

Next Step Fostering Services

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

Unique reference number	SC036540
Inspection date	23/06/2014
Inspector	Mark Blesky
Type of inspection	Full
Provision subtype	

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Date of last inspection	26/05/2011

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Next Step Fostering Services is an independent fostering agency, providing foster care for looked after children and young people. It provides services for assessment, support and respite, as well as short, medium and long-term care for children. 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.

In March 2014 the service has 118 carers in 67 households providing care for 105 children.

Next Step Fostering Services Limited is a family owned private limited company and is an established independent fostering agency operating from its Kent based headquarters in Faversham, Kent. The company operates a group of 4 sub offices in West, East and South London and Medway. The sub offices fall under the direction of head office as a single branch.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding: An agency demonstrating and exceeding the characteristics of a good judgement where children and young people are making significantly better progress and achieving more than was expected in all areas of their lives.

Good: An agency where children and young people, including those with the most complex needs, have their individual needs met and their welfare safeguarded and promoted. They make good progress and receive effective services so they achieve as well as they can in all areas of their lives.

Requires improvement: An agency that may be compliant with regulations, and observing the national minimum standards but is not yet demonstrating the characteristics of a good judgement. It therefore requires improvement to be good. There may be failures to meet all regulations or national minimum standards but these are not widespread or serious; all children's and young people's welfare is safeguarded and promoted.

Inadequate: An agency where there are widespread or serious failures which result in children and young people not having their welfare safeguarded and promoted.

Overall effectiveness

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Young people are looked after by committed and caring foster carers who understand their needs. Carers help them to form and sustain relationships and become part of the family. First, and foremost, this agency works very hard to help young people gain positive experiences of family life and most systems underpin this effectively. Young people's individuality and diversity is captured and visible within placement plans, which reflect a clear sense of focus on the young person.

Systems have been developed to ensure young people have an active voice and that they are able to shape and influence the management of the agency. Carers' also feel engaged and valued and they have good opportunities to make representations and to influence the agency.

There is a higher level of co-operation and liaison with stakeholders and other agencies and this agency robustly pursues working together and forming collaborative partnership arrangements. This is most evident in the commissioning and funding of services by the agency to support health and promote education.

There is a wealth of training for foster carers that is rich and diverse. Training is shaped through consultation with carers and stakeholders. This results in training programmes that meet the more individual and diverse needs of young people and their foster carers. There are however, some difficulties in delivering training to a small number of carers. This is more often the hard to reach or 'second' carer. The agency has begun to address this, but their actions have not been robust, consistent or resulted in delivering training effectively. This has left some training programmes incomplete and some carers without up-to-date training and they are less likely to develop and maintain the necessary insights to meet the challenges of fostering.

Supervision is also provided for both carers, and meetings with the secondary carer take place typically one session in every three. This provides carers and their families the opportunity to reflect on practice and develop their professional role.

The leadership and management in most aspects is strong and effective and the agency's 'vision' is clearly articulated and understood by staff and carers. The Registered Manager and the leadership team are committed and passionate about putting young people first and improving young people's outcomes.

Recruitment practice is well managed and the formal assessment process for all new carers is effective. This results in good quality assessments and motivated and committed carers, who are able to meet the needs of young people.

Systems have been developed to capture information and support quality assurance programmes and in most cases, this has been effective.

Areas for improvement

Statutory Requirements

This section sets out the actions which must be taken so that the registered person/s meets the Care Standards Act 2000, Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the National Minimum Standards. The registered person(s) must comply with the given timescales.

Reg.	Requirement	Due date
17 (2011)	provide foster parents with up to date training, as appears necessary in the interests of children placed with them (Regulation 17(1))	01/08/2014
36 (2011)	notify without delay the persons or bodies indicated if any of the notifiable events listed in column 1 of the events and notifications table in Schedule 7 take place in relation to the fostering agency (Regulation 36(1))	27/07/2014
4 (2011)	keep under review and, where appropriate, revise the Statement of Purpose and children's guide, notify the Chief Inspector of any such revision within 28 days (Regulation 4(a)&(b))	27/07/2014
35 (2011)	maintain a system for monitoring the matters set out in Schedule 6 at appropriate intervals, and improving the quality of foster care provided by the fostering agency. (Regulation 35(1)(a)&(b))	27/07/2014

Recommendations

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

- ensure that foster carers encourage children to take appropriate risks as a normal part of growing up. 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)
- provide at the time a child is placed with foster carers, written permission from a person with parental responsibility to administer first aid and non-prescription medication, and to consent to any other form of medical or preventive treatment authority (The Children Act 1989, Guidance and Regulations, Volume 4: Fostering Services 3.61)
- ensure that the foster carer is given all the information they need about the child to enable them to provide appropriate care, and make sure that this information is kept up to date. (The Children Act 1989, Guidance and Regulations, Volume 4: Fostering Services 3.6)

Experiences and progress of, and outcomes for, children and young people

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Young people speak affectionately about their fostering families and feel very much part of the family. Carers actively seek young people's views and their comments, which are treated with importance and valued. Young people are introduced to carers and their families prior to placement and where possible visit, share a mealtime and meet birth children. Initially visits to new placements are more frequently carried out by the supervising social worker to help the young person settle in and support the carers.

Carers understand the importance of helping young people express themselves as members of the family and as individuals. Young people are aware of their rights and their responsibilities as family members.

Carers and young people have formed relationships that are resilient and reliable and as a result young people express themselves with confidence. Young people feel safe and secure in their placements and this is reflected in their responses to the agencies surveys and within their statutory reviews.

Young people's behaviour is typically positive and well managed. Carers adopt appropriate and effective measures to help young people behave in an acceptable manner. Negative behaviour is addressed as it would be in a typical stable family and sanctions take the form of disapproval within discussions and conversations.

Young people are provided with and enjoy a well-balanced and nutritious diet and carers take the time to plan and help young people make healthy choices. Young people are made aware of how their lifestyle choices can influence their health and carers appropriately discourage poor health care or lifestyle choices.

While most young people are provided with emergency medical consent, some delays and confusion had led to a small number of young people awaiting the necessary consent. Although this is yet to have an impact,, delays in emergency treatments could result in the absence of pre-arranged consent.

All young people benefit from having regular assessment of their educational progress. The agency has developed an educational tracker which plots young people's progress against a comparable average. This allows early intervention when young people are not reaching the expected or anticipated milestones.

Some young people have made significant progress from their starting points.

The education tracking is assisting those young people that were not performing as well, providing them with beneficial early intervention.

Young people benefit from well-managed contact with their friends and family and their carers understand the importance of ensuring young people are provided with good experiences from contact. The agency provides good additional support to carers and young people to ensure that contact is not disrupted through any shortfalls in planning or resources.

Young people are involved in their care planning and this is demonstrated in their contributions within their statutory reviews. Young people use opportunities to

discuss their plans and their progress with carers and this is articulated in the young people surveys.

Young people are supported to learn and develop the necessary skills for adulthood and living independently. The agency supports pathway planning prepared by placing authorities, but also works with carers individually to support young people to learn these essential skills. Young people are therefore able to understand the challenges of moving towards independence and are helped to obtain and develop new skills and experiences. Training is also provided for carers to help them promote young people's confidence and increase their skills and knowledge in looking after themselves.

Young people are supported to complain and to raise concerns. This is discussed with young people when they move into foster care. Informative guidance is also provided to all young people to remind them of their rights and how to complain. The agency has been proactive in this area and guides are produced in several different languages and formats.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Young people enjoy warm and affectionate relationships with the carers and the carer's families. The agency understands the importance of this. From the point of introductions, the agency and carers work hard to establish and develop good communication and relationships.

The agency promotes the family model and young people say that they feel like any other member of the family. Young people are provided with comprehensive introduction information, which not only describes the placement but also articulates a very welcoming family environment. Young people feel engaged and valued as a result.

Young people are provided with homes that are well maintained, decorated and provide them with opportunities to personalise their bedrooms. Young people enjoy a range of activities and meet and form relationships with peers. Young people are encouraged to choose hobbies and carers try to encourage young people to mix with the wider community. Young people say that they enjoy family days out most of all with their carers and the extended family of the carers.

The agency is also aware of the importance of providing carers that can meet the more diverse range of young people's ethnic and religious needs and works hard to recruit to support this. The agency's fostering panel and annual reviewing process is well managed to ensure carers are properly assessed and reviewed at appropriate intervals. This ensures carers remain suitable to provide care for young people.

Carers are supported to meet emerging needs through supervision processes and

training. There is a wide, varied and rich range of training that is insightful and appropriately focused on promoting the carer's professional development. Carers, who are couples, say that when one of them is not available, the other spends time disseminating and discussing the training to ensure both carers use and understand the training. However there is a small group of carers that have failed to engage in training for a sustained period of time.. Carers are also supported through effective supervision. These meetings track and monitor the unique, sometimes changing needs, of the individual household. This practice ensures each fostering household is provided with the type and range of support it needs.

The agency has a dedicated referral and matching team who ensure that only children whose needs can be met are placed within the agency. Young people are supported well with comprehensive and detailed matching procedures, which are overseen by the Registered Manager. Matching is generally well-managed and has been successful in supporting and sustaining of long-term placements.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Young people say they feel safe and secure within their foster homes. This is in part largely promoted by well-established and protective relationships between carers and the young people. Young people understand that they have the right to be kept safe and looked after and carers demonstrate a clear notion of safeguarding. Regular checks are made of foster carers homes and this is often supported by unannounced visits. Regular and effective consultation processes enable young people to report back their feelings of safety to the agency. Carers are therefore aware of the importance the agency places in maintaining a safe environment and care practices for young people.

Carers and the supervising social workers develop risk assessments that keep young people safe. Risk assessments consider young people's historic and emerging behaviours and include an awareness of how behaviour and the environment can impact on risk.

Where appropriate, the agency also provides targeted training and support directly for the young people. One recent example includes a finance workshop. Older young people were provided with guidance on the financial risks and pitfalls they potentially face as they get older.

Young people rarely go missing from foster care and there is an effective out-of-hours and emergency support for carers for these events. Effective protocols and relationships have been formed with local police forces and the agency has adopted the runaway and missing from home, care (RMFHC) protocols. This ensures that in the event of the young person going missing they are reported found and recovered with the minimum delay. Specific training is provided to assist carers to recognise the signs and symptoms of child abuse and child sexual exploitation. This is further

supported by supervision, foster carer meetings and regular, specific online training. This provides carers with insights into the support that they can provide to young people to promote their welfare.

The agency employs experienced and well-qualified staff members to fulfil the roles of both supervising social workers and line management. Panel members are also well managed to ensure that they are experienced and qualified to perform their role in the agency's panel. Annual appraisal is provided for all staff members to ensure that they are able to maintain and develop their professional role.

The agency employs a dedicated human resources officer and recruitment and employment is robustly managed. Procedures are well managed and efficient with prompt statutory checks and assessment of all new staff members. Records are of high quality and comprehensive, which provide an effective overview of all staff employed by this agency. Recruitment procedures for social work staff are also effective and a dedicated recruitment panel ensures that all new employees are suitable to work with vulnerable young people.

Young people are protected by formal procedures to address any allegations or suspicions of harm. The agency ensures that all social work staff members receive training in identifying the signs and symptoms of abuse. Staff members know how to raise compliant and make representations if they have any concerns. A clear line management structure enables staff and carers to raise matters appropriately. This ensures that staff remains vigilant to any signs and symptoms of abuse. In addition, the agency promotes open communication along with a dedicated whistleblowing policy for all staff and carers.

The agency also develops learning and their safeguarding ethos by introducing research and contemporary learning to help shape and develop the safeguarding procedures. This ensures staff members and the agency continue to develop their professional practice to safeguard young people. The agency is yet to develop comprehensive and effective E-safety with their carers to ensure young people are better protected from online abuse.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **requires improvement.**

Carers and staff are well supported by clear management and supervision structures. The agency provides carers and staff with many opportunities to grow and develop their professional practice. This is reflected with innovative and ambitious training and development programs. Carers benefit from clear direction and they are aware of the expectations of the agency. In most cases, this results in motivated carers that have high aspirations for the young people for whom they provide care.

However, weaknesses have been identified in the training and development of some carers and this has largely been evident where carers are not available or are unwilling to attend training. The agency has been both creative and innovative in

providing training across several venues at different times and frequencies. In addition, e-learning and other arrangements that are more flexible are made available to engage more hard to reach carers in training.

The Registered Manager has undertaken monitoring at appropriate intervals and identified weaknesses in delivering training. In many examples this has been effective. New services have been created to support carers and young people. Young people's consultation, surveys, and improved engagement with young people and birth children have all been enhanced through monitoring and quality assurance.

Carers and staff are supported by clear aims and objectives of the services and support that will be provided by the agency to young people, set out within the Statement of Purpose. The agency periodically reviews their Statement of Purpose, however the review process and the evaluation of the document is not always recorded. This may make it difficult to establish what consideration has been given to this essential document. Although the agency's Statement of Purpose have been subject to regular review, copies of the updated Statement of Purpose have not been sent to Ofsted as required.

The agency provides a good level of support for young people and carers and demonstrates a willingness to commission and finance extra support and services, which is to be commended.

The agency has developed generally effective and well-managed systems of recording and administration. Records demonstrate the substantial development and management oversight that underpins and shapes practice. At the time of inspection, the records were being migrated within new software dedicated to care management and specific to the fostering role. Some records were however more cumbersome and difficult to navigate, and this is an area that the agency is addressing within their new systems.

All significant events relating to the health and protection of children fostered by the service are notified by the agency to the appropriate authorities. However, there has been significant delay in these notifications being received by Ofsted. These delays may prevent Ofsted taking a role in any enquires or being able to take prompt action.

Care planning and placement planning is of a good standard and placement plans are regularly reviewed and appraised. The agency drives and promotes services for young people and has taken the lead role on many occasions in improving the outcomes for young people. Young people's education and health have been better promoted by ambitious and aspirational planning.

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 to assess the effectiveness of the service, to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards and to support services to improve.

The report details the main strengths, any areas for improvement, including any breaches of regulation, and any failure to meet national minimum standards. The judgements included in the report are made against the inspection framework and the evaluation schedule for the inspection of independent fostering agencies.