

Heath Farm Children's Services

Marlowe House, Chaucer Business Park, Whitstable, Kent CT5 3FE

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

Heath Farm Children's Services is a privately owned independent fostering agency which currently has 88 active fostering households, and there are 105 children and young people in placement. The agency provides short-, medium- and long-term foster placements for children looked after and has access to an educational provision and therapeutic services. There are two respite houses available, along with a contact suite, day care and transport services.

Inspection dates: 10 to 14 September 2018

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account **good**

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

The effectiveness of leaders and managers **requires improvement to be good**

The independent fostering agency provides effective services that meet the requirements for good.

Date of last inspection: 16 February 2015

Overall judgement at last inspection: outstanding

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency is good because:

- Children and young people make good progress. They are placed with foster carers who are committed to meeting their everyday needs.
- Gathering and acting on the views of the children and young people, when appropriate, are embedded in agency practice. Children are encouraged to develop skills for adulthood, and they thrive.
- The therapeutic support that is provided by the agency supports the emotional development of many children and young people.
- A detailed system is in place for recruiting and approving new foster carers. The support and training that are available to foster carers are of good quality.
- The staff and foster carers have made the safeguarding of children a priority for the agency. Methods of intervention are sound and are fully resourced, resulting in safer environments.
- New leadership arrangements are in place, and there is an appropriate action plan to improve the quality of service.
- Professionals have positive experiences of the agency and say that the quality of placements is good.

The independent fostering agency's areas for development:

- All children and young people between the ages of five and 16 should have a personal education plan in place.
- Some foster carers are not documenting physical interventions properly. Some foster carers do not fully understand what should be classified as 'missing from care', for some children and young people.
- The managers need to ensure that there are sufficient qualified staff employed at the agency.
- All significant events should be reported to Ofsted.
- Panel minutes should be written clearly, reflecting all the queries that are raised by panel members.
- Agency records, specifically in relation to allegations and complaints, need to improve in order to detail the actions undertaken by managers. These records should be monitored by managers for quality assurance.

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
The fostering service provider must take all reasonable steps to ensure that restraint is used on a child only when it is necessary to prevent injury to the child or other persons, or serious damage to property. (Regulation 13(c))	26/01/2019
The fostering service provider must ensure that there is a sufficient number of suitably qualified, competent and experienced persons working for the purposes of the fostering service, having regard to the size of the fostering service, its statement of purpose, and the numbers and needs of the children placed by it. (Regulation 19(a))	26/01/2019
If any of the events listed in column 1 of the table in Schedule 7 takes place in relation to a fostering agency, the registered person must without delay notify the persons or bodies indicated in respect of the event in column 2 of the table. (Regulation 36(1))	26/01/2019

Recommendations

- Foster carers know and implement what the fostering service and the responsible authority's policy is in relation to children going missing. (NMS 5.2)
- The panel chair ensures written minutes of panel meetings are accurate and clearly cover the key issues and views expressed by panel members and record the reasons for its recommendations. (NMS 14.7)
- As soon as possible after an investigation into a foster carer is concluded, their approval as suitable to foster is reviewed. There is a clear policy framework which outlines the circumstances in which foster carer should be removed as one of the fostering service provider's approved foster carers, in the interests of the safety or welfare of children. This is available to foster carers. (NMS 22.8)
- 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. Immediate action is taken to address any issue raised by the monitoring. (NMS 25.2)
- The child care plan, through the Personal Education Plan (PEP), will identify what needs to happen for a looked after child to enable them to fulfil their potential, and should reflect any other education plans such as a statement of special needs or Individual Education Plan (IEP). (The Children Act 1989 volume 4: 3: 106)

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Many of the children and young people with the agency have made good progress. This is despite procedural flaws and unsatisfactory record keeping by a management team that is no longer in place. The children and young people who have been with their foster carers for a considerable amount of time develop positive attachments to them.

The wishes and feelings of children are known and understood, including those who are non-verbal or have difficulty in communicating. The foster carers are actively involved in children's day-to-day planning, and they challenge professionals when decisions are not in the best interests of children.

The children and young people are encouraged and supported to attend mainstream or alternative educational provision. Unfortunately, half of the children between the age of five and 16 do not have a personal education plan on file. This reduces the ability of foster carers to fully support children's educational goals and progress.

The therapeutic support that is provided by the agency is a helpful resource for children. Children benefit emotionally from prompt referrals, leading to weekly therapy sessions with a therapist who is attached to the agency. A young person spoke positively about the therapeutic support that he had received, saying that it had helped him to become more aware of his own issues.

Children participate in the activities that they are interested in. They are supported by carers to pursue skills that help them to develop their independence, and are encouraged to develop positive relationships with others in the community.

Children and young people enjoy relationships that are crucial to their identity and culture through the agency contact centre. The agency is proactive in assisting children and young people to spend time with their birth families. The agency contact suite is utilised to provide a safe, consistent environment in which children and their families may be supported.

The agency's process for recruiting and training new foster carers is well organised. At the point of initial enquiry, potential applicants are promptly contacted and undergo a detailed assessment before being presented to panel. The training, support and development standards for foster carers are completed within the first year of approval. Foster carers are then provided with good-quality training, consistent feedback through supervision and annual review.

Several foster carers are proud to be part of the Mockingbird project. The nationally funded pilot programme was first rolled out at the agency three years ago. Since then, four hubs have been established, with experienced foster carers acting as the leads. Each hub allows at least 10 foster carers to arrange for their children to access respite care consistently. Foster carers describe a hub as small community

within the agency where they are supported by others to understand the difficulties faced by foster carers in caring for children and young people.

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

Foster carers endeavour to keep children and young people safe while in their care. The foster carers' safeguarding knowledge is based on training received at regular intervals. Essential documents such as risk assessments and safe care plans provide foster carers with a helpful reference point and guidance about the individual needs of children.

Members of staff are assigned the roles of specialists in key areas such as child sexual exploitation, missing from care and radicalisation. This provides additional support for foster carers. Supervising social workers arrange multi-agency meetings for those children who regularly place themselves at risk. This helps foster carers to develop strategies to keep these children safe.

Young people who are at risk of radicalisation or extremism receive proactive support. One supervising social worker has established links by being actively involved in the area 'Prevent' strategy. This has proven to be an effective programme for young people who are exposed to extreme views that may not be in their best interests.

The agency's records show a high number of children who have been reported as missing from care. The number of incidents is slightly exaggerated, due to children being classified as missing although their whereabouts are known or they are merely late to return. Foster carers do not always confidently distinguish between actual 'missing' episodes and late returns. On those occasions when children or young people had appropriately been identified as missing, foster carers had correctly adhered to the agency's 'missing from care' protocol.

Young people who are exposed to or are at risk of child sexual exploitation receive good support. Their history is well known to both staff and foster carers prior to a placement commencing. A detailed approach to managing such risks is led by the supervising social worker. This includes liaison with other professionals and attendance at regular meetings. Foster carers utilise well their relationship with children to monitor and promote their well-being.

The physical interventions used by foster carers are not correctly recorded. On more than one occasion, a hold was used on a child without a description of the type of hold used being recorded. Incomplete records make it impossible for the agency to properly scrutinise the intervention to judge whether it was undertaken safely and appropriately.

Recruitment of new employees is good. The safer recruitment practices used by the agency consist of verifying an applicant's background and reviewing their employment history.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: requires improvement to be good

The leadership and management at the agency have changed since the last inspection. The agency has been acquired by a larger registered fostering organisation. The previous management team is no longer in place, and a new manager was appointed two weeks prior to the inspection.

In the recent monitoring report, senior managers successfully identified the shortfalls in the agency. Most of these areas were shown during the inspection to require swifter attention.

The changes in management arrangements have resulted in several staff leaving the agency. This has caused some supervising social workers to have high caseloads and led to a loss of morale in others. The remaining staff are dedicated to their role and are appropriately qualified. They possess first-hand knowledge of the children and foster carers, and are committed to their roles and responsibilities.

The managers have failed to notify Ofsted of significant events that have occurred, due to a complicated and confusing system of reporting. This has led to a lack of transparency in dealings with the regulatory body.

Allegations against foster carers and complaints that have been reported to the agency have been insufficiently documented. The agency has addressed carers' practice that is deemed to be unacceptable and has responded to concerns raised about the agency. However, the records have been haphazardly maintained, making it difficult to understand the response by managers. In addition, managers have been slow to review carers for possible de-registration.

The agency panel is good. A senior member of the agency has been appointed as agency decision-maker. The members offer a variety of perspectives and knowledge when making recommendations for approval or review of foster carers. The panel is prepared with appropriate questions, based on the assessments. However, some panel minutes do not always sufficiently demonstrate how the questions were followed up before being finalised and signed off.

Professionals are positive about the service provided by the agency. Commissioning officers speak highly of the agency, including its ability to provide good placements with well-trained foster carers. Placing social workers say that the communication with the supervising social workers is very good and that the best interests of the children and young people are always a priority.

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people. Inspectors considered the quality of work and the difference made to the lives of children and young people. They watched how professional staff work with children and young people and each other and discussed the effectiveness of help and care provided. Wherever possible, they talked to children and young people and their families. In addition, the inspectors have tried to understand what the independent fostering agency knows about how well it is performing, how well it is doing and what difference it is making for the children and young people whom it is trying to help, protect and look after.

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: SC060386

Registered provider: Heath Farm Children's Services

Registered provider address: Marlowe House, Chaucer Business Park,
Whitstable, Kent CT5 3FE

Responsible individual: John Keane

Registered manager: post vacant

Telephone number: 01233 712030

Email address: enquiries@heathfarm.org

Inspectors

James Harmon, social care inspector
Amanda Harvey, social care inspector



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