

Hampshire County Council Fostering Service

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

Unique reference number	SC061164
Inspection date	20/02/2012
Inspector	Muhammed Harunur Rashid / Jim Palmer
Type of inspection	Social Care Inspection

Setting address	Hampshire County Council, Director of Social Services, The Castle, WINCHESTER, Hampshire, SO23 8UQ
Telephone number	01489 587017
Email	Cathi.Hadley@hants.gov.uk
Registered person	Hampshire County Council
Registered manager	Catherine Maria Hadley
Responsible individual	Catherine Maria Hadley
Date of last inspection	13/03/2008

© Crown copyright 2012

Website: www.ofsted.gov.uk

This document may be reproduced in whole or in part for non-commercial educational purposes, provided that the information quoted is reproduced without adaptation and the source and date of publication are stated.

You can obtain copies of The Children Act 2004, Every Child Matters and The National Minimum Standards for Children's Services from: The Stationery Office (TSO) PO Box 29, St Crispins, Duke Street, Norwich, NR3 1GN. Tel: 0870 600 5522. Online ordering: www.tso.co.uk/bookshop

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 fostering 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 disabled young people.

There are two district teams and a county-wide recruitment team. Each has its own team manager. The district teams assess family and friends carers, while the county-wide team recruits and assesses general foster carers. All are supported by the district teams.

There are currently 491 fostering households and 52 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 is a good service with some aspects 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 children and young people are constantly considered. There is excellent information available about the service and it is organised in an effective way.

Good arrangements are in place for meeting children and young people's assessed health needs. The fostering service is proactive in ensuring children and young people's educational attainments are achieved. There are excellent systems in place for consulting children and young people in foster care. Managers are committed to promoting the welfare of children and young people, and focusing improvement.

To further improve, the fostering service must ensure that foster carers' reviews are conducted at intervals of not more than a year, prospective employees' full employment history, including any gaps in employment is obtained, and children are encouraged to keep appropriate memorabilia of their time in the placement.

Improvements since the last inspection

The fostering service was asked to ensure that children and young people are provided with information about the prospective foster carers; children and young people's opinions are sought on issues that affect their daily lives; young people are

enabled to develop independent skills to prepare them for adulthood; and ensure that medical services are secured for children and young people with regard to ongoing mental health services.

The service has acted upon previous recommendations made at the last inspection. These steps help to promote the health and welfare of children and young people in foster care.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Children and young people live in a healthy environment and their health needs are well met. Hampshire County Council fostering service has a comprehensive procedure for the health care of children and young people in foster care to ensure that their holistic health care needs are assessed. The children in care health sub-group provides a strong strategic lead in order to ensure the necessary medical services are secured for children and young people. The fostering service works to obtain the resources required to promote and secure good outcomes for children and young people in foster care, for example, working in partnership with health professionals. The fostering service works closely with the looked after children nurse and child and adolescent mental health services in order to meet children and young people's holistic needs. A new single child and adolescent mental health service brings benefit in various ways; for example, a single referral and risk assessment system ensures that children and young people in care are fast tracked to appropriate services. Looked after children nurses sit on the fostering panels and contribute to promoting best possible health outcomes for children and young people in foster care.

Foster carers are provided with written guidance on their responsibilities regarding meeting the health needs of children and young people, and understand the importance of supporting and encouraging children and young people to live healthy lifestyles. Foster carers support children and young people to attend health care appointments, advocate on their behalf and provide advice and guidance on matters such as smoking, consuming alcohol and sexual health matters.

Foster carers receive training on first aid, sexual health awareness and drug and alcohol awareness, and appropriate policies and procedures are in place regarding the administration of medication. This helps foster carers to develop knowledge and skills in order to promote the health of the children and young people in their care.

Children and young people who participated in the Ofsted and the Care4me surveys recently were positive about the support they receive to live healthy lifestyles.

Foster carers' homes are warm, comfortable, well maintained and suitable for the children and young people living there. Foster carers are provided with health and safety training to ensure children and young people's safety. Children and young people are able to pursue particular interests and develop confidence through

various leisure activities in the local community.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

Children and young people live in homes where foster carers provide them with nurturing, stable and safe family environments. Children and young people say that they feel safe in their fostering placements. Foster carers are provided with child protection, anti-bullying and safer caring training to promote their awareness of how to protect children and young people in their care. Foster carers receive guidance and training for e-safety issues and protecting young people from cyber bullying. All policies and guidance are easily accessible to foster carers via a secure internet site.

The fostering service works closely with the Local Safeguarding Children Board and Local Authority Designated Officer for safeguarding, and staff seek advice and guidance from them in order to protect children and young people from any potential abuse.

A joint protocol between Hampshire police and children's services is in place for children and young people in care who go missing. Foster carers are aware of the procedures to follow in the event of a child going missing. Foster carers confirmed that the fostering service has a helpline which is open out of hours; this provides them with good support on reporting to relevant professionals including the police.

Young people who go missing have a debrief interview with their social workers on their return, and where necessary a high risk strategy meeting is held to manage the situation. This helps children and young people to understand the dangers and risks of leaving the foster home without permission and makes them aware of where they can access help.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The fostering service provides caring and stable placements to children and young people by giving them an informed choice about their care. This enables children and young people to strive towards achieving maximum outcomes. Children and young people enjoy excellent relationships in their placements. Foster carers are provided with extensive training and guidance in promoting positive relationships and managing challenging behaviour. This helps foster carers to develop knowledge and skills in order to provide an inclusive environment and culture to promote positive behaviour. Children and young people have individual risk assessments and these outline strategies for foster carers to implement to keep young people safe.

The promotion of education for children in fostering placements is one of the strengths of the service. The excellent links with the education services and virtual school bring together a range of skilled professionals who work collectively to

support the educational attainment of children and young people. They support children and young people in raising achievement, promoting attendance and lowering exclusions. There is an increased recognition in schools of the needs of children in care. Pupils benefit from being in mainly good and outstanding schools. A personal education plan is in place for each child, and the virtual school has a process in place to monitor the quality of the plans. The funding for children in care, such as the pupil premium and grant paid by Hampshire County Council to schools for the education of children in care, is being used to best effect.

The education professionals in Hampshire have developed a unique project called 'pair reading as a literacy intervention for foster children'. A number of foster carers took part in this project over a period of 16 weeks and they helped children in developing their reading skills. The results revealed an average improvement in reading age of 12 months during this time.

Facilities in foster carers' homes are conducive to study. Foster carers encourage and support children and young people to attend schools and help them with homework. Foster carers attend school evenings and contribute to children's personal education plans. As a result, the attainment of children in care has improved over the last four years. Improved numbers of young people have achieved 5 A to C grades in GCSE examinations in 2011. More young people are now going to college and 29 care leavers are now attending various universities.

Foster carers ensure that children and young people are engaged in hobbies and interests which boost self-esteem and learning development. Children and young people have easy access to a wide range of activities, for example, swimming lessons, diving competitions and guitar lessons. The fostering service also organises residential summer camps for young people to socialise, build relationships and to develop a sense of teamwork.

The fostering service rewards their foster carers for their inspirational contribution to children in care in areas like their ongoing commitment to training and development, and the improvement of their skills in meeting the individual needs of foster children. The service also arranges celebration events for looked after children and care leavers annually. The events are child friendly and some of the entertainment is arranged by children themselves. The county council recognises foster children's achievements which are both academic and vocational.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

Consultation with children and young people on major developments of the service is a real strength of the fostering service. Hampshire County Council fostering service has a very strong commitment to seeking and listening to children and young people's views. There are excellent arrangements for consulting with children, young people and others involved in their care. For instance, the fostering service consults with children and young people through care reviews, foster carers' supervision,

placement supervision visits, and meetings with the children. Quality assurance questionnaires are sent to children and young people to ensure that they can share their thoughts with the fostering service and influence the way the service needs to develop. The consultation mechanisms include a dedicated website for children in care, and the work of the care ambassadors in developing local engagement of children in care. Young people have been involved in developing the new pledge and in evaluating tenders for the new independent fostering agency contract. As a result of their feedback, a single form is being developed to capture their views and comments on their carers, for use in both statutory reviews and household reviews.

Children and young people are gradually introduced to placements and foster carers receive the placement plans prior to their admission. This ensures that the support is available to them to meet children's needs in full. Children receive individualised care that meets their holistic needs, and develop attachments with their foster carers who support them to promote their social and emotional development. Friends and family carers support children and young people to develop positive images of their parents.

Children and young people in foster care have access to cultural and artistic services including the culture-all passport which provides them with free access to county council-owned museums and attractions and library services.

Contact is well promoted. The fostering service makes sure that children and young people in foster care are encouraged to maintain and develop contacts as set out in their placement plans. Contact meetings take place under supervision at various local places and also at foster carers' homes. This ensures that meetings are comfortable and a successful experience for all relevant parties.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

The fostering service has a good policy on preparation and planning for adulthood. The fostering service provides training and support to foster carers to enable them to provide effective support and guidance to young people preparing to move into semi-independent or independent living. A joint protocol between the county council and the housing department across Hampshire has been developed to support a smooth transition for care leavers. Pathway plans for young people commence at the age of 16 and foster carers are actively involved in the pathway planning process and help young people with developing various living skills.

The shared lives and staying put schemes are developed to enable young people to remain with foster carers beyond 16 years. Under this scheme, children's services make a contribution to rent and support costs to enable young people to remain with their former foster carers to give consistent support with their education and employment.

All care leavers have an allocated worker in youth support services. They help young people to write their curriculum vitae and prepare for job interviews and

apprenticeship opportunities for future employment.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

Hampshire fostering service is consistent across the county and is led by experienced and knowledgeable managers. A multi-agency care matters board has been in place in Hampshire for a number of years, providing a coordinated approach to improving outcomes for children in care. Representatives include schools, health and carers. Their coordinated work and effective communication between various agencies has brought benefits to the fostering service in order to achieve best possible outcomes for children and young people in foster care.

The fostering service is accountable to the children and families management team through a head of county services, who also manages adoption, residential services, special educational needs, and educational psychology. Monitoring systems ensure that the outcomes for children and young people in foster care are constantly considered. There is excellent information available about the service and it is organised in an effective way.

The fostering service has updated its Statement of Purpose which states the aims and objectives of the service. The fostering service has developed a children and young person's guide appropriate to their age and understanding. These documents provide information about the facilities which are available to children and young people.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Equality and diversity are reflected in recruitment literature and advertising, all of which emphasise the need for foster carers from a range of backgrounds. Children and young people receive an individualised service which is designed to meet their personal needs. Staff and foster carers have completed equality and diversity training. Fostering service staff and carers have a good understanding of children and young people's dietary, religious, social and cultural needs. Foster carers support children and young people to make personal choices and to access community resources.

The fostering service has a clear management and staffing structure that ensures there are clear lines of accountability throughout the service. There is a good system in place for supporting fostering staff. Fostering staff receive regular supervision and ongoing support from their team managers. They monitor supervising social workers caseloads. All social workers who are registered with General Social Care Council. The staff team and fostering panel are well supported by the administrative staff.

The fostering service recruits foster carers through various advertising methods including specific postcode leaflet drops, and use of social networking and other internet sites. This has led to increasing numbers of foster carers to meet the needs of looked after children. It carries out comprehensive assessments of prospective foster carers which cover all areas of the competencies needed to ensure children

receive a good quality of care. Foster carers take part in pre-approval training; this informs them about what fostering entails and helps them explore their views and attitudes so they can make an informed decision about whether to pursue this career.

Good systems are in place for working with and supporting foster carers. The service provides 24-hour support for foster carers, and foster carers feel they can approach the agency any time they have a query or concern. Foster carers receive regular visits from their supervising social workers and written records of these visits are maintained so that any issues are followed up. There are a range of coffee mornings and support groups across the county for foster carers to participate in. Foster carers are able to meet others and share their experiences. There is Hampshire's Fostering Network which works with carers and the county council to develop services for children and foster carers.

There are systems in place to conduct foster carers' annual reviews. However, a number of foster carers' reviews are outstanding. Therefore, the service is unable to determine whether those foster carers are suitable to continue as foster carers and their household continues to be suitable. The service is addressing this matter.

Complaints and allegations against foster carers are well monitored. Any complaints or allegations are dealt with promptly and sensitively. Foster carers are supported through independent agencies when allegations are made against them. As a result, foster carers receive independent advice and support.

Ongoing training programmes are available for all foster carers which help ensure they are well equipped to meet the needs of the children and young people in their care. The fostering service supports foster carers to achieve the Children's Workforce Development Council's training award. A number of carers have completed the National Vocational Qualification.

Hampshire County Council has an established short-break fostering service for disabled children which gives families or foster carers pre-arranged short breaks at weekends or during school holidays. A dedicated training programme is available for short-break carers so they can provide effective care to the children they look after.

A significant number of children and young people receive support from family and friends foster carers. These carers have access to all the training and various coffee mornings and support groups. This ensures these carers are also competent and well supported to care for the children in placement.

Matching children with foster carers is carefully considered to ensure that children are placed with foster carers who have the necessary skills to meet foster children's needs.

Six fostering panels are held across the county, ensuring that locations promote ease of access for all applicants. Foster carers and social work staff understand the function of the panel, and panel members attend regular training to ensure that they

can effectively fulfil their roles. Detailed minutes are kept for the panel meetings held. The panel consists of individuals with a wide range of knowledge and experience. This enables them to give all the issues full and proper consideration to promote good outcomes for children.

A detailed electronic record is maintained of each child and young person to ensure that all records are easily updated and securely stored. Foster carers are clear about the expectations regarding record keeping. However, there are inconsistencies across the county, as children are not always encouraged and supported to keep appropriate memorabilia including photographs of their time in the placement which contribute to an understanding of their lives.

Each carer has a foster care agreement and they are well supported by their supervising social workers through regular supervision in order to care properly for children in foster care. The fostering service maintains records of children's activities, incidents, achievements, allegations and abuse, for safeguarding and monitoring purposes and to improve practice.

The fostering service sends notifications of significant events relating to the health and protection of foster children to the relevant agencies including Ofsted.

The fostering service has clear procedures for monitoring and controlling to ensure the quality of service. This is achieved by having clear lines of communication, sound financial standing and robust financial procedures. Foster carers receive their weekly allowances, which enables them to budget for household expenditure and pay children's allowances on time.

The human resources department of the county council carries out all statutory checks such as Criminal Records Bureau checks prior to the appointment of all foster carers, fostering panel members and fostering staff. However, on one occasion, a social worker's employment history, together with a satisfactory written explanation of any gaps in employment was not obtained during the interview process.

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 foster carers' reviews are conducted at intervals of not more than a year (Breach of Regulation 28 (2))
- ensure that children are encouraged to keep appropriate memorabilia of their time in the placement (NMS 26.7)
- ensure that all employees' full employment history, together with a satisfactory written explanation of any gaps in employment is obtained during the interview process. (Breach of Regulation 5 (Schedule 1))

