

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 outcomes for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and the relevant National Minimum Standards for the service.

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

Next Step Fostering Services provide foster care for looked after children and young people, up to 18 years old. It provides services 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 provides parent and child placements offering support, supervision and assessments for 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 75 foster families with 105 young people in placements. The agency has a head office to support carers on one side of Kent and then four further sub offices split between Kent and London.

Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

The service is efficiently run by a senior management team with the skills and experience necessary to ensure good and excellent outcomes for children and young people. Social work staff receive ongoing supervision and training opportunities which promotes their own development and gives them the skills to support foster carers effectively to a high standard. Foster carers know exactly what is expected of them and they are keen advocates for children and young people. Hence, children and young people feel valued, with many enjoying the security and stability of safe, long term placements. The multi-layered approach to management ensures comprehensive quality assurance and monitoring is taking place. The agency has three minor recommendations made to further support the excellent practices.

Improvements since the last inspection

There were two recommendations made at the last inspection. One was to ensure the regulatory body was clearly seen on all relevant policies and procedures to ensure clarity of legal framework , this is now in place.

The second was to ensure the agency's own child protection policies and procedures were firmly embedded in both internal and external safeguarding training. This is now standard practice and further ensures the safety and welfare of the young people.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

Young people's health needs are comprehensively met, including their emotional and psychological health needs. Foster carers have the skills to guide young people to understand and manage their own behaviours by raising young people's self-awareness and self-esteem. Foster carers, young people and staff have access to additional advice and support from workers, consultants, psychologists and therapists from child and adolescent mental health services. The health needs of children and young people are comprehensively explored at the referral and matching stage so prospective foster carers are ready to meet these identified needs.

Young people benefit from having access to a range of health professionals and specialist services. Individual health records clearly identify any needs and foster carers take full responsibility to meet these; whether this is trips to see specialists or hospital stays. Health records within the agencies files do not record the health professionals involved in the young people's care. Consent forms for medication and treatment have been obtained and are on file so ensuring there is no delay in young people getting the treatment they need. Health needs of children and young people are being robustly monitored during supervision visits and foster carers monthly reports record all appointments and interventions. Foster carers have received training on medication and first aid and this ensures the health of the young people. Safe practices are in place around storage and administration of medication and any young person who self administers has been appropriately risk assessed. The agency uses supervision sessions to address any health issues and all carers receive excellent training to be enabled to meet the young persons individual health needs. Any physical adaptations or equipment needed for the appropriate care of a child is provided to the foster carers.

Foster carers encourage young people to make informed decisions about their health and they promote a healthy lifestyle. Young people's surveys state 'we eat lots of fruit and vegetables', 'I do more exercising than I used to', 'I am encouraged to eat a healthy, balanced diet and be active'. Young people are encouraged to help with meal preparation and with planning, budgeting and shopping.

All young people live in foster homes which are spacious, homely and maintained to a high standard of decoration and safety. All young people have individual bedrooms unless specifically agreed by their local authority. The foster carer's homes and any outside space is checked annually within the health and safety check. The agency undertakes unannounced visits twice a year. Foster carers are clear on the policies and procedures concerning vehicle safety and transportation of young people.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

Young people are supported to develop a strong sense of safety and well-being and are encouraged through appropriate support to take reasonable risks. There are no concerns about young people being absent without authority for long periods or placing themselves in harmful situations on a frequent basis. All foster carers and staff are clear on the policy and procedures which meet the Runaway and Missing from Home and Care Protocols (RMFHC) and are explicit within the foster carer handbook. The on-call duty social worker for the agency will also give guidance to follow. Young people can earn free time along with independent travel as a way of taking responsibility for their own behaviour; with risk assessments, loving care and support this helps minimise the risks. The agency has strong links with local police forces and the Local Safeguarding Children Boards.

Young people benefit from foster carers who actively safeguard and promote the welfare of the young people they care for. The foster carers spoken to were clear the relationships formed with their young person enables a trusting and open relationship. This helps them to further keep the young person safe as they talk openly and care about each other. All foster carers and staff have received safeguarded training and are clear on their roles and responsibilities to protect young people. Staff possess a wealth of relevant previous training and experience from within local authority child protection provision. Young people said they feel safe and they trusted the foster carer to keep them safe. The agency has a clear safeguarding policy and is strong at working jointly with all the local authorities and partnership agencies. Each household has an individual safe care policy but this does not include mobile or internet safety. This does not compromise the young people's safety as the agency has clear policies and procedures within the foster carer handbook, and provides carers with training on this subject.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Young people thrive in the foster home's supportive environments which offer consistency and clear boundaries. They enjoy sound relationships with foster carers. The young people benefit from individualised support and encouragement which helps them to develop a positive self view and grow in self-confidence. The foster carers have high expectations and a positivity that the young person will do well and achieve; young people value this. The young people are achieving excellent outcomes as the result of knowing adults genuinely care about them and want the best for them. The young people are encouraged to take responsibility for their behaviour and develop confidence in themselves and foster carers reward positive conduct which in turn, reduces the occurrence of difficult and challenging behaviour. Experienced supervising staff effectively promote positive behaviour management strategies. They provide foster carers with clear guidance and training with regards to the use of sanctions and behaviour management.

The foster carers ensure all young people are actively involved in the local and wider community; for example with work experience or voluntary work, local groups and clubs. A range of purposeful and enjoyable activities are always offered and available for the young people to try to help them develop confidence in their skills. Foster carers work hard to nurture and support young people's interests and hobbies, and help them to find new activities they might enjoy; for example badminton, water sports and singing lessons, as well as simply spending time with their own friends and peer groups.

Young people benefit from foster carers who are motivated and enthusiastic about promotion of education. Foster carers actively promote educational attainment and help support with home work and a 24 hour curriculum. The foster carers attend all educational meetings and are proactive in raising expectations for achievements and ensuring opportunities beyond the school day to maximise their learning. All the young people have school places or access to alternative educational provision like the agencies day care programme. The agency maintains close links with educational professionals like Connexions, local school and colleges. The agency will help support funding for additional educational resources like laptops or extra tuition.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

Children and young people are effectively consulted and listened to with regards to their ongoing care. Foster carers encourage those living with them to share their own personal views and to take control of their own lives. The agency also has its own young person's advocate who is available to the young people if they have a concern or issues they want to discuss.

The children's guide explores children's rights and how to make complaints. It is written in a child-friendly format to ensure that young people easily understand their rights. Young people state, 'I know how to contact our advocate', 'the supervising social worker from the agency spends time talking to me' and 'I know how to make a complaint if I need to'.

Training, guidance and support for foster carers includes life story work and assisting children and young people to understand and make sense of their past histories and experiences to help them move forward. Counselling and therapeutic services are further accessed where necessary to enable children and young people to get the support they need. Foster carers enable children and young people to develop a positive self-image. Young people's ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds are treated with respect and are actively promoted and celebrated. Foster carers are excellent at promoting self-worth by treating young people as valued family members.

Contact arrangements are explicitly clear and foster carers receive good quality training and guidance. Foster carers and the agency provide practical assistance,

where necessary and they facilitate complicated and difficult arrangements professionally and sensitively. Their understanding as to the importance of positive contact is clear and this benefits the children and young people.

Children and young people benefit by joining and leaving the service in a planned and sensitive manner. In the event of emergency placements, great effort is made to welcome individuals and carefully explain the purpose of their placement. Robust matching processes increase the likelihood of placement stability; a good number of children and young people are enjoying long-term placements.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is outstanding.

Young people receive the guidance they need to achieve a successful transition into adulthood. Young people benefit from support to develop their independent living skills, shopping and preparing meals, money management and doing laundry. Foster carers work hard at ensuring young people are prepared for independence while still living at home, and contribute to the development of each child's pathway plan. The agency ensures appropriate training and support for foster carers caring for young people approaching adulthood so they can provide good quality support. Young people benefit from foster carers who provide on-going support in the transition period after they have left the home.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

The fostering panel comprises individuals who are suitably qualified and experienced to undertake this task. Assessments of prospective foster carers are rigorous and thorough. The agency implements strict criteria and filtering systems; hence, those carers who reach the approval stage are deemed to have the potential to provide safe and stable placements, in the best interests of children and young people. Annual reviews occur on time and the panel makes clear recommendations; for example, health and safety checks or training attendance, so as to improve upon the quality of care provided. Excellent matching arrangements ensure that children and young people are placed with families who can meet their needs. Disruptions and breakdowns are rare; stability of placements is a particular strength. Foster carers say, 'I feel the matching with the young person was very good and I was provided with the skills, support and information required' and 'I've never been asked to take a child unless I feel fully confident about my abilities to provide the best for that child'.

Young people, foster carers, staff and local authorities are clear about the aims and objectives of the fostering service and what services and facilities it can provide. Information regarding the systems in place for supporting foster carers, meeting outcomes for young people, dealing with complaints and training is also included in this document. The agency has a young person's guide that is in a child-friendly

format and is translated into several language. The guide contains information about what to expect from being in care, health, education and how to make a complaint.

Any complaints or allegations made are dealt with promptly and sensitively to ensure that the appropriate outcome is reached to safeguard children and young people in placement and that support is available for foster carers who are facing allegations.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. Evidence supports a consistent commitment to always looking to improve equality and diversity in practice; for example, not just sending out achievement rewards to foster children but birth children as well. All young people receive an individualised service which is designed to meet their personal needs and improve their outcomes. Foster carers and agency staff have attended equality and diversity training. Fostering staff and carers are recruited from various minority ethnic groups and have a good understanding of young people's dietary, religious, social and cultural needs. Staff and foster carers support young people to make personal choices and to access all available resources.

This is an extremely well run, financially viable service and they have the finances to provide innovative and effective services. The senior management team have the skills and experience to deliver a highly professional and efficient service and have a strong commitment to ensuring positive outcomes for young people. Quality multi-layered monitoring and quality assurance systems exist which help to ensure that the service is always run in the best interests of young people. There is a clear structure and clear lines of accountability within the agency. Excellent administrative systems allow the agency to function effectively. Staff say 'This is a dynamic and creative company', 'They are always looking at ways to improve and move forward'. Staff say that they are provided with extensive support, training and supervision and this helps them to promote young people's welfare. Comprehensive robust arrangements are currently in place for the selection of staff and carers and this helps to keep young people safe. The two new office managers have not as yet attended the safer recruitment training although this is planned within the next couple of months. The premises are all of a high standard and additional resources and venues are used for training purposes, which are fit for purpose.

Wide ranging systems are in place for working with foster carers so they always feel fully supported. They are given a cohesive foster carer's handbook that they find helpful as a comprehensive reference guide. They regularly access support groups which are themed for each month and provide practice development and training as well as group supervision. Foster carers attend annual reviews and reports are prepared and presented to a small fostering panel as the agency feels the carers need to be recognised for their exceptional commitment and drive each year. The agency provides 24 hour support with an on call system, local to the foster carers with supervising social workers they know. Foster carers feel they can approach the agency any time and state they have no concerns regarding their support and are exceedingly well supported. Foster carers receive regular visits from their supervising social workers and written records of these visits are maintained so that any issues can be followed up. Foster carers praise the professionalism and support received

from their supervising social workers. Training opportunities for foster carers are excellent with a wide range of courses to choose from to meet the specific training and developmental needs of individual carers. One carer said that the training and support that they had been provided with in behaviour management had helped to ensure that the placement did not break down. On-line training is provided for second carers to access within their own time scales. Much dedication has been given to ensuring that all main foster carers and a majority of second carers have completed the national vocational qualification in childcare, as well as the children's workforce development council training. Children and young people are assured that their carers possess sound qualifications and appropriate skills, which promotes safe care.

Foster carers are clear about the expectations regarding keeping records and can demonstrate how they are recording memories as a part of life story work for children and young people, for example, taking photographs and keeping souvenirs from trips and activities. Robust administration systems are in place for the maintenance of all records. Excellent administrative support systems are in place and the agency has computer spreadsheets to keep information live and up to date to meet the agencies needs. All records are kept securely and maintained to a high standard.

There is good communication between the agency, carers and young people's social workers and this helps to ensure that young people benefit from consistency in their care. Young people have placement plans that provide clarity about the roles of all those involved in their care, about how the parenting tasks should be shared. The agency is clear that the foster carers are professionals who are enabled to make reasonable and appropriate decisions about the young people they care for. Young people are able to contribute their views to these plans and these measures help to ensure that placements provide stability. Statutory reviews occur as required and these help to ensure that young people continue to make good progress and how changing needs will be met in their placements.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Recommendations

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

- ensure professionals treating the young person are clearly recorded on the agencies health records (NMS 6)
- ensure children are helped to understand how to keep themselves safe, including when outside of the household or when using the internet or social media (NMS 4.4)
- ensure all personnel responsible for recruitment and selection of staff are trained in, understand and operate within good practices. (NMS 19.2)

