

Inspection report

National Fostering Agency (Scotland) - Fostering Service Fostering Service

Springfield House
Laurelhill Business Park
Stirling FK7 9JQ

Inspected by: Suzanne Beard
(Care Commission Officer)

Type of inspection: Announced

Inspection completed on: 22 January 2007

Service Number

CS2005098696

Service name

National Fostering Agency (Scotland) - Fostering Service

Service address

Springfield House
Laurelhill Business Park
Stirling FK7 9JQ

Provider Number

SP2005007502

Provider Name

National Fostering Agency (Scotland)

Inspected By

Suzanne Beard
Care Commission Officer

Inspection Type

Announced

Inspection Completed

22 January 2007

Period since last inspection

This was the first inspection of the service.

Local Office Address

Stuart House
Eskmills
Musselburgh
EH21 7PB

Introduction

The National Fostering Agency (Scotland) is a not for profit fostering Agency which provides foster placements for children aged 0 - 18. It is the sister organisation of The National Fostering Agency, based in England.

The agency recruits and supports carer families to provide a fostering service to a range of children throughout Scotland. At the time of inspection seven approved carers were supported by the fostering service, a further eight applicants were in the process of being assessed as foster carers and five applicants were waiting to be allocated a placement consultant to undertake the assessment. Nine children/young people were placed with approved carers.

The service is based in Edinburgh, however, at the time of the inspection was planning a move to the Stirling area. The structure of The National Fostering Agency (Scotland) was used to provide line management, quality assurance and other central functions. The service is managed by a senior placement consultant and 2 placement consultants. At the time of inspection, the senior placement consultant and the placement consultants undertook the assessment of applicants and provided support to approved foster carers. The agency also made use of sessional assessing social workers when they were required.

The service was registered with the Care Commission in February 2006.

The aims and objectives of the service are set out in The National Fostering Agency Policy Statement of Purpose dated September 2006. These include:

"The Welfare Principle:

By providing focused solutions, our foster carers and placement consultants ensure the Educational, Health, Identity, and Social Welfare needs of the children are paramount in their thinking and comprehensively delivered to achieve positive outcomes.

Valuing Individuality:

By providing carefully matched and professionally trained and supported foster carers, the National Fostering Agency (Scotland) provides each individual child placed with a responsive, effective and quality service.

Partnership and Consultation:

The National Fostering Agency (Scotland), foster carers and placement consultants strive to work in close partnership with the child, social worker, parent(s) and all individuals and Agencies involved in the child's care.

The National Fostering Agency believes that children's wishes and feelings should be taken into account and included in all Care Planning and review meetings. The National Fostering Agency (Scotland) recognises that within such planning, safe caring is imperative".

Basis of Report

This service was inspected after receiving a Regulation Support Assessment (RSA) to determine what level of support was necessary. The RSA is an assessment undertaken by the CCO which considers: complaints activity, changes in the provision of the service, nature of notifications made to the Care Commission by the service, action taken upon requirements etc.

This service was required to have a medium level of support that resulted in an inspection

based on the national inspection themes of child protection and safer recruitment and the core National Care Standards for foster care and family placement agencies.

Before the visit, the Fostering Agency completed an annual return containing information about the service. The fostering agency also sent a self-evaluation form. These documents were used to inform the inspection process.

Questionnaires were returned from the following:

3 foster carers

6 placing social workers

1 panel member

A letter was received from the medical advisor to the panel in lieu of the questionnaire.

In addition the following people were interviewed:

3 approved foster carers (one by telephone)

1 foster family in assessment

1 young person in foster care

The manager of the service

Chairperson of the fostering panel

Agency Decision Maker

1 Agency social worker

2 sessional assessing social worker (1 by telephone)

Members of the fostering panel.

The fostering panel and the foster carers' support group were also observed.

The inspection was carried out by Suzanne Beard and Carole Meaney, Care Commission Officers.

The inspection took place between 22 January 2007 and 6 March 2007.

The Care Commission Officers examined a range of policies, procedures and records including the following:

Statement of purpose

Whistle Blowing Policy

Complaints Policy

Child Protection Policy

Complaints and compliments policy and procedure

Recruitment and assessment of foster carers guidance

Standard on the protocol for reviews and terminations of approval

Panel members guidance checklist

Minutes of previous fostering panels

Staff recruitment and selection policy and procedure

Foster carer handbook

Newsletter

Files of four foster carers

Staff recruitment files

Registration certificate.

The Care Commission Officer took all of the above into account and reported on whether the

service was meeting the following National Care Standards for foster care and family placement services:

Standard 5 Assessing and approving carers

Standard 6 Completing the application

Standard 7 Information and Advice

Standard 11 Reviews

Standard 12 The Fostering Panel

Standard 13 Management and Staffing

The inspection also took into account: The Regulation of Care (Requirements as to Care Services) (Scotland) Regulations 2002 Scottish Statutory Instrument 114.
The Fostering of Children (Scotland) Regulations 1996.

Action taken on requirements in last Inspection Report

This was the first inspection of this service.

Comments on Self-Evaluation

The self evaluation form covered most aspects of the National Care Standards and identified strengths and areas for development. These have been integrated into the report.

View of Service Users

Foster carers generally expressed very positive views about the service they received.

Agency social workers were seen as supportive and the assessment and preparation process was seen to be thorough. Comments from questionnaires returned included:

"I can't find fault with the National Fostering Agency".

"We know we can contact them at any time and they will be here to support us".

Placing social workers generally felt foster carers provided a good level of care and where there had been areas for development they had been able to discuss these with the agency social worker.

View of Carers

Unfortunately it was not possible to obtain the views of any birth families of the young people in placement.

Regulations / Principles

Regulation :

Strengths

Areas for Development

National Care Standards

National Care Standard Number 5: Foster Care and Family Placement Services - Assessing and Approving Carers

Strengths

The service had a comprehensive written procedure for the recruitment and assessment of foster carers which set out timescales and responsibilities.

The service made use of validated assessment tools to assess carers based on competencies and standard documentation. A thorough and comprehensive pack was available as a guide for social workers carrying out assessments. This included practical strategies for working with prospective foster carers and their children. Foster carers spoke positively about their experience of the assessment process and confirmed that the process made clear the abilities needed to become a foster carer.

All assessments were undertaken by qualified social workers. At the time of the inspection only the senior placement consultant had experience in fostering work, however, the other social workers had experience in undertaking assessments in general.

In discussion with foster carers and evidence found in files, it was clear that relevant people were involved in the assessment process.

Records examined verified that all necessary checks had been undertaken. There was a system in place to ensure that Disclosure Scotland checks were repeated every two years.

All applicants were expected to attend a foster carer preparation course. This included training on understanding behaviour and working in partnership. The use of experienced foster carers throughout the preparation course was found to be particularly valuable to applicants.

The agency expected all foster carers to undertake a minimum of three training courses a year.

The service provided support to foster carers 24 hours per day, 7 days a week. Out of hours support was by telephone in the first instance and followed up by a visit to the foster carer as soon as possible. Foster carers fed back that they felt well supported by the agency supervising social workers.

Records examined confirmed that unannounced visits were undertaken on an annual basis.

Information regarding the retention and access to records, including reference to Data Protection was incorporated in the foster carers' handbook.

Areas for Development

The placement consultants and sessional assessing workers were relatively new to the agency and the work of assessing foster carers. The agency advised that plans were in place for the new workers, including sessional workers, to undertake training in the assessment of foster carers including the competency based assessment framework. The service needed to ensure that all placement consultants and sessional assessors undertook training in the assessment of foster carers.

(See Requirement 1)

The agency had a practice of using sessional workers to assess foster carers and it was generally the case that the supervising social worker was a different person once approval had been granted. In discussion with a sessional worker who had recently completed an assessment, it was clear that they were not aware of who the supervising social worker would be, what hand-over there would be, if any, and was therefore not able to advise the newly approved foster carers accordingly. The service needed to ensure that there was continuity between the two social workers.

(See Recommendation 1)

National Care Standard Number 6: Foster Care and Family Placement Services - Completing the Application

Strengths

Foster carers confirmed that they saw their assessment report prior to consideration by the fostering panel. Foster carers were invited to attend the approval panel. They were advised of the recommendation the panel would be making to the Agency Decision Maker immediately following the panel. This practice was observed at the fostering panel. Foster carers advised that they received the decision of the Agency Decision Maker in writing within 21 days of the panel meeting.

In discussion with foster carers it was clear that they had been provided with regular feedback on the progress of their application throughout the assessment process and any outstanding work or tasks were identified.

Records examined found that assessments were completed within 6 months of the agency receiving a completed application form.

Assessment reports were reviewed by the quality assurance officer before the application was considered by the fostering panel.

Areas for Development

Examination of case files highlighted that letters of approval were not always held on the

foster carers' file. The service needed to ensure that copies of the letters of approval were held on foster carers' files.

(See Recommendation 2)

National Care Standard Number 7: Foster Care and Family Placement Services - Information and Advice

Strengths

Foster carers were provided with a comprehensive welcome pack after they were approved by the agency. All foster carers reported that they had a written foster carer agreement which stipulated the number, age range and sex of the children that may be placed with them. There was evidence of written foster carer agreements in each file examined. Foster carers were also provided with written information regarding what to do if an allegation was made against them.

The service provided the foster carers with a handbook (referred to as a "foster carer portfolio" within the agency). This included information regarding the fostering task, supervision, foster carers reviews, the appeals process, safe caring, support groups, family contact and record keeping. The manager of the service reported that the foster carers' handbook had recently been up dated to include reference to Scottish legislation.

The agency provided foster carers with a quarterly newsletter containing a range of information including training news and policy up dates.

Areas for Development

While safe caring was a topic on the preparation course and guidelines were available for foster carers, the agency should consider each foster carer developing a safe caring policy for their own family. This policy should be reviewed before each new placement.
(See Recommendation 3)

National Care Standard Number 11: Foster Care and Family Placement Services - Reviews

Strengths

The service had a protocol in place for the annual review of foster carers. Information regarding foster carer's reviews was held within the foster carers' handbook. Records showed that reviews were being undertaken on an annual basis.

Reviews were undertaken by the fostering panel ensuring independence from the supervising social worker.

Annual review reports were prepared by the supervising social worker and included training attended, future training needs and any recommendations regarding the number and age range of children the foster carer was approved to look after.

The agency had a protocol in place for a foster carer review to take place earlier if there were significant changes to health, a serious complaint or child protection investigation or a recent criminal conviction regarding the foster carer or members of their household.

Reports were obtained from placing social workers and the child /young people in placement.

Foster carers confirmed that they were given a copy of the review report before the review was held.

It had been necessary at times to place children with foster carers out with their approval. The service had an effective system in place whereby any amendment to the foster carer's approval was agreed by the Agency Decision maker. This change to the foster carer's approval was discussed at the next fostering panel and if appropriate, the foster carer's approval was changed.

Areas for Development

The foster carer reviews were chaired by one of the director's of the agency. This did not provide sufficient independence. The service needed to ensure that foster carer reviews were chaired by someone who can form an independent judgement.
(See Recommendation 4)

The service did not obtain the views of birth parents for the foster carer annual review. The service needed to ensure that the views of birth parents were obtained where possible.
(See Recommendation 5)

National Care Standard Number 12: Foster Care and Family Placement Services - The Fostering Panel

Strengths

Appropriate policies and procedures were in place with regards to the setting up and the running of the fostering panel.

Enhanced Disclosure Scotland checks and Local Authority checks had been undertaken in relation to panel members.

Panel membership included professionals from residential care settings, a foster carer and a quality assurance officer. The Medical Advisor to the fostering panel was based in London and had a wide range of experience which included providing medical advice to other fostering agencies. The chairperson of the panel advised that legal advice was readily available when necessary. Observation at one fostering panel found discussion of the issues was generally comprehensive and showed some understanding of the role of the foster carer as well as the needs of young people. Recommendations at this fostering panel with regards to approval and review of approval were based on the evidence presented and appeared robust.

Inspection of panel minutes highlighted that decisions and recommendations made at the panel were clear.

Panel members confirmed that there was an induction pack for new panel members. The quality assurance officer advised that training was planned for the panel in the coming year. This included the opportunity for panel members to attend training for social workers in undertaking foster carer assessments.

Panel members, carers and staff were clear that the panel's role was to recommend and the Agency Decision Maker's role was to decide.

Foster carers and prospective foster carers reported that they had been well prepared for their attendance at the fostering panel and that they were treated with respect by the panel members.

It was stated that foster carers were informed of the appeals process in all situations.

An evaluation of the panel process was undertaken by the chairperson for each panel. Social workers presenting at the fostering panel were asked to give their views of the panel in a questionnaire.

Areas for Development

The composition of the fostering panel did not fully represent the community it serviced. It did not include someone who had been in foster care, nor did it include professionally qualified members who had experience of early years Childcare and education. The agency needed to ensure that the membership of the fostering panel was broadened to fully represent the community it served.

(See Recommendation 6)

The quality assurance officer advised that training had been identified for panel members. The agency should also ensure that panel members were kept up-to-date with developments from research and best-practice guidance with regards to foster care.

(See Recommendation 7)

At the time of the inspection the service had been in operation for one year. The agency should now give consideration to the ongoing development of the fostering panel. This needed to include an evaluation of their performance and a review of their policies, procedures and practice. An annual report should be produced with details of the panel members, terms of reference and a summary of its work. Regular panel business meetings should also take place.

(See Recommendation 8)

Currently administration support to the panel was provided by the manager of the service. Furthermore, the minutes of the fostering panel were taken by the chair person. The manager of the service advised the plans were in place to appoint administrative support for the service and as the service develops, this may include support to the fostering panel.

The manager of the service advised that plans were in place to introduce a questionnaire for applicants to complete giving their views of the fostering panel.

National Care Standard Number 13: Foster Care and Family Placement Services - Management and Staffing

Strengths

The National Fostering Agency (Scotland) had developed a quality assurance department in England. Quality assurance work for Scotland was managed by the quality assurance

director who sat on the fostering panel. The quality assurance director had overall responsibility for ensuring consistency of service, including the quality and consistency of the foster carer assessments.

The external manager, who was based in London, had regular contact with the service in Scotland. The manager of the service indicated that the support provided by the external manager was good. The manager of the service attended regular national senior management meetings and managers meetings and had been able to build up a network of support within the agency.

The manager of the service presented as committed, competent and experienced with sound practice in family placement work.

All staff were suitably qualified social workers and were registered with the Scottish Social Services Council.

Staff reported they had an effective induction to the agency and regular supervision and support. There was a rolling programme of training provided to staff from within the agency and there was access to external training and professional conferences. The quality assurance officer advised that child protection training and recording would be provided to all staff this year.

The agency evaluated the service it provided on an ongoing basis. Consultations took place with foster carers and children/young people. A recent consultation exercise involved gathering the views of children/young people to help produce a Children's Guide to Foster Care. There was also the opportunity for foster carers to take part in a foster carer's forum where their views were taken into account to influence policy and practice.

The service had a suitable complaints policy and procedure in place.

The agency had effective systems in place with regards to the safer recruitment of staff.

Areas for Development

The agency had a number of quality assurance systems in place. However, examination of case records and assessment reports showed that there was inconsistency of practice in some cases. For example, the competency based assessments were not always signed off by the manager in terms of evidence, assessment reports were not always signed by the assessing social worker or the manager, some assessment reports were not completed fully or accurately. The agency needed to ensure that their quality assurance systems were effective.

(See Recommendation 9)

At the time of the inspection the service was growing and 2 new placement consultants had recently been appointed. The senior placement consultant, who was the manager of the service, had been undertaking foster carer assessments, providing administrative support to the fostering panel, facilitating preparation courses, supporting foster carers and being involved in the development of the service. The agency should give consideration to re-defining the manager's role to ensure the manager was in a position to manage the service effectively.

(See Recommendation 10)

While the manager of the service reported that she had regular contact with the external manager there was no dedicated time allotted for formal supervision. The agency needed to ensure that the manager of the service received regular formal supervision.
(See Recommendation 11)

Case recordings were undertaken electronically and a paper copy transferred to the foster carer's file. However, the purpose of the contact, the detail of the contact, tasks to be undertaken and by whom were not always clear and consistent. The agency needed to ensure that all case recordings were clear and consistent. Case files would benefit from having a list of placements at the front of each file. The quality of the case recordings should be monitored.
(See Recommendation 12)

The manager of the service advised that plans were in place for her to undertake management training.

Annual accounts will be produced for the organisation at an appropriate time.

The agency had plans in place to introduce a Performance Review in respect of all staff. This will include a one to one interview with staff and individual training needs will be identified.

The self evaluation form highlighted that work was in progress on a lone working policy and a violence at work guide.

Enforcement

There was no enforcement action taken.

Other Information

The manager of the service reported that all policies and procedures of the agency were reviewed on an ongoing basis to ensure that they were in accordance with Scottish legislation.

The agency should ensure that service level agreements are in place with local authorities.

Requirements

1. The service must ensure that all placement consultants and sessional assessors undertake training in the assessment of foster carers.

This is in order to comply with: SSI 2002/114 Regulation 13 (c) (i) Staffing - a requirement whereby a provider must ensure that persons employed in the provision of the service receive training appropriate to the work they perform.

Timescales: within 3 months of the publication of this report.

Recommendations

1. The service should ensure that there is continuity between the assessing social worker and the supervising social worker should they be different.

National Care Standards - Foster Care and Family Placement Services. Standard 5:4 Assessing and Approving Carers.

2. The service should ensure that copies of the letters of approval are held on foster carers' files.

National Care Standards - Foster Care and Family Placement Services. Standard 6:2 Completing the Application.

3. The service should consider each foster carer developing a safe caring policy for their own family. This policy should be reviewed before each new placement.

National Care Standards - Foster Care and Family Placement Services. Standard 7:3 Information and Advice.

4. The service should ensure that foster carer reviews are chaired by someone who can form an independent judgement.

National Care Standards - Foster Care and Family Placement Services. Standard 11: 2 Reviews.

5. The service should ensure that the views of birth parents were obtained for foster carers' reviews where possible.

National Care Standards - Foster Care and Family Placement Services. Standard 11: 5 Reviews.

6. The agency should ensure that the membership of the fostering panel is broadened to include representation from someone who has been in foster care and someone who has knowledge and experience of the needs early years children who require foster care placements.

National Care Standards - Foster Care and Family Placement Services. Standard 12:1 The Fostering Panel.

7. The agency should ensure that panel members are kept up-to-date with developments in

research and best-practice guidance with regards to foster care.

National Care Standards - Foster care and family Placement Services. Standard 12:9 The Fostering Panel.

8. The agency should evaluate the work of the panel and produce an annual report accordingly. Regular panel business meetings should also take place.

National Care Standards - Foster Care and Family Placement Services. Standard 12:6 The Fostering Panel.

9. The agency should ensure that their quality assurance systems are effective.

National Care Standards - Foster Care and Family Placement Services. Standard 13:9 Management and Staffing.

10. The agency should give consideration to re defining the manager's role to ensure the manager is in a position to manage the service effectively.

National Care Standards - Foster Care and Family Placement Services. Standard 13:3 Management and Staffing.

11. The agency should ensure that the manager of the service receives regular formal supervision.

National Care Standards - Foster Care and Family Placement Services. Standard 13:4 Management and Staffing.

12. The agency should ensure that all case recordings are clear and consistent. Case files would benefit from having a list of placements at the front of each file. The quality of the case recordings should also be monitored.

National Care Standards - Foster Care and Family Placement Services. Standard 13:6 Management and Staffing.

Suzanne Beard
Care Commission Officer