

Heath Farm Family Services

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector	Lucy Ansell
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About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to assure children and young people, parents, the public, local authorities and government of the quality and standard of the service provided. The inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000.

This report details the main strengths and any areas for improvement identified during the inspection. The judgements included in the report are made in relation to the outcome for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and relevant National Minimum Standards for the establishment.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding:	this aspect of the provision is of exceptionally high quality
Good:	this aspect of the provision is strong
Satisfactory:	this aspect of the provision is sound
Inadequate:	this aspect of the provision is not good enough

Service information

Brief description of the service

Heath Farm Fostering Services provides short, medium, and long term foster care for looked after children and young people, aged birth to 18 years, where it is not possible for them to return home. The agency provides a wrap around service which incorporates schooling, therapy and the care element. There are two respite houses available, along with a contact suite, support team and transport services. At the time of this inspection Heath Farm were supporting and working with 67 foster carers and offering a total of 120 places. Heath Farm is based within the school site in a rural location outside of Ashford close to the motorways for London or the coast.

Summary

This was an announced inspection carried out over five days. In the last six months the agency has expanded, in terms of new foster carers and placements, to the point of almost doubling in size. The agency has had several key staff changes and has had a period of great change. Throughout this the agency has managed to remain fairly stable, with good practice and the outcomes for the young people and the foster carers remaining strong. The agency is constantly striving to improve practice; when all staff are in place and a consolidation period has been achieved with all the new ideas implemented, this will be reflected in the outcomes.

The overall quality rating is good.

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

Improvements since the last inspection

Following consultation with foster carers the agency implemented a career grade framework. This was linked to pay grades and contribution of carers over seven years, to encourage continued professional development of carers. It is linked to the Every Child Matters outcomes. New health plans and health records have gone out to the foster carers, along with plans to introduce more person centred formats for care plans. Within the new staffing structure, several posts have been created and filled, and several more are being advertised. A new 'out of hours' system was introduced and every day the team have a briefing for any 'out of hours' notifications and to look at which carers may need a little more support. There has been a review of all policies and procedures and an update for the Children's Guide and Statement of Purpose. The agency has invested in the refurbishment of the contact suite and the therapy unit.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

The agency promotes 'healthy living' and 'being healthy' through good quality training for the foster carers. They hope next year to expand this to include training for young people. Clear guidance is given to foster carers outlining their role and responsibility to encourage a healthy lifestyle for all. This is supported and encouraged through supervision and support groups, NVQ training sessions and the foster carer handbook. All young people have an up to date health record and the agency have recently implemented a health care plan. The quarterly reports which are sent to the local authority social workers provide comprehensive health records for the young people, a copy of which is kept at the agency. All of those in placement were registered with local health care services and are attending health care appointments. The policy and procedure for foster carers around medication lack clear guidance and support

for the foster carers to follow. Therapy is a key part of the wrap around service provided by the agency. They have a dedicated therapy suite which has recently been redecorated and refitted. There is a strong team of therapists working daily during the week to provide a wide range of therapeutic support and intervention, including play, art and relational psychotherapy. The agency has undertaken a focused counselling pilot, working with Family Matters, contracted to work on solution focussed therapy. They are also looking to expand the service with a dedicated art therapist working with sibling groups.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The operations manager and the acting manager are suitably experienced and qualified, commensurate with the role of safe guarding and promoting the welfare of children. Police checks on all staff are renewed three yearly and records are kept of all other checks and references that have been obtained. Written references are always followed up by telephone verification. Form F Assessments of prospective foster carers are being conducted by those with the appropriate skills and knowledge; these are being completed to a good overall standard. Appropriate checks are being thoroughly completed including three references, verification of local authority and CRB, pet assessments and transport checks. Fostering households are warm and comfortable, hazard free and afforded young people the privacy of their own bedrooms. Annual health and safety checks are being conducted and each individual foster carer's family has a 'safe care' policy which is subject to ongoing annual review. Foster carers are acutely aware of the fostering task and what it means specifically for the individual young person in their care. The knowledge and experience of the referrals co-ordinator who is also the deputy manager of the agency ensures the continuity and appropriateness of matches. The agency holds multi-agency mapping meetings once a fortnight to help plan new referrals and match services to the needs of the young person. Matching processes are robust with 95% of last year's placements still continuing, indicative of a rigorous matching process being implemented. However matching documentation lacks direct correlation with the carer and child's needs, in terms of how the proposed foster carers were chosen to be able to meet those needs. Training on child protection, bullying, promoting self esteem and receiving allegations from looked after children are comprehensively covered throughout initial foster carer training, and then through comprehensive annual training. This is further underpinned by clear policy and procedural guidance detailed within the foster carer handbook. Children and young people are protected from potential harm and abuse by robust and sound child protection systems. The agency holds clear and accurate records that support open and transparent working practices in respect of complaints and allegations. All families have ongoing training on safe caring, and have a family 'safe care' policy and one that is individual to the child placed in the family. There are rigorous safeguarding checks completed as required for all people working in or for the agency, all have had enhanced checks through the Criminal Records Bureau. Checks on identity and qualifications have been completed along with full employment histories. Written references are followed up by telephone verification. There are written procedures in place for recruitment and selection of staff. The panel consists of a wide range of child care professionals, many of whom are independent members, including the chair. All members have been recruited subject to providing appropriate references and checks, conducted by the agency. Access to medical and educational expertise is in place. The acting manager routinely attends panel meetings as an advisor and does not have a casting vote. Panel members receive the necessary documentation in good time and the Chair requires every member to actively contribute at the meeting. Members are encouraged to ask questions of the presenting social worker and the applicant. Clear focus is

placed upon examining an applicant's ability to promote a healthy lifestyle and questions are routinely asked about their attendance at training and health and safety issues. Annual reviews are mostly up to date. The documentation for this process includes seeking the views and opinions of the foster carers, the young people in placement, placing authorities and birth children. Safe care policies are scrutinised; health and safety checks are revisited by the reviewing social worker to ensure these remain current. The panel were able to provide a consistent quality assurance function which supported the work of the agency. The paperwork completed about the strengths and weaknesses of the applicants is not collected by the agency as an aid to future quality assurance.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Sound and robust policies and procedures remain in place with regard to equal opportunities and valuing diversity. This is demonstrated in practice through the agency's training and recruitment procedures of foster carers and staff. The agency recognised that male carers may be disadvantaged by training being held during the week, so put on weekend training for all second carers to attend. The agency has a strong commitment to provide a wide and diverse group of foster carers to meet the needs of the young people placed. The foster carers work hard at ensuring the young people can access local groups and pursue their interests, by ensuring they have equal access to opportunities. Foster carers confirmed they received excellent support with regard to any specialist needs, or additional support for their child. The agency provides two respite houses which ensure a positive experience of respite with the same family. These houses provide planned respite and overnight stays, day care and emergency use. There is clear guidance detailing the responsibility of carers to promote and support educational achievement. Foster carers work hard to ensure there is excellent communication between themselves and the schools. The young people's files contain up to date Personal Education Plans, school reports and evidence of attendance at school events. Heath Farm has a school on the site which consists of a converted farm and outbuildings and is inspected separately by Ofsted. It is approved for 70 pupils and currently there are 40 on roll, the majority of the pupils are looked after children from the agency. The agency has access to 98 school places with the old school on a different site having 28 places. Heath Farm school is also a large part of the wrap around service the agency offers. The school provides a nurture unit for children who are unable to access education in the classroom and who need more support with socialising before moving on to classroom activities. There are currently plans being discussed to either buy a new school site or to develop the existing site.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

The agency promotes good contact arrangements for the young people. The foster carer's handbook and policies and guidelines promote a positive contact experience. The records on file explicitly state contact arrangements. These are monitored and reviewed and the views of the young person are sought in determining future arrangements. The agency has a designated contact worker who is able to facilitate all contact issues along with transport requests if contact is not being held on site. There is a team of experienced contact supervisors who have received training, that sets out the principles and expectations, report writing skills and format they are expected to adhere to. The agency has a dedicated contact suite which has just been refitted and redecorated. Participation and consultation with foster carers and young people is a

particular strength of the agency. The agency produces a monthly newsletter and a separate junior version which is produced to an excellent standard. They use the newsletters and support groups to keep in touch with the foster carers and young people. One example of consultation with their stakeholders is setting up a group involving foster carer representatives and supervising social workers to write a policy on the personal allowances for the young people in care. Another was when one young person wrote asking for the daily allowance given on respite to be increased, this was reviewed under consultation and duly increased. The agency holds an annual conference with themed workshops and mixed groups of foster carers and staff within the agency. The groups are asked to consult on new policies and suggest ways the agency can move forward. The young people meet quarterly and are called the Heath Farm Voice. In their consultation one of the issues they raised was transport and being on school buses too long. This has been changed with pick up points rather than house to house collection. Other events organised this year included trips to Howlets Zoo, Dover water sports for the day and a Heath Farm barbeque. The agency invests a lot of work with the birth children and recognise their contribution to having foster siblings; they hold a Christmas event for birth children which this year will be trampolining then off to Pizza Hut.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The agency provides clear written literature to all its stakeholders. The Statement of Purpose continues to be subject to ongoing review. The agency corrected last years recommendation to list all complaints and their outcomes. The Statement of Purpose does not list staff details, with their relevant qualifications and experience. Documentation for children and young people is provided in clear formats which is available for varying age groups, this could be made available in different languages as required. The Registered Manager is no longer in post. Her previous absence has been temporarily covered by the Deputy Manager, who has been working closely with the Operations Director to ensure the day to day running of the agency has continued with minimal disruption. The Deputy Manager was previously a Registered Manager and has clearly demonstrated her ability to undertake this role. In the last six months the agency has expanded, in terms of new foster carers and placements, to the point of almost doubling in size. This has led to an increase in workload for all concerned. The rapid growth of the agency, as well as staffing changes has been an unsettling time for those in post, however, this is recognised by the senior management team and contingency plans are being implemented. Plans for the new year include the recruitment of two senior practitioners and two social work assistants. Two additional administrative workers have already been employed and several new posts created, including therapy development co-ordinator, contact and children's right officer, referral and placement officer. Supervising social workers are allocated a maximum of 12 fostering households. All social workers are suitably qualified, and registered with the General Social Care Council, they come from a range of relevant child care backgrounds. They each take turns with providing 'out of hours' emergency on call cover. This equates to one week in every six. The use of the on call service is described as 'well used' and this can impact upon the worker's ability to keep up with their ongoing workload throughout the week that they are on call. Recently, the agency introduced an additional payment for this element. With the continued growth and expansion of the service, the on call provision may not be sustainable by the current team. There is no separate dedicated policy or procedure in place with regards to the strategy

for the supervision and support of foster carers. However, supervising social workers state there is written guidance for the supervision format available and in the main, they are clear about their own roles and responsibilities. Foster carers are being visited on a monthly basis, with telephone calls in between. At difficult and busy times, the regularity of input increases. Notes of the visits are typed and a more thorough three monthly review is also completed. The quality of supervision records for foster carers is variable in terms of content. The management team are introducing a new format for supervision and this will help rectify this. The agency implemented following consultation with foster carers, a career grade frame work. This was linked to pay grades and contribution of carers over seven years, to encourage continued professional development of carers linked to the Every Child Matters outcomes. Staff report positively about appraisal and supervision systems. These are occurring regularly and staff mostly feel supported. The deputy manager is being supervised by the operations director; there is no provision for either to currently receive external supervision. The records of supervision seen show that clear and focussed discussions are happening with regards the worker's caseload. However, there is no tracking of previous supervision meetings, working towards improving practice or any linking into the individual's current appraisal. Case records for children and young people are securely held. Care files for young people are well ordered and subject to regular auditing from the senior management team. The sections within hold all of the information needed to effectively monitor a child's progress and ongoing needs. Sound systems are in place for the storage and easy retrieval of administrative records. The administrative team is led by a competent manager and each team member works consistently well within prescribed procedures. Each member has a specific role and job description, which supports accountability. Clear databases show when specific checks are due for renewal and annual reviews are flagged well in advance. Personnel files are securely held, with access suitably restricted. The files were subject to variable standards and lacked robust scrutiny. Not all contain a photograph of the individual and some do not have an audit or front sheet, detailing the contents within. Examples were found of omissions in terms of identifying a specific start date and no current job description. Whilst clear induction processes were confirmed by staff members, there are no formal records to support this.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions, which must be taken so that the registered person meets the Care Standards Act 2000, The Fostering Services Regulations 2005 and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider must comply with the given timescales.

Standard	Action	Due date
8	ensure the matching paperwork contains all specific reference to elements of matching considered in agreeing the placement (Regulation 34.3 Schedule 6)	29 February 2008
20	ensure the format of staff supervision accurately reflects clear supervision (Regulation 21 4 a)	29 February 2008

Recommendations

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

- ensure the panel paperwork required for assessing the applicants strengths and weaknesses is collected after the panel NMS 30
- ensure clarity of recording start dates and received CRB checks. NMS 15
- ensure the policy on medication is suitable for a fostering agency and provides clear guidance for foster carers NMS 12
- provide health training for young people, in preventative measures, such as healthy eating and advice on smoking, alcohol and illegal substances. NMS 12
- ensure staff details and experience are listed on the Statement of Purpose NMS 1
- ensure a seperate and dedicated policy for the support of foster carers.NMS 22
- ensure senior management recieve external supervision NMS 20
- provide a formalised induction process for all new staff NMS 20

Annex

Annex A

National Minimum Standards for independent fostering agency

Being healthy

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service promotes the health and development of children (NMS 12)

Ofsted considers 12 the key standard to be inspected.

Staying safe

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- any persons carrying on or managing the service are suitable (NMS 3)
- the fostering service provides suitable foster carers (NMS 6)
- the service matches children to carers appropriately (NMS 8)
- the fostering service protects each child or young person from abuse and neglect (NMS 9)
- the people who work in or for the fostering service are suitable to work with children and young people (NMS 15)
- fostering panels are organised efficiently and effectively (NMS 30)

Ofsted considers 3, 6, 8, 9, 15 and 30 the key standards to be inspected.

Enjoying and achieving

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service values diversity (NMS 7)
- the fostering service promotes educational achievement (NMS 13)
- when foster care is provided as a short-term break for a child, the arrangements recognise that the parents remain the main carers for the child (NMS 31)

Ofsted considers 7, 13 and 31 the key standards to be inspected.

Making a positive contribution

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service promotes contact arrangements for the child or young person (NMS 10)
- the fostering service promotes consultation (NMS 11)

Ofsted considers 10 and 11 the key standards to be inspected.

Achieving economic well-being

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service prepares young people for adulthood (NMS 14)
- the fostering service pays carers an allowance and agreed expenses as specified (NMS 29)

Ofsted considers none of the above to be key standards to be inspected.

Organisation

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- there is a clear statement of the aims and objectives of the fostering service and the fostering service ensures that they meet those aims and objectives (NMS 1)
- the fostering service is managed by those with the appropriate skills and experience (NMS 2)
- the fostering service is monitored and controlled as specified (NMS 4)

Annex A

- the fostering service is managed effectively and efficiently (NMS 5)
- staff are organised and managed effectively (NMS 16)
- the fostering service has an adequate number of sufficiently experienced and qualified staff (NMS 17)
- the fostering service is a fair and competent employer (NMS 18)
- there is a good quality training programme (NMS 19)
- all staff are properly accountable and supported (NMS 20)
- the fostering service has a clear strategy for working with and supporting carers (NMS 21)
- foster carers are provided with supervision and support (NMS 22)
- foster carers are appropriately trained (NMS 23)
- case records for children are comprehensive (NMS 24)
- the administrative records are maintained as required (NMS 25)
- The premises used as offices by the fostering service are suitable for the purpose (NMS 26)
- the fostering service is financially viable (NMS 27)
- the fostering service has robust financial processes (NMS 28)
- local authority fostering services recognise the contribution made by family and friends as carers (NMS 32)

Ofsted considers 1, 16, 17, 21, 24, 25 and 32 the key standards to be inspected.