

Kent County Council Fostering

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Kent County Council's fostering service comprises four main offices. The county manager is based at the Ashford office and team managers are responsible for the local management of North, South, East and West teams. The service provides children and young people with placements including: emergency; time limited; continuing care; long term; permanent; family and friends; respite care; parent and child; intensive fostering; and treatment care. At the time of this inspection, the fostering service had 1383 individual approved foster carers, supporting 1901 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 **adequate**.

The fostering service is effective. Children and young people are benefiting from holistic care packages which are derived from a multidisciplinary approach. Improved communication between professionals has resulted in changing needs being recognised at an earlier stage. Children and young people are enjoying good outcomes. They are making good progress with regards to their health, educational and social needs. The vast majority are very happy with their foster carers. Feeling happy, valued and cared for are key factors which enable them to look forward with ambition and enthusiasm.

The fostering service is committed to valuing every child and improving their outcomes. Foster carers are passionate about providing the best possible care and they advocate tirelessly for children. Great emphasis is placed upon keeping young people safe alongside providing them with opportunities for personal growth and development. Consultation forums for young people and foster carers are improving in an effort to ensure such voices are heard and influence service provision.

The service benefits from strong leadership and management. Strategic monitoring and planning recognises the strengths and weaknesses of the service. Necessary changes are being implemented in a timely manner. A number of changes remain in

their infancy, with the full impact yet to be fully realised. Areas including training, consultation processes, foster carer recruitment and monitoring mechanisms are recognised by the service as needing to improve further in order to fully meet all of the national minimum standards. The entire service is working tirelessly to support the progress made, with the well-being of Kent's children as its driving force.

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 children and young people communicate their views on all aspects of their care and support. This recommendation is made within the context of further developing consultation forums to enable their views to inform service development (NMS 1.3)
- ensure all foster carers receive training in positive care and control of children. This recommendation is made within the context of the need to review and update guidance for foster carers, with particular regard to the physical restraint policy and procedure (NMS 3.8)
- ensure the care and support provided to children minimises the risk that they will go missing and reduces the risk of harm should the child go missing. This recommendation is made within the context of the service continuing to drive down the number of episodes of children going missing (NMS 5.1)
- ensure foster carers are trained in health and safety issues and have guidelines on their health and safety responsibilities. Avoidable hazards are removed as is consistent with a family home. This recommendation is made within the context of ensuring foster carers' own safe care policies are in line with the service's own guidance, including fire risks and e-safety (NMS 10.3)
- ensure the foster home is inspected annually, without appointment, by the fostering service to make sure that it continues to meet the needs of foster children (NMS 10.5)
- maintain an effective strategy to ensure sufficient foster carers are responsive to current and predicted future demands on the service. This recommendation is made within the context of recruiting a sufficient number of foster carers who can accommodate sibling groups, so as to reduce the need for exemptions (NMS 13.1)
- ensure the fostering panel shall give advice and make recommendations on such other matters or cases as the fostering provider may refer to it. This recommendation is made within the context of updating the panel's terms of reference and seeking its views on additional service matters (NMS 14)
- ensure the manager regularly monitors all records kept by the service to ensure compliance with the service's policies, to identify any concerns about specific incidents and to identify patterns and trends. This recommendation is made

within the context of addressing the variable quality of carer supervision records and ensuring that all service policies and procedures are regularly reviewed and updated. (NMS 25.2)

Outcomes for children and young people

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

Young people benefit from good outcomes. They attribute this to the positive relationships they enjoy with their foster carers. They speak of feeling loved, valued and cared for. Comments include, 'I'm treated as a member of the family', 'this is my home', and, 'my carer calls me her daughter'. Younger children are very happy with their lifestyles and talk of fun activities, hobbies and seeing their friends. Fostering households are good at providing children with individualised care which recognises their unique personalities.

Older children are particularly positive about the stability of their placements. Comments include, 'I am very settled', 'I'm staying here even when I leave for University', and, 'I've grown up with my foster family'. Foster carers demonstrate an enthusiastic commitment to keeping young people with them. They say they receive the support they need from the service and this helps them to see difficult behaviours through. Training includes the use of physical restraint techniques; however, the policy for this has not been updated for some time. Older teenagers benefit from permanence and longevity. One quote fully captures this, 'I would just like to apologise to my carer for all that I've put her through and I would also like to say thank you.'

Children and young people are highly valued by their foster carers. Good quality training and guidance are put into practice. This includes valuing diversity, completing life story work and helping children to make sense of their histories. Children and young people are proud of who they are and they develop emotional resilience. They feel that they are listened to. They refer specifically to their carers who support them to make key decisions and to take appropriate control of their lives. The service offers a wide range of consultation mechanisms in order to capture the views and opinions of the young people. Some are better known than others, and the service is actively advertising these forums to improve upon seeking the views of young people to influence and shape service provision.

Children and young people receive the help and support they need to attend school and reach their full potential. The energy and drive committed to the virtual school over the last two years is paying real dividends. Attendance and attainment figures are rising. Exclusions are on the decline; a 40% reduction is noted this year and the inclusion strategy is seeing more children in mainstream schools. Foster carers are excellent role models; many use their own continued training and development to demonstrate the value of learning to those in their care. A high percentage of children and young people say they enjoy learning because they get the help they need. Individual needs are very clearly captured within personal education plans.

Attending the most appropriate school and remaining settled in a current school is heavily featured when placing a child in a new foster home.

Children and young people enjoy good health. Foster carers assist them to keep and maintain their own health passports. Hence, they become increasingly self-aware and responsible for making informed choices about their own well-being. Foster carers provide healthy meals and access to a wide range of physical activities. They remain sensitive to individual needs arising from a child's religious beliefs, disability and other relevant factors which need to be considered to maintain healthy lifestyles. Additional health care services are well coordinated. Children and young people receive the specific and where necessary, therapeutic interventions, as dictated by their individual needs. Improved monitoring systems effectively track children's developmental milestones, immunisations and ongoing health and medical conditions. Necessary interventions are promptly delivered, thus promoting positive outcomes.

Children and young people enjoy appropriate and meaningful contact with their family members and important others. Older children really value time spent with their friends and are given the appropriate freedom to do this. Individual contact arrangements are specific and clear. Where concerns arise, foster carers and social work staff advocate strongly in support of the children and young people. Practical arrangements are tailored to meet individual needs. Contact sessions are held in a variety of settings ranging from carers' homes to supervised contact centres.

Young people say they receive a good service to prepare them for leaving care. Further education, careers and housing advice is carefully explained in a variety of ways. Young people make informed decisions. Children and young people of all ages give good examples of how their carers assist them to develop independence skills. This aspect is equally driven by foster carers who look after children with disabilities; independence and empowerment is the mantra within this group. Young people also place high value upon enjoying the security of remaining in their foster placement beyond leaving care age.

Quality of service

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

The majority of those involved with the fostering provision express satisfaction with the service they receive. The views of children and young people are overwhelmingly positive, particularly about the quality of the direct care and support they receive from their foster carers. Senior managers are aware of areas of dissatisfaction expressed by some foster carers and staff; a planned and systematic drive towards continued improvement remains ongoing. Foster carers say that matching processes are one key area of recent improvement. Although a number of unplanned endings still occur, these are on the decline and foster carers attribute much of this to better matching processes and the clarity of initial information over the last year. This is endorsed by placing social workers who say they have more time to devote to placement planning due to recent restructuring within their own department.

Excellent systems reliably inform the ongoing foster carer recruitment campaign. The service knows where the gaps are and delivers a targeted approach based upon its own high quality data. Children and young people from minority ethnic groups are currently under represented by the number of fostering households available. This aspect is being keenly pursued, as well as households able to accommodate parent and child placements and sibling groups. Children and young people are being effectively supported by foster carers who possess skills, experience and growing expertise. Such aspects are further complemented by increasingly joined-up working. Placing social workers value foster carers as professional colleagues. Comments include, 'the quality of the reports she produced for court was excellent', and, 'they are an exceptional family to work with'.

Newer foster carers say they are happy with their own initial assessment processes. A backlog of historic delays led to dissatisfaction. This has been addressed. Current foster carers now speak of realistic timescales being met which gives them the introduction and preparation they need. Representatives from all aspects of the fostering service, including the wide variety of the placements offered, give prospective foster carers plenty of good quality information to consider. Comments include, 'I really valued the information about caring for a child with special needs and knew early on that I wanted to do this', and, 'the preparation for being a carer in the treatment fostering team was second to none.'

The wide variety of placements offered by the service increases the likelihood of placing young people successfully and appropriately. Children with disabilities receive the care and support they need from well-trained carers. Families value the respite provision of the short breaks team. They are assured their child receives appropriate and stimulating care from consistent carers who get to know individual families well. Specialist provision, including treatment foster care and therapeutic re-parenting have again successfully received certification from the multidimensional treatment foster care programme. Children and young people receive intensive interventions which successfully reintegrate them with their own families, independent living, or stable long-term placements. Placing social workers commend recent changes, including a busy period for the commissioning team which enables them to place within the private sector if this is deemed the most suitable placement. Comments include, 'I am able to really focus upon finding the best possible placement', and, 'our focus is upon the quality of the care provided, not the cost.'

Foster carers say their training opportunities continue to improve. The percentage of those having completed the Children's Workforce Development Council's induction training is higher than the national average. Beyond this, current carers confirm their ongoing training opportunities are routinely negotiated and monitored through regular supervision meetings with their supervising social workers. The service is within its second tranche of delivering 'Keep' training which carers say, 'has really enhanced my skills' and 'not only benefits me but the children I look after as well.' Foster carers understand the service's requirement for them to attend a specific amount of training each year. Experienced carers have spoken about issues concerning repetitive courses. Others mention childcare difficulties and the need for

training specific to disability issues. A foster carer training steering group is tackling such concerns. Creative approaches are now providing better opportunities and include Diploma courses, one-off specific sessions to meet individual needs and e-learning facilities. Comments from foster carers include, 'the education training gave me the confidence to challenge the school', and, 'the attachment stuff is excellent, it really makes you think from the child's point of view.'

The fostering panel provides a robust quality assurance role and function in terms of assessments, reviews, allegations and complaints. However, it is not being fully utilised in terms of seeking the panel's view on additional fostering matters and good practice queries. Owing to the size of the county, four panels operate from a central list which includes members from a wide range of professional and lay backgrounds. Members are experienced as well as new. Independent status is well represented. Detailed minutes of panel meetings demonstrate active and robust debates which lead to solid recommendations. Some panel members have received more direction and training than others. However, this is recognised within the context of ongoing organisational restructure. A new decision maker, for each area panel is about to commence and the service views this as a timely opportunity to review the panel's overall role and function.

The use of exemptions is relatively high compared against other local authorities. Not all sibling groups have been placed together, despite recommendations to do this. Fostering households exceeding the approved number of children are doing so to keep siblings together, whereby they are placed within households already looking after other unrelated fostered children. Such situations are being robustly monitored and carer recruitment campaigns actively seek to address this situation.

Safeguarding children and young people

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

The arrangements for safeguarding children and young people are adequate. The authority received an inadequate rating for safeguarding from its Safeguarding and Looked After Children inspection in November 2010. This has resulted in a structured and targeted approach which is driving and achieving improved safeguarding practices throughout the authority. Good links are established with the Local Safeguarding Children Board and much interagency working is becoming embedded. Good examples include partnership working with the police, and extensive dialogue with schools. The ongoing safety and protection of looked after children is high on everyone's agenda.

Children and young people are protected from potentially unsafe adults. Approval checks conducted on prospective carers and members of their households are robust and thorough. The same stringent checking systems are also conducted on staff members, who cannot commence their employment until such checks are satisfactorily completed. Foster carers say they are suitably equipped with the training and guidance they need to keep young people safe from harm. Guidance and training is provided in dealing with difficult and challenging behaviours but the

policy guidance on the use of physical restraint interventions has not been reviewed for some time.

Children and young people say they feel safe with their foster carers. Comments include, 'I can talk to them about anything', 'they look after me really well', and, 'nothing bad has happened since living with them.' Foster carers refer to informative training, guidance and support which equips them to deal with concerns. They fully understand their roles and responsibilities. Good quality record keeping is a key aspect of training, as is recognising signs and symptoms of potential abuse. Foster carers pass on concerns without delay; this includes accidents and illnesses. Hospital accident admissions are robustly monitored through links between safeguarding liaison and looked after children nurses. Concerns requiring follow-up investigations are swiftly communicated.

Children and young people say they are effectively protected against bullying. One child states, 'my carers went straight to my school after I told them and it was sorted out really quickly.' Foster carers receive training and guidance which highlights the potential within the home, school and increasing sources such as the internet and social networking sites. Children and young people live in safe homes which are appropriately secure. Foster carers implement their own safe care policies which reflect the safety needs of the entire household. Some lack the necessary detail in terms of fire risks and e-safety, and not all households have received an unannounced visit from their supervising social worker within the last year.

The majority of foster carers say they have been well supported following a complaint or allegation. Peer mentoring schemes and access to independent support during such times is a relatively new venture which is receiving positive feedback. All allegations against foster carers are monitored by the panel and carers are invited to attend to reflect on how their own experience was managed. One referral was made in the last year to the Independent Review Mechanism and no recommendation was made for the service.

Children and young people are making more formal complaints this year. Consultation forums for children and young people have been keenly advertised and driven over the last two years, whereby young people are actively encouraged and supported to express their views and opinions. Foster carers say, 'I want him to say this isn't good enough if that's the case', and, 'she has the right to challenge and demand more.' Such developments are encouraging; however, a good number of foster carers remain unaware of the developments of advocacy services and the children in care council. A number of children are at risk of going unheard as a result. Furthermore, although foster carers maintain good quality diary records which capture children's low level concerns, this information is not being fully captured from their supervision visits. This is a missed opportunity for such issues to impact upon improving the service provision before more formal processes become necessary.

Significant energy is having the desired effect upon driving down the occurrences of young people being missing from care. Although current figures for the authority are

still higher than the national average, they continue to reduce every year. Additional factors, which impact upon the data provided, include a high number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people who elect to leave their assessment centres and fostering placements early on. Such young people remain on the authority's system until they reach the age of 18 with emphasis placed upon finding them. Recording mechanisms have significantly improved and the majority of instances reflect young people are missing for no longer than one night. Protocols with the police are clear and effective. Foster carers understand their role. They quickly notify the fostering service and police, conduct local searches and maintain ongoing contact wherever possible. This is often through text messaging, often the young person's preferred method of communication. One young person says, 'my carer texted me every day for weeks, it was the first time I felt really cared for, so I came home.' Risk assessments and individual protocols are improving in terms of quality and effectiveness. Children and young people are actively encouraged to cope with their difficulties and issues in safer ways.

Leadership and management

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

The service is effectively managed and staffed by people who possess the skills, experience and qualifications required. Recent developments to secure permanent senior management posts are already achieving a positive impact. A clear sense of purpose and direction dedicated to improving outcomes for children and young people is demonstrated by staff across all disciplines. Children and young people value the service they receive and have a very high regard for their foster carers. Comments include, 'I give mine 10 out of 10', and, 'I wouldn't want to live anywhere else.' An informative website, Statement of Purpose and young people's guides provide clear information about the services young people can expect to receive. The establishment of consultation forums, including those for foster carers' own children, although in their infancy, are also proving effective.

Multidisciplinary working is now an integral feature of planning and monitoring the support provided for children and young people. A mutual respect is demonstrated across all service personnel, and foster carers are increasingly confident and competent in the decisions they can make for those in their care. Children and young people are particularly positive about this aspect. They say it is more akin to living in an ordinary family where you do not have to ask a social worker for permission to do things. Integrated teams which bring together health, education and social services are speeding up interventions and enabling focus to be placed upon proactive planning for children and young people.

The percentage of children and young people who are placed with foster carers is higher than the national average. Good retention and an active recruitment campaign see the number of approved fostering households across the county increase year on year. The service is acutely aware of the challenges faced by more children entering the care system each year. To this end, emphasis is also being

placed upon securing clear contractual arrangements with private sector providers. Successful current arrangements include specialist provision for unaccompanied asylum seekers. Robust monitoring ensures that the vast majority of children placed outside of the service's own provision are in services judged by Ofsted to be good or outstanding.

The majority of carers and staff feel well supported by the service. Foster carers are generally satisfied with the content and frequency of their supervision visits. Records of these are variable in terms of quality and this is being monitored by line managers. Carers value support groups and a wider range of training provision than they had historically. Topics including payments and respite provision receive variable satisfaction levels; these are being explored through supervision and focus groups. Staff say they receive good, often excellent levels of support from their line managers. Caseloads have become more manageable and this has been heavily influenced through the introduction of social work assistants. Their input is also well received by foster carers, although not all households currently benefit from this helpful role.

Further strategic plans are still to be implemented. Staff and carers are kept abreast of all such proposals. The decision to implement changes gradually and methodically demonstrates the service's desire to allow key changes to embed rather than overwhelm the service by introducing a range of changes at once. Good use of pilot schemes across regional offices is proving to be an effective tool. New data analysis systems are ready for implementation; senior managers are driving improvements with regards to learning from reliable sources of information. The service is focused upon making improvements. Senior managers understand the service's strengths and weaknesses. A clear action plan is entering its secondary phase because initial work has been completed. The five recommendations regarding recruitment, health and safety checks, staffing levels, health needs, pocket money and carers' diaries made from the last fostering inspection of July 2008 have been implemented.

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.