

Foster Care NCH: Wessex Community Projects

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector	Lynda Mosling
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About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to assure 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.

This report details the main strengths and any areas for improvement identified during the inspection. The judgements included in the report are made in relation to the outcome for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and relevant National Minimum Standards for the establishment.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding:	this aspect of the provision is of exceptionally high quality
Good:	this aspect of the provision is strong
Satisfactory:	this aspect of the provision is sound
Inadequate:	this aspect of the provision is not good enough

Service information

Brief description of the service

The National Children's Home: Wessex Community Project provides family placements for a variety of young people aged eight to under 18 years. This includes remand fostering, post custody placements, intensive fostering programmes and longer term welfare placements. All provide supported foster placements in the local community. The service works closely with placing authorities and have close links with youth offending teams in the Wessex area. The aims of the service include a reduction in the use of custody, a reduction in re-offending behaviour and improved family and social relationships. There are currently 19 approved fostering households providing placements to the project. The agency office is situated on the main Fareham to Gosport road and is easily accessible. It provides office accommodation for the managers and staff and facilities for meetings with social workers, carers and young people.

Summary

This is an announced inspection and assesses the key National Minimum Standards for fostering services. The overall outcomes for young people fostered through the service are good, with the outcome area of positive contribution judged as outstanding. The agency are excellent at gaining views of carers and young people and acting upon them. The service provided by the agency have made a positive impact on the behaviour of the young people accommodated and has reduced the risk of custodial sentences. The agency provide supported and trained carers who are committed to meeting the needs of young people. The staff are qualified and have a lot of combined experience of caring for young people who are living away from home. The service has a contract to provide foster placements to a number of local authorities in the south.

The overall quality rating is good.

This is an overview of what the inspector found during the inspection.

Improvements since the last inspection

Following the last inspection two actions were made. These were to ensure the criminal record bureau checks are completed every three years and to ensure social work staff have access to professional training. These have both been addressed and records provided. Other improvements since the last inspection include: a move to newly built office premises; provision of consistent out-of-hours support; appointment of a project worker to ensure young people's views are obtained; regular team and management meetings and training for carers from the leaving care team. The improvements have provided the service with clearer information on which to develop the service, has enabled better understanding of individual roles within the team and provided young people with better opportunities for consultation and information to help plan their future. The move to purpose built offices has improved the working conditions of the staff and enabled carers and young people to meet in more suitable surroundings.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

The service promotes the health of the young people it cares for by clear assessment of health needs and the provision of advice from appropriate professionals. All young people are registered with a local doctor and have an annual health check. Young people benefit from referral to specialist services where necessary. Foster carers are supported by the agency to encourage healthy lifestyles including regular exercise and good food choices. Many of the young people

placed are restricted in how often they go out unaccompanied, due to tagging devices or conditions imposed by the courts. This provides the carers with more control over unhealthy behaviour such as drug and alcohol misuse. Smoking is actively discouraged and any restrictions are included in the house rules. Carers are aware of their responsibilities regarding medication and keep records of all medicines administered. There is evidence of carers questioning prescribed medication where it no longer appears appropriate. Young people are able to make their own appointments and see medical professionals alone if they wish. Young people feel they are more healthy now than in their previous situations, although some choose to turn down the opportunity to have check-ups or make use of therapy. There are good systems to ensure young people's health needs are considered and met whilst in placement, including regular reviews.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The manager and senior staff have the appropriate qualifications and experience to carry on the service. They are employed by the National Children's Home voluntary organisation who have a long history of providing for children. They work to the corporate policies and procedures that are devised to ensure safe care for young people. All staff working in the service have undergone the appropriate checks. These are now up-dated every three years as required. Assessments of foster carers are thorough and well recorded. The assessment includes skills to foster training that covers all aspects of the fostering task. Any issues arising during this training are addressed in the individual assessment visits to the family. Health and safety checks and appropriate references are taken up and presented to the fostering panel for consideration, along with the family assessment. Carers feel the process is good at helping them understand their responsibilities to the young people placed. There is a diverse group of foster carers who are committed to young people and who show careful consideration of young people's needs and wishes. They show a clear desire to improve young people's experiences and an ability to balance their liking for the young person with their need to provide clear boundaries. Young people feel they are helped to understand the effect of their behaviour on others and given support to change it. The foster homes provide warm, nurturing care in domestic settings. All young people have their own rooms within the household. The agency only accepts referrals for placement if they have an appropriate vacancy amongst the carers. This enables matching to be well considered. The contracts with local authorities places some pressure on the agency to provide enough placements, but they do not allow this to impact on good matching. Whilst the matching is well considered the considerations are not routinely recorded in the young people's files. Foster carers are made aware of child protection issues during the assessment process. Individual safe caring plans are drawn up for each placement and take into account the vulnerability of all household members. Procedures for reporting suspicions of abuse are clear and are provided to all carers. Risk assessments on each young person highlight any known risk as well as previous experience of abuse. The young people are often under strict control, directed by the courts, whilst in placement and this can limit the opportunities they have to put themselves at serious risk. Young people feel this lack of opportunity can sometimes be a relief to them. The manager and staff advocate strongly on behalf of the young people placed and ensure their safety is considered whilst in placement. There is evidence that the fostering programmes reduce young people's likelihood of further re-offending and the risk of being placed in custody. Recruitment is organised by the head office of National Children's Homes. The processes are designed to keep young people safe. The local offices undertake the short-listing and interviews and records are clearly kept. All staff have gone through the correct

procedures and are committed to the welfare of young people. There are tried and tested systems to deal with inappropriate carers and staff. The team have many years of combined experience and bring different child centred skills to the service. The fostering panel has been set up according to the regulations and the panel members bring a mix of backgrounds and experiences, including growing up in a foster home. Representatives from contracting local authorities has led to more members of the panel specialising in fostering than in direct work with children. The panel are presented with thorough applications and have the opportunity to meet the applicants. Records are clear and identify the questions asked of the applicants, and the recommendation of the panel. The decision of the agency is clearly recorded and communicated to the applicants. Reviews of carers' suitability are considered by the panel and any emergency decisions taken by the chair of the panel, such as variations of approval, are reported to the next panel. The panel make good decisions about applicants' suitability. This is evident in the small numbers of carers who are subsequently de-registered.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The service values diversity and promotes the acceptance of the individual. Applications are accepted from carers of all faiths, genders and lifestyles. Most carers are, however, of a white British background but this reflects the local area and the young people accommodated. Carers show respect for young people's individual choices and value their experiences. No young person is overlooked and special arrangements are made for young people with disabilities to ensure they are supported and their views taken into account. Education is promoted and its importance understood by the service. Many of the young people placed do not have positive experiences of school and have not attended regularly. The service is involved in choosing and supporting school placements but if a placement is short-term, as in remand fostering, it can be a challenge to get something in place before the young person moves on. In longer term placements, and in intensive fostering programmes, education forms part of the package. In these placements young people are progressing well and a small number have gained places at local colleges.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

The preparation training for carers highlight the importance of contact with families and friends. Carers show an understanding of young people's feelings for their family. All young people have some contact with family or friends and are supported by the agency to maintain this contact. Young people are aware of the contact arrangements and the reason for these. Carers often provide support to the families of the young people in their care and some have daily communication with them. Young people in longer term placements appreciate becoming part of the foster family and say they have "gained brothers and sisters" in the foster home. The intensive fostering programme includes direct work with the birth families to ensure consistency in handling challenging behaviour. All carers understand the impact difficult family relationships have on young people and provide excellent alternative experiences of family life. The agency is very good at gaining people's views about the service. They have systems to obtain these views, such as young people's questionnaires and feedback forms for foster carers. They encourage honest feedback and make changes as a result of the feedback. Foster carer's reviews include a question about how support from the agency can be improved. This is reported to panel with other feedback and gives the panel the opportunity to comment on the quality of

the service offered to carers. Foster carers are clear that they can "tell it as it is" and feel valued by the service. Challenge is expected throughout the service and is seen as valuable by the managers. Young people feel listened to on a day to day basis by the carers, and at their reviews. They are consulted about food, clothing and activities as well as plans for their future. The staff and managers are very child focused and discuss the impact for the young person of any proposed action. Foster carers are treated with respect and are consulted about any changes in the service. Expectations are clear and there is a route to support those who require help to meet the expectations. There is an excellent balance between the needs of the young people and the needs of the carer and their family. The presentations made by the young people at the graduations from intensive fostering provide good evidence of the success of the scheme and the difference it has made to them. The agency contribute to reviews, planning meetings and court reports in consultation with the carers and young people. All of the projects undertaken have reviews, and studies, to evidence the effectiveness of the methods used. The intensive fostering programme is directly supervised by the project organisers and recordings of meetings are used as part of the accreditation process. There is a complaints process that is clear and easy for young people to understand. The two complaints made since the last inspection were unfounded on investigation. The agency provides a newsletter to foster carers and young people with up-dates, good news, information about agency and staff changes. This keeps carers in touch with the wider issues in the agency and provides young people with evidence that their views have been acted upon. Young people's successes and experiences are also used in promotional information and the recruitment of carers.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

There is a clear statement of purpose that accurately outlines the services provided by the team. In addition there is a leaflet on each of the projects and types of fostering that are provided. A young person's guide is also available and is given to young people being considered for any of the schemes. The general aim of the team is that the services provided will reduce offending, improve family relationships and help young people move on to appropriate accommodation. Young people are also given information about the family they are to be placed with and are welcomed into the family when they arrive. Staff are well organised and managed. Each staff member has a clear role and is provided with support and supervision to undertake that role. Their particular skills are valued and well used by the team. The number of projects and roles involved can lead to some confusion for outsiders and some competition from within, but, there are forums to discuss this and the majority of staff said they trust each other to share tasks and provide support. There have been some complicated staffing issues, including sickness, re-deployment and resignation. These have left some feeling more empowered than others, but there is a shared desire to get on with the task of helping young people and carers. There is a duty presence every day to take referrals and a rota for out of hours cover. Team meetings are used to discuss pressures, allocations and up-coming events. Supervision and consultation is undertaken regularly and is seen as helpful by the staff. Each staff member has different responsibilities such as recruitment, duty rota or carer training as well as their day to day responsibilities. They cover each other for leave and sickness. Staff have access to the National Children's Homes employment processes, including grievance procedures. There are sufficient staff to provide a service that meets the statement of purpose. Staff are busy but

are good at prioritising their work. They collectively try to resist the temptation to put new ideas into practice before consolidating the work they are already committed to. This is to ensure the quality of their work continues. There is a clear strategy for supporting carers and carers talk of support being "good" or "excellent". This includes 24 hour support and an out of hours telephone service. Carers say this has become more consistent since the last inspection. Support was quoted as one of the reasons why the carers chose to foster for the project. Each carer has an allocated supervising social worker who visits monthly, or more frequently if necessary. The visits are recorded and carers can raise any issues affecting their task. Those that provide intensive fostering are contacted daily. They have good support, including a carers group and a clinical group that meets weekly to look at behaviours and responses to them. The role of the various social workers is clear and there is good communication between the placing social workers and supporting social workers. Young people's files contain sufficient information to provide appropriate care, although this information is sometimes not immediately available if the young person comes straight from the court. There is additional information held on the placing agency's files. This is generally made available to the project during the first week of placement. The files contain signed agreements for the placement from the placing agency, carers and young people. There are good administrative systems and support from dedicated administrative staff. The carers value the friendly response from the administration staff when they phone the office and are confident their messages will be passed on. Administrators are seen as full members of the team and clearly support the work undertaken. All records required by regulation are available at the office. Since the last inspection there has been a move into a newly built office with parking. It has provided more room for the staff, individual offices, a supervision room and a large meeting room. There is a kitchen, good toilet facilities and the office is designed to greet people as they arrive. It has enabled groups, training and social events to be more easily managed at the office facilities. The new office is a major improvement on the previous facilities.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions, which must be taken so that the registered person meets the Care Standards Act 2000, The Fostering Services Regulations 2005 and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider must comply with the given timescales.

Standard	Action	Due date
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Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further the registered person should take account of the following recommendation(s):

- ensure the considerations for matching are clearly recorded on the young persons file (NMS 8.4)
- review the membership of the fostering panel to ensure there is a good balance of experiences represented (NMS 30)

Annex

Annex A

National Minimum Standards for independent fostering agency

Being healthy

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service promotes the health and development of children (NMS 12)

Ofsted considers 12 the key standard to be inspected.

Staying safe

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- any persons carrying on or managing the service are suitable (NMS 3)
- the fostering service provides suitable foster carers (NMS 6)
- the service matches children to carers appropriately (NMS 8)
- the fostering service protects each child or young person from abuse and neglect (NMS 9)
- the people who work in or for the fostering service are suitable to work with children and young people (NMS 15)
- fostering panels are organised efficiently and effectively (NMS 30)

Ofsted considers 3, 6, 8, 9, 15 and 30 the key standards to be inspected.

Enjoying and achieving

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service values diversity (NMS 7)
- the fostering service promotes educational achievement (NMS 13)
- when foster care is provided as a short-term break for a child, the arrangements recognise that the parents remain the main carers for the child (NMS 31)

Ofsted considers 7, 13 and 31 the key standards to be inspected.

Making a positive contribution

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service promotes contact arrangements for the child or young person (NMS 10)
- the fostering service promotes consultation (NMS 11)

Ofsted considers 10 and 11 the key standards to be inspected.

Achieving economic well-being

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service prepares young people for adulthood (NMS 14)
- the fostering service pays carers an allowance and agreed expenses as specified (NMS 29)

Ofsted considers none of the above to be key standards to be inspected.

Organisation

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- there is a clear statement of the aims and objectives of the fostering service and the fostering service ensures that they meet those aims and objectives (NMS 1)
- the fostering service is managed by those with the appropriate skills and experience (NMS 2)
- the fostering service is monitored and controlled as specified (NMS 4)

Annex A

- the fostering service is managed effectively and efficiently (NMS 5)
- staff are organised and managed effectively (NMS 16)
- the fostering service has an adequate number of sufficiently experienced and qualified staff (NMS 17)
- the fostering service is a fair and competent employer (NMS 18)
- there is a good quality training programme (NMS 19)
- all staff are properly accountable and supported (NMS 20)
- the fostering service has a clear strategy for working with and supporting carers (NMS 21)
- foster carers are provided with supervision and support (NMS 22)
- foster carers are appropriately trained (NMS 23)
- case records for children are comprehensive (NMS 24)
- the administrative records are maintained as required (NMS 25)
- The premises used as offices by the fostering service are suitable for the purpose (NMS 26)
- the fostering service is financially viable (NMS 27)
- the fostering service has robust financial processes (NMS 28)
- local authority fostering services recognise the contribution made by family and friends as carers (NMS 32)

Ofsted considers 1, 16, 17, 21, 24, 25 and 32 the key standards to be inspected.