

Heath Farm Family Services

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

Unique reference number	SC060386
Inspection date	17 May 2010
Inspector	Lucy Ansell
Type of Inspection	Key

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Date of last inspection	6 December 2007

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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 foster care element.

There are two respite houses available, along with a contact suite, support services and transport services.

At the time of this inspection Heath Farm was supporting and working with 90 foster carers and 90 young people in placement. 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 completed over one week and all key outcome groups were judged. Overall this is a strong service with good directional management and an experienced staff team who are able to provide excellent support to the foster carers. There is an action for the annual appraisal system in place for staff to be more directional during monthly supervision.

The new health framework in the foster carers handbook and the therapy centre enables effective support to the young people and carers. However, health monitoring and paperwork is required to be more robust to evidence outcomes for the young people.

The processes for ensuring that young people are safeguarded are very strong. However an action is required for the 'matching' paperwork to provide evidence of how matching choices are made.

The service demonstrates a strong commitment to equality and diversity throughout all the outcome judgements.

The outcome group 'positive contribution' is judged outstanding for its consultation with young people and its facilities and support for contact.

Three actions and four recommendations to further improve practice have been made.

The overall quality rating is good.

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

Improvements since the last inspection

The last inspection of the agency was within the statutory time frame of three years and significant improvements have been made since that time. There were eight recommendations made at the last inspection, these have all been met.

The agency was asked to ensure the policy on medication is suitable for a fostering agency and provides clear guidance for foster carers. The agency has written a new medication policy along with a brand new health framework which provides effective guidance for foster carers. They were also asked to provide health training for young people in preventative measures, such as

healthy eating and advice on smoking, alcohol and illegal substances. The foster carers have received extensive training to facilitate this role and young people's workshops have been set up by the agency to compliment this.

The agency was asked to improve recruitment processes by recording start dates for staff when Criminal Records Bureau checks had been received. This is now clearly seen on all files and a complete overhaul of all recruitment files is being completed to ensure all dates and paperwork can be clearly seen.

The panel paperwork required for assessing the applicants strengths and weaknesses were not being collected after panel. A panel summary sheet is now at the front of each new foster carers Form F assessment, recording strengths and weaknesses. This is now completed and collected after each panel.

The agency was asked to ensure that staff details and experiences are listed on the Statement of Purpose. These are now available as a separate appendix which can be requested. The new updated and rewritten foster carers' handbook has a separate and dedicated policy for the support of foster carers. Senior management receive external supervision from a private organisation.

The agency was asked to provide a formalised induction process for all new staff. A very clear and comprehensive development structure is now in place for foster carers.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Children's health is promoted. A good health framework with clear policies and procedures is available for foster carers on their roles and responsibilities. The majority of foster carers provide a good service around health needs for their foster children, from healthy eating, activities, education and information giving. The fostering agency helps ensure that children's health needs are assessed and that access to resources is secured. The agency is working hard to engage young people within the health remit and this is also covered in the school's curriculum.

The many forms of therapy and the therapy suite provide an excellent addition to the service. The health record, health care plan and recording of health information coming into the agency is satisfactory. There is insufficient monitoring of health outcomes for the young people.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The persons carrying on and managing the service are suitable to do so with all appropriate checks undertaken.

The agency provides suitable carers with the skills to provide a safe and nurturing environment. The suitability of foster carers' homes is monitored during supervision and support visits. The suitability of foster carers' homes is also included in foster carers' annual reviews, to ensure that they remain at a good standard of safety and comfort. Training, support and written guidance cover this area.

The agency can evidence that 71% of children and young people in foster placements have been with the same carers for over two years. This is indicative of careful and comprehensive

matching processes. However the initial matching criteria's need to be more robustly evidenced to show why the young people have been matched to their carer. There is insufficient clear reference to assessed strengths and weaknesses, and where additional support is required for any gaps in the matching process. Where practicable, each child has the opportunity for a period of introduction to a proposed foster carer.

The agency protects each young person from abuse and neglect with extensive safeguarding processes and monitoring of related significant incidents. Training, supervision and guidance cover safe caring skills, managing behaviour, recognising signs of abuse and ways of boosting and maintaining the child's self-esteem. These include the mentoring scheme and individual anger management work.

Complaints are dealt with in a comprehensive manner. Individual safe care plans for both foster carers and young person's are clear and comprehensive, although they do not include mobile phone safety.

The fostering service is careful to ensure the people it employs to work with children are suitable to do so. Recruitment has improved with better policies and procedures in place, staff files are much clearer and easier to access and navigate. All staff within the agency are subject to the same high level of checks. All files are being updated to ensure this consistency. The young people are involved in the recruitment of new staff.

The fostering panel ensures that all applicants approved, are suitable to be foster carers. 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. The operation of the panel is monitored and training of panel members happens regularly.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The fostering service values diversity and promotes equality. The foster care service recognises and addresses any needs in terms of gender, religion, ethnic origin, language, and culture. Supervision and guidance covers this area. A wide variety of training is provided to carers and staff ranging from core sessions on diversity awareness to specific courses relating to needs. Equality and diversity is found within all the training given to both staff and foster carers. The impact of this, ensures that foster carers can promote equality and self worth for the young people in their care. Children are given encouragement and equal access to opportunities to develop and pursue their talents, interests and hobbies. Children's attendance at karate clubs, dance lessons and football are, for example all being supported. The mentoring scheme also provides an excellent support service to the young people and helps find individual activities to suit that young person.

Educational attainment is promoted. A new education policy is in place. This means that foster carers' responsibilities towards the children's educational needs are much clearer and specific. Clear records are maintained of children's educational progress, needs and achievements. Records seen, show evidence that exclusions of children and young people placed with the agency are being tracked and monitored. The 'Alternative Education Provision' identifies those who are not in mainstream for a host of reasons and provides support outside of the foster

home. The agency's own school is being extensively remodelled and phase one is due to be completed shortly.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

The agency promotes and encourages the young people to maintain contact with their family members where this is appropriate. The agency has an on-site purpose built contact suite. This is very well used and the service provided is outstanding. 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 in a comprehensive report. Children's views about contact are sought and valued. All out of hours staff have regular updated information on contact details.

The fostering agency promotes consultation. Children are routinely consulted with at the time of their foster carer's annual review, their own childcare review and education planning meetings through child friendly paperwork. Children who completed inspection surveys indicate that their views are 'usually' or 'always' sought and taken into account by their foster carers and social workers. The fostering agency has organised several workshops to engage with children and seek their views on a range of matters in relation to being fostered. They have a children's champion and a child's mentoring scheme, along with a children's forum 'The Voice', although predominately run in school time, it can be accessed by all. Details of how to complain or make representations is included in the information made available to children within a welcome pack, chosen and designed by the young people.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

The fostering agency provides support to young people moving onto independence and preparing for adulthood. Young people are supported to prepare for adulthood by their social worker and through the local authority 'pathway planning' process. Foster carers are also supported to help young people through this process. A detailed section within the foster carer handbook and a comprehensive training programme for moving into independence is in place. The sections on moving on and preparing for adulthood in the foster carers' handbook are comprehensive.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

There is a clear Statement of Purpose with the aims and objectives of the fostering service, which contains all the required information. The children's guides are available in different age formats and are very child friendly. These guides contain information on how a child can secure access to an independent advocate and about how to complain.

The fostering service is managed by an individual with the appropriate skills and experience. All staff state that the manager is very supportive and always has time to listen to them. Staff state that they value the manager's open door policy. The registered individual has a clear focus and direction along with a strategic overview for the growth of the agency.

Staff at the fostering service are well managed, trained and supported so as to promote positive outcomes for children in foster care. There are seven qualified social workers, two of which are senior practitioners and have a lead role for education and health within the team. The ratio of staff to carers and their range of qualifications and experience ensure there is a good balance of support and expertise. Pay and conditions for staff is exemplary. All staff receive supervision and annual appraisals. However, the outcomes of these appraisal processes do not lead to setting targets in the form a development plan for the forthcoming year.

During the last year, the agency has experienced rapid growth in terms of the number of referrals received. A clear recruitment drive for additional foster carers remains in place to meet this demand. During this very busy period, the quality of some aspects of documentation and the recording of processes has been variable. The senior management team is reviewing the organisational structure in an effort to ensure there remains a sufficient amount of posts in place to meet the needs of an expanding service.

Young people are placed with foster carers who provide appropriate care and support. This is kept under review and additional support is provided as required. There is a clear assessment process leading up to foster carers' initial and ongoing approval. The foster carers receive a good level of support, with excellent training in place to help them develop the relevant skills and competencies. Support strategies include training and development, new development folders for carers, supervision and support, peer mentoring, out-of-hours telephone service, respite care and annual reviews. Carers support groups are not always utilised to their full extent and facilitators would benefit from receiving training in running support groups.

Written information and other administrative records are on the whole well maintained and well organised. However, there are lots of examples of paper trails where the agency is not clearly evidencing the actual work and processes that are, in reality, being undertaken. This means that the content and style of all written work is inconsistent. Appropriate records are kept and are accessible in relation to the fostering agency, 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
12	ensure the fostering service promotes the health and development of children placed with foster parents particularly in regard to health outcomes (Regulation 15(1))	29 October 2010
8	ensure it is clearly recorded why the foster parent was chosen as a match for the young person (Regulation 34)	29 October 2010
20	ensure that the outcomes of the appraisal process leads to setting targets in the form of a development plan. (Regulation 21(4))	29 October 2010

Recommendations

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

- ensure that the paperwork contains specific reference to elements of matching, which clearly identifies the carer's strengths and weaknesses (NMS 8.4)
- ensure that the carer's individual safe care policies include mobile phone safety (NMS 9.3)
- improve consistency in the content and style of all written work (NMS 25)
- ensure that training for facilitators running support groups is provided. (NMS 22.6)