

Hertfordshire County Council Fostering Service

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

| | |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Unique reference number | SC060220 |
| Inspection date | 12/10/2012 |
| Inspector | Kristen Judd / Natalie Burton |
| Type of inspection | Full |

| | |
|--------------------------------|--|
| Setting address | Hertfordshire County Council, Children's Services, County Hall, HERTFORD, SG13 8DP |
| Telephone number | 01992 555 555 |
| Email | lynn.costello@hertscc.gov.uk |
| Registered person | Hertfordshire County Council |
| Registered manager | Lynn Mary Costello |
| Responsible individual | Alison Twynam |
| Date of last inspection | 14/03/2008 |

© 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.

Service information

Brief description of the service

This fostering service is operated by Hertfordshire County Council. The range of fostering services includes, long and short term, specialist, parent and child, permanent, shared care and family and friends and connected people fostering. The service assesses, approves and provides on-going support to foster carers.

At the time of inspection the service had approved 645 foster carer households and provided 712 places for children and young people.

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 **good**.

This is a child focused service that offers a good quality service and ensures excellent outcomes for children and young people are achieved. The service is effective in ensuring that the right type of fostering placement is found as quickly as possible for children in need of foster care. There is careful matching and thorough planning in preparation for a placement. This ensures that children and young people are placed with carers who can meet their needs very well.

Effective arrangements are used to recruit and retain good quality carers who can meet a diverse range of children and young people's needs. Staff are extremely able and are focused on ensuring that children and young people have excellent outcomes. Foster carers speak very highly of the supervision, support and training they receive to equip them to provide such positive placements for children and young people. This ensures that children and young people make excellent progress and receive outstanding individualised care. Children and young people are included and supported exceptionally well to give their views, wishes and feelings about their care. Foster carers are meeting children's needs very well.

The fostering panel members have a good range of relevant experience and expertise; however, on occasion there is a lack of recording in regard to the reasons for the recommendations that are made. Additionally, there are some inconsistencies

in records maintained by staff; in particular, regarding supervision records for foster carers and records pertaining to children and young people. Despite these shortfalls, outcomes for children and young people are excellent.

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 that panel minutes include the reasons for recommendations made. It is important that these are full and accurate so that the fostering service is clear about the matters discussed and the reasoning behind recommendations (The Children's Act Guidance and Regulations Volume 4: Fostering Services 5.25)
- ensure entries in records, decisions and reasons for them, are legible and clearly expressed. (NMS 26.5)

Outcomes for children and young people

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

This service ensures that excellent outcomes for children and young people are achieved. The service actively seeks the wishes and feelings of children and young people on a regular basis and these influence their care. Children and young people are encouraged and supported to share their views through foster carers' reviews and statutory reviews. Additionally there are excellent opportunities for children and young people to access a variety of planned activities and training events which provide them with the opportunity to express their views. Prompt action is taken to address issues raised by children and young people. There have been several improvements made to the service following consultation with children and young people, such as the development of a child-friendly family profile of foster carers which is shared with children and young people before the start of their placements. Young people contribute to foster carer training courses, are involved in the recruitment of staff and participate in meetings with the senior managers of the service. Young people spoken to confirm that they feel confident and empowered to drive changes to the service provision. This is a strength of the service.

Children and young people are placed with foster carers who can meet their social, emotional, psychological and physical needs. For example, children who have complex behavioural needs are placed with carers who provide specialist care. These are lone placements enabling the children and young people to receive the high level support needed to meet their individual needs. This means that excellent outcomes for children and young people with complex behavioural needs are achieved.

Children and young people say they are made to feel welcome by their foster families. Those children and young people who returned surveys said that the care

given to them by carers is excellent and the vast majority answered that they strongly agree they are treated like one of the family. As a result, children feel safe and are safe.

All children and young people benefit from good health care. They all have a health passport which provides clear and detailed information regarding their individual health needs and the regular health checks. Children and young people and foster carers are able to directly access a range of professionals. Such as the dedicated Child and Adolescent Mental Health service for children looked after, who are available for consultation for children, social workers and foster carers. Children and young people with more complex health needs have their needs met effectively. This is because foster carers receive specialist training when required. This ensures that there are optimum health outcomes for children and young people.

Children and young people are supported to pursue active, healthy lifestyles with their foster families and pursue sports and leisure activities according to their talents and interests. Children and young people have access to a range of planned activities such as fun days, learning circus skills and trips to museums. Additional funding is also available to support the individual recreational interests of children and young people through the 'exceptional expenditure' scheme. This has assisted some young people to compete at a national level in their chosen activity. For example, financial support to compete abroad has been provided as has the equipment that they require. Surveys completed by children and young people indicate that they are happy and are very well supported by their foster carers.

Foster carers provide excellent support to children and young people to help them understand why they are in foster care. They are provided with a personal record of their life story, through detailed and imaginative photo story books and memory boxes. Their contact needs are identified in placement plans and these detail any plans for on-going contact or any restrictions in contact. Foster carers are aware of the importance of contact for children and encourage and support them to maintain regular contact with significant others. Children and young people's needs for social development and emotional care are comprehensively met by carers who provide positive social interaction and emotional security.

Children and young people are making very good educational progress overall with support from the Virtual School. School attendance is very good and they receive consistent support to continue with their work through related activities and homework outside school. When young people are not in main stream education additional support packages are in place to meet their individual needs. Education support workers and advisors also provide assistance to foster carers in the morning and after school if extra support is required for a young person. Carers find this very effective particularly if a young person is finding education a challenge. Some young people are accessing vocational training, while others have embarked on university degree courses. Children and young people confirm that they receive excellent support which enables them to do well.

The fostering service prepares young people for adulthood and leaving local

authority care. Foster carers support young people with practical tasks to assist their developing independence. These include budgeting, shopping and cooking skills. The peer mentoring scheme for young people enables care leavers to attain an accredited training award to mentor other young people. Young people spoke positively about the scheme. The 'children in care council' meets regularly. They highlighted that they feel extremely comfortable liaising with management within the council in order to make on-going improvements. Young people are provided with excellent opportunities to develop new interests and experiences.

Quality of service

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

The arrangements for the recruitment of carers are robust. Foster carers say that the assessment process is positive and they receive good induction, support and training. Young people and experienced carers are involved in the 'skills to foster' initial training to enable applicants to have a good insight about foster care. The service recruits carers who are highly skilled in meeting the needs of children and young people. Foster carers talk positively about the responsive, reliable support from the service. Experienced foster carers act as 'buddies' for new carers to offer additional support. Foster carers say that they receive excellent individual support and on-going training. One social worker said 'foster carers are very committed' and another said 'we have good quality foster carers.'

There is a careful matching process that ensures that children and young people are placed with foster carers who have the skills and backgrounds to provide care that is unique to children's needs. This is supported by foster carers, who reported 'they really try and match.' This ensures the welfare and safety of children and young people.

Foster carers are very positive about the quality of support they receive from supervising social workers. This is through regular supervision and excellent on-going training; this enables carers to achieve a very good record of placement stability. They say they are supported by effective social workers and support staff who put children and young people at the centre of what they do. One carer said, 'the strengths are in the social workers, whether ours or the child's social worker.' Another stated 'our supervising social worker is brilliant.'

Foster carers talk positively about the support groups which are generally well attended. There is also a fostering forum where carers can raise issues to be taken forward. Foster carers also receive news letters to enable information to be shared effectively.

Carers complete extensive training that is tailored to the needs of the individual children and young people. For example, training has been provided to carers who care for children with complex health needs or who have behavioural issues. Carers are also supported to access external training courses to meet the individual needs of young people. All foster carers have or are working towards the Children's

Workforce Development Council (CWDC) training standards in foster care. New carers are expected to complete the CWDC before their first annual review. Training is consistently reviewed and evaluated through the foster carer's personal development plan. This is discussed at the annual reviews to determine the effectiveness of training, and to highlight any further developments required. Children and young people benefit from highly trained carers. This training enables them to provide a good quality of care to children and young people.

All fostering panel members on the central list have a good range of relevant experience and expertise to consider carers' approvals and relevant annual reviews. The panel provides feedback if there are any quality assurance issues. However, the fostering panel minutes do not consistently provide clear reasons for panel recommendations, in relation to either approvals or annual reviews. This does not ensure that clear information is provided to the decision maker of the service. Applicants to become carers are invited to attend the panel and are given the opportunity to present their views on the process.

Safeguarding children and young people

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

Foster carers are made aware of the impact of abuse on children and are aware of the action to take if they are concerned. Staff and carers are trained to recognise the signs and symptoms of abuse. This ensures they are fully aware of their roles and responsibilities in safeguarding children and young people and that they know how to refer any issues or concerns to the service. The fostering service follows child protection procedures robustly to ensure that children, young people and foster families are well protected. The service also provides support for the person who is the subject of the allegation. All children consulted said that they feel safe in their placements with fostering families.

Relationships within fostering households are positive. Foster carers set appropriate and fair boundaries. Children and young people say they do not identify bullying as an issue. Foster carers are vigilant and act appropriately to concerns raised by children and young people. The fostering service helps to prevent children and young people running away and becoming 'missing' from home. There is a Multi-Agency Missing Children Action Group (MAMCAG) which shares information through a multi-agency planning meeting. This is to discuss any concerns in relation to young people in order to plan and reduce future incidents. For a very small number of young people there are numerous missing from home events, although, this is related to a very small cohort. Over the past year these incidences have greatly reduced. This is because carers are well prepared and receive good support to help children to reduce these behaviours.

Foster carers understand safe care practice well. The safer care agreement is effectively implemented in practice in each fostering household. Annual health and safety checks are conducted on all fostering households to ensure that the environment is safe for children and young people. Unannounced visits to foster

carers take place annually and additional visits are carried out whenever there are concerns about safety or safe care practice. These visits are recorded on foster carers' annual reviews, which enables the panel to monitor that they take place and are effective. As a result, children and young people are well protected.

Recruitment is robust for those working in and for the fostering service. All staff have Criminal Records Bureau checks in place. This protects children and young people from unsuitable staff being employed to work with them. The workforce and foster carers are from a diverse range of backgrounds and this ensures that the needs of looked-after-children are met to a high standard.

Leadership and management

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

The service is managed effectively and efficiently and delivers a service which meets the needs of children and young people. The managers are passionate about the service they provide. They demonstrate a clear vision and ambition for children and young people who are fostered. The fostering service consults extremely well with children, young people, foster carers and staff.

There are quality monitoring systems of all aspects of the fostering service, including audits on case records. However, there are some inconsistencies in records maintained by staff. In particular, regarding supervision records of foster carers and records pertaining to children and young people. These weaknesses are minor and do not impact on the quality of care that children and young people receive.

Staff organise many events including awards nights, parties and summer events; all are very well attended. There are further events such as a day for carers' sons and daughters which enables the fostering family to celebrate their role within the service provision. Managers continually use children and young people's views, ideas and experiences to improve the fostering service and to provide better outcomes for children and young people. The 'children in care council' meets regularly and managers provide feedback on the concerns raised by them in form of action points, 'you said we did'. Young people confirmed that they feel listened to by management of the service. Effective communication with all those involved with children and young people helps to deliver excellent outcomes for children and young people using the service.

Partnership working and child-focused professionalism are clear strengths of the service. One panel member said 'workers and managers never lose sight of the individual child. When workers talk about children it is wonderful.'

Foster carers and staff are enthusiastic about and committed to their role and are very child-focused. Supervising social workers feel well supported and valued by the leadership and management team. One social worker stated 'we have good management support.' Another stated 'they are very supportive to encourage our skills.' Staff are qualified, experienced and have access to on-going training. Staff say

that the training provided is extremely good. This supports positive and safe care for children and young people.

Managers have addressed all the recommendations made following the previous inspection. Issues were raised in relation to improving the information provided to carers and the training and support available to them. Carers now have a comprehensive handbook which provides them with extensive guidance. They complete extensive training that is tailored to the needs of the individual children and young people. Carers spoken to were extremely positive about the individual support that they received from staff. Further work was required in the recruitment processes and the panel membership. Recruitment for carers, staff and panel members is robust with all relevant checks now in place. Now that there is a central list for the panel and there is a good range of relevant experience and expertise within the membership and specialist advice can be sourced if required. There were further shortfalls in health information and life story work that required improvement. All children and young people now have 'health passports' which provide clear and detailed information regarding their health needs. Children and young people are provided with a personal record of their life story, through photo story books and memory boxes.

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.