

National Fostering Agency

The National Fostering Agency Ltd

2 Quay View Business Park, Barnards Way, Lowestoft, Suffolk NR32 2HD

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

National Fostering East is an independent fostering agency in the National Fostering Group, supporting foster carers in the East region of England. At the time of the inspection, the fostering agency was supporting 123 fostering households that were caring for 160 children.

The manager has been registered with Ofsted since September 2020.

Inspection dates: 22 to 26 January 2024

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 **outstanding**

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

Date of last inspection: 13 May 2019

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

This is a good agency. There are examples of excellent practice, underpinned by strong, confident leadership.

Children become part of their fostering families and develop a sense of belonging. Many children enjoy long-term stability, including into adulthood, because of the care and commitment of their foster carers. This enables children to build trusting relationships with the adults who care for them, providing the foundation they need to achieve positive outcomes now and in the future.

Foster carers are supported to provide specialised care for children with complex health needs. This support helps foster carers to feel confident to provide effective care. As a result, children who may otherwise require residential care are able to remain in a fostering family. This support extends to birth family when appropriate. Consequently, children experience meaningful relationships with the people who matter most to them.

The agency has dedicated workers who ensure that children can access appropriate education provision that meets their needs. When local authorities are providing children with limited or no education, the team makes effective challenge. As a result, most children are in the right education provision. Foster carers are supported to understand children's rights and to ensure that children receive the educational resources they are entitled to. Consequently, children make good progress and, overall, achieve their education targets.

Foster carers introduce children to new hobbies and interests and facilitate long-term interests and talents. Children attend clubs and compete in sports, learn musical instruments and enjoy arts and crafts. The agency has links with organisations that provide opportunities for expeditions abroad, in addition to organising a considerable number of more local events for foster carers and all children in the fostering household. Most foster carers have delegated authority that allows them to consent to everyday activities. However, some delegated authority forms are missing or are not signed and up to date.

Foster carers help children to gain independence skills and to be increasingly responsible for making choices and decisions about their lives. Some foster carers have used their knowledge and experience of supporting teenagers to develop an independence programme and training that they have disseminated within the agency. This helps children to develop the practical and social skills that they need for adulthood.

Children's achievements are frequently celebrated by foster carers and the agency, through the 'Everyday hero' award. This helps children to build confidence and self-esteem. The agency also ensures that any member of the fostering family, including

birth children, can be recognised for their contributions to foster care. This recognition, often accompanied by a bespoke gift, helps the recipients to feel valued.

Foster carers provide culturally sensitive care and support. Children from other countries are supported to integrate into the community and to make links with other local children who have shared similar experiences and who may share the same language and religion. Foster carers seek advice to provide informed responses to children's cultural needs.

Staff can arrange for information about the agency to be shared with children in any language. This includes information about how to make a complaint. Most children's records are well written and capture important memories for children. However, some records use language that is not in line with the ethos and values of the agency.

The agency works well with local authorities to ensure that children can live with the right foster carers. One local authority representative said that the agency provides high-quality, stable placements. Children's social workers are positive about the care provided and the communication with the agency.

One child said, 'I feel like I am making progress and I am happy.' Another child said, 'I couldn't be in a better place.'

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

When needed, supervising social workers take the lead in ensuring that foster carers are supported to keep children safe. Supervising social workers know their fostering households well. They invest in building positive relationships with children and are aspirational for them. This provides children with an additional adult to share any worries with.

The close and consistent relationships that foster carers form with children help to increase children's safety. One foster carer was described as 'reading the child like a book'.

Managers ensure that allegations about foster carers are well managed. Concerns are escalated as needed to relevant professionals, in line with good safeguarding practice. When internal investigations are requested, these are clear and comprehensive and subject to further scrutiny by the fostering panel. When needed, managers challenge poor safeguarding practice of other professionals to increase children's safety.

Foster carers help children to understand how to keep themselves safe. Children are enabled to take age-appropriate risks. This helps them to build resilience and make informed decisions.

Fostering panel offers a range of diverse and relevant experience. The panel provides suitable scrutiny and challenge when needed. This is captured in clear

minutes of meetings. Together, the agency decision-maker and fostering panel provide effective quality assurance of assessments of new applicants.

Foster carers and the agency respond to concerns about exploitation, online abuse and bullying effectively. Risks are minimised because of the effective multi-agency working. Supervising social workers are an integral part of the team around the child and help foster carers to implement safety plans and strategies. Safer caring plans are individualised to children and contain guidance for foster carers on reducing risks. However, on occasion, there have been delays in updating these plans.

Managers ensure that foster carers have access to a range of relevant training. The agency recently changed its online training offer, which foster carers say is now more accessible. In addition, in response to foster carers' feedback, there has been an increase in face-to-face training. This includes at the weekend and in the evenings to improve choice and accessibility, especially for foster carers who work full time. Managers also fund relevant external training to meet children's individual needs. Most foster carers have completed training identified by the agency as mandatory. However, some foster carers have not had up-to-date first-aid training.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: outstanding

The agency is led by a well experienced, knowledgeable and appropriately qualified manager who has high expectations of her staff and foster carers. Foster carers feel valued and listened to. They say that the manager is always available and approachable and is a strong advocate for children.

The manager demonstrates confident decision-making and a commitment to continuous learning. She is embedding a culture of professional curiosity and reflective practice within the agency. She often works alongside supervising social workers to model excellent social work practice and to explore complex cases.

The manager champions the professional and personal development of her team. As a result, staff are wholly positive about the support that they receive from the manager. Feedback about the manager included:

- 'Phenomenal; without a doubt the best manager I have had.'
- 'A great manager; she is fair, extremely child-focused and supportive.'
- 'She is a rock.'

The manager is assisted by a competent and caring management team that also knows the families and children well. While there have been some staffing pressures over the last year, the team remains cohesive and has maintained high staff morale. As a result, fostering families have continued to receive a high level of support.

The manager has established highly effective relationships with the agency decision-maker and panel chair to ensure that quality assurance processes are embedded.

This helps to improve the quality of assessment and to review practice across the agency.

The agency has developed innovative ways for children to share their views. The agency is committed to increasing children's participation in the development of the service.

Managers and leaders have established a comprehensive action plan to ensure the continuous improvement of the agency. The plan outlines the actions required to embed initiatives that are in their infancy, including the agency's psychotherapy offer, participation in the Duke of Edinburgh's Award and access to enhanced therapeutic training for all supervising social workers.

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

Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that children's safety and welfare are promoted in all fostering placements. This specifically relates to ensuring that safer caring policies for the children and fostering household provide guidance for foster carers on the current risks. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', page 14, paragraph 4.1)
- The registered person should ensure that foster carers receive sufficient training on health and hygiene issues and first aid, with particular emphasis on health promotion and communicable diseases. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', page 17, paragraph 6.7)
- The registered person should ensure that foster carers are supported to make reasonable and appropriate decisions in line with the authority delegated to them, without having to seek consent unnecessarily. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', page 19, paragraph 7.4)
- The registered person should ensure that information about the child is recorded clearly and in a way which will be helpful to the child when they access their files now or in the future. Children should be actively encouraged to read their files, other than necessarily confidential or third-party information, and to correct errors and add personal statements. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', page 52, paragraph 26.6)

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: SC038843

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