

Medway Council Fostering Service

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

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Inspector	Sophie Wood / Lucy Ansell
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Service information

Brief description of the service

Medway Council's fostering service is one element of the wider children's services team provided by the local authority. The team is responsible for the assessment, training and ongoing support of foster carers.

At the time of this inspection 161 approved fostering households are looking after 269 children and young people. The types of foster care provided include permanent, short term (including pre-adoption), short break, emergency, family and friends and parent and child.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding: a service of exceptional quality that significantly exceeds minimum requirements

Good: a service of high quality that exceeds minimum requirements

Adequate: a service that only meets minimum requirements

Inadequate: a service that does not meet minimum requirements

Overall effectiveness

The overall effectiveness is judged to be **adequate**.

The fostering service is effective. Children and young people are kept safe while being enabled to grow and develop through appropriate risk taking. The vast majority say they are happy and settled, as is demonstrated by statistical data which shows placement stability as higher than the national average.

Children and young people have a strong voice within the authority. Their views and opinions influence service provision. Equality and diversity are celebrated and promoted; children are highly valued by their carers. Corporate parenting is being targeted as an area to develop further. Children and young people receive a generally good wrap-around service but the communication systems between professional teams are recognised as having weaknesses. The proposed introduction of a permanence panel is aimed at achieving better holistic care delivery.

A strong leadership and management team is acutely aware of the service's strengths and weaknesses. A detailed management review and subsequent development plan targets the continued areas of need. Staff are led by an efficient and effective management team which is systematically implementing improvements for the benefit of the children and young people. Areas for improvement identified as

a result of this inspection include panel and decision-making arrangements, some documentary shortfalls, management hours and better communication.

Areas for improvement

Recommendations

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

- ensure the number, skills, knowledge and experience of persons on the central list are sufficient to enable the fostering service to constitute panels that are equipped to make competent recommendations to the fostering service provider, taking into account the nature of the children and carers that the service caters for. This recommendation is made within the context of adding to the central list and enabling more meetings to occur when needs dictate (NMS 14.8)
- ensure written minutes of panel meetings are accurate, clearly cover the key issues and views expressed by panel members, and record the reasons for its recommendation. This recommendation is made with particular reference to exemption decisions (NMS 14.7)
- ensure that in reaching a decision or making a qualifying determination, the decision maker should consider *Hofstetter v LB Barnet and IRM (2009) EWCA 328 (Admin)*, in which the court set out guidance for the way in which an adoption agency decision maker should approach a case. This applies equally to fostering decision makers (Paragraph 5.40 Volume 4, Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations)
- ensure foster carers' personal development plans set out how they will be supported to undertake ongoing training and development that is appropriate to their development needs and experience. This recommendation is made within the context of ensuring that foster carers receive the support they need to attend training (NMS 20.5)
- ensure staff have access to support and advice, and are provided with regular supervision by appropriately qualified and experienced staff. This recommendation is made within the context of improving upon the quality of the content of staff appraisal and supervision records (NMS 24.4)
- ensure children's safety and welfare are promoted, with particular reference to foster carers' own safe care policies (NMS 4.1)
- ensure the fostering service implements an effective strategy to ensure sufficient foster carers to be responsive to current and predicted future demands on the service. Planning for future demands covers the need for short breaks for disabled children. This recommendation is also made within the context of analysing the reasons for the recent high number of applicant withdrawals (NMS 13.1)
- ensure the fostering service supports foster carers to play an active role in agreeing the contents of each child's placement plan, in conjunction with the

responsible authority. This recommendation is made within the context of ensuring all involved parties are provided with clear and accurate communication systems (NMS 31.1)

- ensure children have access to a range of educational resources to support their learning and have opportunities beyond the school day to engage in activities which promote learning. This recommendation is made within the context of reviewing the current resources, including the administrative needs of the virtual headteacher (NMS 8.2)
- ensure there is a sufficient number of suitably, competent and experienced persons working for the purpose of the fostering service. This relates to the reduction in management hours (Regulation 19)
- ensure the fostering service can demonstrate, including from written records, that it consistently follows good recruitment practice. This recommendation is made within the context of ensuring work reports and evidence supporting an individual's suitability are recorded on personnel files in the event of internal transfers into the fostering team. (NMS 19.2)

Outcomes for children and young people

Outcomes for children and young people are **good**.

Children and young people enjoy good outcomes. Many form positive lasting relationships with their foster carers. A good number enjoy long-term stability and remain in the same placement until leaving care age and beyond. Young people frequently talk about feeling loved. Their comments include, 'I have always been treated as a member of the family', 'it's my home', and, 'I just think of my carer's son as my brother.'

Young people feel safe and secure. They trust their foster carers. Comments include, 'I always tell her if something is worrying me', and, 'my carers look after me properly, like a mum and dad should.' Foster carers understand individual needs and go to great lengths to meet these. Children and young people know they are valued and they learn to feel good about themselves. They make appropriate decisions and develop emotional intelligence.

Young people feel empowered. They have a strong voice within the authority and their views continue to shape the service. They are enthusiastic about their children in care council and have used this to influence and improve the process of moving into a new placement. They are extremely positive about independent advocacy provision and are very confident in expressing their views and opinions. A small number say they do not always agree with decisions about their care. Speaking privately with young people during home visits has increased as a direct consequence of this view.

Children and young people are routinely placed with foster carers who can meet their identified needs. The service knows its carers' strengths, for example, those who

move children on to adoptive placements in a well planned and structured way, thus causing minimal upset and trauma for the child. The service continues to expand upon its use of the private sector. Moreover, young people are being placed with foster carers who can meet their needs, thereby placement disruptions and unplanned endings are on the decline. Young people are enjoying increasing stability in their lives.

Children benefit from healthy lifestyles. Foster carers are good role models and ensure young people have access to the health services they need. Children with complex medical care needs thrive within nurturing fostering households and are effectively supported by carers who take full advantage of additional training and guidance. Older children demonstrate a good awareness about potential health risks, such as alcohol and drug use, smoking and sexual health. They learn to take responsibility for making appropriate choices.

Children and young people benefit from attending educational establishments which meet their needs. Some good individual pieces of work are providing targeted support for young people. However, current resource restrictions limit the virtual headteacher's ability to impact so positively for every young person. Foster carers establish positive working relationships with nurseries, schools and colleges. They understand the needs of their children and provide them with additional help and support at home. Attendance and achievement figures are rising every year for the authority's fostered children and exclusions are rare. Young people are making positive decisions about their education and see this as a way of improving their life choices and chances as a result.

Young people say they enjoy regular contact with those who are important to them. Clear contact arrangements are understood by all parties and children receive the practical and emotional support they need. Older children particularly value the freedom that comes with age in terms of spending time with their friends.

Young people value the guidance and support they receive from their foster carers. Comments include, 'I always get good advice', and, 'they've always helped me in the right way.' Preparation for independent living is keenly targeted to meet individual needs. Some young people feel they are not ready to leave the care system and a good number benefit from remaining with their foster carers in supported living arrangements beyond leaving care age.

Quality of service

The quality of the service is **adequate**.

Senior managers use reliable data to analyse and predict the service's current and future needs. An enthusiastic foster carer recruitment campaign remains ongoing, and specific under-represented groups are being keenly targeted, for example, those who can accommodate sibling groups and children with complex care needs. Foster carers commend a thorough initial assessment process but many also comment upon a very lengthy timescale. Figures also show a relatively high number of applicants

withdrawing during the initial assessment stage and this warrants further analysis by the service.

The team is aware of the potential impact of its increasing need for foster carers. Wider strategies to meet growing demands sees the authority making more use of independent provisions when available in-house carers cannot sufficiently meet presenting needs. Robust processes, including the recent appointment of a dedicated placement officer, ensure independent providers are thoroughly vetted, quality assured and monitored to ensure such children move into well-matched placements.

Thorough matching processes are scrutinised through additional panels. Any identified gaps in terms of prospective foster carers' skills, training or experience are explored and planned for. The chances of the success of a placement are maximised, although a small number of disruptions do sometimes occur. The service recognises the value of establishing a permanency panel to give young people the clarity they crave about remaining in homes they are settled in.

Responses from foster carers in terms of the information they receive about children, at the initial stage and beyond, is variable. A good number say they are well informed; others say ongoing information is sometimes disjointed and inaccurate. Similar disparity is conveyed when foster carers share their views about working as part of a wider professional team. Comments include, 'I feel highly valued', 'I'm always listened to', and, 'I don't think my views about the child are taken into account.' Hence, many carers feel they benefit from receiving the support they need to effectively look after those in their care. Others believe the quality of the care they provide could be enhanced with improved support from the service.

The vast majority of foster carers say that their own supervision arrangements have significantly improved over recent months. Many say this aspect has always been good. Positive comments focus upon the regularity and content of such meetings. Negative issues with regards to the quality of the support provided include the complex contact arrangements and respite care arrangements for the children and young people in their care. The service does provide a range of forums as a means of additional support for foster carers. The Foster Carers' Association feeds into senior management meetings and has influenced positive changes to systems affecting foster carers directly. A secure internet site is in place for foster carers only, although not all carers take advantage of this.

The fostering panel comprises a range of long-serving members from a wide variety of relevant professional backgrounds. Although a new chairperson has recently been appointed, no other additions have recently occurred and the central list is relatively small against the size of the service. This factor compromises the panel's ability to meet more regularly, when business needs are high. Panel recommendations are solid and are made subject to close scrutiny. No panel recommendation has been subject to the Independent Review Mechanism in the last year. Panel minutes do not always reflect the degree of scrutiny discussed and they lack evaluation, particularly in relation to exemption dialogue. This factor adds to the workload of the decision maker, who routinely needs to explore additional information further in order to

make a final decision.

Safeguarding children and young people

The service is **good** at keeping children and young people safe and feeling safe.

The arrangements for safeguarding children and young people are good. The authority received an adequate rating for safeguarding from its Safeguarding and Looked After Children inspection in November 2011. Energy and focus have driven significant improvements, particularly in relation to young people being missing from care. Such instances are rare but robustly monitored when they do occur.

A dedicated team continues to review and update robust reporting and monitoring systems. These include unauthorised absences as well as being deemed as missing. Strong links exist within the authority and these ensure collaborative working between foster carers, social workers, schools, the police, key administrative staff and ultimately the Local Safeguarding Children Board. The service knows who is at risk and monitors such individuals very closely. Proactive measures are deployed where necessary to prevent re-occurrence.

Children and young people say they feel safe. Direct quotes include, 'I have to let them know where I'm going all the time. It feels nice to know I'm cared for', and, 'nothing bad has happened since I've been with my foster carers.' Clear guidance is provided for foster carers in terms of keeping young people safe from potential harm. One example includes internet safety; however, this has not been fully incorporated within all relevant foster carers' own safe care policies.

Written guidance on bullying and behaviour management strategies is clearly communicated to foster carers. Children and young people do not cite bullying as an issue within their homes, the community or at school. Comments from young people include, 'I would tell someone if it happened', and, 'my carers always ask me if I'm having any difficulties at school.' Foster carers say they receive good guidance from their supervising social workers, but some have felt undermined by children's social workers in terms of general behaviour management strategies.

Robust recruitment processes in terms of staff and foster carers ensure protection for the children and young people. All statutory checks are completed before a new post commences. Social workers possess the qualifications, experience and skills to enhance the quality of the service provided. Personnel records are in good order. However, internal moves, for example, a social worker transferring from another department, are not always fully supported by previous work reports or evidence of robustly scrutinising a candidate's suitability for this particular role.

Complaints and allegations are stringently managed and monitored. Robust systems ensure that concerns raised by children are actively listened to and responded to. Complex concerns are scrupulously investigated, risk assessed and managed with the welfare of the child as central to the process. Solid relationships between the service, Local Authority Designated Officer and the police place the safety of children as

paramount. Recent changes to supervising social worker visits include time spent alone with the children, and the number of annual unannounced visits has increased, in line with updated guidance. Opportunities for children to raise or display their concerns are increased. Foster carers subject to an allegation receive support from the service and independent sources. The majority of carers say such processes are positive, but a small number say they did not feel adequately advised or updated during such investigations.

Leadership and management

The leadership and management of the local authority fostering agency are **adequate**.

Many aspects of leadership and management are sound. The recent appointment of an interim assistant director has already resulted in a detailed review and analysis of the service. A permanent appointment is to be made and a new children's services manager is already in place. Necessary changes are underway. These are clear, focused and driven by the service's desired outcomes for its children.

Since the last inspection, the team manager has reduced his working hours and team seniors have taken on additional responsibilities. Negative impacts include a reduction in the team's overall ability to keep up with foster carer assessments and their own supervision needs. More recent changes see an increased use of independent assessors which is addressing the backlog of assessments, and senior managers appreciate the need to continue to review overall permanent staffing numbers. The service is striving to increase its own number of approved fostering households and the percentage of children who are placed with foster carers remains higher than the national average. Staff supervisions are now occurring more regularly but the quality of such records is variable.

A new information technology system is being implemented. The service recognises its current system is cumbersome and does not lend itself to readily monitoring young people's progress. Staff across the authority are currently being introduced to new systems and they are extremely positive about the additional data which can be created and accessed. Although its impact cannot yet be fully measured, the authority predicts improved information sharing across all of the teams involved with the children and young people.

The vast majority of children and young people speak very positively about the service. They say they are happy with their carers and feel safe. Those who have moved placements are very positive about remaining in the same school. Most foster carers also make positive statements. Their relationship with their supervising social workers is reported as a particular strength. Negative issues are concerned with the practical implications of contact arrangements and respite provision. Some foster carers say that such issues make attendance at training difficult. Recent attendance figures, particularly those sessions covering health topics, show a poor attendance rate. Conversely, the completion of the Children's Workforce Development Council's induction training was above the national average for last year.

The service enjoys positive working relationships with associated teams and partner agencies. However, there is sometimes a lack of clarity between the service and the looked after children's nurses team which has led to missed appointments and poor training attendance. Plans are in place to establish a permanence panel which is also aimed at bringing different professionals closer together. The concept of learning from research and practice outcomes is being driven by the interim assistant director; staff welcome this approach to improve their own learning and practice.

The nine recommendations made from the previous inspection in January 2008 have been implemented and have had a positive impact on the quality of the service. Health guidance and matching information have improved, recruitment records are clearer and all files are better audited. The move of premises gives the team more space, and improvements to database systems are ongoing. Staffing levels increased as a direct response to the previous recommendation but this is to be repeated in response to a decrease in management hours.

Staff members throughout the service are energised and motivated. They commend the dynamic and inclusive approach of senior managers. The service is fully aware of its strengths and weaknesses; clear development plans are being implemented in a systematic and timely manner to realise continued improvements for the children and young people.

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 to assess the effectiveness of the service and to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards.

The report details the main strengths, any areas for improvement, including any breaches of regulation, and any failure to meet national minimum standards. The judgements included in the report are made against the inspection framework and the evaluation schedule for local authority fostering agencies.