

Nexus Fostering

Nexus Fostering Ltd

4 Jardine House, Bessborough Road, Harrow HA1 3EX

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

Nexus Fostering provides fostering services in London, the Home Counties, the south east and south west of England, East Anglia and the Midlands. It operates under one registration from its main office in London and has satellite offices in Birmingham, Gloucester, Cambridge, Ampthill, Norwich, Hornchurch, Telford and Nottingham.

The agency provides a wide range of placements - short-term, long term, parent and child, sibling placements, children who have disabilities, enhanced therapeutic placements, unaccompanied asylum-seeking minors and 'staying put' for young people.

At the time of the inspection, the agency was providing foster care placements for 510 children in 360 fostering households.

Inspection dates: 5 to 9 December 2022

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: 8 October 2018

Overall judgement at last inspection: outstanding

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: outstanding

This fostering agency offers an outstanding service to children in foster care placements. Children's experiences and progress are excellent.

The agency has significantly improved its services to children since the last inspection. The service negotiates and maintains very successful and stable foster placements. The service's matching processes are effective. Children, including several sibling groups, have their welfare safeguarded and promoted. Unplanned endings do not happen often. As a result, children thrive in safe, stable homes, enjoying secure relationships that are nurturing and positive. A child said, 'Mum and dad [his foster carers] are amazing, I love it here. They praise me even when I'm not so good. They go above and beyond to help me. I hope to stay here until I'm 18.'

Children trust the adults who care for them and they have excellent opportunities to share their views about the care they receive. The Head of Participation is highly effective in engaging children in activities that help to shape the fostering service. For example, recognising that a written newsletter was proving ineffective in reaching children, a group of children and the Head of Participation developed a monthly digital newsletter instead. The platform makes use of creative video clips and animation to share information, events and activities that are of interest to children and celebrate their achievements.

Increasing numbers of children are involved with the service. They are willing to share, sometimes for the very first time, their interests with other children. This acts to increase their social interaction, self-esteem and self-confidence. Similarly, this forum is successful in creatively engaging children in key training. For example, children have recently been instrumental in developing child-friendly digital workshops focused on internet safety and General Data Protection Regulation.

Children lead healthy lifestyles. Foster carers and staff ensure that there is good promotion of children's physical, emotional and social well-being. The agency's response to the COVID-19 pandemic has been effective. This helped to keep children and their families safe and well. However, not all foster carers have recently completed first-aid training. This does not ensure that they are equipped to deal appropriately with medical emergencies. Children have good access to primary healthcare services, and they receive advice and support from specialist services as required. This is particularly the case for children with complex medical needs.

Disabled children receive expert specialist care from their foster carers and medical professionals. Foster carers receive healthcare training from external professionals that meet children's needs. This allows them to meet the daily healthcare needs of children. In one case, the foster carers moved from their family home to a property that could accommodate adapted equipment. This was in order to safely care for

their severely disabled child. This care has resulted in the child significantly exceeding her predicted life expectancy. Communication between foster carers, staff and key health care professionals is consistent. This ensures that children's healthcare needs are well met and that treatment plans result in improved health outcomes for children.

Children benefit from the fostering service's commitment to and investment in a therapeutic approach to care. Staff and foster carers receive targeted training and support to offer trauma-informed care to children. This means that foster carers have a very good understanding of the impact trauma has on children's lives. Therapeutic clinicians provide foster carers with individual and group therapeutic sessions. This is particularly the case in the supported placements service. In addition, each local office has a lead therapeutic supervising social worker and in-house clinician. This helps to reinforce and support therapeutic care plans. Staff ensure that there are regular reviews of the effectiveness of these plans. This ensures that plans are successful in meeting children's often changing emotional needs, and promote placement stability.

Children's identity needs are well met by the fostering service. For example, if required, children have access to an interpreting service to ensure any language barrier is lessened. Children are encouraged to explore and celebrate individual faith practices if they so wish. Foster carers are supportive in helping children understand their backgrounds and the life events that have happened to them. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are carefully matched with foster carers who have good insight into their experiences. Children are able to explore their gender identity safely and sensitively. Staff and foster carers encourage disabled children to join in events and experiences with their non-disabled peers.

Children's learning outcomes are excellent. The agency's head of education is responsible for offering expert advice, support and resources to foster carers and staff. This ensures that children have access to appropriate educational provision that meets their learning needs. Children's educational progress, attendance at school, college and nursery, and any exclusions are tracked and scrutinised. Children receive information and support to consider learning options such as apprenticeships and traineeships. Staff and foster carers ensure that children have access to resources that they are entitled to. This includes, for example, pupil premium funding. Children benefit from staff and foster carers' advocacy at personal education planning meetings. This ensures plans are relevant and effective in promoting children's learning achievements

Children very much enjoy a diverse range of social, educational and recreational opportunities. They have fun. Children are routinely included in family events, religious celebrations and holidays, sometimes abroad. The fostering agency arranges group social events and activities for entire families to participate in. Recent examples include Christmas card competitions, a healthy eating event and Christmas pantomimes. Children have the opportunity to take part in activities that they have previously been excluded from. For example, this year a group of children

participated in the Duke of Edinburgh's Award through the agency. A child told the inspector, 'This trip was one of the best times I've had in my life.'

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

The fostering service staff team and foster carers ensure that the safety and well-being of children are paramount. The service ensures that foster carers are aware of the vulnerabilities of the children that they care for. Staff ensure that foster carers are well informed about the underlying causes of some of the behaviours children can exhibit. This is supported by relevant, good-quality training, which is focused on safeguarding issues and regular supervisory visits that consistently scrutinise child protection issues.

The assessment, preparation and supervision of foster carers are excellent and emphasise the protection of children. For example, applicants seeking to be approved as foster carers are required at the midway point of their assessment to complete a two-day therapeutic care course. This enhances their understanding of the nature of care the fostering service seeks to provide to children.

The vast majority of foster carers receive a range of safeguarding training, which continues throughout their fostering career in different forums. However, this is not the case for all foster carers. In one case reviewed, the foster carer had not undertaken safeguarding training. In one other case, a foster carer providing support to a parent and child placement had not completed the expected specialist training. This does not ensure that all foster carers have up-to-date training that supports safe care practice.

Staff and foster carers devise risk assessments and safe care policies to help promote children's safe care. However, in some cases reviewed, risk assessments did not highlight all known risks. For example, in one case, the pet risk assessment for dogs living in the household was not completed in sufficient detail. In another case, a child's nut allergy was not highlighted. Comprehensive risk assessments are important to help inform safe care practices.

Staff routinely interview children in private to obtain their views on how they feel they are doing. Staff consistently carry out at a minimum one, although typically more, unannounced home visits to each fostering household per year. This helps them to further monitor the safety of children.

Foster carers understand the impact of abuse on children's behaviour. Consequently, they are guided to respond to children's changing needs for protection. This is particularly in cases where children may be subject to child sexual abuse or self-harm or are missing from care. In these instances, staff and foster carers demonstrate excellent knowledge and skills in dealing sensitively and effectively with these risks.

Children who have high-risk-taking behaviour benefit from the agency's Care+ and 360 Supported Placements service. These offer children and their carers specialist input from a multidisciplinary team of internal and external professionals from relevant childcare fields. The team is 'wrapped around the child', with the child's well-being, protection and placement stability being the focal areas of the work. Professional meetings are held frequently. These explore how best to support children's welfare and reduce risk-taking behaviour. Safety plans are largely effective in achieving long-term, stable placements when children's needs are complex and risks to their safety are high.

A foster carer said of the service, 'When the chips are down or even well before they are down, the agency send in the cavalry. The clinicians are brilliant and the other professionals help you to work through whatever the issues are. It's the best possible experience for me and the children. We're totally included.'

Comprehensive policies and procedures are in place to guide foster carers and supervising social workers in caring for children safely. These are updated to ensure compliance with developing guidance and legislation. Staff regularly link practice with research and share learning from, for example, serious case reviews. Managers ensure that the organisation learns from safeguarding events that occur in the fostering service. Recent safeguarding initiatives include managers promoting the concepts of 'professional curiosity' and 'thinking the unthinkable' among staff teams. This helps to promote staff's deeper reflection when exploring safeguarding concerns.

The fostering service takes seriously all allegations against foster carers or concerns for the quality of care provided. When these occur, they are handled with vigour and in accordance with child protection procedures. The fostering service's monitoring of such incidents is thorough and robust. Managers ensure that any learning from allegations or any serious incident is fully explored and shared with staff teams.

Managers and the fostering service's human resources team ensure the safe vetting and recruitment of staff and panel members. This confirms that staff and others are suitable to work with children.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: outstanding

The management and leadership of the fostering service are highly effective. Leaders and managers are ambitious and strive for continual improvement to children's experiences and progress. The registered manager is well qualified and is a very experienced practitioner. She receives support from a range of senior managers in the organisation. All managers are highly visible to stakeholders, including children.

Leaders and managers make use of efficient and effective monitoring systems. They regularly devise and review action plans that drive the continual growth and development of the fostering service. For example, the organisation's new staffing structure includes an additional tier of managers and an assessment manager. This

assists leaders to have an improved oversight of the quality of the service. Managers' frequent overview of the service prompts change and innovation. This results in improved outcomes for children.

The service is very well resourced to meet the needs of children and their foster families. Foster carers overwhelmingly say that the support they receive from the fostering service is exemplary. Foster carers have access to various support forums. These include, for example, local area support groups, a support group for men who foster, a group designed to support transracial placements and support groups for foster carers who care for disabled children. The agency has very recently launched its buddy scheme. This links newly approved foster carers with experienced foster carers who are available to mentor, coach and offer advice and support.

Staff teams are equally well supported. They receive regular and meaningful supervision. Staff training opportunities are good. Staff participate in reflective team and peer support group meetings, and therapists provide clinical consultation to help to inform their practice. A member of staff said, 'I am proud to work for an agency where we work to achieve the best, where children do come first. I see all the time that the people I work with, including senior leadership, have the best intentions to achieve the best for children and carers. There is no greater job satisfaction than the feeling that you know you are part of trying to make a positive difference to children and young people.'

The service's fostering panel operates effectively and efficiently. The fostering panel undertakes clear and appropriate analysis of the work presented at panel meetings. The administration of the fostering panel is effective and panel meeting minutes are appropriately detailed. The service's process for annual review of foster carers is robust and confirms the continued suitability of foster carers.

The quality of foster carer assessments is generally of a high standard. These assessments are detailed and analytical. However, assessments and, subsequently, foster care agreements do not specify fully the terms of foster carers' approval. In particular, these fail to clarify the maximum number of children foster carers can care for. This does not ensure that all parties have agreed confirmation of the full terms of foster carers' approvals.

It is the agency's practice that all foster carers are approved to care for up to three children, aged 0-18 years. This is not always appropriate, as the decision does not account for applicants' preferences, the type of accommodation available for children, or foster carers' ability to care for three children aged 0-18. This practice requires review to ensure the terms of all foster carers' approval are specific and appropriate to their circumstances.

Foster carers, staff and managers work in close partnership with other professionals. An independent reviewing officer said, 'The carers are amazing, dedicated to [child's name]. The care is excellent and [child's name] is treated as a family member. I have no concerns whatsoever. [The fostering service] are real advocates for carers

with the local authority. There is good communication. All paperwork is completed on time with good contributions at meetings. I identify no areas for improvement.'

The entire fostering team demonstrates passion and a commitment to ensuring the experiences and outcomes for children remain positive and continue to improve. The service has ambitious plans in place to support its efforts to continue to offer high-quality care.

Developing initiatives include, for example, formalising the foster care buddy system, the agency's Black Lives Matter project and a support group for children. Shortfalls identified during this inspection do not negatively impact on children's progress or experiences, which are exceptional. All those involved with the agency have high aspirations for future service development and its continued improvement.

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What does the independent fostering agency need to do to improve?

Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions that the registered person(s) must take to meet the Care Standards Act 2000, Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the national minimum standards. The registered person(s) must comply within the given timescales.

Requirement	Due date
<p>The fostering service provider must provide foster parents with such training, advice, information and support, including support outside office hours, as appears necessary in the interests of children placed with them. (Regulation 17 (1))</p> <p>This relates to parent and child training, first-aid and safeguarding training.</p>	1 February 2023
<p>If a fostering provider decide to approve X as a foster parent they must—</p> <p>enter into a written agreement with X covering the matters specified in Schedule 5 (the foster care agreement). (Regulation 27 (5)(b))</p>	1 February 2023
<p>Subject to paragraphs (2A) and (3), where the fostering service provider have obtained all the information set out in paragraph (1A) and have not given the notification in paragraph (1B), the fostering service provider must—</p> <p>prepare a written report on X which includes the following matters—</p> <p>the fostering service provider’s proposals about any terms of approval. (Regulation 26 (2)(c)(iii))</p>	1 February 2023

Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that staff understand the nature of records maintained and that there is a system in place to monitor the quality and adequacy of record-keeping and take action when needed. This relates to the quality of some risk assessments. (‘Fostering services: national minimum standards’, 26.2)

- The registered person should ensure that there are clear and effective procedures for monitoring and controlling the activities of the service. This relates to all foster carers being automatically approved to care for up to three children aged 0-18 years. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 25.1)

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people 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: SC066400

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