

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 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, 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 and young people. At the time of this inspection, 34 fostering households were approved, with 58 children and young people in placement.

Inspection dates: 22 to 26 January 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	outstanding

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

Date of last inspection: 26 September 2014

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency is good because:

- The registered manager inspires all who work for the agency to develop their individual skills and strengths. This successfully adds value to the in-house resources which support children, young people and foster carers effectively.
- Managers, staff and foster carers are child focused and aspire for those in their care to achieve the best they can.
- Children and young people feel safe and valued by their foster carers and the agency staff. They develop a real sense of belonging and so feel part of the family.
- Risk management is a strength of the agency. Staff and carers demonstrate a very good understanding of the needs and vulnerabilities of children placed with the agency; they are risk aware but not risk averse. This attitude provides children and young people with age-appropriate opportunities and supports them to develop essential life skills.
- Foster carers benefit from comprehensive support and training that equip them to provide care for children.
- Children and young people enjoy good health and do well in education through the proactive and effective support of their carers.

The independent fostering agency's areas for development:

- The work of the agency is not always fully reflected in the supporting documentation. For example, there is insufficient detail in some of the strategies in risk management plans; and how cultural, ethnic and religious needs are to be met is not always included in the care plans.
- Action and development plans do not routinely include clear targets and timescales.

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

Recommendations

- Foster carers actively safeguard and promote the welfare of foster children. (NMS 4.2) In particular, ensure that the strategies outlined in risk management plans contain sufficient detail.
- Foster carers make positive relationships with children, generate a culture of openness and trust and are aware of and alert to any signs or symptoms that might indicate a child is at risk of harm. (NMS 4.3) In particular, provide training in gang culture.
- 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) In particular, ensure that action and development plans include clear targets and timescales.
- Children are provided with personalised care that meets their needs and promotes all aspects of their individual identity. (NMS 2.1) In particular, ensure that strategies to address needs arising from children's identity are specified in their care plans.

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Children and young people thrive in the security of their relationships with their foster carers. Children and young people become part of the family and feel a sense of belonging. This is heard in their warm descriptions of those who they live with and seen in their interactions. One young person seeking asylum said of the long-term placement, 'It feels like home'. Another young person said of their foster family, 'They accept you for who you are.' Another proudly showed photos of events that firmly establish her as part of the family group.

Children's and young people's voices are central to the work of the agency. Foster carers and staff regularly seek children's wishes and feelings. There are plans to formalise some aspects of this through the member of staff responsible for participation. Children and young people spoken with confirm that they have opportunities to express any concerns confidentially. There have been very few complaints made by the children. Where a complaint has been made, the response is thorough and answers the concerns expressed, to the complainant's satisfaction.

Foster carers value education and successfully communicate this to the children so that the vast majority engage effectively and make good progress from their starting points. For some, this has meant a successful move from specialist to mainstream education.

Children and young people talk enthusiastically about the wide range of activities that support their interests, as well as those that give them new experiences and opportunities, including holidays at home and abroad. Agency activity days and respite arrangements support the development of friendships between children and young people, which they value. This in turn helps them learn how to make and sustain friendships in other social groups. These opportunities provided by foster families contribute effectively to the development of children's and young people's self-esteem.

Foster carers have a good understanding of their role in equipping children and young people with the skills they will need as adults. They encourage them to learn self-care skills commensurate with their age and ability: for example, small children are praised when they help tidy up, and young people are learning to manage money. Foster carers, working in partnership with other professionals, strike a balance between keeping children and young people safe and developing and practising their knowledge and understanding about risk. This equips children and young people for the future and enables them to keep safe when in the community.

There are some young adults in staying-put arrangements, and the agency supports these effectively.

Children and young people enjoy excellent support from foster carers to improve their health. The role of the health promotion worker is valued by children and foster

carers, both for the direct work and the guidance and information offered.

Foster carers are child focused and provide children and young people with good-quality support through the ups and downs arising from the impact of their life experiences and traumas. The wider organisation also offers children and young people access to therapists, by separate negotiation. Staff advocate successfully on behalf of children where there have been delays in meeting an identified specialist need, and there have been occasions when the organisation has funded this.

The agency is vigilant in sharing with foster carers all the referral information it receives and actively chases additional information and supporting paperwork. This underpins the successful matching of children and young people with families that are well placed to meet their needs. Children, young people and professionals spoke positively about the warmth and welcoming attitude of foster carers and the agency. Children and young people benefit from moves into and out of families that are well managed. Where there have been unplanned endings and a child or young person is able to move to another fostering household within the agency, the opportunities are taken for children and young people to learn how to rebuild relationships.

Foster carers teach children and young people how to express their wishes and feelings safely, rather than through challenging behaviour. Children and young people develop an increasing awareness of and ability to manage difficult feelings and emotions. This is achieved through positive relationships with their carers and the consistent, caring maintenance of boundaries. A social worker commented very positively on the skills of the foster carers in doing direct work with a young person about how to manage their responses.

Foster carers are sensitive to and mindful of individual needs and treat children and young people with dignity and respect. Children and young people said that their cultural, ethnic and religious needs are understood and met by their foster carers. This is not always fully reflected in the care plans seen.

Children and young people engage in contact as outlined in their care plans. The agency makes good use of resources within the wider organisation to promote contact. The combination of the new contact centre and dedicated sessional workers providing consistent support provides the best opportunity to make it a positive experience for all. Where children and young people are not happy with the arrangement, or staff have a concern, they raise this appropriately and secure change by agreement.

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

Children and young people placed with this agency feel safe and are safe. One young person said, 'They keep me out of trouble!' All those working for the agency understand that safeguarding is central to the whole fostering task and their individual roles and responsibilities in this. Children and young people have trusting relationships with their carers. They are confident that carers will take action in the light of any concerns they raise with them.

Foster carers know how to respond to and report any safeguarding concerns. The agency is proactive in sharing information with relevant people promptly and following up where necessary. There are limited instances of children and young people going missing. When this happens, foster carers know what to do and are supported in this by the out-of-hours support staff, who know them and the young people they care for. Foster carers understand the risks associated with children and young people going missing and are alert to the signs and indicators of many of the wider risks. Foster carers have not yet had gang culture training. They take action where necessary and notify the relevant people promptly. Staff are proactive in seeking return home interviews for young people and are prepared to offer these, when the placing authority has not responded in a timely way, with a member of staff who has had formal training in conducting these interviews.

The team has a very good understanding of risk and risk management and communicates this effectively to its foster carers. Staff and carers strive to involve children and young people in developing their risk management plans. This strategy has worked well for many children. Although staff and carers know and act effectively on the risk management plans, some written strategies lack sufficient detail.

Foster carers are very appreciative of the informed, sensitive approach of the team that supports them in enabling children and young people to take age-appropriate risks. Those working for the agency are risk aware but not risk averse. Staff and foster carers work together and advocate for children and young people to manage risk safely, but not in isolation, as it is a shared responsibility. This helps children develop the skills they will need throughout their lives, as they grow up, through adolescence and into adulthood. The staff-run child's safety group aims to develop and build children's thinking about how to keep themselves safe and the role of others in this. Children engage and participate well and demonstrate a good understanding of the messages delivered.

The agency uses an approved behaviour management method that forms part of the foster carers' toolkit in looking after children and young people. The training for this is delivered by a suitably trained foster carer. Other carers said that this perspective is invaluable. The training places an overarching emphasis on strategies to de-escalate challenges. Foster carers are also trained to hold a child if this is absolutely necessary to ensure their safety. Such instances are infrequent. When they do happen, foster carers know how to report this, and this includes recording children's views on the incident. Foster carers apply sanctions infrequently. They ensure that any they give are appropriate, and they record these. The allocated supervising social worker and manager monitor foster carers' use of behaviour management actions effectively.

Foster carers benefit from training delivered by a Child Exploitation Online Protection ambassador on the staff team. Foster carers apply this training at home in promoting children's and young people's safe and age-appropriate use of social media and the internet.

The agency implements sound recruitment practice with those who work for the agency.

Children live in safe and secure houses. This is assured by the agency annual health and safety checks of carers' homes by the reviewing officer, who also meets with children placed, in her additional role as participation officer. Unannounced visits take place as required and the supervising social worker also sees children alone, giving them another opportunity to talk to a trusted professional.

The agency response to any allegations against carers is sensitive, with needs of children placed at the forefront of the risk assessed decision-making process. It is proportionate, child focused and objective. The agency has good links with placing authorities and has worked with the host authority designated person when necessary.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: outstanding

The registered manager is established and effective in her role; she has an inspiring and inclusive management style that her team embraces and responds enthusiastically to. As a management team, they are all committed to ensuring that foster carers receive the level of support they need to provide children and young people with care that enables them to fulfil their potential.

All staff of the agency know the children very well and work collaboratively in their best interests. They can talk meaningfully and proudly about the progress that each child has made and celebrate all their achievements. These are routinely published in an in-house magazine. All staff working for the agency are invested in their contribution and look to add value to what they do and how they do it. Foster carers and children benefit from this, for example an administrator was made aware that a child's photo could not be included in the magazine, so she made an individualised copy for the child. Supervising social workers have very manageable caseloads. This enables them to deliver higher support where this is necessary and also to develop specialisms that inform and increase the range of skills and knowledge across the team, underpinned by relevant training.

Foster carers feel that the agency values and invests in them. They are very complimentary about the role of their supervising social workers in enabling them to look after the children they foster. They provide numerous examples of tailored, practical and emotional support that reflects the individual needs and situations of themselves and the children they are looking after.

The manager models and promotes a learning environment. Staff and foster carers report that they feel listened to and can give many examples of how their feedback, both made voluntarily and actively sought, has been implemented in practice. The manager ensures that monitoring of the work of the agency is effective and this informs the development plans. For example, the new contact centre, which provides a homely, domestic environment for families to meet in, opened as a result of the vision and commitment of the manager and her team with the support of

senior managers. The manager can talk about the actions and targets she and the team are working towards, but the written plans are broad brush and do not reflect the targets and timescales outlined in discussion.

Staff are very well supported within a clear framework of supervision, appraisals and team meetings. Staff have welcomed the move to a new office. The layout promotes strong communication, informal peer support and responsive case discussion. This also ensures that all know what is happening at any given time and provides current, informed guidance and support to foster carers, which they really appreciate. Sessional staff working directly with children and/or supporting contact also benefit from regular group supervision.

The matching of children with foster carers is child focused, and the success of this is seen in the stability of the placements. The introduction of a framework to demonstrate the matching considerations has proved useful and also highlights any need for additional support to fill a gap. Staff monitor the stability of placements and strive to identify strategies that may support and enable the placement to continue. They also acknowledge where a move is necessary and work with the local authority to achieve a planned move in the child's best interests, sometimes within the agency.

The agency has developed strong partnerships with placing authorities and ensures that they work together to meet the needs of the children placed. This is described by one placing social worker as 'excellent partnership working' and this includes challenging placing authorities appropriately. The team takes a pride in effective communication that promotes the needs of the child. One commissioner described 'excellent communication'. Another was very complimentary about how the agency used the resources of the wider organisation to support children and young people effectively.

Foster carers' records show their love for and pride in the children placed with them. They are meaningful and provide children and young people with a detailed history of their progress, interests, activities and achievements.

Foster carers' supervision and support is of a very high standard and strikes a good balance between looking at the needs of children and the skills and resources that foster carers need to meet these. The foster carers' annual reviewing system is strong and actively promotes the engagement and involvement of a range of people with an interest in the well-being of the child. Foster carers and staff benefit from an excellent training programme. The courses available are designed to meet mandatory requirements and the emerging needs and interests of all. Staff develop specialisms and are equipped to deliver a range of relevant courses to foster carers. In addition, they have access to courses run by external trainers and others delivered online. Carers achieve the training, support and development standards for foster care within the required timescale.

The agency has maintained a steady number of fostering families, with the number of approvals keeping pace with the number of resignations. The team is working in line with the recently reviewed recruitment strategy with a view to increase the

number of fostering households.

The established panel is led by an experienced and knowledgeable chair. The panel is thorough in its analysis of assessments and all annual foster carer reviews. The panel performs its quality assurance function through regular feedback and an annual report which support the development of the service.

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 differences 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

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Inspector(s)

Maire Atherton, social care inspector



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