

Surrey County Council Fostering Service

Inspection report for la fostering agency

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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

There are approximately 327 fostering households approved by Surrey County Council providing a total of 576 potential placements. There are two fostering teams, one covering the East of the county and the other covering the West. The senior managers of the service are responsible for the whole of the county. The service aims to recruit, assess, train and support foster carers who can provide safe and nurturing care to young people who are unable to live with their own family. The service includes a Family Link Scheme that provides short breaks to young people who meet the criteria for registration on the Surrey Children with Disability Register. The fostering service provides permanent and time limited placements for young people from birth until independence.

Summary

This announced inspection took place over six days and assesses the key National Minimum Standards for fostering services. The overall outcomes for young people fostered through the service are good. Young people are provided with safe and sensitive care by a wide range of carers who are well supported by the service. Assessment and training of foster carers is thorough and the staff working in the team are enthusiastic and knowledgeable about their role. The service is particularly strong in consulting with young people who are looked after and, as a result, the young people are confident that their voices are heard. The service is judged as outstanding in the outcome area of positive contribution. The service has a good understanding of its strengths and weaknesses and provide comprehensive evidence to support their own assessment of the service. The only outcome area to be judged as less than good is economic wellbeing which is judged as satisfactory due to some weaknesses in the service to young people preparing for independence. Foster carers feel the support offered by the service is good and continually improving. There are six good practice recommendations made as a result of this inspection.

The overall quality rating is good.

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

Improvements since the last inspection

At the last inspection a recommendation was made to clarify the benefits and allowances that foster carers are eligible for. This has been addressed and carers now have a clear statement about the allowances paid, what they cover and the system to apply for any additional allowances.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

The service ensures the health of young people in foster care is promoted by providing good health training to carers and supporting carers to access a wide range of health services. Specialist health workers, including primary mental health workers, are involved where appropriate to ensure the emotional and mental health needs of young people are met as well as the physical needs. Young people coming into foster care have thorough health assessments and continuing support from the specialist nurses. Take up of medical advice and assessment tends to lessen as the young people get older and become more independent. Foster carers understand the need to encourage a healthy lifestyle and provide a good range of food and

activities to meet young people's needs. This is confirmed by young people in placement. Advice on sexual health and relationships is provided by schools, specialist nurses and the carers themselves. There is also a peer education scheme set up to provide young people with opportunities to discuss concerns with people nearer to their own age. Parental consent to emergency treatment and medication administration is provided to the foster carers to enable them to take appropriate action to care for the young people. The service has introduced clear systems to record the medication given by foster carers. First aid training is given as part of the carers basic training. Where there is a need for carers to provide care for young people with more complex needs the community nurses train and check the carers competence before allowing them to undertake necessary treatments. Young people's health needs are taken into account when considering appropriate placements and the service has a policy not to place children under five years of age with carers who smoke. The corporate parenting strategy for the council has strengthened the links with other departments and has led to initiatives such as provision of discounted access to leisure centres for children who are looked after. This has provided support to carers and young people in promoting healthy living. Carers supervision and appraisals cover the young people's health needs and how these are met to ensure it is seen as a priority within the home. The service has introduced a fee paid scheme to encourage provision of short term foster placements to young people with complex health needs who may otherwise be cared for in residential settings. This demonstrates the services' attempts to increase the options available to all young people requiring care away from home.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The service is managed by people who have been safely recruited and have the necessary qualifications and experience to run a good service. Management roles are clear, with a strong mix of strategic and day to day management. Confidence in the managers is evident and social workers in the team say the support and supervision is very good. Foster carers and social workers feel the service has become more professional over the last few years and are proud to work for the team. Social workers are consistently positive about the various fostering team leaders across the county and particularly value their accessibility and their range of experience. There is effective cover for managers when they are absent. Recruitment of foster carers is undertaken by all of the fostering teams and this gives a clear feeling of ownership of the service. There are approximately 320 carers across the county and all have been through an extensive assessment process, including the fostering panel, before being recommended for approval. Whilst there are not sufficient carers to meet the needs of all of the young people requiring placements in the county, there is a wide range of carers providing safe and nurturing care to young people. The foster carers seen in their homes are child centred and knowledgeable about the needs of those they are caring for. There are a large number of carers who have committed long term to the young people they foster and who expect them to be part of their family forever. This commitment has provided good outcomes for the young people. It has, however, added to the problem of availability of placements by permanently filling the home with settled young people. Foster carers and staff are subject to stringent checks and references, including Criminal Record Bureau checks to ensure their suitability. Systems are in place to ensure the checks are up-dated appropriately every three years. Young people feel well cared for in their foster homes. Comments include 'I love it here' and 'I feel like a normal child - not one in care'. Most young people have their own rooms. Where sharing is happening it has been risk assessed to ensure young people's safety. Foster carers have been financially assisted by the service to enlarge their houses where additional space is required to care for a group of

children. Health and safety checks form part of the assessment process and these are up-dated at the annual reviews of carer's suitability. Good quality guidance is given to carers about how to keep the fostered child and their own family safe. This includes the development of an individual family policy and safe caring plan. Carers are clear about their responsibilities and welcomed the inspection process. The risk assessment and matching process is clear and effective. Any gaps in matching are recorded and strategies to cover the gaps identified. This provides young people and carers with honest information about suitability and available options. Whilst matching is well understood by the staff it is limited by the number of carers available at any one time. As a result of ensuring the best available match the council uses independent fostering agencies to meet the needs of the young people who can not be appropriately placed in-house. There are currently approximately 118 young people in this type of placement. The services' placement strategy recognises this and the service has successfully recruited more in-house carers during the past year. Carers feel matching works well for them and do not feel under any pressure to take inappropriate placements. Young people placed in a planned way are involved in introductions to the family and feel they have a choice as to whether to accept the placement. Those placed in an emergency feel there is little choice, however, the service is now able to provide information about carers to the young people prior to placement to make the initial introduction easier. This development is in response to consultation with young people. All newly recruited carers now provide a profile of their family that can be shared with young people as part of the assessment process. Training for foster carers includes child protection and provides carers with a clear process for raising concerns about young people's safety. Carers were able to quote examples of how they had been instrumental in identifying concerns and ensuring they were investigated. Notifications, referrals and follow-up information demonstrate that the service manages child protection appropriately within the fostering service. The high profile of this work is helped by the recruitment of workers to the team who have past experience of specialising in child protection. Young people say they feel safe in their foster homes and only three of the 33 young people who responded to the survey said they have experienced bullying. In all three cases the bullying had happened at school, not in the foster home and had been taken up by the carer and social worker. The service has clear procedures for reporting missing persons and an audit of the incidents of young people going missing is helpful in identifying vulnerable groups. A recent report highlights very low numbers of young people going missing in in-house foster placements but a larger number doing so in out of area placements. This information has been used in putting together the placement strategy to increase carers within the county to minimise these risks to young people. The service takes protection of young people from inappropriate use of technology seriously and has a specialist worker to help carers and young people understand the risks involved. The fostering panel is made up of members with a wide range of experiences. The questions put to prospective carers appear challenging but sensitive. Good records are kept of all panel recommendations, although the minutes sometimes do not make it clear what role each of the members are taking at the meetings. The decision making process is clear and foster care files accurately reflect the decision taken. Carers and staff are positive about the panel process and feel that suitability of carers is well tested there.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The fostering service values diversity and foster carers are encouraged to celebrate differences and respect individual choices. Carers say that diversity is covered in all training provided and in their supervision. There are many examples of carers helping young people understand their

cultural background and keep in touch with their country of origin. Specialist groups exist to consider the needs of unaccompanied asylum seeking young people and children of travelling families. This demonstrates the service's desire to provide good access to services for all groups of young people. The majority of foster carers are white British, and whilst this reflects the largest group of looked after children the service is actively seeking carers from minority groups. Recruitment information and advertisements now include images of black and Asian people and efforts are being made to contact minority groups in the county to raise their awareness of the needs of looked after children. The matching of young people and carers take into consideration religion, gender and ethnic origin and carers are asked to be clear about how they will meet the specific needs of each young person placed. Carers are aware that the acceptance of young people's backgrounds helps raise their self-esteem and see this as a priority. The placement stability team includes a minority ethnic worker to provide advice and support to carers who are caring for young people from different backgrounds to their own. This helps minimise placement disruption caused by lack of understanding of specific needs. All staff seen demonstrate a good understanding of diversity issues. The provision of family link services and short breaks for young people with complex health needs and disabilities allows them to access family based care to support their families to care for them at home. This service is valued by the parents and young people accessing the scheme. Full time foster placements for disabled children has been strengthened by the provision of specialist workers to find and support carers able to provide appropriate care. Unfortunately there are delays by other services with regard to assessment and equipment to make the placements possible. This has led to some children having to be placed in residential care rather than the preferred family placement. Foster carers take an active role in promoting education. Young people say that they are helped by their carers to attend school and complete homework. Carers and young people visited have high aspirations and many are aiming for university or college following school. The attainments are still lower than the general population but there are overall improvements in educational targets for looked after children. The service celebrates the successes of the young people and a much appreciated Oscar ceremony is put together by a group, including looked after children, where presentations are made to young people and carers. Young people of secondary age, and those with special needs, are provided with a computer to assist their study. Additional tutoring is available to young people in foster care and school reports are available on their files to enable monitoring of progress. Whilst all looked after young people have personal education plans their completion are sometimes delayed. Educational provision is reviewed at the looked after children review, to which teachers are invited. The service provides training for carers regarding their responsibility to promote education and will provide carers with support if they want to extend their own education. Library tickets are made available to all young people and gifts of books are also frequent. Respite care and family link services use the main carers to gather information and to help foster carers to provide appropriate care. The relationships between the foster carers and main carers are strong and supportive. The services provide rewarding and beneficial experiences to the young people as well as breaks for the family.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

Contact with family and friends is seen as vital to the success of foster placements and carers are made aware of this from their first enquiry about fostering. Comprehensive contact plans are made at the point of placement and young people are clear about when they can see their family. Carers provide help and support to many parents and are generous in sharing their time

and property to assist good contact. Some carers have been trained to supervise contact and are paid for this service. There are excellent examples of carers, who share the care of siblings, getting together to enable them to have quality time together. Foster carers have also instigated new contacts with extended family, with the agreement of the young person's social worker. Carers remain alert to the vulnerabilities of the young person they care for and pass any concerns about contact to the appropriate people. Whilst most young people remain in the school they have attended prior to placement some say they have chosen to move to a school in the area in order to make new friends and integrate into the community. These decisions have been made having carefully balanced the implications of this. It has enabled the young people to settle into a placement on a long term basis and build friendships that will see them into independence. The service is particularly strong in the area of consultation with young people. The National Youth Advocacy Service (NYAS) is commissioned by the council to be very involved with young people in the looked after system. They provide advocacy, group work, training sessions and support to young people in their dealings with the service. Young people who presented their views were enthusiastic about the help they are given and are confident that their views are heard. The Total Respect training is particularly successful in helping councillors, social workers and other professionals get a real feeling of what it is like to be in the care of the council. Young people are involved in delivering the training and shared excellent examples of how their experiences had moved and enlightened the participants of the course. The Total Respect training concludes with a list of pledges to young people in care in Surrey. These are reviewed at the follow-up training to ensure the pledges have been actioned. They include looking at support and skills for independence of care leavers, sending birthday cards to young people, social workers spending more time with young people and using young people more in provision of training courses for foster carers. The pledges identify who is responsible for taking the pledge forward and a timescale for completion. Young people were extremely positive about the pledges and feel they have made a real difference to their experiences in care. Young people are involved in staff selection interviews and discussion with senior managers about the service. In the completed surveys all young people say they are listened to by their carers and/or social workers. They are all able to pinpoint people they can talk to about their experiences. Young people, with the support of NYAS, have produced a website for Surrey Looked After Children. The website gives valuable information, links to other websites and advice on how to get help with things such as making complaints. There is also an attractive magazine sent to looked after young people that includes articles provided by young people, photographs of activities and explanations about the way young people can get involved with decision makers in the council. In addition there is an exceptionally helpful DVD produced by young people explaining what it is like to be in care in Surrey. The service provide an impressive number of options for young people in their care to have their views heard and provide excellent evidence of how they have responded to these views.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is satisfactory.

The fostering service supports foster carers to prepare young people for adulthood by continuing to finance and support young people in foster homes beyond eighteen. There is a clear expectation that young people should not leave care until they are ready to do so and many foster homes are supporting young people into their 20's. There have, however, been some recent changes to the management of services for the 16+ age group. Services that were commissioned out for 16 - 18 year olds are now provided in-house, with the previous provider working with 18+ young people. The staff are clear about these changes but young people and

foster carers express confusion and concern about the arrangements. There is flexibility about the social work support for young people planning independence, with some young people able to keep the social worker they have formed good relationships with. This is welcomed by young people and foster carers. However, some foster carers report being left out of discussions about plans for the young people they look after, causing anxiety and conflict with workers. Some foster carers are unsure about their role and expectations of them once the young people are heading towards independence. The service does not have a supportive lodgings scheme and this is identified as a major gap by staff, foster carers and young people. Concern is expressed about the amount of support currently on offer once a young person moves to live independently. Development plans provided by the service aim to address this weakness. The allowances paid to foster carers are clearly set out and understood. The payments are regular, accurate and itemised. Foster carers are provided with a list of things covered by the allowances and know how to request consideration of additional allowances. There are well tested systems in place to deal with the complexities of providing financial support to such a large number of carers.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

There is a clear Statement of Purpose setting out the aims and objectives of the fostering service. It gives an accurate description of the services provided and covers all of the information required by the standards. The management structure and decision making process is well set out and there is good information about how to make a complaint. There are many additional reports and leaflets available to further clarify the services provided. The managers of the service are competent at monitoring the work of the fostering team and are good at linking the strategic direction of the team to day to day tasks. This gives staff a clear understanding of their roll and the targets they are working to. The administrative systems set up in the teams are supportive and well organised. They are vital to the smooth running and monitoring of such a large provision. The business plan and placement strategy highlights the priority of the service and describes the developments needed to meet these priorities. Finances have been identified for the agreed developments, such as the supportive lodgings scheme, and timescales set to action these improvements. The service provide comprehensive evidence to support their self-assessment regarding strengths and weaknesses. The fostering teams are managed effectively and the managers are seen as accessible and sound. The staff present as confident, committed and enthusiastic. They provide good support to colleagues and have many years of combined experience of working with young people. There is a comprehensive understanding of the needs and vulnerability of young people in public care. The East and West teams have separate offices, and managers, but are consistent in their practice. The teams are respected by their colleagues and other professionals. Staff feel allocation of work is fair and makes good use of their individual skills and interests. The work is wide ranging and there is consistent pressure on their time. A duty system ensures that a good service is provided to the social work teams seeking placements, although the lack of enough available carers is always a matter of concern. Clear systems are in place to commission other agencies when they are unable to provide a placement in-house. Accountability is clear and all staff feel supported by their managers. There is a feeling of security within the fostering teams but some expressed concern about the future of their colleagues in other teams. This is said to arise from a number of previous re-organisations and the anticipation of further changes to come. The fostering staff provide support to these colleagues where possible. The shortage of carers across the county has been exaggerated by the rising numbers of young people being placed in the looked after

system. The stock of carers has been further depleted by the successful attempts to secure permanent placements in foster care. There is a clear recruitment strategy and strenuous efforts being made to attract more carers within the county. Incentives for carers to introduce new carers are in place and there is a robust advertising plan, including advertisements in local cinemas. The team work closely with the communications team, the specialist recruitment worker and the minority ethnic worker to target areas, and people, who research shows are most likely to be interested in caring for young people. The recruitment has been effective with 51 new carers being approved this year, however, this still does not provide enough carers to meet the needs of all of the young people in Surrey requiring foster placements. The support provided to foster carers is clearly detailed in the foster care agreements. In completed surveys 95% of carers rated the support they received as outstanding or good and made comments such as, 'They enabled the placement to continue during a rocky time' and 'I can not praise the support worker high enough'. Supervision to carers is provided at a minimum of six weekly, but the team are responsive to individual situations and contact can be daily with some carers. In addition to one to one support there are a number of carer support groups in different areas throughout Surrey. These are currently being reviewed to ensure they meet the needs of the majority of carers. Informal arrangements between carers to share concerns and ideas and to involve the children in joint activities have developed and are felt to be particularly helpful. The foster carers have an extensive range of training courses to choose from and the service is currently working on helping the carers meet the new foster care standards. Support includes a mentoring arrangement with specially trained foster carers. This arrangement is effective at raising self-esteem and confidence amongst carers who are anxious about having the necessary skills to complete the tasks. The service is looking at a range of methods to engage foster carers in education, including distance learning packages. A website for carers has been developed and is used to share information and agreed policies. Carers feel this is a valued resource and see it as additional support. Information about the young people is available on the files held by the social work teams and on the fostering files. The carers feel information availability has improved over the last two years and most say they have enough information to provide appropriate care to the young people. A new computer system is about to be introduced to enable more sharing of information. The young people's files seen are thorough and well organised. Record keeping and providing evidence for their work is a particular strength of the fostering team. All records held are well managed and easy to read. Data collected by the service is used to consider trends and changing needs. Foster carers varied in their views about the amount of paperwork they complete, but they are clear about the reasons for keeping the records and their compliance is checked at supervision visits. Foster carers are made very aware of their responsibility to keep information confidential. Some carers feel that information about their own family is shared too readily between professionals and that the rules of confidentiality should provide them with some protection too. The service assesses family and friend carers using a specially adapted form that is presented to the fostering panel. Those that are approved receive the same allowances for the young people they care for as other foster carers. There are good systems to consider the possibility of placing young people with family and friends before a stranger placement is looked for. Currently the service supports 39 family and friend placements. There are no specific support groups for these carers but they are included in all training and support offered to other approved carers. Feedback from carers who are specifically approved to care for relatives is positive.

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
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Recommendations

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

- ensure the fostering service provide older young people with a range of options to encourage them to access health services to meet their needs. (National Minimum Standard 12.6)
- ensure the fostering panel minutes provide evidence of adherence to the Regulations with regard to membership. (National Minimum Standard 30.1)
- ensure each child with a disability receives specific services and support, including appropriate equipment, to maximise their potential (National Minimum Standard 7.6)
- provide clear written requirements of what is expected of foster carers in terms of preparing young people for independent or semi-independent living (National Minimum Standard 14.2)
- provide services to help develop skills, competence and knowledge necessary for adult living (National Minimum Standard 14.1)
- review the confidential information strategy to include confidential information about carers. (National Minimum Standard 25.8)

Annex

Annex A

National Minimum Standards for a 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.