

Hythe House Support Ltd

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

Hythe House Support Limited is an independent fostering agency. The agency offers foster placements for assessment, support, respite and rehabilitation guided by individual children's and young people's ongoing care plans. As appropriate, placements can be made for the short-, medium- and long-term and if required on an emergency basis. Services offered also include organising and supervision of family contact and meeting daily travel arrangements with driver and escort services.

Additional services that can be provided include access to the company's educational unit and nursery, arrangements can be made for therapy and counselling.

The office premises are close to Sittingbourne town centre and can provide a suitable venue for training, meetings and contact visits - supervised or otherwise. The agency has 16 foster carers based in Kent and Medway and has 24 children placed with them.

Summary

This was a key announced inspection completed over four days by one inspector. This small agency has chosen to not take the rapid growth route and instead concentrate on providing a quality service. They have achieved this, and provide an excellent supportive service for both carers, staff and young people. They recruit carefully and excel at their matching to provide stable long-term placements. The promotion of the young people to ensure they can meet their potential is paramount to the agency. Alongside safeguarding and safe recruitment practices, which are exemplary in practice. The staff are professional and have excellent relationships with the carers, which is built on a relationship of trust that they will be supported and trained to provide a high standard of care to their young people. The files, monitoring and paperwork within the agency are robust, and maintained to a very high standard. Two recommendations were made to help improve the safeguarding practices further.

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

Improvements since the last inspection

The agency was last inspected three years ago and there were seven recommendations made at that time. There were two recommendations to ensure that young people were given appropriate access to their written records and that data protection of their records was being properly upheld. The policies and procedures around file monitoring and recording clearly evidence young people are given freedom to their files and any information on other young people is made anonymous on the files. All local authorities now receive a monthly report on their young people, so they are kept updated on their placements. All policies and procedures have been reviewed and updated to reflect the change of governing body to Ofsted and all the new procedures that have been put in place over the last three years.

The agency now provides health training for all young people, in preventative measures, such as healthy eating and advice on smoking, alcohol and illegal substances to ensure best possible outcomes for the young people. The health care plans were asked to be reviewed annually, these are monitored monthly during supervision and also under the manager's monthly

monitoring. The agency was asked to ensure that all child protection records are kept in one place. There has been an overall improvement in the monitoring of any safeguarding incidents with records scrupulously kept and monitored by the manager and senior practitioner.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

The agency has excellent systems in place for promoting the health and development of children. The agency obtains relevant information about children's health needs prior to placements being made and this is carefully considered in the matching process. Effective systems are in place for chasing this information up from placing local authorities when it is not provided.

Foster carers state that the service provides them with the relevant information they need about their young people's health needs and that they always have the same information that the agency does. The updated foster carer handbook also covers all the Every Child Matters outcome groups in depth with informative and comprehensive information for carers.

Foster carers are clear of their responsibility for registering children with a doctor, dentist and optician. The service also supports foster carers to access specialist services for children. Every young person on arrival to the agency gets a health pack full of information and a health passport. The health plan and passport is updated regularly and monitored monthly during supervision sessions. The service has access to two therapists to ensure swift attention to meet the mental health needs of the young people.

Extensive training is provided to both foster carers, young people and staff members in all aspects of health and healthy living, first aid and hygiene issues. Training is also discussed with carers to ensure any specialist training they require can be provided. All carers and young people are encouraged to lead healthy lifestyles and participate in community activities and local leisure clubs.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

The persons carrying on and managing the service are suitable to do so. All required checks and references are in place.

The agency ensures foster homes can comfortably accommodate all who live there and they are warm, adequately furnished, decorated and maintained to a good standard of cleanliness and hygiene. Suitability of foster carers' homes is ascertained at the time of carers' initial assessment. Suitability is monitored during supervision and support visits, and is included in foster carers' annual review. Training, support and written guidance covers this area.

A strength of the agency is the matching process which is evidenced by the long-term stable placements of the young people. They ensure they offer carers only if they represent appropriate matches for a child and decisions carefully consider any cultural or ethnic needs. The paperwork clearly identifies strengths and any gaps in any elements of the match and how these will be compensated for with additional support or training. Matches are achieved by means of information sharing and consideration involving all relevant professionals, the child, potential carers, their families and other children in placement. Where practicable, the agency likes each child to have the opportunity for a period of introduction to a proposed foster carer.

Young people are protected from abuse and neglect. Training, supervision and guidance covers safe caring skills, managing behaviour, recognising signs of abuse and on ways of boosting and maintaining the child's self-esteem. The foster carers have not received any training from the local authority safeguarding team, only private trainers. Individual safe caring guidelines are in place for each foster home. The guidelines are explained clearly and appropriately to children. Allegations of neglect, abuse or bullying of a child in foster care are dealt with in line with good practice. All staff are knowledgeable on safeguarding and are clear of their roles and responsibilities. Policies and procedures seen would benefit from a flow chart to show child protection practice.

The fostering service is careful to ensure the people it employs to work with children are suitable to do so. Recruitment and selection procedures are robust and rigorously applied. The recruitment files are exceptionally well managed and systematic.

The fostering panel helps to ensure that people the service approves to be foster carers are suitable. The panel is properly constituted and benefits from members that bring a wide range of skills, knowledge and experience in fostering and childcare. The panel provides a clear quality assurance function in relation to the assessment and review of foster carers. Development and training needs for foster carers are identified and acted upon. The operation of the panel is well managed and monitored.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The agency ensures that young people are provided with foster care where diversity is valued and equality promoted. The service is committed to ensuring that all individual aspects of young people's lives are met and promoted. Anti-discriminatory and inclusive practice is evident throughout the agency. There are policies relating to equality and diversity, to ensure each child's placement meets their individual needs. Training in equality and diversity is provided to staff members and foster carers. All young people are encouraged to join activities in the community, to try lots of different experiences. A record of all young people's achievements is kept on file.

Children's education is seen as important and children are encouraged to meet their full potential. Foster carers feel that they are given excellent support by the service regarding education. One foster carer commented 'I have been fully supported regarding my foster child's education, and helped to access funding for extra tuition.' Foster carers confirm that they are required to be involved in the assessment of children's educational needs and contribute to personal educational plans and school activities. Clear and comprehensive records are maintained of children's educational progress, needs and achievements. A foster child commented 'My teacher, foster carer and supervising social worker help me with education.' The agency has a school and half of the young people being cared for by the agencies foster carers attend. The school has recently had an education inspection which received an overall good rating from Ofsted.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

The agency promotes family ties and encourages the young people to maintain contact with their family members where this is appropriate. There are clear records and reports regarding contact on children's files and foster carers feel that they have all the information they need

regarding contact arrangements. Contact arrangements are reviewed on a regular basis and information about contact is shared with relevant professionals. Children's views about contact are sought and valued. All out of hours staff have regular updated information on contact details.

There are excellent systems in place for ensuring that foster carers and foster children have a say in the way that the service is run. Foster carers are clear about the importance of listening to children. One foster carer said 'We are encouraged to discuss decision making with the children so they are involved in their care.' A foster child said 'I am listened to by my foster carer and I also get advice from the agency when I need it.' Another foster child said 'I feel supported and part of Hythe House family.' Review reports indicate that children's views are taken into account regarding their care and the agency has produced its own version. There is a child-friendly guide available in paper and CD formats that gives details of the service, explains how complaints can be made by children, and how advocates can be contacted. This comes with a welcome pack containing a gift voucher and stationary sets, information on the service and information on all the staff and local activities. Children know the whole team well from seeing them on a regular basis, they get birthday cards personally made by one of the directors and gifts at Easter and Christmas.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

The fostering service promotes the preparation for young people into adulthood. This can be identified at the initial planning meeting, with the agency undertaking specific tasks for task centred work. The young people usually start preparation for independence with their foster carers in their early teenage years. Training with foster carers on preparing for adulthood is completed bi-yearly and the fostering handbook holds comprehensive written information. The agency works closely with the young person and the local authority when it becomes time for pathway planning and records on file support this.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

The fostering service publishes accurate information about the service and facilities it provides. A children's guide to the fostering service is also produced. The guide includes a summary of what the service sets out to do for children. It is produced in a format designed to meet the needs of different groups of children. The children's guide contains information on how a child can secure access to an independent advocate and about how to complain.

The people who work for the fostering service are managed, trained and supported so as to promote positive outcomes for children in foster care. There is a high level of social work expertise within the team. The number of staff and carers and their range of qualifications and experience are in line with achieving the purposes and functions of the organisation. Comments received from placing social workers indicate a high satisfaction level with the services provided by the agency.

Children are placed with foster carers whose ability to provide appropriate care and support is assessed and kept under review. There is a clear assessment process leading to foster carers initial and ongoing approval. Qualities, competences and aptitudes for fostering are considered in relation to a wide range of topics recognised as essential to the role.

Children are looked after by foster carers who receive an exceptionally high level of support to do so. Clear strategies to help develop foster carers skills and competencies are in place. Foster carers describe a service that '...nothing is too much trouble, support is excellent' . Support strategies include arrangements for training and development, supervision, information and advice, assistance in dealing with other relevant services, out-of-hours support, respite care and arrangements for reviews.

Written information and other administrative records are maintained to a high standard and are very well organised. Appropriate records are kept and are accessible in relation to the fostering services and the individual foster carers and foster children.

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 local authority safeguarding training is available for foster carers to access (NMS 9.2)
- ensure the foster carers and staff have a clear flow chart to follow on safeguarding procedures. (NMS 9.1)