

Next Step Fostering Services

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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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

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| 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

Next Step Fostering Services provide foster care for looked after children and young people, aged nought to 18 for assessment, support and respite, as well as short, medium, and long term care for children where it is not possible for them to return home. Next Step also provide parent and child placements offering support, supervision and assessments within public court proceedings. There is a day-to-day activity programme and assertive outreach support for children temporarily outside of mainstream education. At the time of this inspection Next Step were supporting and working with 59 foster carers and offering a total of 116 places.

Summary

The agency's working ethos is underpinned by the principles of Every Child Matters and now the new Green paper. This was clearly evidenced under all of the outcomes looked at and paperwork that was seen. It is also worth noting that the last inspection was only 10 months ago but the service has still moved forward without any compromise on quality. The agency provide a high calibre of skilled, well trained and committed foster carers and staff group who are child centred and focused on the needs of the child. The most commented upon aspect of the service is the high levels of support received by carers, from the management right through to the admin staff. Also how the agency is striving to meet the needs of the children placed through practical and imaginative support, which matches the mission statement of the agency "one placement for one child".

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

Improvements since the last inspection

The agency have expanded their geographical area by setting up three sub-offices and obviously along with this recruited a larger staff team. The Website is now live, allowing stakeholders to have entry for updated information about their services. Successful bid for contract as preferred provider for local authorities with invitations to tender for further contracts with other areas. Next Step is currently assessing a foster carer to provide supportive accommodation in a semi-independent home. This is a direct result of a number of older teenagers voicing a need for alternative experiences of care. The agency have arranged for every foster home to have carbon monoxide detectors. The new training programme for foster carers, is fully supported by Next Step and the Independent Social Worker is taking a lead role in this development.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

All of the young people in placement were registered with local health care services. Carers demonstrated a sound understanding of their own roles and responsibilities to promote the health and development of those in their care. All young people have an up to date health record and have health chronologies on all files, however, these are a duplication of the information. Up to date medical consent forms were seen on file. Each year a month is picked to be the designated 'Health Promotion Month'. Training is then provided for the month specific to health matters, with specialist speakers. Annual training provided by the agency promotes the Healthy care agenda and is available for all staff and carers. Detailed health guidance is in the Foster Carer's Handbook, alongside information and advice for foster children. Foster carers

spoken to said the recent health training they had attended was informative and relevant, all carers are up to date with their first aid training. The agency accesses a wide range of external agencies to ensure the 'right' provision is secured through psychiatric and psychology services, for example, Greenfinch charitable Trust, Kent Counsel for Addition, Chilston Project and the NSPCC. The agency are also able to provide from a bank of highly skilled and experienced practitioners further support for families who are struggling, this provides a higher level of consultation to promote a greater degree of stability in the placement. The agency has continued to develop best practice within being healthy with advice taken from the Independent Fostering Agencies forum, also from the Healthy Care Partnership, which works together with a number of health professionals, foster carers and young people and members of the forum. The function of this partnership is to promote a healthy lifestyle and follow the government's Healthy Matters Agenda. One of the senior management team is a member of the Kent Tackling teenage pregnancy Board which is representing the forum.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

The senior management team which consists of the manager, developmental manager and senior social worker all possess a wealth of previous relevant experience and qualifications that are commensurate with the role of safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children. Police checks on all staff are renewed three yearly and records are kept of all other checks and references that have been obtained. Written references are always followed up by telephone verification. Three households were visited and whilst each differed in terms of size and location, each was clean, tidy, hazard-free and afforded young people the privacy of their own bedrooms. In the event of 'sharing', this may occur with sibling placements; all such arrangements are agreed with young people and placing authorities before commencement. The homes are inspected annually to ensure they comply with all relevant health and safety issues and pet risk assessments are also carried out. The young person's bedrooms are also checked during supervision and unannounced visits. The foster carer's handbook along with annual training covers guidelines on their health and safety responsibilities. The agency uses for each family a SWOT matching analysis, which highlights strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. The initial matching form includes good evidence of risk assessments and clarity of why the placement is being made, its proposed length and intended outcome, specific needs of the child against the skills/deficits of the carers, race, religion, culture and ethnicity. Good matching processes are further demonstrated through the finding that 87% of placements have gone on to become long term placements in excess of 18 months and breakdowns of placements are low. The knowledge and experience of the referrals co-ordinator who is also the manager of the agency ensures the continuity and appropriateness of matches. Foster carer profiles are completed by the agency and all families have ongoing training on safe caring. A family policy which is individual to the child placed and links health and safety into the process, is reviewed annually. Children and young people are protected from potential harm and abuse by robust and sound child protection systems. Child protection policies and procedures have been revised, updated and communicated to all staff and carers in recent training. The system for collating all child protection information is regularly monitored and checked by the manager. The policies and procedures did not clearly reflect the training information. The Foster Carer Agreements clearly state that no form of corporal punishment is to be used. Foster carers are supported to manage absconding behaviours appropriately, truancy or bullying policies and procedures are in place. Support can also be offered to young people who abscond by an ex foster child who can provide guidance and support in his role as a mentor for the agency. The agency in response

to the withdrawal of CRB checks for baby sitters has produced its own sitters policy as a further measure to safeguard children. The content of the staff files consistently hold all the relevant paperwork. There are rigorous safeguarding checks for all people working in or for the agency, and all have had enhanced checks through the Criminal Records Bureau. Checks on identity and qualifications have been completed along with full employment histories. Written references are followed up by telephone verification. There are robust written procedures in place for recruitment and selection of staff. The panel members consist of a varied and diverse group, who are quorate and have relevant childcare experience and offered insightful questions. The panel chair was organised and effective with inclusive leadership and warmth to the carers being interviewed. The panel offered clear questioning and robust quality assurance with all members completing a SWOT analysis prior to panel when reading the paperwork.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The agency has recruited carers from a range of different cultural backgrounds suitable for those young people in placement. To ensure the agency is recruiting foster families from diverse cultures they have attended the Muslim music festival and been to local community events and places of worship. Sound and robust policies and procedures remain in place with regards equal opportunities and valuing diversity. The agency has an extensive library to inform about different cultures and is available for staff and foster carers. The agency has a "quality promise" that any trans racial placement acknowledges difference, and support and training is given to the young person and the foster carers to identify any issues around culture, identity or speech and language and then managed appropriately. The foster carers ensure that young people access local groups and pursue their interests, and ensure they have equal access to opportunities. An example of this is the one off payment every year the agency gives to foster carers, for holidays. Foster carers confirmed they received excellent support with regards to any specialist needs, including funding, adaptations to their homes, equipment, additional support for their child at school and specific training for them as carers. The link worker and senior foster carers attended a child development observation course set up by the agency to look at the specific role of the foster carer with a mother and baby, as this is an area of specialism for the agency. Training on 'diversity' and 'equality' is carried out for all staff and carers. This has included a presentation about Jehovah's Witnesses and Afghanistan history and culture, and promoted Black History Month to ensure that staff are informed to provide the best level of care and matching possible. There is clear guidance detailing the responsibility of carers to promote and support educational achievement. Foster carers work hard to ensure there is excellent communication between themselves and the schools. The foster children's files contain up to date Personal Education Plans and 100% of the foster carers attend parents' evenings. The agency supports them with this by providing a daytime programme with support workers to assist if there are problems. Their role is dedicated to working predominately with the young people in a support/advocacy role to build their self-esteem and confidence. This could include going into the schools forming partnerships with them as well as meeting up outside of school or them attending the programme if they are not in school. They can help out at the school on a sessional basis to reduce the likelihood of exclusion, to provide support to the child when they are experiencing a particularly difficult period. The service are very successful with getting school places and currently only one young person is not in school/full time education or work. School uniform grants are provided by the agency. The agency runs an Educational Achievement Award scheme for the young people, which acknowledges their achievement with a financial reward.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

Care files hold clear information about contact arrangements, including any legal restrictions and those carers and young people spoken with talked positively about the support provided by the agency to maintain regular contact arrangements and for determining future arrangements. Included in the foster carer's handbook is policy and guidelines regarding promoting and supervising contact. The agency provides training that sets out the principles and expectations that foster carers are expected to adhere to and the arrangements to support them in facilitating contact. The agency recognised the complex issues around contact, the needs of parents, children and other relatives and was instrumental in setting up services and a service level agreement with the first local accredited Contact Centre which later became Greenfinch Trust, and has produced a leaflet specifically for birth parents. They now facilitate contact at Greenfinch Charitable Trust if supervision and assessment is required, which have good facilities and produce a comprehensive professional report. The agency can assist with transport or further support as required. Records on file indicate that children's opinions have been sought prior to their own reviews and that of their foster carer's review. Children and young people spoken to described means by which they had been consulted, child friendly questionnaires, and the opportunity to attend groups and events set up by the service. They can also see a worker during monthly support visits and the young people have access to foster carers' diaries and read and comment on monthly summaries that the foster carers complete. The agency offers all young people an advocate and runs a group called What About Me? (WAM). The agency are in the production stages of further developing their website to include a web page for birth and looked after children with a separate page for birth children, to act as a forum for advice. The organisation is now involving the young people by asking foster children who have left and are living independently in the community to be involved in the agency in a mentoring or organisational role. One ex foster child sits on the IFA Healthy Care Partnership in England. His role is to represent the views of looked after children. The agency have produced a children and young people's guide to the fostering service including information about how to complain or to raise concerns in relation to their being in foster care, this is also available on DVD format and has been translated into several languages. The agency promotes for all the young people including birth children, a gift token for birthdays, Christmas and any significant achievements. Every summer the agency organises children's days out suitable for different ages, this year they also organised a trip solely for the birth children, and the family day was unfortunately cancelled due to bad weather but they will try again at Christmas.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

There is a clear statement of purpose, which describes the aims and services of the agency. This document meets with legal requirements and was recently reviewed. Staff fully understand its content and updated it at their team away day. The agency has a young people's guide which is available on DVD. The children's guide contains all the required information about how to complain, and independent advocates and includes a summary of the service in a child friendly way and has been translated into several languages. There is a clear management structure within the senior management team, with defined lines of accountability in place.

The senior management team is suitably qualified and experienced. Lines of communication and responsibility are clear. Social workers and the support workers are also appropriately qualified and experienced. They receive regular supervision from the senior social worker on a monthly basis unless on the robust induction period where this is fortnightly. Individual staff members are provided with good access to ongoing training and opportunities to broaden their own knowledge base. Team meetings are weekly and a recent team away day was organised to explore the vision and development of the service. Foster carers and young people receive regular supervision visits. All the questionnaires received back from foster carers and young people were positive, for example, "extremely accessible to us", "high levels of support and advice", "great relationship with the agency" and "very child focussed and dedicated". The agency's supervision and support is recognised by the foster parents to be of a high standard that they feel is very supportive, as is the use of the link workers in the Out Of Hours' service. The agency has just reviewed the foster carer's handbook after consultation with new and existing carers, and has been endorsed by the Chief Executive of Fostering Network, Robert Tapsfield. The agency now has a live website allowing for updated information about the service; the agency wish to further develop the website to include a web page for birth and looked after children. Annual home reviews result in robust reports being written and overseen by an independent reviewing officer. These are further supported by clear competency based assessments of carers' skills and how they meet the needs of the children they are caring for. There are clear policies and procedures in place now following a consultation process with carers, and the development of the new respite policy. This concluded with carers receiving additional respite, whilst also rewarding carers financially if they chose not to use the respite. Foster carers are further financially rewarded in line with their professional and learning development over a three year period. The grading allowances reflect length of service and participation in ongoing learning. There are already good arrangements in place for training and development of the carers, with a wide range of good quality training available. However, the agency is already starting to put into place "The training, support and development standards for foster care" which are due to be implemented April 2008. The support groups offered monthly by the agency are well attended. The agency have a case recording policy, which details the purpose of recording information, and outlines the information to be held on file. The files were scrutinised and showed a high level of consistency in terms of content and organisation, the content was detailed and evidenced regular auditing both by internal and external staff. The Agency has comprehensive and robust policies and procedure, however some do not have the new governing body Ofsted on them. The agency's administration records contain all the required information in a well ordered and comprehensive way. The agency have recruited additional administrative staff so they remain as effective and efficient and support the growing development of the business. The agency has reviewed all of its IT equipment to ensure its suitability for the task.

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 governing body Ofsted is updated on all policies and procedures.NMS 22
- ensure the child protection policy and procedure is reflected in the training.NMS 9

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.