

Hythe House Support

Hythe House Support Ltd
59 Staplehurst Road, Sittingbourne, Kent ME10 2NY
Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

Hythe House Support Limited is an independent fostering agency, registered since 2003. The agency provides permanent long-term, short-term and emergency foster care and parent and child placements. The provider offers fostering services for children who have emotional and/or behavioural difficulties and/or mild learning difficulties, and access to education in therapy, counselling and nursery services within the same organisation.

At the time of this inspection, the fostering service had 18 carer households providing care for 24 children and young people.

Inspection dates: 9 to 12 May 2017

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: 9 December 2013

Overall judgement at last inspection: requires improvement

Enforcement action since last inspection

None

Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency is good because:

- Those who work for the agency are committed to the community and family ethos as set out in the statement of purpose and successfully communicate this to children, staff and partners.
- Children feel safe and valued by their carers and the agency staff. They build strong relationships, develop secure attachments and a sense of belonging. They achieve permanency in many cases.
- Children learn how to express their feelings safely and, as a result, can participate in the activities and groups of their choice. Carers provide them with opportunities for memorable first experiences.
- Children enjoy good health and do well in education through the proactive and effective support of their carers.
- Carers benefit from comprehensive support and training that equips them to care for children well.
- Staff and carers demonstrate a very good understanding of the needs and vulnerabilities of children placed with the agency. This knowledge is used to manage risks to children effectively, taking their age and ability into account.

The independent fostering agency's areas for development:

- The panel lacks critical thinking in the evaluation of assessments and in the chair's annual report. There is a lack of clarity about individual members' roles and responsibilities. The central list does not provide sufficient diversity of experience or background. Panel training has not taken place for some time.
- The manager's monitoring and reports are insufficiently evaluative and do not include behaviour management measures used by carers.
- There is a shortfall in the provision of supervision to independent social workers.
- Records in respect of some aspects of recruitment, health and safety checks of the carers' homes, and learning from feedback and complaints, lack detail.
- The agency is reticent in encouraging children to explore their identity.

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 ensure that the fostering panel has sufficient members, and that individual members have between them the experience and expertise necessary, to effectively discharge the functions of the panel. In particular, clarify roles and responsibilities and provide refresher training to ensure that all members are fully equipped to undertake these duties. (Regulation 23(1)(7))	31 July 2017

Recommendations

- Ensure that the manager regularly monitors all records kept by the service (including behaviour management) 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 issues raised by this monitoring. (NMS 25.2)
- The fostering service can demonstrate, including from written records, that it consistently follows good recruitment practice, and all applicable current statutory requirements and guidance, in foster carer selection and staff and panel member recruitment. This includes CRB checks. All personnel responsible for the recruitment and selection of staff are trained in, understand and operate these good practices. (NMS 19.2) In particular, request the use of headed paper or company stamps on employer references, and fully evidence verification of the reason for leaving previous positions that involved work with children or vulnerable adults.
- 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) In particular, ensure that records show when required actions arising from health and safety checks are completed.
- All staff, volunteers and the registered person are properly managed and supported and understand to whom they are accountable. (NMS 24.2) In particular, provide regular supervision to independent social workers to ensure a robust evaluation and appraisal of their work.
- The wishes, feelings and views of children and those significant to them are taken into account in monitoring foster carers and developing the fostering service.

(NMS 1.7) In particular, further develop systems for recording learning from feedback and informal complaints.

- Children are provided with personalised care that meets their needs and promotes all aspects of their individual identity. (NMS 2.1) In particular, develop practice in respect of children's understanding and appreciation of their heritage.

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Children and young people develop secure relationships with their carers. Carers and staff know the children well, and this is noted by professionals working with the children. One headteacher wrote of a child, 'X has begun to make attachments, a joy to see.' Children and young people become part of the family and feel a sense of belonging, both with their foster family and the agency. One young person said, 'I love living at X's – she's awesome. I feel like I belong here.'

From a secure base, children enjoy a range of experiences, including some memorable firsts, which they talk about excitedly. Carers tailor activities to individual interests and abilities. These include swimming, boys' brigade, sewing club, karate lessons, a visit to the seaside, holidays in this country and abroad, and a trip to Harry Potter World, which a child described as 'one of the best days of my life'. Carers also make contact with local faith groups that meet children's needs or expressed wishes.

The agency has an established pattern of respite care, which children regard as a holiday, with a designated family. They talk positively about their experiences, including the opportunity to be with another child in a similar situation. The planning and monitoring of these stays is a strength of the agency, characterised by phased introductions leading to a 'sleepover' and thorough information sharing.

The agency maintains a strong focus on children's views and sees these as vital in the agency's work. The carers individually and the agency itself prioritise seeking children's wishes and feelings and will carefully explain to children why things happen, or not, in accordance with these. The agency engages with children through an activity day during the school holidays, most recently using this to go roller skating. There have been no formal complaints made by the children. Those spoken with are clear that they have ample opportunity to express any concerns confidentially to agency staff.

Carers inspire children to be ambitious for themselves and support and promote education effectively. All children are in full-time education. When there are delays in securing a full-time placement, the agency is proactive in supporting children and carers through the provision of tuition and activities with a support worker. This has enabled children to successfully return to mainstream education or move to schools more suited to their needs. An independent reviewing officer said of carers, 'The information they provided was in tune with the feelings of the child.' A headteacher wrote, 'Since moving... we have seen a remarkable improvement in his well-being and educational progress. He is communicating with us and it is almost hard to stop him speaking.' One education professional described a carer as 'an exceptional communicator'.

Carers encourage children to learn self-care skills according to their age and ability. A five-year-old proudly showed his tidy clothes in a drawer, communicating a real sense of personal achievement. A health professional reflected on a carer's particular sensitivity in the support of a child with a personal issue and the steady development of age-appropriate awareness. Young people learn to use public transport to travel independently, accompanied at first by carers until they feel sufficiently confident to go alone, with back-up arrangements in place. The agency encourages carers to record

young people's progress and this is well evidenced. Young people learn many basic skills, such as cooking and budgeting, but also making their own appointments, learning to contact agencies to sort out queries, such as mobile phone bills, job hunting and college applications.

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

Children enjoy excellent support from carers to improve their health. Carers proactively seek professional advice and advocate on behalf of the children to good effect. A health professional said of a carer, 'She is focused and understands children's current health needs. She is keen to learn, researches, asks questions and attends the many appointments. The agency provides good advice and guidance.' An independent reviewing officer noted the carer's prompt identification of an issue, for which the child now has a specialist appointment. Professionals from all disciplines spoke positively about the improvements in the presentation of children. For example, 'X looked a different child within 24 hours [of arriving in a foster household].'

Children value their time with the independent therapists contracted by the agency. They are able to build strong relationships with them, working within the child's frame of reference and pace. Therapists comment positively on the progress children and young people have made, for example in the development of social skills and an increased willingness to look at the past. Staff advocate successfully on behalf of children where there have been delays in meeting an identified specialist need.

The agency is vigilant in sharing with carers all the information they receive in the referral and actively chase additional information and supporting paperwork. Children and professionals speak positively about the warmth and welcoming attitude of carers and the agency. This includes the use of age-appropriate welcome books and activity bags. When a young person moves, transitions are well managed. Where there have been unplanned endings and a child remains with the agency, there are opportunities for children to learn how to rebuild relationships in a safe community atmosphere.

Children develop an increasing awareness of, and ability to manage, their difficult feelings and emotions. This is achieved through positive relationships with carers and their consistent, caring maintenance of boundaries. One young person said, 'I tell X what has been going on, or what has upset me and how I am feeling. She really understands me.' The young person also reflected that she has only really understood why she is unable to live with her family since she has lived with her current carers. She is able to ask questions and talk about how she feels about this. Young people have been encouraged and enabled to express their feelings and thoughts through the arts, such as music and poetry, with very moving results shared in public arenas.

Carers are alert and sensitive to the children's individuality and treat them with dignity and respect. This includes children's views on how they wish to acknowledge their heritage. The agency struggles to work out how to address some of these issues with children and young people of dual heritage, where there is dissonance between how they see themselves and how others may see them.

Children's frequency of contact is in accordance with their care plan. Carers are sensitive to the impact of contact arrangements and make every effort to ensure that it is a positive experience. Where carers have concerns that it is not, they raise this

appropriately and secure change by agreement. Carers form positive relationships with children's family members where this is in the child's best interests; in one case, this has enabled the child to invest in and commit to the placement.

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

Children and young people living with this agency's carers are safe and feel safe. Agency staff work proactively with carers on risk management, using a clear format to identify risks and put in place effective strategies. They adopt a balanced approach, recognising that young people need to take age-appropriate risks in order to develop and equip themselves for the future. There are minimal instances of children going missing. In one case, a young person with a history of going missing has not done so once since being with this agency.

Carers demonstrate good knowledge, understanding of and insight into the wide-ranging aspects of safeguarding. Carers understand and know how to apply the training they have received in safeguarding and child protection. They talk knowledgeably about the possible links between missing episodes and child sexual exploitation and potential radicalisation. Carers are alert both to the dangers and benefits of social media use, and protect and educate children in their care about both facets. Carers know how to respond appropriately to any disclosures or allegations made by children and young people. Carers are trained to identify and work with young people who may self-harm. They implement this training in practice and, as a result, young people learn different coping strategies and reduce such occurrences.

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. For example, carers have contacted schools to share information about bullying and, as a result, this behaviour has been dealt with to the satisfaction and relief of the children.

Carers speak positively about the training in behaviour management, delivered by a therapist. They learn about strategies, attachment styles and the impact on children's relationships and behaviour. As a result, carers understand behaviour as an expression of feelings or life experiences and manage children's behaviour in this context. They say that they do this by 'changing our response, rather than their behaviour'. The carers' focus is on encouraging children and young people to behave well, through praise and rewards. Carers encourage the desired behaviour by the use of incentives. As a result, children flourish in a range of settings as their social skills improve, enabling them to join in community-based activities and groups. Carers' use of negative consequences is minimal, and they record these. There has been no use of physical intervention. On the rare occasion when carers are struggling to manage children's behaviour, they describe the agency support as 'fantastic'. There is always someone available to talk to and visit if necessary, who knows the carers and the children.

The agency implements sound recruitment practice on all those who work for the agency, including staff and carers. However, not all staff files fully evidence verification of the reason for leaving previous positions that involved work with children or vulnerable adults.

Carers say that safeguarding is a common thread in all their contacts with the agency, beginning with the initial enquiry. They say that the assessment process and ongoing

support and training focuses on their ability to promote the welfare of children and protect them from harm. The agency contracts a number of independent workers who contribute an objective perspective and provide children and carers with an opportunity to talk to someone outside agency staff, for example through foster carers' annual reviews. The registered manager carries out the required unannounced visits to carers and so provides an additional opportunity for children to speak to a trusted professional adult alone.

The agency response to allegations against carers is prompt, proportionate, child focused and objective. The agency has good links with placing authorities and has used the host authority designated person when necessary. Carers are offered access to independent support during an allegation. Such allegations are infrequent and no action has been taken by the local authority as a result of any allegation since the last inspection.

Children live in safe and secure houses. This is assured by the agency annual health and safety checks of carers' homes. The records do not consistently show that required actions in the light of these checks have been completed.

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

The registered manager forms part of a long-established management team that successfully models and promotes a strong family and community ethos, as outlined in its statement of purpose, which keeps the children at the heart of all it does. Children and carers consistently describe the agency in these terms. One young person said, 'I know all of the staff at [name of home] and most of the foster carers. It's like a sort of family. I have friends who live with the foster carers here, too.'

All employed staff know the carers and the children placed with them well. They work as a team, striving to ensure that children are provided with what they need to fulfil their potential. Staff speak enthusiastically about children's progress and achievements. Since the last inspection, the management team has developed an effective system for recording these achievements for all children in all areas of their lives. This ensures that children have a secure record for the future.

Staff are and feel well supported, as seen in the strong staff retention. They benefit from regular formal supervision and annual appraisal. The small team is in constant communication, which provides team members with opportunities for frequent informal supervision and keeps all staff up to date with current developments in the agency. The independent staff contracted by the agency do not benefit from the same level of supervision. This limits the manager's oversight of the assessments of prospective foster carers. The impact of this is that not all assessments fully explore all the issues identified in the report.

Carers describe training as a strength of the agency. The agency ensures that core courses are run regularly and staff and some panel members attend training alongside carers. The management encourages those working for the agency to identify external courses that will support them to meet the particular specialist needs of children placed, or promote their own professional development.

The manager undertakes regular monitoring of most of the work of the agency. Supervising social workers monitor the use of sanctions by carers through their reading of

daily records, but the manager does not gain an overview of these behaviour management measures. The management analysis of the matters monitored is insufficiently evaluative. The manager does not make full use of this information to formally identify themes, patterns, or emerging trends. The team can outline lessons learned from complaints and feedback, which is actively and regularly sought, but not routinely recorded.

The agency has met both requirements and all but one of the recommendations of the last report.

The agency has developed effective partnerships with placing authorities and ensures that they work together to meet the needs of the children placed. The agency is confident to challenge local authority plans when these are not in the best interests of children and, through this, achieve change successfully. One social worker described the agency as being made up of 'Effective partnership workers. A strength is the support for carers and children who they know well.' The strength of matching, seen in the high percentage of permanent placements achieved, is not fully reflected in the recording of the areas that managers consider when assessing the suitability of carers for children referred. This was a recommendation of the last inspection. 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. A social worker commented that she was, 'Very happy with the matching process when the child was placed. The unplanned ending, though hard, was in the child's best interests and managed well by the agency.'

The responsible individual maintains up-to-date, detailed financial reports, verified by accountants, which demonstrate the ongoing financial viability of the agency.

Carers maintain handwritten diaries for children that provide them with a detailed account of their lives as part of their fostering family. Carers also complete monthly summaries which form part of children's electronic records and detail their progress and achievements. The manager has created easily accessible paper files that children may have immediate access to should they ask to see their records.

The manager ensures that notifications are made when required and updated where necessary.

Carers are very complimentary about, and appreciative of, the comprehensive support provided by the agency. They describe in glowing terms the quality of the relationships they have with all the staff. Supervising social workers provide regular formal supervision and provide them with a summary of their discussion. Carers are reviewed annually at a minimum. These reviews are undertaken by independent social workers, who provide objective scrutiny and challenge. The agency has a policy that all carers' reviews are heard by the panel and carers attend in person. This happens in practice.

Support groups are held monthly and are well attended. The 'men-who-foster' group is also a welcome fixture. The office operates an open door policy and, because carers live locally, they do pop in for a variety of reasons, including bringing children to appointments. This provides opportunities for discussion or informal supervision. Children and carers enjoy the atmosphere of the warm, homely kitchen as they sit round the table waiting for their appointment time. Carers are confident that, both during and out of

office hours, they can pick up the phone and talk to someone who will give them meaningful and informed support and advice. Carers achieve the training, support and development standards for foster care within a year of approval, with targeted support, training and workshops. One carer said, 'I have never had a question mark that has gone unanswered.'

The recruitment of carers is in line with the statement of purpose, and the agency maintains a small group of fostering households to sustain the community ethos. The diversity of the carer cohort is limited and the agency is striving to change this. Carers report that, from the first contact with the agency, they were made to feel welcome. Assessments are timely.

The agency has capacity to meet the range of needs of the children placed. Independent, appropriately qualified and registered therapists contracted by the agency are part of the agency resources. They are part of the team around the child and also provide training, advice and guidance to carers on request to inform their delivery of care, tailored to individual children. The agency is part of a company that also runs a school and a nursery and so can provide access to educational support and resources if necessary.

There were a number of recommendations from the last report relating to panel. Minutes have improved and are passed to the independent agency decision maker with clear reasons for recommendations; appraisals are undertaken for all staff, and a system has been developed of feedback on the quality of assessments. Panel meetings are scheduled quarterly, a frequency in line with its workload. Although the agency has begun to increase the membership of the central list of panel members, the core membership of the fostering panel is longstanding, including the chair. The familiarity of the established members has led to a blurring of roles and responsibilities. This has also dulled their objectivity and critical exploration of the three assessments brought to panel in the last year. This means that opportunities have been missed to inform robust quality assurance of assessments and drive improvement. There has been no recent whole panel or specific panel chair training; this has been booked in the light of observations during this inspection. The chair prepares annual panel reports, but these lack critical evaluation.

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 who 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: SC043609

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