

Next Step Fostering Services

Next Step Fostering Services Limited

41 Stone Street, Faversham ME13 8PH

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

Next Step Fostering is an independent fostering agency providing services in Kent, East London, Surrey, Thames Valley and London boroughs, as part of the National Fostering Group.

The agency provides respite, short-term and long-term care for children and young people, and parent and child placements.

At the time of this inspection, the agency had 57 approved fostering households and 72 children placed.

The manager has been registered with Ofsted since 7 September 2022.

Inspection dates: 9 to 13 September 2024

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account **outstanding**

How well children and young people are helped and protected **outstanding**

The effectiveness of leaders and managers **outstanding**

The independent fostering agency provides highly effective services that consistently exceed the standards of good. The actions of the independent fostering agency contribute to significantly improved outcomes and positive experiences for children and young people.

Date of last inspection: 15 November 2021

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: outstanding

Children receive excellent care and support from caring, compassionate and committed foster carers. Staff provide exceptional support to foster carers, even at times when they are not officially on duty. As a result, the all-round care for children is exceptionally strong.

Staff advocate for children to ensure that they receive the best possible service. They ensure that foster carers receive specialist training that enables them to care effectively for children with the most complex needs. For example, carers have received training on tube feeding and manual handling, and trafficking and modern-day slavery, all of which have helped them to provide the children with outstanding care and support.

Staff provide regular and comprehensive supervision to foster carers. These sessions are dynamic and help with carers' learning and development, as well as supporting them to provide high-quality care to children. Staff consistently ensure that they consult with children about the care and support that they receive. This engagement with children supports positive relationship-building between the supervising social worker and the child.

Children experience well-coordinated services that result in a bespoke approach to their care. This includes therapeutic input to help them to begin to address a history of trauma. The education lead at the agency acts as a strong advocate for children's education. This ensures that children's educational progress is outstanding. One child has completed university and is pursuing a career in finance. Another received excellent GCSE results and aspires to have a career in forensics.

Children experience a service dedicated to providing them with a wide variety of opportunities that support their holistic development, build confidence, and improve their life chances. Children access a wide range of extra-curricular activities that help them to feel accepted and part of their community, including army cadets, trampolining, dance classes and basketball. One young person passed their driving theory test and is being supported with their plans to take the practical test. The service has purchased a Duke of Edinburgh's Award licence, enabling them to deliver a programme adapted for children who would otherwise struggle to access it. Additionally, the service supported a child to go on a specialist expedition to experience self-discovery in wilderness environments.

The matching of children to carers is meticulous. Carers receive extra training to meet any identified gaps in their knowledge. Children's identity and cultural needs are met, and they feel a strong sense of belonging with their fostering family. Many children remain with their carers into adulthood.

Staff ensure that children's views and wishes are well understood. They provide a wide range of opportunities for children to share their views. These include participation activities that provide children with space to talk to staff and carers in a relaxed way. The service has worked with children to develop the Youth Voice app, which enables children to express their views, wishes and feelings. This app has successfully increased children's engagement with the agency.

Assessment and preparation of prospective carers are comprehensive. The fostering panel is effective and explores suitability information rigorously. The experienced agency decision-maker provides constructive challenge to the agency. This means that the service only approves people who they are confident will provide safe and suitable care for children.

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

Children's needs are well understood by supervising social workers and foster carers, who are proficient in identifying and mitigating risks from the outset. Detailed risk assessments and management plans provide useful guidance. The involvement of children in this process means that they better understand the risks to which they are subject or that adults are worried about. The carers and agency staff work with the children to reduce risk and, as a result, they become safer.

Protective factors are in place to sustain fostering arrangements and to prevent avoidable moves. For example, the service has arranged for foster carers and children to have time apart when circumstances have become challenging, and they have undertaken restorative work to repair relationships. Specialist training is also provided to support carers in times of challenge.

Carers know the children's needs and meet them in a safe and considered way. They are guided by excellent 'safer caring plans', specific to the household. There are also specific safer caring plans for parent and child placements, which set clear expectations. This helps to keep all in the household safe. Parent and child arrangements are well planned and ensure that the parent is appropriately prepared before moving in. If possible, parents are supported to meet the carer and see the house in advance. Carers and agency staff recognise the impact on parents of previous traumatic experiences. This attention to the support needs of the parent, as well as the child, enables a positive start to the placement.

Foster carers have confidence in their supervising social workers. They value the skills and the knowledge that they offer. This helps to build foster carers' confidence in their own ability to set appropriate boundaries and manage difficult situations. Foster carers value the advanced therapeutic parenting training that they receive. This helps them to meet the needs of children and young people and to understand their life experiences. Carers recognise the positive impact that this therapeutic training has on the way that they care for children.

Strong safeguarding arrangements are in place to protect children and to promote their welfare. Weekly safeguarding meetings review any existing or emerging concerns about children. Appropriate action to reduce risk is taken swiftly. Leaders and managers appropriately and sensitively responded to the recent sad death of a child who had life-limiting conditions. Staff, carers, and families were supported well, and exemplary working together with other agencies meant that information was shared effectively.

The manager takes appropriate action in response to any practice issues or standards of care concerns.

The service follows safer recruitment practices and appoints staff based on suitable qualifications and character.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: outstanding

The highly effective registered manager is ambitious for children. He has high expectations for what the children can achieve. He manages a service with a strong 'can do' ethos. Leaders and managers lead by example and use their skills and experience to support and inspire their staff.

The manager maintains effective monitoring of the agency. He is a strong advocate for the rights of children and their carers. He is determined to ensure that foster carers have the tools that they need to provide exceptional and impactful care to children. The manager knows the service well and continually explores areas for development.

A strong training offer is in place for staff and carers. The training platform allows them to access training specific to their needs and those of the children they care for. Staff and carers are positive about the training on offer and recognise the impact on their growth and development.

Staff receive high-quality appraisals of their practice. Managers are responsive to issues raised in appraisals. They ensure that staff feel well supported, heard and respected. Supervisions are regular. Staff attend reflective practice meetings that provide time for discussion and a review of their work. Clinical and therapeutic support is available to staff and carers. There is a strong focus on their well-being. Leaders and managers recognise that if staff and carers feel well cared for, this has a positive impact on staff retention and, in turn, carers and children's experiences.

Leaders and managers seek out and listen to the voices of carers and children. Their views and opinions inform changes in the service. As a result of carer consultation about the impact allegations have on them, a charter on supporting them through allegations has been developed.

Leaders and managers have developed exceptionally strong professional relationships with partner agencies. Because of this, the manager can quickly escalate concerns to senior local authority leaders with confidence.

There is a commitment to advancing equality and diversity. This leads to a service that is open and inclusive.

No requirements or recommendations were set at this inspection.

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: SC036540

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Inspectors

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