

# Hampshire 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**

The Hampshire County Council Fostering Service covers the whole of Hampshire. It is operationally led by a County Services Manager. The purpose of the family placement service is to provide a range of foster carers for young people, in Hampshire, who are unable to stay in their own homes. The service includes long and short term placements, respite care and a family link service providing short breaks for young people with disabilities.

There are three district teams and a county wide recruitment team. Each has its own team manager. The district teams assess family and friends and family link carers, whilst the county team recruits and assesses the pool of general foster carers. All are supported by the district teams.

There are currently approximately 510 foster carers and 126 family link carers registered with the service.

### **Summary**

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This announced inspection took place over four days and assesses the National Minimum Standard for fostering services.

The overall outcomes for young people fostered through this service is good. The outcome area of organisation has been judged as outstanding. The service is consistent across the county and is led by experienced and knowledgeable managers. Monitoring systems ensure that the outcomes for young people are constantly considered. There is excellent information available about the service and it is organised in an effective way.

Young people benefit from the large range of foster carers, although more availability would provide better choice for young people. Support to carers, including training, is good. Foster carers are providing safe and sensitive care to the young people.

There are a good range of systems to consult with young people and use their views in the development of the service.

There are four good practice recommendations made as a result of this inspection.

## Improvements since the last inspection

At the last inspection there were five recommendations made. One related to household reviews, and the need to include an updated safety check and risk assessment when young people share a bedroom. This is now in place and risk assessments prior to placement are undertaken highlighting any particular vulnerabilities and risks. This provides more safety for young people placed.

The second recommendation was with regard to unaccompanied asylum seeking young people and those placed outside of their cultural background. The service has worked on this throughout the year and are developing information and resources for carers who have such placements. There is more understanding of the needs of these young people and training is made available to carers.

Recording matching considerations was the third recommendation. This has been actioned by the development of a matching form that details the considerations made, any gaps in the matching and how those gaps will be covered.

The next recommendation was to provide a sufficient number of family link carers. The service has continued to recruit family link foster carers but can not guarantee the response to advertisement will provide enough suitable carers to meet the needs of all the young people referred to the service.

The final recommendation was that foster carers keep more detailed records. The service has produced procedures for foster carers to follow regarding record keeping. This includes the need to keep detailed records, particularly with regard to medication administration. Foster carers confirm that record keeping responsibilities have increased in the past year.

The service is responsive to new legislation and have excellent monitoring systems to ensure they are meeting their objectives. The self-assessment information sent prior to the inspection demonstrates a high level of understanding about the strengths and weaknesses of the service. Collection of evidence showing how the service is delivered has improved since the last inspection.

## Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

The fostering service is good at promoting the health and development of the young people placed. Specialist nurses undertake a full health assessment as soon as possible after a young person is referred. This highlights health needs and leads to a health care plan involving specialists where necessary. Good working arrangements with school nurses, mental health services and other health specialists exist to ensure young people's health needs are met.

All young people are registered with a general practitioner and can access advice and support from a range of settings. There is a good inter-agency education programme

covering sexual health, smoking, drugs and relationship issues. Young people are encouraged to live a healthy lifestyle and are provided with plenty of opportunities for exercise and sports. They say they are given a healthy menu, one commenting that they are invited to eat 'too much fruit and vegetables'. Local schools are involved in the healthy schools' initiative and provide additional support to foster carers and young people.

Foster carer training covers health issues, as does the regular supervision of foster carers. This ensures that young people's health remains a high priority within the placement.

Young people with special needs who use the family link scheme have full assessments and carers are provided with training and support to care for them appropriately. Equipment needed to support the placements can sometimes be delayed due to the pressure on health colleagues. This varies across the county but can lead to an agreed link not being put in place for some weeks.

Whilst the access to mental health assessments for young people has improved through resources being made available to children and adolescent health services there is still a concern about lack of on-going mental health support for young people.

A clear smoking and drugs policy has been developed giving foster carers clear guidance on their responsibilities. It sets out the support available to encourage carers and young people not to smoke.

The membership of the fostering panels include health representatives. Each panel has the benefit of a medical advisor. This ensures that the health of carers is properly considered at assessment and review of their suitability.

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

The provision is good.

The registered manager has many years experience of working with children living away from home, and the appropriate qualifications to manage the service. She has a good understanding of day to day fostering issues as well as strategic oversight of the service. In addition, each of the districts have a team manager with responsibility for the fostering and family link services in their area. The managers are held in high regard by the team members and offer very good support and supervision.

The staff recruitment processes are safe and are evidenced by clear records and appropriate references. The staff present as child centred and committed to improving the service to fostered young people.

Recruitment of the general pool of foster carers is undertaken by the county team whilst family and friends and family link carers are assessed by the district teams. Assessment processes are thorough and include interviews with all members of the

family. Criminal record bureau checks are completed and referees are spoken to by the assessors. The fostering panel make recommendations about suitability to the county decision maker who has the final responsibility for approval. The assessment runs alongside preparation training which gives an opportunity to pick up on any of the issues raised in group situations. Carers feel that while the process is lengthy it ensures they are fully aware of the fostering task.

The carers seen in their homes are providing sensitive, warm care. They all speak fondly of the young people placed and are knowledgeable about the young person's individual needs. Young people report being happy with their placements and generally feel well cared for in their foster homes. Carers' suitability is reviewed appropriately and considers the views of the young people placed.

Information available prior to placement can be limited and this affects the risk assessments undertaken. There are good examples of well considered risks, as well as anecdotal evidence of problems created by lack of information. On balance the systems set up to identify risks appear to be working well the majority of the time.

Matching requirements are well understood but lack of choice compromises matching on a day to day basis. There are clear processes to refer on to independent fostering agencies where an appropriate in-house placement can not be found. Carers feel matching has improved in the last three years and feel empowered to take an active part in deciding whether an offered placement is appropriate for their family. One carer whose first placement has become permanent remarked 'the matching must be excellent' and another said 'the family placement workers appear to have an instinct for matching'. Where matching was not so successful it was often as a result of limited available knowledge about the young person at the point of placement. Gaps in the matches made are noted and used to target recruitment of future carers. Whilst the lack of available carers limits the choice of placement for young people there were many examples of placements working out well and positively influencing the outcomes for young people in all areas of their life.

Young people who are placed in an emergency report having very little information about foster homes prior to arriving there. One said 'I was collected from school and taken to a foster home - I didn't know anything about them. A photo would have helped'. Newly recruited carers are producing profiles that can be used with young people prior to placement, but these are not yet available for all carers.

Foster care training includes child protection. The training diary shows that there are evening and weekend training sessions for carers covering allegations, safe caring and child protection. The training aims to help carers recognise and describe signs of abuse, support young people through the disclosure process and develop strategies to keep the young person and their family safe. All of the training is linked to the outcomes for children and the National Minimum Standards for fostering. Carers are very positive about the quality of the training they receive and clearly feel it impacts on their performance. The family placement teams have a good mix of staff with experience of working in the child protection field. This helps raise the profile of child protection. All carers have safe caring plans detailing individual strategies for keeping

the whole family safe.

Complaints and allegations processes are clear and records demonstrate appropriate handling of them, including evidence of inappropriate people being referred to the Prevention of Child Abuse process (POCA). The recruitment team consider lessons learnt from proven complaints in their assessment procedures to try to ensure mistakes are not repeated.

There are six fostering panels across the service and each are formed according to the regulations. The appointment of a commissioning manager for fostering panels has strengthened the consistency of panels. Panel membership has been evaluated and changes are being made to ensure that all panels have the most effective membership. There are good monitoring systems, including membership attendance. Panel training has been provided. Plans are in place for further improvements including the appointment of an ex-fostered person on all panels.

Observation of one panel showed it was well organised and welcoming to applicants. The background of the members is varied and represents health, education and social care. Panel minutes are clear and detailed with good tracking of recommendations and decisions.

Carers find the panel process 'serious, important and daunting' but feel it is a good way of considering applicants' suitability.

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

The provision is good.

Foster carers are encouraged to value young people's background and culture. Training for foster carers include sessions that aims to 'help foster carers understand diversity and discrimination'. Matching takes into account the cultural and religious needs of young people. It is evident that foster carers raise young people's self-esteem through celebration of their background, experiences and parentage. Young people are given appropriate choices about how to live their lives.

The family link service provides respite care for approximately 120 children and young people with disabilities. There are strong links between this service and the children with disabilities team. The placements are well considered and the service promotes young people reaching their potential. The council has signed the Every Disabled Child Matters charter. There was a recent survey of 600 families to gain ideas for improvement of service to disabled young people. A specialist carers and parents group (PIDS) work together with the children's dept to improve services. Carers of young people with disabilities feel the access to services is improving.

Foster carers receive training regarding their responsibility to promote education and are now taking a more pro-active role to ensure the young people placed receive appropriate education. Carers are involved in choosing schools, supporting teachers and working with schools on behaviour management. Additional funding for looked



after children has been made available to schools. Whilst there are some inconsistency in how this is used it has been beneficial to many by providing additional tuition, computers and financial help for activities and educational trips. There are good examples of local schools providing support to foster families. In most homes visited the educational outcomes for the young people have improved, particularly with regard to attendance. Currently there are 22 young people either at or about to commence university. Young people say that although they value the support to do this they need on-going support in terms of housing, money and social work support in order to make the most of the experience.

The training for foster carers has enabled carers to value education for themselves as well as the young people and this has raised the profile of education in the foster homes.

Young people's attendance and attainment is monitored and any issues are picked up with foster carers and social workers. Celebration events are provided to award achievement and effort. A spring school for young people aged 13-17 is available at the University of Winchester to provide first hand experience of university life and promote the benefits of further education. This has been successful, with young people commenting that it has led to them considering university as an option when they leave school.

Activities are encouraged, and young people are engaged in many sports and interest groups. The council provide free access to leisure and sports centres, and local parks, to ensure all young people have the opportunity to use the facilities. The service have also set up a sailing course at Calshot which has proved very popular with young people.

The service demonstrate that they celebrate all achievements of young people whether they are academic, interest based or personal.

Whilst access to group activities is good young people say they are frustrated by the systems used to access monies for individual activities and trips. One said 'by the time you have got the social worker's permission and the funding agreed the trip has been and gone'. They would like the service to consider ways of speeding up this process. They have made this point to senior managers through the Care Council.

Respite care and family link services recognise the main carers as central to all arrangements. The family link scheme works particularly well with parents to share the care of the young people. The service benefits the young people by providing friendships and new experiences.

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

The provision is good.

Foster carers are made aware of how vital contact is in the training to prepare for fostering. They provide good support to parents and extended family to ensure

contact takes place. There are examples of foster carers taking young people's siblings on activities and inviting them to tea and special occasions. However, some young people expressed sadness about their lack of contact with younger siblings and this generally occurs where there is not a strong relationship with their social worker and contact plans have not been fully discussed.

Foster carers show good understanding of the effect on behaviour of difficult contact with parents and feel supported to cope with this. They advocate on behalf of young people who choose to cease contact with their family, but are creative about ways of keeping the parents informed about the progress of the placement.

The service employs a participation officer who works with young people to set up consultation arrangements. This has had a positive impact on the thought given to consultation. A group of young people have identified what they would like to see in Hampshire Council's pledge to young people in their care. The resulting list of priorities has been shared with councillors. The list includes better placement choice, peer mentors, an individual budget for leisure activities, extra tuition, setting up of a Care Council and a consistent adult in their life. They have also produced simple messages under each outcome area to highlight the things that can make a real difference to their lives.

The service arranged a 'take over' day when members of the Care Council took part in a debate with senior managers. A fostered young person shadowed the director of children's services for the day and had opportunities to share his views with senior members. Young people who are looked after have contributed to the citizenship curriculum in some local secondary schools, explaining what it is like to be looked after and tackling issues such as discrimination and bullying.

The service has a pool of advocates for young people. These can be used to ensure young people's views are heard at reviews, meetings and complaints. The service can evidence their response to young person's views, for example, providing driving lessons when this was high on the agenda of 'what would make a major difference'. More young people are taking part in their statutory reviews as a result of listening to them regarding the time and venue of meetings.

Birth children of foster carers are seen by the service as vital to the success of placements and their views are taken into consideration. A group (The Others) set up for children of foster parents is seen as positive by those that attend. They share experiences and play a part in foster care training and presentations to staff. Family placement workers are involved with the children of foster carers as well as the fostered child. The views of both groups are considered in the annual reviews of the foster carer.

The family placement service have less involvement with young people looking for placements in residential care. Although their needs are discussed in the managers group, family placement workers do not have first hand contact with the young people to discuss their needs and expectations of a foster family.

The service demonstrates a real desire to seek the views of young people and use these in their planning. A good example is the involvement of young people in the recruitment process of staff. Young people say that they feel listened to by their carers and most social workers, however the frequent change of social workers diminishes this.

### **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is satisfactory.

Young people are helped to prepare for adulthood on a day to day basis by their foster carers. This includes developing skills that will help as they move into independence. Young people and carers say they are unclear about the options when they reach 18 years. Staff are also unsure about the process for moving on. Foster carers feel that they are sidelined by the service once the young person starts planning for independence and whilst they can appreciate the need for choices to be made by the young person they appreciate being involved in the planning.

Supportive lodgings are available and some progress has been made in setting up links with external accommodation providers. The route to access these services is not known by many of the carers, young people and staff spoken to.

Where appropriate planning and working together has existed, the outcomes for young people have been good, with some remaining as part of the carer's family and others moving on to independence or re-united with their birth family.

The service is introducing a new payment scheme for foster carers in the next few months. The details were due to be released to the foster carers soon after the inspection. Carers are experiencing some anxiety about the scheme, although representatives have been involved in the consultation process. The managers are very aware of the likely repercussions of introducing a scheme that rewards skills and knowledge and have carefully considered introduction of the scheme. Foster carers and staff are unclear as to whether the scheme relates to family and friends foster carers and family link carers.

Currently carers are getting their allowances on time. The allowances comply with the Fostering Network's suggested minimum allowances. The main dissatisfaction with the allowances are with regard to family link as the payments are felt to be low and do not reflect the complex needs of many of the young people placed.

### **Organisation**

The organisation is outstanding.

The statement of aims and objectives is thorough and accurately describes the service. The purpose of the family placement service is said to be 'to provide a range of good quality family based care for children of all ages in Hampshire who are unable to stay in their own families'. It outlines the structure of the service and sets

out information about the teams and areas they cover. The statement includes information about recruitment of carers, training and support. It gives a good initial explanation of the service covered and how it is managed. In addition to the statement of objectives there is an excellent range of information covering, in great detail, each function of the service. There is good planning information, monitoring systems, and clear links between activity and the standards and regulations.

The service is quick to respond to new initiatives such as Care Matters and have already put in place some of the suggestions such as the additional finance for schools for looked after children and the Charter for looked after children. Information in the service plan relates closely to the outcomes for children and is presented in an attractive and easy to read format. The service is excellent at monitoring their performance and understanding the link between the work of different sections.

All managers present as knowledgeable and committed to their work. They are seen by their teams as trustworthy and open. Workers say they can be totally honest with their managers. Roles and responsibilities are very clear and all staff have job descriptions. There is the flexibility to be involved in projects of interest as long as they relate to the core business. This provides staff with excellent opportunities to use their knowledge and feel valued by their colleagues.

Accountability is extremely well understood and supported. Managers are involved in senior management groups and have a thorough knowledge of the strategic plans of the council and their part in delivering these. There is trust expressed between all layers of management. Supervision of staff is experienced as outstanding and staff commented that they feel 'well cared for' by managers.

The systems across the district teams are consistent. Given the size of the county the consistency is impressive and enhances staff confidence. There is a clear area loyalty and some healthy competition. Managers were seen as the major link with the county. There are lots of opportunities for staff to move into other jobs in the county. This was felt to be an excellent way of increasing experience and learning new skills. Some staff felt that there could be more opportunities to get involved in management and supervision as a developmental step.

There is a very clear strategy of support to carers. This is set out in the foster care handbook, foster care agreement and in the promotional material regarding fostering. Feedback from carers judge support as outstanding or good in the majority of cases. The support from the fostering teams was said to be 'excellent' and carers particularly appreciated the support provided to the whole family. Foster carers receive regular supervision from the family placement team. There is an agenda for supervision to ensure issues are not missed. Foster carers are very positive about supervision and say many difficult placements survive due to these sessions.

There is a 24 hour duty line including independent support to foster carers undergoing allegations or complaints.

The foster care meeting, observed as part of the inspection, involved managers and

members. The meeting evidenced open and honest feedback to carers and follow up of all issues raised.

Review of carers' suitability is undertaken annually and reported to the fostering panel. The panel also considers the results of any concerns or complaints investigations. The reviews include the views of young people fostered by the family. Medical, criminal record bureau checks and health and safety checklists are up-dated as required. Issues arising relating to training from the foster carers' reviews are passed on to the training officer. This is another example of how the service ensures one system informs another and is excellent practice.

There is clarity about the different roles of social workers and carers and young people know where to take individual issues. The training officer has been involved with the local Diploma in Social Work courses to discuss the need for good relationships between social workers and foster carers. Carers feel this has made a difference, with newly qualified social workers having clearer understanding of the fostering task.

Training for foster carers is referred to as excellent by many of the carers. Training is related to the fostering standards and regulations and is mapped against the new guidance for foster care training so that previous learning can be accredited. Training for carers is being taken into the carers homes to ensure that those who do not, or can not, attend training courses do not miss out. This is an excellent development and helps all carers gain the necessary training to improve their knowledge and skills.

Each carer is given a foster carer training directory and diary. This lists the courses available and provides the dates of training and application forms. There is an extremely large range of courses on offer at weekends, evenings and during the day to try to ensure everyone is catered for. The take up of foster care training has increased dramatically over the past four years, from 15% of households involved in training in 2004 and 38% in 2007. The courses cover child protection, listening skills, mental health and substance abuse, impact of domestic violence on young people, cultural awareness, deaf awareness, child development, life story work and court skills. Carers say they can additionally access training specific to the needs of the child they are caring for. Carers encourage new or hesitant carers to attend by offering them lifts, helping them with coursework and providing support. Where this has happened carers' confidence has been raised and the value of training has been appreciated.

Basic information on each young person placed is kept in the family placement offices but most of the case information is kept with the child's social worker. Family placement workers can access the necessary information and have a very good understanding of the needs of the young person. They spend time alone with the fostered young person which enables them to understand the placement, support the carer and have a grasp of the young person's needs if they have to move on.

The service is exceptionally good at keeping records to evidence the work they do.

Records required by regulation are all in place and up-dated appropriately. A range of records were seen and they all conform with the regulations. There is a clear policy for carers regarding keeping records. The records are monitored as part of the supervision process and carers receive instruction on how to keep records safe and confidential.

Family and friends fostering is a particular strength of the service and in each area the family placement workers recruit and assess family and friends carers. They undertake an initial assessment within the required six weeks and then do a full assessment. Both assessments go to fostering panels for recommendation. Family and friends carers who were spoken to were very positive about the support they receive and the young people were pleased to have been placed with family. The usual fostering allowances are paid and the carers are welcome to join in with training and support groups. There are plans to set up specialist support for the group. Staff are very aware of the positive outcomes for young people cared for by the family, or friends, and are appreciative of the complexities of the arrangement. During inspection a number of family and friends carers indicated their interest in becoming 'stranger' foster carers in the future.

## **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):

- provide information to young people about proposed carers to ensure they are able to express an informed view about the placement. (NMS 8.7)
- ensure the service seek the opinion of young people in all issues that are likely to affect their daily life (NMS 11.1)
- ensure the service help to develop skills, competence and knowledge necessary for adult living (NMS 14)
- ensure the necessary medical services are secured for young people, particularly with regard to on-going mental health services. (NMS 12.7)