

Ethelbert Fostering Service

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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| Unique reference number | SC036583 |
| Inspection date | 26/09/2014 |
| Inspector | David Putnam |
| Type of inspection | Full |
| Provision subtype | |

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| Date of last inspection | 06/06/2011 |

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Ethelbert Fostering Service is a privately owned independent fostering agency based in Margate, Kent. The service is part of Ethelbert Specialist Homes Limited, a company that also owns and manages a number of registered children's homes and a school. During the twelve months prior to this inspection nine carers in five households have resigned, but 12 new carers in seven households have been approved. This has resulted in a nett increase of three available placements. At the point of this inspection 43 fostering households were approved, with 63 children and young people in placement. The service provides emergency, short, medium and long-term foster placements for children and young people. Other services include placements for children and young people moving on from the organisation's children's homes, bridging or pre-adoption placements, respite and parent and child placements. Therapeutic services can be commissioned when this is identified as a particular need.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding: An agency demonstrating and exceeding the characteristics of a good judgement where children and young people are making significantly better progress and achieving more than was expected in all areas of their lives.

Good: An agency where children and young people, including those with the most complex needs, have their individual needs met and their welfare safeguarded and promoted. They make good progress and receive effective services so they achieve as well as they can in all areas of their lives.

Requires improvement: An agency that may be compliant with regulations and observing the national minimum standards but is not yet demonstrating the characteristics of a good judgement. It therefore requires improvement to be good. There may be failures to meet all regulations or national minimum standards but these are not widespread or serious; all children's and young people's welfare is safeguarded and promoted.

Inadequate: An agency where there are widespread or serious failures which result in children and young people not having their welfare safeguarded and promoted.

Overall effectiveness

Judgement outcome: **good**.

A change in leadership and management arrangements in January 2014, led to a brief unsettled period for this service. Senior managers in the organisation worked quickly to recruit a new Registered Manager. Some foster carers struggled with these changes and chose to transfer to other agencies. Point in time surveys submitted to

Ofsted in spring 2014, reflected the concerns of carers. However, the new leadership and management team worked hard to stabilise the service by listening and responding to foster carers' concerns. Staff say that the current management team instils confidence in them. This enables them to undertake their work safely and effectively. Carers spoken to during this inspection were extremely positive about the current management arrangements and the support they receive. They describe senior managers as 'accessible' due to their willingness to listen. They commend the support they receive from the agency which they say helps them to meet the needs of children and young people in their care.

The agency responds positively if it believes it can match foster carers to meet the complex or challenging needs of children or young people referred to them. Equally, their willingness to promptly say if they cannot place is valued and respected by placing authorities. The agency works closely with commissioners of services to obtain insight into current and future placement needs. This supports effective planning and targeted recruitment of foster carers.

Close and effective working relationships with external agencies help to support the identified needs of children and young people. Co-ordinated approaches help to promote and safeguard the welfare of children and young people.

Children and young people benefit from stable placements. Of the 63 children and young people placed with the agency 48 (76%) were in long-term or permanent placements. Almost all had been placed for more than a year, but 32 (51% of all placements) had been in their placement for more than two years. Nine of the 63 children and young people placed (15%) were in short term foster care, including placements preparing them for adoption or permanence. Many carers remain in touch with people they have previously fostered. Several remain in households as young adults under different arrangements. This emphasises the sense of belonging that children and young people consistently establish within their foster families.

Children and young people say that they feel safe in their placements. They recognise and are proud of fundamental changes they make as a result of the care they receive. They praise their carers; some are comfortable using the word 'love' to describe the relationships they have with their foster families. Others simply say, 'it really feels this is home.' When there are difficulties or challenges children and young people confirm they are comfortable about expressing their views confident that people listen.

No breaches of regulation are identified, but some minor shortfalls against national minimum standards result in recommendations for improvement. These relate to; ensuring medication is always stored safely and securely; clearly recording reasons for recommendations in panel minutes; preparing a written plan for developing the service; and supporting all approved foster carers to achieve the relevant Training, Support and Development Standards. The direct impact of these shortfalls upon young people is limited.

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 medicines kept in the foster home are stored safely and are accessible only by those for whom they are intended (NMS 6.9)
- ensure written minutes of panel meetings are accurate and clearly cover the key issues and views expressed by panel members and record the reasons for the panel's recommendation (NMS 14.7)
- prepare a written development plan, reviewed annually, for the future of the service, either identifying any planned changes in the operation or resources of the service, or confirming the continuation of the service's current operation and resource (NMS 18.2)
- support all foster carers, including all members of a household who are approved foster carers, to achieve the Training, Support and Development Standards for Foster Care. (NMS 20.2)

Experiences and progress of, and outcomes for, children and young people

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Children and young people are helped to settle into their placements as a result of the preparations foster carers and staff undertake in advance. Whenever possible, children and young people visit their new placements before moving in. This enables them to meet people in the fostering household and see their new home. Visits are augmented by child-focused examples of written and pictorial profiles of each fostering household that detail family members and facilities in the surrounding area. These are prepared by foster carers who amend documents to reflect the levels of understanding and need for each child. This helps children and young people to know what to expect. Good quality children's guides are also produced by the agency and issued to each child or young person to help them understand how they will be cared for. At the outset of the inspection the inspector found that some content within these guides was out of date and that the latest versions had not been forwarded to Ofsted. Immediate action was taken to address and rectify these shortfalls. This prompt action minimised any impact upon children and young people and negates the need to make a statutory requirement.

Children and young people provide positive feedback about their experiences of being placed with this agency. Those spoken to demonstrate a good understanding of their individual care plans, indicating their inclusion in both identifying and meeting their needs. This helps children and young people to build positive and strong attachments with their carers and their extended fostering families. Children and young people say that they are given respect and asked for their views and opinions all the times. When children and young people have issues or concerns they

remain comfortable and confident to express themselves. This results in them still feeling valued as part of their fostering family even when there are disagreements. Comments young people made to the inspector included, 'I love it where I am; from the moment I first visited we just seemed to gel' and 'I've been here a long time. It really feels this is home.'

Children and young people's sense of belonging is enhanced by the longevity and stability of placements. At the time of this inspection almost three-quarters of children and young people placed had been with their carers for over a year. Over a half had been in placement for more than two years. A number of young adults continue to live with the families with whom they were previously fostered under different arrangements. Carers communicate a genuine openness to this as an option and pro-actively work with placing authorities to enable this to happen. Some young adults attend university and return between academic terms. Others remain living in fostering households full-time and having attained vocational qualifications at college go on to benefit from full employment. One young adult said, 'If it wasn't for (their former foster carers) I wouldn't be the person I am today.' They went on to describe how they have built a life in the area with friends who provide an extension to their support networks.

When appropriate, young people are supported to take action to reduce negative and risk-taking behaviours. They describe how they grasp opportunities provided to them to turn their lives around. For example, as a result of comprehensive health information, advice and personal motivation they take steps that lead to the cessation of drug and alcohol abuse. Such habitual changes mean that these young people no longer place themselves in vulnerable situations. They recognise and are rightly proud of the changes they make in their lives. As a consequence they take more personal responsibility for themselves and engage fully with education opportunities provided to them. The progress young people make is inspired by the clarity of their own ambition to achieve. The attainment of such personal goals and aspirations is striking when their previous life experiences are taken into account.

Children and young people grow and develop through making the most of the good opportunities available to them in the wider community. Positive engagement in groups, activities and the use of local facilities helps them confidently build lives for themselves. Photographs displayed around foster homes demonstrate that children and young people are incorporated into family life, including family holidays. This helps them to feel they belong, but also expands their experience and knowledge of the world around them. Children and young people describe how they build positive memories of their time being looked after. Appropriate use of delegated authority enables children and young people to develop and sustain friendships. This includes the ability to visit friends or invite them over to stay, when this is appropriate.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The fostering agency has approved a diverse range of foster carers to meet the aims

and objectives of the service, as set out in its statement of purpose. The utilisation of an established placements team within the organisation leads to strong working relationships with local authorities and a clear understanding of individual children's needs. Significant examples of positive matching lead to stable and long term placements. The agency does not shy away from offering placements to children and young people with complex and challenging needs. However, when they are unable to meet specified needs they quickly communicate this to placing authorities. Commissioners and placement officers from local authorities consistently fed back to the inspector that this open and honest approach is valued by them.

Feedback provided to Ofsted through surveys completed in the spring of 2014 indicated that foster carers were unsettled by changes in management that had just occurred. However, foster carers who contributed to this inspection consistently commended the service they now receive. Carers now praise the quality of relationship they have with their supervising social workers and the agency as a whole. They state that they feel well-supported. Furthermore, they say that their views and opinions are heard by the current management team and that their contribution counts. The feedback provided as part of this inspection gave a clear indication that leaders and managers have brought about fundamental change that has reassured carers. Foster carers indicated that previous concerns had been allayed. Others used their views of the current management arrangements to support their decision to remain with the agency.

Through this period of change supervising social workers have maintained a focus on promoting the needs of individual children and young people. This ensures a child-centred approach that does not allow particular events to detract from the quality of service delivered. As a competent and committed group of professionals they evidence extensive knowledge of the children, young people and the carers who look after them. Where there are practice issues these are promptly addressed by leaders, managers and staff. If disagreements preclude effective progress the fostering panel is called upon to review the suitability of carers and make recommendations to move things forward.

The fostering panel is effective. The central list of panel members reflects individuals from diverse backgrounds with wide ranging experiences, knowledge and skills. The independent panel chair creates a formal, but relaxed approach within panel meetings. Questioning and exploration of issues is robust. Minutes of panel meetings effectively record lines of discussion and questioning. However, the format of these minutes does not currently summarise the reasons for making recommendations. All necessary information is efficiently passed onto the agency decision maker. Decisions are made and communicated within the required timescales. Both the panel chair and the agency decision maker contribute to the quality assurance function of the panel which is taken very seriously. They draw upon their extensive experience of managing and commissioning services within local authorities to identify issues and raise standards.

Recent changes to enhance the quality of preparation courses for foster carers are beginning to reap benefits. Feedback from foster carers indicated that in the past not

all felt properly prepared. However, pro-active steps taken by leaders and managers result in links between the preparation and assessment of new foster carers being more clear. Carers taken to panel for initial approval now confirm that they feel suitably equipped to commence the fostering task, albeit with the continued support of the agency. The assessments of foster carers are sound. The agency has begun to reduce the number of assessments undertaken by external, independent social workers. By bringing this vital work in-house, information about foster carers is retained more effectively and positive working relationships between carers and agency social workers are built over time.

A number of foster carers use the word, 'fantastic' to describe the quality of training they receive. A comprehensive range of courses are available to all carers. A rolling programme of core training is augmented by specialist courses to address the continued professional development of foster carers. However, some indicate that at times they find the expectation to attend as many as three courses each month overwhelming. The newly established management team acknowledge this feedback. While this year's training programme will be completed, leaders and managers demonstrate their willingness to listen to the views of foster carers by undertaking a thorough review of training within the agency.

The agency works well to encourage and support all approved foster carers to attain the Training Development and Support (TDS) Standards. A small number of carers are unable to demonstrate that this has been completed in the timescales set out in national minimum standards. A recommendation is made to support improvement in this area to ensure that all carers meet the expected standard.

Children and young people directly benefit from the employment of health professionals within the wider organisation. This supports their physical and psychological health needs beyond the provision of core services. Therapeutic interventions are made available when this is an assessed need. Furthermore, young people appreciate and respond positively to the receipt of key information and advice about the misuse of drugs or alcohol. This promotes their ability to make personal choices. Sexual health needs are also addressed confidentially and sensitively in a way that enables young people to take personal responsibility.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **good.**

Children and young people clearly communicate that they feel safe in their homes and in the wider community. They are able to state this clearly, but also express this through their behaviour and presentation in their foster placements. Children and young people confirm that they are comfortable and confident about expressing their views to someone if they are worried or concerned. They list people outside the foster home that they can talk to, but are clear that their foster carers always listen to them. One young person said that they felt respected because, 'I am treated more like a young adult in this placement.' They went on to explain that this had enabled them to open up to their carer in ways they had not been able to in previous

placements. This indicates that carers are able to safeguard and promote the welfare of children and young people through the delivery of day-to-day care.

Risk assessments relating to children and young people are of a good standard and help to promote safer care. Documents are highly individualised and reflect areas of specific need. Carers and staff review these documents when new or updated information comes to light. This responsive approach helps ensure that written texts reflect the frequent changes in children and young people's lives. When necessary, supervising social workers work closely with placing authorities to ensure that risk assessments dynamically address known or developing areas of concern.

Carers and agency staff work well with the police and placing authorities to safeguard the small number of young people who go missing. Carers are made aware of and appropriately follow local missing children protocols and those of placing authorities where there are differences. Positive examples of collaborative working demonstrate a clear understanding about the risks of exploitation. The agency demonstrates a commitment to addressing concerns of this nature through especially commissioned training for foster carers and staff. Persistent attempts to engage vulnerable children and young people help them to understand that they are valued and loved. This leads to demonstrable changes in behaviours that promote the safety and welfare of particular children and young people.

Good systems for the recruitment, selection and vetting of staff are well established. Support from specialist staff at the organisation's head office ensures that clear records of recruitment checks are maintained. This reflects the value leaders and managers place upon safeguarding children and young people. The quality of these checks helps to ensure that unsuitable applicants are prevented from coming into contact with vulnerable children or young people, or accessing their personal information.

A recommendation was made at the last inspection to ensure that all medicines kept in foster homes are stored safely and securely. Leaders and managers took robust action to respond to this. Expectations are now clearly set out in policies, procedures and guidance, leaving carers in no doubt as to what is required. All carers recently received a letter to remind them of their responsibilities. Supervising social workers monitor practice around medication as part of regular planned and unannounced visits to foster homes. Despite this rigorous response limited examples have been identified where foster carers have failed to ensure medication is stored safely at all times. One example was identified during this inspection. This has the potential to place children and young people at risk of serious harm. When such suspected failures are identified staff take urgent action to investigate and follow these up. The agency does not shirk from dealing with concerns. When it is identified that foster carers have stepped outside clearly stipulated expectations, matters are referred to the fostering panel for the suitability of carers to be re-considered.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Senior managers in the organisation responded promptly to secure the appointment of the current Registered Manager. This followed the departure of the previous incumbent. These and other changes in the agency led to a short period of uncertainty that unsettled a number of carers. While a small number chose to transfer out of the agency the majority have remained. Some carers say that they take a pragmatic view and are simply comfortable with change as a normal part of development. Others say that they were contemplating leaving the agency but have chosen to stay as a result of the new management structures in place. They describe a more open approach from the agency and senior managers in the organisation. They say this helps them feel valued. In addition they identify enhancements to the quality of support they receive as another example of how things have improved from their perspective.

The Registered Manager is supported by two experienced senior practitioners who enhance the leadership team. Together these key staff are seeking to obtain the views of all stakeholders. Carers say they feel more empowered to give their views and genuinely believe they are able to influence change within the agency. Supervising social workers report that leaders and managers instil confidence in them, helping them to feel safe and supported in their role.

Supervision of staff is undertaken regularly. Minimal gaps in the frequency of meetings are clearly explained and do not negatively impact upon the quality of supervision, which is good. Staff say that they value the knowledge and experience supervisors provide. Opportunities to further individual professional development are explored. Learning opportunities are sourced through access to a range of internal and external training.

While the current leadership team has achieved a lot in a relatively short space of time they recognise that the development of the service is a work in progress. At the time of this inspection, no formal development plan was in place. Leaders and managers had made a conscious decision to consult with all stakeholders before producing this important document. A recommendation is made to ensure plans for the agency are formalised in a way that further supports the positive progress being made currently.

Effective monitoring arrangements have a strong focus on children; their safety, welfare and the progress they make. This helps the agency to understand the differences made in the lives of children and young people. Much of the information held by the agency is stored in paper files. A transition to a computer based recording system is underway. Leaders and managers seek to identify ways to utilise this new system to provide more evaluative and qualitative information about the agency's work with children and young people.

Leaders and managers pro-actively build strong and effective relationships with key personnel in placing authorities. This ensures that a strategic overview of current and future placement needs is obtained and understood, enabling targeted recruitment of foster carers. Clear contracting arrangements are in place with those who

commission services. Placing authorities identify the agency's openness, honesty and promptness to respond as key strengths. Involvement in local and regional forums increases awareness of good practice and ensures leaders and managers keep up to date with changes in legislation and guidance.

Effective action has been undertaken to address the three recommendations made at the last full inspection. Steps taken to ensure the safe storage of medication are addressed in detail elsewhere in this report.

Work to support young people to make the transition to independence is addressed through training for foster carers alongside formal pathway planning arrangements agreed with placing authorities. The inspector found that foster carers engage young people in a natural process to address preparation for adulthood. This happens throughout their time in foster carer and goes far beyond the ability to undertake specific practical tasks. Carers support the confidence and self-esteem of young people in ways that help them build effective networks of support. In this way they are able to seek and access appropriate help when needed, including from the carers themselves. The carers' ability and willingness to remain in contact with young adults perpetuates the sense of belonging beyond the formal end of foster placements.

Safer caring principles are extensively addressed through a mandatory training course for foster carers. All fostering households now have safe care policies in place. Like risk assessments these are not generic documents. They are prepared having considered the individual needs of children and young people and are reviewed regularly, including any time new information comes to light. In this way carers are able to promote the safe care of children and young people placed with them.

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, to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards and to support services to improve.

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 independent fostering agencies.