

Next Step Fostering Services

Next Step Fostering Services Limited

Wrens Hill House, Rushett Lane, Norton, Faversham, Kent ME13 0SH

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

Next Step Fostering Services is an independent fostering agency, providing foster care for children and young people looked after. It is a family-owned private limited company operating from its Kent-based headquarters in Faversham.

The agency has three sub-offices in East London, South London and Thames Valley. The sub-offices fall under the direction of the head office as a single branch. The agency provides respite, short, medium and long-term care for children and young people, in addition to parent and child placements, and support, supervision and assessments for public law court proceedings.

Inspection dates: 25 to 29 September 2017

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account **outstanding**

How well children and young people are helped and protected **outstanding**

The effectiveness of leaders and managers **outstanding**

The independent fostering agency provides highly effective services that consistently exceed the standards of good. The actions of the independent fostering agency contribute to significantly improved outcomes and positive experiences for children and young people.

Date of last inspection: 16 June 2014

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection:

None.

Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency is outstanding because:

- Children are exceeding expectations educationally with a substantial number of them pursuing further education.
- Children placed with this agency's foster carers flourish and make exceptional progress in all areas of their lives.
- There are significant improvements in children's social and emotional achievements.
- The quality of emotional and practical support given to young people approaching adulthood, and in particular post-18, is exceptional.
- The agency has effective working relationships with local authority commissioners, and ensures that services are developed in line with changing needs and demographic trends. This ensures that the recruitment of foster carers is targeted to meet the diverse needs of children.
- Foster carers are skilled, committed and well supported. They tenaciously advocate on behalf of the children in their care.
- A highly effective fostering panel is chaired by a professional with considerable experience who provides strong leadership and vision. This helps to ensure that quality assurance and safeguarding are at the centre of the panel's functions.
- Children live in well-matched, stable placements, with a low number of unplanned endings. This is due to the excellent matching and high-quality support that foster carers receive.
- Children say that they feel happy, safe and secure in their placements, and are highly positive about the care that they receive. The agency encourages a high level of participation with foster carers and children in order to continually improve their service delivery. Children significantly influence and contribute to the development and improvement of the service through participation groups and events.
- The registered manager actively drives continuous improvements in outcomes for children through rigorous monitoring and quality assurance processes.
- Staff and managers demonstrate outstanding commitment to vocational and ongoing training for staff and foster carers. Extensive support is available to foster carers, provided by highly skilled and motivated social workers whose central consideration is the well-being of the children in placement.

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: outstanding

Children placed with this agency flourish and make exceptional progress in all areas of their lives. They receive an outstanding level of care which meets their individual social, emotional, psychological and physical needs. Children develop excellent and meaningful relationships with their foster carers, and this enables them to form and maintain strong attachments and to develop a positive view of themselves. One child said, 'This is my home and my foster carers are my family. I belong here and I always will.'

Children rarely experience unplanned placement endings. The careful matching process is rigorous, and placements are tailored to meet children's individual needs, with additional support provided when necessary. The agency works hard to ensure that detailed information is obtained and that children are placed with foster carers who have the right experience and resources to fully meet their needs.

When children do move on, it is usually part of a planned move. A large number of children who were initially placed on a short-term basis have settled well and remain with their foster carers, some under highly successful 'staying put' arrangements. Specific training is provided to foster carers to support them to be fully prepared to help young people to acquire a range of knowledge and skills. This, in turn, helps children to move successfully into independent or semi-independent living.

A number of brother and sister groups are placed with the agency's foster carers, and many of these are long-term, stable placements in which children feel cherished and develop a sense of belonging to a positive family.

Children's needs in relation to their identity are met well. Children are appropriately matched with foster carers who can meet these needs. One young person, who is placed with a family of a different ethnic background, said, 'Myself and my foster carers are from different backgrounds, but they have gone to the ends of the earth to make sure that my own culture and needs are respected and, in turn, I have learned about their culture. This has really helped me to understand people.'

Children's attendance at school and college is excellent. Staff and foster carers have high aspirations for children and advocate on their behalf to ensure that their educational needs are being fully met. This results in children developing a high level of motivation, and their aspirations for their own future significantly increase. One young person who previously refused to attend school is now fully engaged in an educational course and, with the full support of his foster carers, is enjoying a dance programme and making excellent progress.

The fostering agency strives to learn from research, for example in relation to the value of education for children. Leaders actively encourage carers to feel empowered to advocate for children and to share consistent and successful relationships with education professionals in order to promote children's educational development and achievements. A number of young people have remained in further and higher education.

Children's health needs are extremely well supported by staff and foster carers, who are both proactive and vigilant. Foster carers have developed excellent relationships with health professionals, and children are supported to understand the importance of their health and healthy living from an early stage. Foster carers receive training in relation to health and nutrition, and ensure that any identified physical, emotional or mental health issues are appropriately addressed. Children's health is monitored carefully by the agency, and children have regular health checks. Foster carers ensure that children, including those with complex health needs, have access to additional services in order to promote the best possible health outcomes.

The agency ensures that children have the opportunity to express their views, wishes and feelings in a variety of ways. Children are empowered by staff and foster carers to contribute to foster carers' annual reviews and to their own looked after reviews. In addition to direct work undertaken with children by supervising social workers, children are supported to take part in a variety of participation events, including residential trips that are arranged by the agency. This allows children to meet and share their experiences with other children in a similar situation to their own. This also ensures that children feel valued and listened to, and know that their views really matter.

Staff and foster carers demonstrate an understanding that many children placed with them have experienced traumatic and chaotic lifestyles, and as a result experience difficulty in establishing routines and adhering to behavioural boundaries. Foster carers understand that children's behaviour is a means of communication. Foster carers receive support and training in how to develop clear boundaries and behaviour management strategies, and these are consistently applied.

Foster carers' supervision provides a focus for reflection upon their own practice. Foster carers reported that they feel strongly supported by their supervising social workers. This leads to foster carers feeling empowered and valued, and to remaining committed to children during challenging times. One foster carer said, 'My supervising social worker is incredible. She is always there to offer support and guidance, and she truly understands my foster child's behaviour. She supports me to adopt different approaches to manage her behaviour. I feel that we work as a team, and this makes such a positive difference to children.'

Another foster carer said, 'We were fully involved and consulted throughout the matching process. We knew that our child's behaviour was going to be challenging and we are given training, support and lots of good ideas about how

to manage this. It is working.' The child said, 'My foster carers listen to me, and they understand me and don't ever give up on me. I have lived with so many foster carers, but I know that I will stay here forever, because my foster carers really care about me, even when I give them a really hard time.'

Children are engaged in an extensive range of activities, hobbies and interests, and are encouraged to develop their individual talents. The birth children of foster carers are also provided with opportunities to share their feelings and to develop greater empathy with children living with their families through learning about their general experiences. Children placed are provided with the opportunity to follow their religious and cultural traditions, including attending places of worship. Children also receive practical support from the agency and their foster carers with their immigration issues, for example attending appointments with the Home Office and with legal representatives. The agency ensures that children have access to an independent advocate as required, and strongly advocates on behalf of children where it is believed that their interests are not being fully considered.

A local authority social worker said, 'This agency and foster carers provide an excellent service. They are flexible and responsive to the needs of (the child) and have made such a positive difference. She has achieved outcomes in all areas of her life which are far beyond anyone's expectations. They are excellent in their communication and I am kept very well informed about all aspects of the child's life and progress.'

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

The agency places a strong and proactive emphasis on safeguarding and ensures that there are robust systems in place to ensure that children are safe. The service aims to provide foster placements in which children feel secure and can spend their childhoods without fear. Children feel safe in their homes.

Safeguarding underpins the agency's policies, procedures and working practices, and the agency is excellent in reviewing its practices. There is detailed monitoring of all incidents and concerns relating to children in their care. Messages from serious case reviews and good practice are identified and shared with staff and foster carers.

Each fostering household has a safer care policy, and all children have thorough and detailed risks assessments and behaviour management plans. These identify the impact of any risks to the child and outline the actions to be taken by foster carers to minimise risk. Allegations against foster carers are handled in a timely and appropriate way. Unannounced visits by supervising social workers are undertaken regularly and, depending on the risks identified, take place several times a year. Recruitment procedures for any new staff, including panel members and independent staff, are robust.

The agency ensures that foster carers are aware of the particular vulnerabilities

of each child and are well informed of both the underlying causes and the behaviours which children may exhibit. Specific risk assessments are carried out in respect of children with known histories of sexual exploitation, self-harm, absconding or fire setting, and the matching process considers the needs of each family member.

Detailed placement plans provide guidance for foster carers on how the risks associated with children's behaviour should be managed. These are subject to review in response to any significant incidents or changing circumstances.

All staff and foster carers receive regular and comprehensive training from those with professional expertise on the impact of trauma, attachment disorders, safer caring, internet safety and the risks of radicalisation and online grooming.

Foster carers' homes are subject to regular health and safety checks, which ensures that the environments in which children are living are safe.

While safeguarding underpins all aspects of this agency's service delivery and working practices, the agency is not risk averse. Staff and foster carers support children to participate in a wide range of activities. Children are helped to understand age-appropriate risks and to acquire a range of skills to keep themselves safe.

A strength of the agency is the excellent ongoing support, advice and guidance that are offered to the foster carers of children who go missing or start to exhibit risk-taking behaviours. This significantly reduces risk and promotes safety and well-being. The agency has very low instances of children going missing, and the response of staff and foster carers to such incidents is timely and thorough. Staff and foster carers work in close partnership with other professionals to develop a holistic approach to ensure that the recurrence of risk-taking behaviour declines.

Foster carers, staff and the registered manager are clear about their individual responsibilities to report any safeguarding issues or concerns to the relevant authorities. The registered manager ensures that staff and foster carers learn from any safeguarding issues or incidents, and he discusses the issues with them. All incidents are analysed to identify if any amendments to policy, procedures or practice may be appropriate. Case examples are discussed in the foster carers' support group and staff meetings. This ensures that safeguarding remains a central focus and that good practice is constantly reinforced.

The registered manager ensures that the views of children are regularly sought, analysed and appropriately incorporated into practice. Children are encouraged and supported to raise worries or concerns. One child said that she regularly sees her foster carer's supervising social worker and that she feels confident that they would listen and take action as a result of any concern that she raised. Another child spoke of an incident in which he was bullied in school, yet was completely reassured when his foster carer went into school and challenged the actions of staff on his behalf. He said, 'I felt safe, knowing that my foster carer will protect me, even when I am not at home, and that she won't let anything

horrible happen to me.'

The registered manager and responsible individual believe that no one has a right to foster. The rigorous assessment process adopted by the agency ensures that only those individuals and families with the right attributes are recruited and trained as foster carers. The selection of staff and foster carers focuses upon comprehensive vetting systems which reduce the likelihood of unsuitable individuals gaining access to the children in their care. The performance of foster carers is monitored rigorously on an ongoing basis and any standards of care issues which are identified are immediately addressed. This firmly supports and promotes children's safety and well-being.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: outstanding

This agency is extremely well managed by a leader who has a clear vision for the continued development and ongoing improvement of the service. The registered manager is fully aware of the areas of strength of the agency, and has significantly developed the quality of the foster placements and services provided. He inspires his staff team and foster carers to provide the very best placements possible for children and to embrace research and practice developments such as theories on attachment, resilience and the impact of trauma.

Supervision of staff and carers is professional, regular and practice focused, providing opportunities for reflection upon practice and the impact of this upon children's lives. Supervision records are detailed and evaluative, and provide targets and a focus for each staff member and foster carer. All foster carers receive a timely annual review, and staff undergo annual appraisals of their performance. The agency ensures that children who are placed contribute to these processes in a meaningful way and that their contribution is valued.

Leaders have designed and continuously developed systems for maintaining a detailed and rigorous monitoring system, which is evaluative and highly effective. Thorough quality assurance mechanisms help staff and managers to propel improvements in practice and outcomes for children in placement. The agency operates a 'RAG rating and SWOT analysis' system which monitors risk and placement stability effectively. This enables the agency to ensure that additional support is provided to reduce risk and avoid placement breakdown.

The registered manager and staff team are qualified and experienced, and staff are well trained and supported. Staff and foster carers are provided with opportunities to undertake additional training and qualifications, sometimes focused upon the needs of specific children, which raises the level of professionalism within the service and, as a result, service delivery.

Staff and foster carers share the registered manager's vision for the service. One supervising social worker said, 'We are always looking to improve. If we improve, then the service we provide to children improves and, in turn, children's lives become more fulfilled. That is the ethos of this agency.'

The agency has a very stable workforce, and staff and foster carer retention is excellent. Foster carers said that they remain with this agency because they are valued and supported to do the very best for the children placed. One foster carer said, 'This agency and our supervising social worker have made a positive difference and really changed our lives. They encourage us, support us and believe in us. This means that we feel able to meet any challenge we are faced with and never give up on the children.'

Leaders and managers are visible and approachable, and are passionate about the work of the agency at both a strategic and operational level. The engagement of staff and foster carers is integral to care planning and service delivery, and staff and foster carers report that they feel highly valued and part of a team.

The agency has a highly effective fostering panel, with committed and experienced regular panel members. The chairperson takes ownership of the panel and, together with managers and leaders within the agency, has developed a clear vision for its development. The voice of the child is heard by the fostering panel through a care leaver representative, who consults with children in foster placement and ensures that their views are considered by panel members.

The agency has developed effective partnerships with placing authorities and ensures that they work together to meet the needs of the children placed. The agency is confident to challenge local authority decisions where it is felt that these are not in the best interests of children, and the registered manager proactively escalates concerns when required. One local authority social worker commented on the robustness of the agency's matching processes, saying, of the agency, 'They were very thorough in ensuring that they had all of the information about the child and, as a result, I am confident that the foster carers can fully meet the child's needs, that this placement will be the child's last placement and that she will remain until she is an adult.'

A placements manager at a local authority said, 'Our local authority really appreciates the agency's responsiveness to taking children and young people in an emergency and about whom little is known. The foster carers keep detailed records and share useful information with us in order that we can source a longer-term placement which meets the child or young person's needs. We would highly recommend this agency to other local authorities.'

The registered manager has addressed effectively the requirements and recommendations from the last inspection.

Foster carers are provided with a comprehensive training programme that includes bespoke training to address the specific needs of children. The registered manager maintains appropriate systems for ensuring that significant events in children's lives are notified in a timely manner to the appropriate bodies. Detailed and effective quality assurance and monitoring systems are now in place. The statement of purpose accurately reflects how the service is to be provided. A creative and

carefully designed children's guide ensures that children can understand the role of their foster carers and the agency, and that children know how to express their views and concerns. Updated and reviewed documents of this nature are provided to the chief inspector in a timely manner. The registered manager ensures that decisions in relation to aspects of children's lives are appropriately delegated. Foster carers receive the right information about children and the matching process is transparent. Detailed risk assessments are completed for all children placed, and these help foster carers to minimise risks while ensuring that children are supported to take appropriate risks and to learn how to keep themselves safe.

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people. Inspectors considered the quality of work and the differences made to the lives of children and young people. They watched how professional staff work with children and young people and each other and discussed the effectiveness of help and care provided. Wherever possible, they talked to children and young people and their families. In addition, the inspectors have tried to understand what the independent fostering agency knows about how well it is performing, how well it is doing and what difference it is making for the children and young people whom it is trying to help, protect and look after.

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: SC036540

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