

# Hertfordshire 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 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

Hertfordshire Family Placement Service provides a service responsive to the needs of children who require a family placement. There are 555 approved fostering households, providing 856 approved places. At the time of the inspection there were 742 children placed with the service.

The service operates from four teams covering different geographical regions of the county. Services provided include respite care, short-term placements and kinship as well as long-term placements.

### Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This key inspection took place over five days. This inspection was announced and looked at the key National Minimum Standards. Outcome groups for being healthy is judged as satisfactory, staying safe, making a positive contribution and organisation are judged as good, whilst those relating to enjoying and achieving are judged as outstanding.

### Improvements since the last inspection

One action and one recommendation were made when the service was last inspected. Both of these have been fully addressed by the provider.

### Helping children to be healthy

The provision is satisfactory.

Children receive generally satisfactory health care whilst living with foster carers. Background health information is provided at the time of placement, using essential information forms and placement agreement forms to ensure medical needs are identified and consent is recorded for routine medical care. The local authority has access to the services of a specialist nurse, employed to support looked after children and foster carers access the resources needed to respond to the health needs of children and young people in foster care. Carers are not provided with a written health record for each child in their care that can be updated as and when required and can move with the child if and when they move placement. This reduces the quality of health recording maintained by the service in respect of children and young people it looks after. Carers have access to first aid training, but do not always

attend the courses available, again reducing the overall quality of health care provided to children and young people in foster care.

### **Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe**

The provision is good.

The local authorities ensures good outcomes are achieved for children and young people in respect of staying safe. Those responsible for managing the service are suitable and have all been subject to the local authorities recruitment and vetting procedures, ensuring robust checks are undertaken and updated on a regular basis. Children are placed with foster carers who have been assessed by qualified social workers. The assessment process includes the quality and safety of prospective carers' homes, including a health and safety checklist, which is reviewed as part of the annual review process for carers. An internal audit of carers has found one example of a carer's home not being fitted with a smoke detector.

The service has procedures in place for matching children with prospective carers. There are currently three parts of the service with responsibility for matching children who need placing with appropriate carers. The central placement team matches planned placements, whilst respite care arrangements are organised by family placement teams and the emergency duty team (EDT) has responsibility for emergency, out of hours placements. Social workers produce stand by lists, identifying the matching criteria of carers available for emergency placements, including cultural issues, space available, terms of approval, skills and training undertaken. Children are generally placed with carers who are suitable in terms of matching criteria, however there have been examples of children being placed in an emergency with carers who do not have the required equipment to care for them, resulting in a placement change within 24 hours. There have also been cases where emergency placements have been made out of category without exemptions to the approval categories of the carers in question. Where children are inappropriately placed, the local authority makes good efforts to put additional resources in to support children and carers, often making the placement viable.

Children are protected from abuse and neglect by social workers and carers who have all had access to child protection training. Carers and social workers are also supported by a clear policy on child protection procedures, giving good guidance about how to respond to cases of suspected or reported abuse. The policies also include good advice about safer caring for carers and behaviour management. Children have access to a website especially for looked after children that contains advice about keeping safe and a range of options for young people to use if they are unhappy or unsafe. Children report positively about the independent advocacy organisation (VOICE) made available by the local authority. Children are also protected by the local authorities recruitment procedures, undertaken by staff who have had access to training in this area, however, the lack of records confirming employment gaps have been explored reduces the robustness of the system.

Fostering panels are well organised and efficient, ensuring all members have time to

read papers before panel sits. Panel chair has undertaken relevant training and all members of the panel have access to training courses that are relevant to the work of a fostering panel. Clear procedures and guidelines are also available to panel members. The fostering panels provide useful feedback to individual assessors on the quality of their assessments and to the management team through regular management of panels meetings. One shortfall in the panels make up is the lack of a child health expert.

### **Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do**

The provision is outstanding.

Children with diverse needs have these needs met by the local authorities provision of an appropriately diverse range of carers. Children with disabilities have access to specially approved carers whose skills relate to providing care for children with disabilities and separate social workers within the family placements team have responsibility for matching and placing children in appropriate placements. The service makes good efforts at providing additional support and resources where cultural needs are not best met.

The promotion of educational achievement is an area that the service performs particularly well. The local authority employs a corporate parenting officer with responsibility for coordinating the provision of educational support for all looked after children, including those in foster care. Four advisory teachers and eight support workers are also employed to support children and young people with educational needs, along with four Connexions personal advisors, two support officers and two project officers. A reading project is run to help encourage reading with children and young people in foster care. A computer project is under way, providing children and young people with access to a computer and the internet. Courses are provided to foster carers on promoting the educational achievement of children in care, including events aimed at numeracy, reading and personal education plans. The local authority also runs a number of programmes for looked after children and young people and links in to others, including virtual classrooms, IT courses for carers, support officers who can support looked after children in their foster placements and residential courses at a university, enabling young people to experience life at a university and prepare for GCSE examinations.

Short term breaks for children with disabilities are arranged by the local authorities link scheme, with specific policies and procedures aimed at maximising parental involvement. Primary responsibility for ongoing health and education needs remains with parents in these cases.

### **Helping children make a positive contribution**

The provision is good.

Children and young people who live with foster carers have their contact needs identified in placement agreement forms, identifying any plans for ongoing contact or

any restrictions in contact. Carers are provided with training and guidance on the importance of maintaining contact for looked after children. Financial arrangements are in place to reimburse carers who incur additional expenses when facilitating contact. Contact arrangements are reviewed as part of the statutory review process, ensuring that children and young people are able to contribute to the process for determining contact arrangements.

Children and young people who live with foster carers have a number of ways in which they can contribute their views about their daily lives and futures. Children and young people are provided with written information when they move in with carers, explaining how concerns and complaints may be expressed, including reference to advocacy organisations, the local authorities customer focus teams, children's complaints officers, Ofsted and the local government ombudsman if necessary. Groups are run specifically for looked after children and young people who are fostered, where the issues covered include seeking the views of fostered children and young people about their experiences of involvement with social services, including the fostering experience. On an individual basis, carers are provided with guidance and training as part of the approval process that emphasises the importance of listening to the views of children in their care. Children and young people are routinely invited to their own annual reviews and given consultation forms to complete if they wish to record their views about their care and plans for the future.

### **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is not judged.

### **Organisation**

The organisation is good.

The local authority produces a statement of purpose of its fostering services, including the aims and objectives of the service and the services it provides to meet those aims and objectives. The statement of purpose is approved by the elected members of the local authority and is available to all parents, children and other users of the service. The local authority produces two separate guides to the service for children and young people. One is designed specifically for younger children and one is for older children and young people. Both guides include information about how to access advocacy and complain if the need arises.

Staff are well organised, with clear management arrangements in place ensuring accountability through the line management process. Team managers are all appropriately experienced and qualified. Staff receive regular supervision and a staff appraisal system is in place to ensure regular review of the performance of individual members of staff. The staff who assess and support foster carers have access to office equipment and information technology equipment that helps them undertake

the tasks effectively, along with written job descriptions, policy documents, procedural guidance and contracts of employment to help clarify their respective roles. Staff are supported in gaining post qualification awards and additional training has been purchased by the local authority when needed. All of the staff who undertake assessments of prospective foster carers have undertaken training appropriate to the task and work to a nationally agreed competency based framework.

Hertfordshire have a clear expectation that carers will undertake regular training and a programme of training courses is provided at varying times and locations to make training available to all carers. Generally carers take up the training provided, but there are some instances where annual reviews and supervisory visits have identified that some individuals have not undertaken satisfactory levels of training. This potentially compromises the quality of care provided to children and young people placed with foster carers.

Children and young people are looked after by carers that are supported by the local authority fostering service through a planned strategy for supporting carers that includes regular supervisory visits, including at least one unannounced visit per year; support groups are held at a variety of times and locations; out of hours support via a duty system during the day and an emergency out of hours team is available during the evenings and weekends. There is also a respite scheme where carers can have planned breaks when required.

Foster carers are also supported by the provision of named social workers allocated to each set of carers and the provision of a foster care agreement, however, the information included in this document is currently weighted heavily towards laying out what the local authority requires of foster carers and fails to explicitly set out the amount of support and training to be provided to carers by the local authority. Carers are provided with a handbook, containing policies, procedures, guidance, legal information and insurance details. Some of the policies are over four years old and, whilst the service has initiated a review of the handbook, new copies have not yet been distributed, potentially reducing the quality of information available to carers in this format.

The local authority is currently in the process of switching to a new, computerised database where all children's and carers records will be able to be completed and accessed. Paper files are still maintained, providing records in respect of looked after children and young people in foster care and approved carers. Case files are dependent upon the information passed from the young person's social worker. However, all files examined contained the information required. Records are appropriately maintained and stored.

## **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/s meets the Care Standards Act 2000, Fostering Services Regulations 2002 and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider(s) must comply with the given timescales.

Std.	Action	Due date
22	ensure that foster care agreements include the amount of support and training to be provided to the foster parent [Reg 25(b)]	30/05/2008
12	ensure that all foster carers undertake first aid training [Reg 17 (1)]	30/05/2008
8	ensure that children are only placed with carers whose terms of his approval are consistent with the proposed placement [Reg 34 (1)(b)]	30/05/2008
15	ensure that employment records contain a full employment history, together with a satisfactory written explanation of any gaps in employment [Reg 20(1)(3)(i)].	30/05/2008

## Recommendations

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

- ensure that the independent members of the panel include, as far as possible, expertise in education and in child health (NMS 30)
- ensure that the programme of training in areas related to the fostering task is delivered to carers (NMS 23)
- ensure the foster carer's handbook contains up to date policies and procedures related to the fostering task (NMS 22)
- ensure that foster carers are provided with equipment to assist children and young people to document significant events during their time in foster care (NMS 24)
- ensure that all carers are provided with a written health record for each child placed in their care, which is updated during the placement and moves with the child (NMS 12).