

Essex County Council Fostering Services

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

Unique reference number	SC042083
Inspection date	21/03/2013
Inspector	Rachel Ruth Britten / Linda Leeder
Type of inspection	Full

Setting address	Essex County Council, Social Services, PO Box 297, CHELMSFORD, CM1 1YS
Telephone number	08457 430430
Email	christine.hill@essexcc.gov.uk
Registered person	Essex County Council
Registered manager	
Responsible individual	Stephanie Bishop
Date of last inspection	27/11/2009

© Crown copyright 2013

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 local authority fostering service responds to the needs of children who require a family placement. The service operates four teams covering different geographical regions of the county, plus a separate recruitment team. Services provided include respite care, short-term placements, kinship and long-term placements. At the time of the inspection, the service provided 603 foster carer households with 688 children placed with the service's own foster carers.

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**.

The fostering service is effective. High quality care and support is consistently provided to all children and young people being cared for. As a result, placements are sustained and good outcomes for children and young people are promoted across all areas of their welfare and development. For example, there have been particular improvements in the quality of children and young people's contact with their birth families since the last inspection. Similarly, more effective, individualised planning now provides for siblings to be placed together and for children and young people to be geographically close to their birth families. Overall, children and young people are benefitting from stable placements with few changes. There is effective planning for prompt rehabilitation to birth families or clear permanent arrangements for family placement.

Children and young people have very positive views about the quality of their care and their relationships with their foster families. Likewise, carers and their families are thoroughly assessed and carefully prepared for the fostering task. Carers are highly committed to train, develop and provide high quality care, demonstrating increasing insight and understanding of children and young people's needs. Carers are also well supported and supervised, so that their role in safeguarding children is prioritised. The localisation and unification of social work and placement teams enables greatly improved liaison, support, planning and review. As a result, children and young people are consulted and included well in all aspects of their care and the

service's work. Equally, carers and their families are much more consistently and effectively involved and supported. They feel valued and motivated in the fostering role.

Leaders and managers have focussed effectively and diligently on the fifteen weaknesses in the service identified at the last inspection in 2009. Their improvement and development plans have successfully been executed. There has been a complete reorganisation of the local authority's children's services into a localised 'quadrant' system. As a result, the fostering service has made significant and wide ranging improvements to outcomes for children, quality of service and standards of safeguarding. The service has adapted to ensure that in-house fostering provision caters for a significantly higher proportion of its own children and young people, with a much-reduced reliance on independent fostering agencies. At the same time, the service has secured much improved liaison and satisfaction levels amongst children and young people, carers and the professional team involved with each child.

A few small weaknesses remain in pockets around the county. These result in some local inconsistencies in supervision to carers, input to children's reviews and the supply of information to children about their carers. These shortfalls, and the regulatory breach of not naming a fostering manager to Ofsted, do not impact negatively on the welfare or safety of children and young people.

Areas for improvement

Recommendations

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

- the registered provider must appoint an individual to manage the fostering service (breach of Regulation 6, Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011)
- ensure that the fostering service and foster carers always contribute effectively to each child's statutory review of the child's care plan (NMS 31.7)
- improve the overall consistency with which all approved carers are supervised by a named social worker (NMS 21.8)
- ensure that children are consistently given information about the foster carer before arrival, and any information they need or reasonably request about the placement in a format appropriate to their age and understanding. (NMS 11.3)

Outcomes for children and young people

Outcomes for young people are **good**.

Most children and young people who are looked after by the local authority live with foster carers, where this is the placement of choice and is the best option for each

individual child. This includes many children who are placed with members of their extended family under kinship arrangements; young people who are 'staying put' with carers beyond the age of 18 and young people who have chosen to move on to supported lodging placements.

Consultations within the service also show that the majority of children under 16 are happy in their placements and feel consulted about where they were going. Specific examples given by social workers illustrate that young people have had the opportunity to visit two suitable possible placements and made their own choice. A young person said about their carer, 'she is just the most amazing person I have ever met; she is in it for the kids; she is emotionally connected to us.'

Overall, placement stability is much improved since the last inspection. The number of children who have experienced three or more placements is down from 8.6% four years ago to 6.5% in 2011/12. The numbers of unplanned placement endings are also low. There were 20 unplanned endings in 2011 to 2012 affecting 17 children and there have been 16 unplanned endings from 2012 to 2013.

However, some children and young people still say that they have little information about their foster carers before their arrival. One young person said, 'you don't know where it is; you just go there; it is still like that.' Despite requirements for carers to produce up-to-date profiles about their fostering family, many of these are not available for placing social workers to share with children and young people in advance of their arrival. This shortfall means that some children and young people are insufficiently well prepared for their placements.

Children and young people are placed with their siblings unless there are particular reasons not to, based on their needs. This is because the service focusses on recruitment for carers who can take siblings. One girl stated, 'this (foster placement) is more suitable – me and my brother can be together'.

Many recent examples were given where siblings have been kept together whilst looked after and then have been successfully returned home. Equally, one set of four siblings remain together in their foster home and the older ones, who have gone on to college and independence, are still regular visitors. Where siblings' needs mean that they cannot live together, the service ensures regular contact and geographical proximity. For example, disabled twins enjoy regular contact together and are placed near one another.

Children and young people are happy with their foster placements and understand their situations and the responsibilities and expectations of their foster carers. There have been no complaints from children or young people from 2011 to date. One child says, 'a good foster placement is one where you have the right to speak and be yourself with them and you get along. I receive that; I am glad I live there.'

Children and young people are able to actively participate in day-to-day and more complex decisions about their lives, as appropriate. All children and young people are supported and enabled to share their wishes, views and feelings irrespective of how

they communicate and they understand why they are looked after. This includes children and young people who speak English as an additional language. A weekly drop-in is well attended by some asylum-seeking children and enables the development of peer support and friendships. Equally, carers seek help from interpreters where necessary and in one recent case, use dual language flash cards to help a child communicate her wishes and feelings to her family. One carer's own child said, 'I'm happy because I'm helping children, I speak their language which helps children who now can't speak English.' Where possible, kinship carers from young people's own country of origin have also been approved by the service to care for their relatives.

Children and young people understand the importance of healthy lifestyles and, where appropriate, take responsibility for their own health. Children and young people know about the risks of smoking, alcohol use and taking drugs. They understand sexual health risks and the benefits of healthy eating and regular exercise. This is because the foster carers' training and skills are broadening to meet the identified needs of children and young people with specific historical, inherited and complex health needs. Specialist training on foetal alcohol syndrome and substance misuse is also being developed for carers. All carers' training covers general health matters and first aid. It challenges perceptions about drug and alcohol use, sexual health, diet and exercise.

Carers can 'fast track' referrals to speech therapy and mental health services. Carers have an improved understanding about the requirements for consent and their delegated authority, increasing their confidence in helping children and young people take responsibility for their own health. Independent reviewing officers say that carers are 'quick to highlight with relevant professionals any need for health intervention', to help children and young people.

Children and young people regularly attend school or other educational provision. Their statutory entitlement of 25 hours per week to the end of Key Stage 4 is attained. Only three of the 449 school age fostered children in the county were on a reduced timetable at the time of the inspection. The educational achievement of children and young people is good, taking into account both their attainment and progress from their starting points at the time of placement. They are enthusiastic and positive about education too. One child said, 'the whole family, including my foster carer's children, will support me with school work and offer help if I don't understand something.' Another child said, 'I moved schools; my grades have gone up. The teachers thought the old school had made a mistake (where they placed me academically).' The achievement gap for fostered children achieving five or more A* - C passes continues to narrow gradually and currently stands at 26.4%. For example, a teenager who has been in care since 2005 shows significant accelerated progress from the time she came into care. She has progressed academically from level one at the end of Key Stage 1, to level five at the end of Key Stage 2. Successes like this are due to the carers' commitment in prioritising both attendance and support with school work and peer relationships.

Young people are confident, as appropriate to their age, about their readiness for

independence and adult life and are strongly supported in attaining independence. Children and young people also acquire good practical and life skills throughout their time, to prepare them for adult life. One teenager said, 'I do my own washing, clean the kitchen every day and do some cooking.' Independent reviewing officers say that planning for independence is flagged up early and that 'carers are very good at preparing young people to move on and gain skills.'

The county's new 'staying put' policy is addressing the need to promote young people staying on in foster care beyond 18, where this is appropriate to young people's level of emotional maturity, or when a secure base is needed; for example, during further education. Carers have been consulted and more staff posts are being created to support leaving and after-care services. A rent deposit scheme for fostered young people is in place to help them access university accommodation and private rented accommodation where they are studying.

There are numerous examples of success in moving on and 'staying put'. Examples include a fostered young person winning a scholarship as a professional footballer, with the on-going support of carers transporting him to the club and preparing him for independent living. Another young person has been through university and is now training with a London law firm. A young person with learning disabilities who is continuing with a foster carer said, 'now I am going swimming and shopping on my own. I can find my way; I am walking to college now.' Another young person was able to keep returning to her carers to have meals and overnight stays, because they kept a place for her. She has now decided to move back in with them until she is emotionally ready for independence.

Children and young people are able to make and sustain attachments with their carers, family and friends. The facilitation of contact with family and friends has vastly improved since the last inspection, with carers much more involved in the transportation and sometimes hosting and supervising of contact visits. In addition, carers have increased their skills and understanding about attachments, the fostering task and developing positive relationships. As a result, young people's relationships have flourished, because they know that carers understand and respect their family background and the impact of this on their behaviour. Children feel more supported to keep in touch with friends and relatives and feel that many subtle barriers to this have been removed. Children and young people have also been consulted about the running of the fostering service and take part in staff recruitment interviews as well as carer and social worker training. Children and young people are influencing key areas which concern them, such as having their review meetings outside school time and being confident that their social worker knows them as a person and will share something of themselves to make a more genuine relationship. Children and young people have good access to participation services and events where they meet senior managers within the fostering service. Young adults who have been fostered are represented on all the fostering panels and are valued members of the team. As a result, young people feel listened to and are proud of the county's fostering service.

Children are engaged in a wide range of experiences that broaden their outlook and life chances. For example, many children and young people were taken to the

Olympic and Paralympic Games in London during 2012. One child who is deaf but living with hearing carers, benefits from deaf respite carers who enhance her signing and take her to social events both in the deaf community and generally. Carers can access extra payments to facilitate children and young people accessing holidays and ambitious school trips, such as the Ethiopia World Challenge. Children and young people also enjoy normal life events, such as English holidays in caravans or cottages and visiting friends for overnight stays where appropriate. For example, carers do not give up on offering holidays for groups of siblings in their care, even when previous holidays have been difficult. One teenager said, 'I can still keep in touch with my old friends by text and Facebook and I am taken to visit them sometimes or have them over.'

Disabled children and young people's inclusion is good too, with access to a full range of stimulating and appropriate opportunities. For example, the carers of a child who is dependent on oxygen is always taken on holiday with the foster family because they have found ways to transport the oxygen wherever they go. Other carers stay nearby while their fostered child attends a specialist scout camp so that any health emergencies can be safely met without compromising the child's experience. As a result, children and young people broaden their experiences and are actively and positively involved in activities in the community.

Quality of service

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

The fostering service recruits specifically and effectively. There is a good range of skilled foster carers who are able to meet the needs of looked after children, or the needs of children who receive short break care. The number of carer households is being maintained year on year, but sufficiency is improved. This is because the number of children being looked after is reducing and there is a better range of suitably skilled carers for the needs of siblings, adolescents, mothers and babies and children with disabilities and complex health needs. As a result, the county's use of independent fostering agencies is significantly reduced and most children are placed within ten miles of their family home. 75% of looked-after children in the county are being fostered by the service. This is slightly higher than the national average and represents significant improvement for the service since 2011. Retention of carers is also higher than the national average, while the vacancy rate is lower than the average. The turnover of foster carers is attributable to permanency arrangements or kinship carers' foster children reaching 18. These positive and improved statistics result from carers' very high levels of commitment. A carer stated, 'all children can improve regardless of their situation and it's my job to see that they do.' For example, one carer household saw all four siblings into independence before recently retiring. Another carer family has won an award for the number of baby, long term and permanency placements they continued to offer over a period of many years.

The preparation and assessment of foster carers is very well focused on the needs of children and young people, so that carers develop an in-depth understanding of how important the balance is between fostered child and fostering family needs. An

outreach worker in the recruitment and assessment team works with the children of foster carers providing preparation training and support specifically for carers' children. This ensures that these children are fully involved in the assessment process and are well prepared for their family beginning to foster. Support to carers' own children continues through their own support groups and the feedback they give to foster carer annual household reviews. Many carers' children have been involved in making a new recruitment DVD for use in the training of new carers. As a result of these activities, carers' children cope well with their role and the quality of new carers' preparation is enhanced in an accessible and realistic way. One carer's child said, 'I feel happy because I have helped a child; I feel proud because I help children move and meet their families from other countries; I feel proud because my classmates say 'how do you do it?' I feel sad when children go, even if I know that it's a happy ending.' Another carer's older teenager said, 'fostering has changed me for the better. I will never be the same again.'

The assessment and on-going training process is quicker and better than at the time of the last inspection. Improved local organisation means that assessment, support, training and supervision of carers are all more effective than previously. Assessments are completed timely, including robust and effective kinship carers' assessments. All carers can access support groups in their locality and are subject to equitable fees and allowances which are well organised to better suit carers' needs. Similarly, all carers receive the same level of supervision and support, including at least one unannounced visit per year. Only a very small minority of carers and kinship carers are yet to complete the required training and development standards and individualised assistance is being given with this. Children and young people benefit from carers who are well trained and skilled. Implementation of the 'Fostering Changes' training during 2012 to 2013, has paid significant dividends to carers' practice. For example, a kinship carer stated how much the programme assisted him with understanding and responding to a child's behaviour. Strategies they put in place following the training produced real improvements in behaviour which have been remarked upon by the child's school.

As a result of good quality assessment, support and training, carers have a good understanding of their role as professionals and parents. They show clear consideration of the age, ability, ethnicity, faith, gender, gender identity, language, religious belief or sexual orientation of the children and young people placed and ensure that positive outcomes are achieved. Independent reviewing officers say that the carers' ethos is, 'I can keep this young person; I am not giving up'.

The five fostering panels in the service promote timely, safe, secure and stable placements through active engagement with the fostering service. There is no waiting list for panel, despite the number of matters for consideration rising from 277 to 309 between 2011/12 and 2012/13. The panel makes timely, appropriate and child-centred recommendations, which are also decided in a timely manner and with full understanding by the agency decision maker.

Deferred matters have been drastically reduced since the last inspection and assessment quality is now good, due to improved quality assurance by advisors,

team managers and the appointment of more experienced panel chairs. It is also intended to provide written feedback to social workers about the quality of every assessment. The panel also keep up to date on relevant research at their annual training day and they meet quarterly to analyse trends and lessons. Children and young people benefit from this highly effective part of the service and some have particularly enjoyed attending panel and meeting the decision maker when their placements have been made permanent.

Foster carers are well supported to ensure that children and young people are cared for in line with their individual placement plan or short break care plan and have access to services and support to meet their physical, emotional, psychological and physical health needs. Additional support from health professionals and high quality training are key strengths which shore up placement stability and assure progress for children and young people with complex needs and difficulties.

The quadrant system for looked after children's services in the county means that carers' support social workers and children's social workers are managed together and can work together very effectively. For example, incident reporting and sharing of information about significant events works effectively to keep children and young people safe and ensure rapid responses to issues which might threaten placement stability.

Most carers are pleased with the frequency and quality of their support and the way that they are valued as professional contributors to each child's plan for progress. Carers say support social workers 'will go above and beyond with their support', 'they are a lifeline'. However, occasional instances are still cited by independent reviewing officers where carers have not been supported by their support social workers at a child's statutory review and have not supplied a good quality report of the child's progress. Similarly, a few carers still say that they are not consistently supervised by one named social worker. These shortfalls are minor and affect only a very few carer-households. The overall morale, skill and professional standing of the carer population in the county has considerably improved since the last inspection. For example, one carer said about being included in consultation about the new foster handbook, 'it has been really fantastic to have our views heard about the handbook; my contributions were valued and considered; I am very proud of being a foster carer for this county.'

Safeguarding children and young people

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

Children and young people feel safe from bullying and abuse both in and outside the foster home. They are confident about the support they receive because there is a robust and supportive response from foster carers and staff to any incidence of bullying. Bullying related to ability, age, ethnicity, faith, gender, gender identity, language, religious belief or sexual orientation is recognised and addressed. For example, a young person with some learning disabilities said their carer helped them to resolve bullying at college. All young people spoken to had confidence in their

carers, their independent reviewing officers and their social workers. Many young people know who the social work team managers and fostering service managers are. Some have also taken part in children's rights forums. Children and young people clearly know how to complain, feel able to do so, but have not needed to. This confidence is indicative of the considerable improvement in outcomes for children and young people since the last inspection.

Children and young people are safeguarded because the service culture helps prevent unsuitable people from having the opportunity to harm them. All carers are safely recruited, as are the staff and panel members working in the fostering service. The quality of carer training on child protection is good, and is regularly refreshed. Carers are therefore confident about how to handle allegations and disclosures as well as how to record and notify concerns. Carers are also confident about the purpose of their household safe care policies and ensure that these work to enhance children's safety in an appropriate, individualised and proportionate way. Supervising social workers support carers in regularly reviewing and updating these policies as children change and develop. Similarly, support social workers and children's own social workers ensure that children and young people are seen alone and are given opportunities to voice any concerns or issues without any fear.

Data is collected and regular monitoring occurs to ensure that carers are always seen at least once a year on an unannounced basis. Some supervising social workers achieve two or three of such visits per year to their caseloads of carer households. The chairman of the foster carers' association describes a 'sea change' in the management of allegations about carers and staff in the service, stating, 'they have reduced significantly, are handled more sensitively, without automatic removal of the child or young person; they are less defensive and are more child-centred.'

Managers in the service have also forged good relationships with Local Authority Designated Officers for safeguarding (LADOs). As a result, there are only four complaints or issues about staff or carers under investigation at present. Overall, the robust culture of safeguarding practice places children and young people's safety at the centre of the service's work.

Foster carers are trained and empathic, able to understand the impact of past abuse or neglect on children and take appropriate action to support them. They know what may trigger children or young people to go missing, take action to minimise the risk and know what to do if it does happen. Managers are confident that the apparent increase in children and young people going missing from foster care is about improved reporting. Managers ensure that supervising social workers offer an independent visitor to the child or young person and that missing reports are audited for trends, patterns and a robust assessment of the reasons given by the child for going missing and their levels of vulnerability. In the vast majority of these incidents, children have gone without prior agreement to see family members. Carers make contact by phone, text and look for children and young people at these known places. A very few young people are known to be at risk of exploitation and training about this is being rolled out shortly for carers. Likewise, a small proportion of fostered children are receiving support from youth offending teams or are known to

police. Strong and proactive relationships between these professionals and young people's carers is known to support and promote children and young people's safety. For example, carers and police have successfully collaborated to ensure that traffickers have not been able to pick up children who are placed with the service.

Leadership and management

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

The fostering service demonstrates a good capacity for continuing improvement, based on its track record and performance since its previous inspection. There is good evidence of the impact of improvements on outcomes for children and young people. Carers enjoy markedly improved working relationships with the service since the introduction of the quadrant system. This is because service managers are responsible for operational fieldwork and fostering support social workers. Meetings are convened more easily and resolutions to issues are found more quickly. There is improved sharing of priorities and issues from all points of view. Managers 'meet and greet' carers, know them much better and now resolve most issues early and effectively. Carers comment that the responsible individual for fostering is 'extremely knowledgeable about fostering and consults and respects us and leads by example.' In addition, the caseloads of both support social workers and children's social workers have been significantly reduced, with newly qualified social workers carrying an even lower caseload. There are no vacancies being carried in fostering teams and sickness rates are low. All this benefits fostered children and young people because their carers are fully supported to maintain stable, effective placements where they can flourish.

Leaders and managers monitor the delivery of the service very effectively and conduct a thorough and insightful review of the fostering service annually. They now have an effective data collection system and scrutinise it regularly and carefully to ensure that the quality of service is good and to ensure that targets and requirements are met across the county. The service annual review gave rise to a ten-point development plan for 2012/13, which focussed well on securing good outcomes and high standards of safeguarding for children and young people as well as targeted recruitment in key geographical areas and for specific types of carers. For example, the plan focussed on ensuring that all social workers are trained; that thorough safeguarding checks are completed on all carers; that all allegations are thoroughly investigated and that carers' approval is always considered at panel following an investigation. Managers say, 'we are going well on compliance and we know the continuing issues; core training for carers; embedding delegated authority; doing placement planning meetings and monitoring delegated authority.'

The structure of the service, where there are number of fostering managers reporting to the responsible individual for fostering, poses a barrier to the service in informing Ofsted of one named manager to comply with fostering regulations. Nevertheless, the service is aware of the regulation and intends to nominate one fostering manager to Ofsted in order to meet the regulation.

Service development planning continues to drive improvements based on the success of the quadrant model. For example, placement resource planning is shortly to be de-centralised into the quadrants with the aim of using local knowledge to improve commissioning. Similarly, the foster care charter is being adopted in each quadrant, in consultation with the carers in that quadrant. In addition, the newly-constituted fostering board for the county has specific terms of reference which aim to oversee the county's fostering service by pulling together all the key personnel and information about the fostering service in each of the four quadrants. The board monitors and reviews patterns and trends in the service and identifies requirements for recruitment, fees, training and staffing, as well as looking at national trends, government policy and research in fostering. Fostering managers competently demonstrate how learning from practice issues and research influences the service. For example, the service is now better informed about appropriately assessing carers where religious beliefs dictate what gender an assessing social worker must be. Fostering managers have also learnt from recent research about the significance and features of a secure base for children. They are implementing lessons learnt about this by providing permanency workers in each quadrant to drive forward appropriate and timely permanency placements in children's own communities. Similarly, they are incorporating lessons from recent research about family contact, to ensure better quality contact experiences for children where a return home is in prospect. Outcomes for children and young people are much improved as a result of the service's vision and continuing development.

Very effective action has been taken in relation to meeting all 15 recommendations from the previous inspection. The shortfalls in 2009 related to safe recruitment of staff; the quality of safe care documentation; complaints and allegations; adequacy of staffing and administrative support; health outcomes; timeliness of carer reviews; quality of joint working between fostering and children's social workers; ascertaining children's views; the quality and distribution of the carer handbook; carer supervision and unannounced visits; and monitoring of carer training. Managers describe that they are 'in a completely different place' since the restructuring of the county's children's services into quadrants in 2012. The service has embedded new teams and significant numbers of new posts, both in social work, administrative, and management roles. There are significantly improved lines of communication between managers, staff, carers and children. Improvements are also due to vastly improved data collection and use of monitoring systems by managers to focus efforts where they have most been needed. For example, all carers now have basic training on health, hygiene, medication administration and first aid because managers know exactly the numbers requiring training from data collected by supervising social workers. The service now provides suitable training and support for carers to complete all training timely. Similarly, spread sheets now enable close monitoring of children and young people's immunisations, dental checks and medical checks. Equally, managers better identify and provide specialist and specific training to carers looking after children and young people with complex health needs. As a result, carers are more confident in their skills, they feel valued and supported and children's health is better assured.

Overall, the outcomes for children and young people, and the quality of service are

now good. This is reflected in the consistently high morale of children, carers, staff and managers.

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 the inspection of local authority fostering agencies.