having difficulty with sustaining their education receives additional help from the agency and the professionals involved in their care. This helps to reduce barriers to learning and supports children to reach their educational potential.

Good plans are in place for children who live a long distance from their home local authority. Carers show an awareness of the need for children to maintain family ties. They work well with families and share information and photos of important milestones. This good support ensures that children have time with their family and those who are important to them. As a result, this helps children to support their identity.

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

Children feel safe and welcomed into their foster carer's home and extended foster family. Children trust their foster carers.

The risks to children are understood well, and there is a proactive approach to managing risk. Supervising social workers regularly update children's risk assessments and have clear plans to help reduce the risks. Regular safeguarding meetings with the leadership team ensure that there is ongoing management review and oversight of safeguarding concerns. Leaders and managers appropriately report concerns to local authority designated officers and placing social workers as required.

Staff know what to do and who to inform if they have a concern about a child's welfare. Clear procedures are in place. These include how and when to notify relevant professionals about safeguarding incidents. Carers receive support in helping children to understand exploitation. They receive guidance to help children understand how to keep themselves safe.

Allegations against foster carers are managed well, and thorough investigations are completed. Following allegations, carers are returned to panel to ensure that there is independent review and oversight of what has happened. This supports good decision-making for children and ensures the ongoing suitability of foster carers.

Unannounced visits take place twice per year. This ensures that the home environment stays suitable for children. Supervising social workers speak with children alone, which helps children to have their say, share any concerns and provide feedback to the agency. The children's guide comes in a selection of languages, and they are individualised for children. The guide also provides routes for children to express their views and wishes and reach out for help should this be necessary.

Placement stability is an area of strength for this agency. The referral and matching process is thorough. Matching assessments are comprehensive and provide a detailed overview of how the child has been matched to the carer. Management oversight is provided, which helps to support and strengthen the decision for the matching. This ensures that children are safely and carefully matched to carers who can meet their needs. The agency focuses on the longevity and ethos of family ties, with over half of the children living in their foster homes being brothers and sisters living together.

The agency prepares carers to manage challenging situations. They know how to handle behaviours that put children and others at risk of harm. Carers receive de-escalation training. This provides them with the knowledge and skills to support children. However, there are occasions when carers have not been provided with training to support children who were at risk of self-harm. This means that some children may not be receiving the most effective support from their carers for this issue.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

The registered manager is suitably qualified and has significant relevant experience of working in fostering services. Leaders and managers are fully committed and dedicated to improving the lives of children. They are ambitious about what children can achieve and continue to strive for better outcomes for them. Leaders and managers are child-focused and ensure that children receive high-quality care.

Regular face-to-face and virtual team meetings ensure that there are frequent, ongoing conversations about children's day-to-day experiences. Managers encourage reflection and regular discussion at all levels. Reviewing the recommendations and lessons from serious case reviews ensures that the team remains up to date and can learn from research into practice.

Leaders and managers implement a range of added services. This helps to prioritise children's needs. For example, support workers provide additional help to children, families and foster carers. There is evidence of excellent progress made by the children they have supported, whether this is through supervising family time or mentoring.

Foster carers feel very well supported by the agency. Almost all carers say that communication is excellent, and they can always speak to somebody when they need to. Some carers raised with inspectors that they were unhappy with the investigation process and how this can take too long. However, the majority described the agency as a 'family'.

Staff morale is positive, and workers feel supported in their roles. Staff receive regular and effective supervision. Staff training and events ensure that staff continue to grow and develop. Regular team meetings give staff the opportunity to come together and discuss their practice. Staff retention is good, and there are few changes for children and foster carers.

The fostering panel is effective. The panel ensures that there is a rigorous process for approving and reviewing foster carers' suitability. Issues identified during assessment are explored, and helpful recommendations are made to support foster carers. Independent reviewing officers produce good-quality annual reviews of foster carers.

Annual reviews are completed within the required timescales and provide a detailed overview of the last 12 months the carers have experienced. The annual reviews include feedback from children, professionals and birth children. The reviews provide a clear rationale for continued approval and make clear recommendations. While it is noted that the above scrutiny is a strength of the agency, the registered manager does not ensure that recommendations from annual reviews and the panel are always met within the required timescales.

The agency uses an electronic recording system. Difficulties to locate factual information during the inspection were evident. This is an area that requires improvement to improve the efficiency of the service.

There are several gaps in the mandatory training that foster carers are asked to complete. For example, some foster carers have not completed up-to-date first-aid or safeguarding training, and in some cases, they are significantly out of timescales. Furthermore, when foster carers are unable to complete mandatory training, the agency has not always made arrangements to ensure that the training is delivered. One set of foster carers has not completed self-harm training, which is specific to the needs of the children they care for. Consequently, foster carers are not consistently provided with the knowledge and guidance to meet children's specific needs. However, the agency had identified these shortfalls and is making changes to address them.

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

Statutory requirements

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

Requirement	Due date
<p>The fostering service provider must provide foster parents with such training, advice, information and support, including support outside office hours, as appears necessary in the interests of children placed with them. (Regulation 17 (1))</p> <p>This is in relation to ensuring that carers complete mandatory training courses within the prescribed timescales and that training is provided to carers to meet the children's current needs.</p>	1 May 2023

Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that any areas of concern, or need for additional support, identified at annual reviews are addressed in a timely way. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 13.9)
- The registered person should have a system in place to monitor record-keeping and take action when required. This specifically relates to ensuring that children's records that are uploaded onto the electronic recording system are correct. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 26.2)

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: SC470279

Registered provider: The National Fostering Agency Limited

Registered provider address: Outcomes First Group Ltd, Atria, Spa Road, Bolton BL1 4AG

Responsible individual: Pamela Larsen

Registered manager: Sara Chambers Ross

Telephone number: 01212740289

Inspectors

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Dean Wilton, Social Care Inspector

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