

Ethelbert Fostering Service

Ethelbert Specialist Homes Limited

17 Leigh Road, Ramsgate, Kent CT12 5EU

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

Ethelbert Fostering Service is a privately owned independent fostering agency based in Ramsgate, Kent. The service is part of Ethelbert Specialist Homes Limited, a company that also owns and manages several registered children's homes, a contact centre and a school. Therapeutic services can be commissioned when this is identified as a particular need.

The service provides emergency, short, medium, and long-term foster placements for children. At the time of this inspection, 34 fostering households were approved, with 51 children in placement.

The registered manager has been in post since 2014.

Due to COVID-19 (coronavirus), at the request of the Secretary of State, we suspended all routine inspections of social care providers on 17 March 2020.

Inspection dates: 27 September to 1 October 2021

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account	Good
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How well children and young people are helped and protected	Good
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The effectiveness of leaders and managers	Good
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The independent fostering agency provides effective services that meet the requirements for good.

Date of last inspection: 22 January 2018

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

New children referred to the agency are well matched with foster carers. The staff work hard to ensure that the children's individual needs can be met. Foster carers' own children's wishes and feelings are also taken into consideration. The agency's child-focused approach means that children's needs are put first, particularly when quicker introductions are made. New foster carers have helped to develop the process by introducing themselves and their home by video. This, along with a welcome box, helps children to feel valued and settle more easily.

Children have a positive experience of family life. Over time, they have been supported to form close and trusting relationships with their foster carers. Those spoken to during the inspection talked openly and excitedly about their foster families, describing how they feel safe and healthy, and how they are coping well in school. This, together with opportunities to join clubs and pursue their hobbies, gives the children enjoyment and stability in their lives. Children have additional support from an education worker and communication between home and school is effective. This help children to make good progress in education.

During the COVID-19 restrictions, children were supported to maintain relationships with those close to them. This included being able to talk to their foster carers and the agency staff about any worries or concerns. Video calls were used effectively throughout this time to ensure that the children were still able to talk and see their families and friends. As restrictions have eased, the children are starting to benefit from face-to-face visits again.

Children's health needs are a priority. Access to a specialist health worker means that the children and their foster carers receive advice and guidance when needed. The wide range of support on offer means that the children's health needs are met. Children spoken to during the inspection say that they can talk about any issue and are supported. Children are supported to attend specialist medical appointments.

Older children and foster carers have good support from agency staff to learning about relationships and sexual identity. This ensures that young people who identify as LGBTQ+ get the support that they need to thrive and develop. .

The agency staff use creative ways to engage with the children. During the COVID-19 restrictions, interactive and virtual games were used to help the foster families, children and the agency to keep in touch. The revamped agency magazine now includes photos of celebrations, as well as fun activities and information. Age-specific versions of the magazine mean that it is accessible to all.

How well children and young people are helped and protected: good

All the children spoken to during the inspection say that they feel safe and well cared for. Excellent personalised plans help foster carers to make their homes safer.

For example, family routines and boundaries are clearly explained. This means that children know and understand the expectations from the outset. Equally, the content of these plans indicates respectful and child-focused thinking that is evident in the care children receive. Strategies to address needs arising from children's identity are now clearly specified in their care plans, which addresses a previous recommendation made.

Children are supported to take and manage risk. Foster carers trust children and give them the opportunity to have normal childhood experiences, for example travelling independently on public transport and cycling to and from school each day. This approach is underpinned by realistic plans that allow and guide the children to have and use their mobile phones and electronic consoles safely. Because of this, incidents of children going missing are low and children are generally settled.

Foster carers' written records are good and provide rich information about children's daily lives. However, there have been some instances of foster carers not updating the agency about concerns when they arise, as well as not following the correct procedure in relation to a child going missing. While the agency has taken appropriate action following these incidents, some children experienced a breakdown in their placement as a result. A previous recommendation was made in relation to ensuring that foster carers actively safeguard and promote the welfare of children, and this has not been met. A requirement is now raised from this inspection.

In situations where safeguarding concerns have been identified, leaders and managers take appropriate action. This includes liaising with other agencies and carrying out standards of care investigations where necessary. The outcomes of these show that this is done in a robust way. A recent example of this includes the Independent Review Mechanism, upholding the agency's decisions.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

Since the last inspection, the registered manager stepped back from day-to-day control for a short period. However, due to some unforeseen circumstances with the new management arrangements, she has returned to provide full-time support. Prior to this, the staff team had been unsettled and therefore the registered manager's priority has been to get things back on track. This includes further succession planning internally for when she leaves and plans for a new manager to register with Ofsted. There has been no obvious impact on the children during this transition, and they have remained the focus throughout.

Leaders and managers have good systems in place to oversee the quality of care provided. Recent changes to the monitoring arrangements include managers taking a more thorough look into practice. Findings from these reviews have been well received by the staff and have prompted some reflective thinking. Further plans are underway to formalise the learning from this and to form part of the overall development plan. This meets a previous recommendation made at the last inspection.

The recruitment, assessment and approval of new foster carers is of good quality. Staff carry out thorough background checks and ensure that information is complete before recommendations are made. The minutes of panel meetings are clear and show enough of the discussion for the agency decision-maker to make informed decisions.

Foster carers' training is up to date. Training in gang culture is now part of the foster carer's training and development package. All mandatory training is complete, and refresher courses and ongoing learning is evident in records. However, while there is evidence that staff have opportunities to progress their skills and knowledge, the records of their mandatory training are not clear. This is a missed opportunity for managers to identify what, if any, the gaps are.

Overall, foster carers feel supported. However, changes within the agency have meant that some foster carers have experienced multiple changes of supervising social workers. Despite this, foster carers remain committed to their children and the agency and continue to share and promote the family focused values outlined in the statement of purpose. New staff appointed also spoke positively about their induction and the support they have received from the team.

What does the independent fostering agency need to do to improve?

Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions that the registered person(s) must take to meet the Care Standards Act 2000, Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the national minimum standards. The registered person(s) must comply within the given timescales.

Requirement	Due date
<p>The fostering service provider must provide foster parents with such training, advice, information and support, including support outside office hours, as appears necessary in the interests of children placed with them.</p> <p>The fostering service provider must take all reasonable steps to ensure that foster parents are familiar with, and act in accordance with the policies established in accordance with regulations 12(1) and 13(1) and (3). (Regulation (17) (1) (2))</p> <p>Specifically, that the provider assures themselves that the foster carers are familiar with their responsibilities to report any changes in circumstances, including safeguarding concerns, and can and will act in accordance with the agency's safeguarding policy to keep children safe. This includes taking immediate actions where safeguarding concerns are emerging.</p>	31 October 2021

Recommendation

- The registered person should ensure that the learning and development programme is evaluated for effectiveness at least annually and is updated where necessary. Specifically, to ensure that review systems are in place to monitor mandatory training. ('Fostering Services: National minimum standards', 23.2)

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people using the 'Social care common inspection framework'. This inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000 to assess the effectiveness of the service, how it meets the core functions of the service as set out in legislation, and to consider how well it complies with the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the national minimum standards.

Independent fostering agency details

Unique reference number: SC036583

Registered provider: Ethelbert Specialist Homes Limited

Registered provider address: Ethelbert Specialist Homes Limited, 17 Leigh Road, Ramsgate, Kent CT12 5EU

Responsible individual: Leslie Davenport

Registered manager: Sharon Eddy

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Inspectors

Sarah Olliver, Social Care Inspector

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