

Ethelbert Fostering Service

Inspection report for independent 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 outcomes for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and the relevant National Minimum Standards for the service.

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

Ethelbert Residential Fostering Services provides fostering and supported accommodation for children and young people and is part of Ethelbert Specialist Homes Ltd, which owns registered children's homes and schools. The fostering service office is situated in Cecil Square, Margate. In 2006 this company merged with an associate fostering agency. The organisation has increased in size by approximately 50%. This service offers foster placements for a wide range of young people with differing needs.

Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

This is an outstanding agency that successfully strives and achieves improvement in all key areas of practice. Systems are robust and emerge through well-established consultation and clear and consistent engagement with the carers and the young people provided with care.

The promotion of equality and diversity has been fully embraced by this service and systems reflect adherence to these central principles of care and provision. The manager maintains clear and effective oversight of the service and supervising social workers are committed insightful and motivated.

Carers are empowered by these practices and this translates into care that puts young people first. Three areas of recommendation are identified within the report to enhance outstanding practices.

Improvements since the last inspection

This service was found to be outstanding at the last inspection in 2007. A recommendation was made to ensure that the quality assurance function of the panel was explicit and purposeful and that it conducted and recorded this appropriately. A second recommendation was made to improve both the presentation and content of staff files.

A review of the fostering panel has been comprehensive, a new chair has been appointed to manage the panel. New members have also been recruited. The chair has many years of experience in this area and has brought a renewed richness and objectivity to this function. The chair is motivated and insightful and members and carers feel that the new chair has made a significant improvement to the panel function.

Staff files and panel member files have been reviewed and a dedicated staff member has since been appointed to oversee all files and maintain them.

Files and records are now robustly managed with systems of checking and quality assurance. This service has taken appropriate action to meet or exceed the recommendations made at the last inspection.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

Young people are supported to maintain good health and well-being. Food and meals provided are nutritious and young people are able to make choices about the meals that are prepared.

Young people's health is promoted by careful assessment, monitoring and support. Each young person's health needs are ascertained during the matching process. Regular monitoring ensures health planning is reviewed and appropriately targeted to the young person's needs.

All young people are supported to engage with formal health services such as the General Practitioner, dentist and optician and the agency ensures that this is well managed by liaison and planning with primary care services.

Young people who have specialist health needs are given extra support to ensure that they have access to the services that best meet their needs. Any area of healthcare which is more heavily influenced by personal choice, culture or other reason is clearly identified within the healthcare plan and appropriate action is taken to address this.

Recording of young people's health needs, planning and subsequent interventions are robustly recorded through monitoring both by the carer and the agency. Monitoring arrangements are also underpinned by formal supervision sessions and records are regularly updated which reflect well-managed systems.

All young people are encouraged to participate in their healthcare and this is primarily promoted through health education and raising young people's awareness. The agency makes a clear commitment to this and employs a dedicated health promotion worker. This staff member provides one-to-one sessions with the carers and will engage the young people in all relevant aspects of healthcare.

Healthcare is given high priority by this agency and both time and investment in this key area are evident. Training for carers is frequent and mandatory and all carers are expected to demonstrate commitment and importance to this area of care. It was noted that medication storage arrangements in one carers home was not robust and the manager was advised of this. Healthcare monitoring support and delivery is outstanding.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

Young people are encouraged to understand and be aware of safety and their rights to be safeguarded. All young people have comprehensive guidance in the form of a children's guide, which details matters of safety and well-being. Information given to young people is designed in various formats to ensure that this is age appropriate and best suited to raising awareness and promoting discussion with carers.

All young people are well protected by thoughtful risk assessments and this process seeks to reduce and manage known and perceived risks. Young people are clearly engaged in this process and where appropriate to understanding, expected to take some responsibilities for behaviour and risk management. Young people are therefore both aware and instrumental in this process and encouraged to take these skills into independence and adulthood.

Missing or unauthorised absence of young people is infrequent in this service, but this likelihood is risk assessed and plans are in place with all carers to respond to any such and event. Well managed out-of-hours and on-call support is available for carers to assist them in the safe recovery and return of any young person. Effective protocols are in place to network with other services such as the police and all carers receive training to manage episodes of absence.

When young people are placed in homes that need the additional provision of equipment or services, such arrangements for placements are made during the matching process. Where additional support to meet needs develops subsequent to the placement arrangements are put into place and regularly monitored to ensure they are adequate.

Carers say that close and effective monitoring, through supervision, enables them to raise emerging or additional needs promptly and effectively. Any specialist care is only provided once appropriate carers have been identified and training has been successfully put into place.

All carers have safe care procedures which detail the expectations of arrangements and behaviour within the home. Safe care arrangements are agreed with the carer and monitored to address changing needs or developing behaviours.

All safe care arrangements identify specific needs and behaviours arising from diversity, lifestyle choices and influences from culture or religion. Young people are encouraged to understand and engage with safe care practices and their views are considered essential to this process. Although young people have a good awareness of safe care, the safe care recording practices are a little weak in some areas. Although this is more focussed on administration, records did not reflect assessments as well as they may have.

Carers receive both mandatory training in matters of diversity and difference and

carers are encouraged to consider their own views and behaviours and how these impact on their role as a carer. More specialist training is provided where diversity impacts significantly on the caring role and such matters are regular topics within carers supervision and support groups. Carers say that they are well supported and their opinions are given value and importance.

Young people are encouraged to understand their rights and express views of both satisfaction or dissent. Both formal and informal arrangements are in place to best support a young person to make representation or complaint.

Formal complaints are uncommon, but rigorously managed should they emerge. Independent or external oversight can be deployed if complaints are more significant or of greater concern. Young people say that their carers will support them to express their views either within the home, agency or indeed externally to an independent party.

Matching is currently under review and emerging systems provide a greater emphasis on issues of culture and choice and seek to engage more fully the placing social worker, young person and carer. Current systems are effective and matching arrangements can be measured by stable and consistent placement outcomes. When placements are made that have clear differences in culture or ethnicity, arrangements are considered and measured to ensure decisions are appropriately influenced. No placement is made in the absence of effective matching.

Carers say that they are fully engaged in this process and are encouraged by the agency to have a very significant role in the final decision. Young people benefit from the importance and emphasis placed by the agency in the matching process. Young people are also supported to express more general views about the agency and formal surveys are provided to each young person. To support this process the agency provides age appropriate guides and information to each young person to encourage them to express views and opinions related to the operation of the service.

Prior to each review of the placement the carers and young people discuss their views and wishes and this provides a useful and effective forum for engaging young people in expressing views. Young people say that their carers treat their views and wishes with importance and encourage them to understand their rights.

Safeguarding and the care of the young people is outstanding and commitment is measured through the effectiveness of these systems and the resulting quality of care.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Young people are very positive about their placements and all young people expressed their happiness and gave examples of the benefits of the placement.

Young people are complimentary about their carers, but also realistic in acknowledging the balance between care and control. Young people are aware of their rights and understand the role of foster carer. Young people feel included and express a strong sense of belonging and commitment to their carers and the placement.

All young people are encouraged to identify a personal interest or hobby and the carers support any reasonable request. Carers hold the view that the young people should have access to all the organisations, leisure facilities and engage fully with the community activities.

All young people express awareness of community activities and feel encouraged to engage with activities designed for them. Any young person that needs additional support to participate in activities or clubs is supported by both the carer and the agency.

The agencies health promotion worker is also deployed more formally to advise the carers and develop strategies to encourage young people's confidence and participation in activities, where appropriate. The agency is therefore proactive in encouraging inclusion and engagement for the young people and successfully addressing any inhibiting or restrictive factors.

All young people are encouraged to commit to training and education and the agency maintains robust systems to achieve this. The agency has 100 per cent of the young people attending education (including vocational placements) and views education with great importance.

The agency maintains effective measures to support all educational placements through regular and well-managed liaison between the school carer and young person. A dedicated staff member is employed to monitor all education activities and each school is surveyed by the agency to ensure all appropriate services and support is being provided by the carer and education authority. All carers receive mandatory training in the importance of educational support and attainment. In addition the agency provides their own schools for young people who are unable to attend mainstream provisions to ensure young people have equal opportunities to further their education. The agency provides exceptional support to both carers and the young people and provides an outstanding service in this outcome area.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

Each young person is encouraged to express their views and opinions about the agency and their individual carers. The agency has developed children's guides, surveys and information packs to encourage participation and a voice in the provision of care. Translation and support services are sourced or funded by the agency to ensure that young people with additional communication needs receive support to express themselves.

All statutory reviews and placement reviews are discussed with the young people prior to the event. Young people are canvassed for their opinions and carers engage with them specifically to consider their views and wishes. In addition education and health support staff are also available in the agency to provide specific guidance in these areas.

Young people are engaged with their care plans and understand that they have the right to influence and shape their care. Young people are confident to express their views regarding the care within the home and foster carers provide detailed logs and reports on the progress of the young people.

Carers receive support and guidance on encouraging young people's views and support networks for carers exchange strategies to promote this.

Contact planning and arrangements are supported by each carer and are subject to agreement; carers provide excellent logistical support with transport as well as emotional support and encouragement. Each carer is aware of the importance of promoting contact with family and friends and all contact arrangements are overseen by the supervising social worker.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

Carers support young people with learning skills of independence and help them prepare for adulthood. Carers have devised tasks and goals to encourage young people to develop skills essential to their subsequent transition into adulthood.

Current programmes are effective in some cases and demonstrate progress and development. However in some other cases planning lacks formality making assessment of progress rather complicated. The current programmes are under review and it is noted that emerging systems are clearer, concise and more ambitious.

Young people are aware of the importance of their preparation for adulthood; pathway plans are in place in some areas. Young people are supported in learning new skills and planning is in place in many areas. Current planning is therefore good, with further improvement emerging.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

The agencies panel has suitably diverse membership which has insight into issues of ethnicity, culture and difference. Members have been selected from a range of diverse backgrounds, suitably knowledgeable within the roles that they represent at the panel. Members represent the local community and promote the philosophies of

equal opportunities. The operation of the panel is underpinned by a sound understanding of the rights of young people and the importance of promoting young people to reach their full potential.

Carers are selected carefully and a range of carers from different backgrounds and cultures ensure that there is a richness of influences for the young people.

All recruitment is robustly managed and the service is clear on the importance of ensuring carers are vigorously screened to ensure only appropriate people are considered as foster carers.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding and explicitly permeates through the panel business and process of approval and decision making. Carers are recruited to bring their experience to the service and the panel promotes carers individual and professional growth through training and supervision.

The understanding of equality and diversity is fundamental to this service and all carers receive specific training in this area. Policies and procedures make clear these issues and interpret these expectations in all appropriate guidance. Carers are well motivated in this area and it is clear that equality and diversity is central in this service.

The decision maker considers and makes approval decisions promptly and fairly, detailing elements of the assessment that has supported the final judgement. All the panel members, and the attending applicants, are expected to complete a quality assurance survey to detail their views regarding the panel and activity of the panel. The service collates this information and there is clear evidence that this information acts to develop and progress the panels quality. This underpins excellent quality assurance.

During approval, annual review and any other business, members of the panel are provided with key information relevant to the meeting. Panel members are motivated to challenge and question information and assessments and are robust in their quality assurance function.

Young people are provided with interpretation services and specialist support to enable them to make clear and concise representations for any panel or review considerations. In addition carers are asked to complete a quality assurance survey about their experiences at the panel. All returned surveys are considered and action is taken where services may be improved.

Consultation with the carers is excellent and carers say that they feel supported and valued. Consultation is also conducted where parents are supportive and with all other agencies relevant to the assessment.

Details of all carer approvals and reviews are collated by the manager and assessment is undertaken to consider how assessments have contributed to both approval and non-approval of carers.

The fostering service provides a comprehensive Statement of Purpose detailing the services offered and the manner in which the service operates. This statement is regularly reviewed and provided to all parties.

Information within the service includes age appropriate guidance for young people and translation/alternate communication services are sourced or commissioned. The fostering service promotes young people's opinions and views. As such, all young people in the care of this service are well represented by both their carers and the fostering service.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Recommendations

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

- ensure that medicines kept in the foster home are stored safely and are accessible only by those for whom they are intended (NMS 6.9)
- ensure that foster carers understand how safer caring principles should be applied in a way which meets the needs of individual children (NMS 20.9)
- ensures there are comprehensive arrangements for preparing and supporting young people to make the transition to independence (NMS 12.3).