

Heath Farm Children's Services

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

Unique reference number	SC060386
Inspection date	16/02/2015
Inspector	Tracy Murty
Type of inspection	Full
Provision subtype	

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Responsible individual	Gareth Bonar Walton
Date of last inspection	17/05/2010

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Heath Farm Children's Services is a privately owned independent fostering agency which currently has 86 fostering households (consisting of 157 foster carers) with 85 children and young people in placement. The agency provides short, medium and long-term foster placements for looked after children and has access to its own educational provision and therapy services. There are two respite houses available, along with a contact suite, support services and transport services.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding: An agency demonstrating and exceeding the characteristics of a good judgement where children and young people are making significantly better progress and achieving more than was expected in all areas of their lives.

Good: An agency where children and young people, including those with the most complex needs, have their individual needs met and their welfare safeguarded and promoted. They make good progress and receive effective services so they achieve as well as they can in all areas of their lives.

Requires improvement: An agency that may be compliant with regulations and observing the national minimum standards but is not yet demonstrating the characteristics of a good judgement. It therefore requires improvement to be good. There may be failures to meet all regulations or national minimum standards but these are not widespread or serious; all children's and young people's welfare is safeguarded and promoted.

Inadequate: An agency where there are widespread or serious failures which result in children and young people not having their welfare safeguarded and promoted.

Overall effectiveness

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

This agency has made exceptional progress and improvements since its last inspection in May 2010, when it was judged as good overall. The agency staff and foster carers have achieved outstanding outcomes for a large number of children and young people. There is a real learning culture embedded within the agency, led by an inspirational Registered Manager. All the requirements and recommendations from the previous inspection have been fully addressed and met. Two recommendations have been made as a result of this inspection, relating to the agency decision maker and development plan for the service. Neither of these has a significant impact on the experience and progress of children and young people, which is judged as outstanding.

Children and young people make exceptional progress from their starting points in their foster placements. This is particularly evident in relation to their educational progress and engagement. They report feeling very happy, settled and safe in their placements and very much part of the foster family. There is also a very strong focus and emphasis on supporting birth children of foster carers within this agency. Children and young people feel listened to and regular consultation takes place with them to ensure that they actively influence the care and services they receive.

Foster carers are very well prepared, assessed and approved through a formal, robust process to ensure that they have the necessary skills to be a foster carer. The training and development opportunities offered are of an excellent standard. This further enhances foster carers' skills and competence. They are central to the team around the child, which involves agency staff, education providers, placing authorities and other relevant agencies. They receive comprehensive supervision and are regularly consulted with, to inform decision making by the agency.

Very strong and positive working relationships exist with partner agencies. All local authorities contacted during this inspection reported exceptionally high levels of satisfaction at the standards of care provided to children and young people. Such relationships have led to significantly improved outcomes for a large number of children and young people in foster placements. Well trained, supported and highly efficient agency staff provide excellent support to foster carers at all times. Management oversight and monitoring of all aspects of the services provided are extremely robust and have led to the service providing outstanding care and support to children, young people and foster carers.

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 the fostering service's decision-maker is a senior person within the fostering service, or is a trustee or director of the fostering service (NMS 23.12)
- ensure that there is a written development plan in place, 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)

Experiences and progress of, and outcomes for, children and young people

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

Children and young people receive detailed information and profiles about their foster carers, prior to moving into placement. They are supported to meet their carers prior to moving in and some state how helpful this was for them and how it

reduced their anxiety levels. One placing social worker stated: 'I have always been sent very full profiles on the carers so I am fully informed and can actively engage in this matching process. One set of carers has helped develop a young person's confidence and self-esteem to such an extent that the child is unrecognisable as the child they were four years ago. The carers have supported and advocated for this child in their schooling, encouraged them to eat a varied diet and to be active and develop interests.'

Children and young people enjoy very secure and positive placements with their foster carers. Some young people have remained in the same placement for several years; others have remained with the same foster carers beyond their 18th birthday in staying put arrangements. This provides them with security and a real sense of belonging. It enables them to complete their formal education, form and maintain attachments in the local community and develop their independence skills.

The agency works closely with placing authorities to consider the needs of sibling groups. Where it is not assessed as appropriate to place siblings together, the agency has very successfully placed siblings in close proximity to each other. Foster carers actively promote and support contact, leading to children and young people feeling valued and cared for. One young person stated how important it was for them to see their family members and how well the carers supported them to achieve this on a regular basis. The agency also employs contact supervisors and provides transport and contact venues. This further demonstrates their total commitment to promoting and supporting high quality contact for all children and young people placed with them.

A social worker commented: 'My experience has been that this agency supports foster carers by offering a comprehensive support package which includes extensive training, round-the-clock phone support and respite should this be required; this seems to work in practice as well as on paper. I think this helps carers who are also experienced stick with children and young people through the more difficult times, and enables the carers to focus upon the child or young person, and to gain a better understanding of why they may be behaving in the way that they are.'

There is very regular and proactive consultation and engagement of children and young people placed with this agency. Their views are sought on a wide range of issues. Some have recently been involved in reviewing and updating the children's guide. Their views have been elicited about respite care services, mentoring support, activities and events. The agency has also included birth children of foster carers in training and consultation events. A birth child of a foster carer said what they liked about it: 'I particularly like the good feeling it gives you. Fostering makes you feel like you are really doing something good by helping the foster children and giving them somewhere that they can feel safe and loved.'

All children and young people spoken with during this inspection reported feeling safe, knowing how to make a complaint and who they could turn to for help. There have been no reported complaints by children or young people since the last inspection. The agency also employs a children's rights worker. This person makes

contact with every child and young person at the start of their placement. They offer them practical and emotional support in relation to all aspects of the care they receive. As a direct result of consultation with young people, the agency is currently in the process of developing a website for young people to communicate with staff more easily. This reflects the exceptional commitment of the agency in listening to and acting on what children and young people say.

The agency also uses the services of nine qualified and registered therapists. All children and young people have access to therapy. One therapist stated how impressed they were with this agency for providing such comprehensive therapeutic services to children, young people and their carers. The therapist stated that as the sessions are not time limited, progress has been extraordinary for some children and young people. Management oversight of missing incidents and other concerning behaviours is exceptionally robust. Each child has a health plan in place, identifying their needs and how these will be met. Data provided from monthly supervisions with foster carers is used to inform how any concerning behaviours can be addressed.

Another placing social worker reported: 'When a young person was absconding and putting themselves at risk a lot, one set of carers worked very creatively to try and keep the young person safe and did not give up on them, and eventually they 'came back to them' and broke away from the negative influences and group of young people with whom they had become involved.'

Children and young people receive exceedingly comprehensive support in relation to meeting their holistic health needs. All are registered with relevant health agencies and receive the care and support they need. A supervising social worker in the agency has a lead role as a food champion. This person collates all health-related data for children and young people and ensures that their individual health plans reflect their needs and progress made. Training is also provided to foster carers on such areas as healthy eating, exercise and lifestyles. Consultation and advice are also provided for children and young people in relation to healthy packed lunches at school. Such comprehensive and cohesive support and services have led to children and young people's physical and emotional health improving significantly from their starting points.

All children and young people attend their educational placements and some achieve exceptionally well. There are several young people who have moved on to university from their foster placements, with others securing college placements and internships. One young person spoken with said: 'I would never have imagined that I would have done so well. This is not just down to me, but to the fantastic support I have had from my carers. I am going to university next year and am very proud of what I have achieved.'

A supervising social worker within the agency has a lead role for education. They collate and oversee all children and young people's educational needs and achievements. The emphasis on ensuring that all children and young people have suitable education and achieve to their full potential is excellent. The agency is able

to demonstrate how each child and young person is progressing, tracks their achievements and ensures that they receive additional support if required. The education lead person also works closely with schools, personal advisors and others to ensure that services meet the current and future needs of all children. This has led to some highly successful outcomes for some young people.

There is also excellent evidence of foster carers being very strong and positive advocates for those children and young people placed with them. They appropriately challenge education providers to ensure the most appropriate provision is in place. Some have also advocated for children and young people to be placed in local educational provisions. This has enabled some children and young people to attend the same school as foster carers' own children. This further promotes their engagement and inclusion with their foster family and community.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

The quality of service provided is excellent, due to the high calibre of foster carers recruited. Assessments are very robust, detailed and undertaken by suitably qualified and experienced agency staff. The agency specialises in providing placements for children and young people with complex and challenging behaviours. It provides an extremely comprehensive assessment and training package for its foster carers. Foster carers spoken with during this inspection praised the quality of the assessment and training processes. Some foster carers have worked for other fostering agencies previously, with all stating that this agency was 'by far the best'.

The extensive training and development opportunities provided to foster carers reflect the complex needs of children and young people. Training courses provided include the role of the appropriate adult, child protection awareness for birth children of carers, and anger management. The agency actively considers the training needs of carers and ensures that these are consistently met. The fostering panel also takes an active role in overseeing training and development needs of foster carers. This is considered at each annual review, with very close monitoring to ensure that all foster carers have the ongoing skills and competence to perform their roles.

Foster carers display a detailed awareness and understanding of the complex needs of those children and young people placed with them. This is in part attributable to the excellent matching processes in place. Prior to a placement being agreed, agency staff and foster carers fully consider the needs of potential placements and how they can best be met. This has led to highly successful matching and placement stability. Foster carers have access to respite care if required, which further supports them and those children placed with them. Respite is provided by consistent carers, with children and young people forming close attachments and enjoying their time away from their main placement. The regular support of therapeutic services also further strengthens placement stability and supports foster carers in their roles.

One foster carer stated: 'I feel very much a part of a team in this agency. We all

work as a team around the child, with everyone getting the support they need to ensure the children make significant progress in our care.' All foster carers have either completed or are near completion of the Training, Development and Support Standards. Several foster carers are also currently undertaking a level 3 Diploma in Working with Children and Young People. This reflects the agency's commitment to promoting a highly trained and effective workforce.

Foster carers receive regular formal supervision, which is comprehensive and very well recorded. Detailed reporting formats ensure that all aspects of their role are considered and clear actions set from each meeting. One placing social worker commented: 'In my experience, all the foster carers are experienced, committed and very well trained and they have the necessary and multiple skills to work with young people from varied and challenging backgrounds. They work in co-operation with local authority social workers and the fostering agency to provide the best possible support to the children in their care.'

The fostering panel has a range of skilled and experienced members. It is chaired by a very experienced, knowledgeable chairperson and provides robust scrutiny and consideration of the approval and review of foster carers. Panel members include foster carers, health and education representatives and previously looked after adults. Minutes from each panel meeting reflect the detailed consideration and scrutiny provided by panel members to each case presented. The agency decision maker receives the minutes in a very timely manner and clearly records their decisions in great detail. Formal letters are then sent to each foster carer, in line with regulatory requirements. The current agency decision maker is not a senior person within the fostering service. They perform their role with great skill and competence, but the agency would benefit from considering if a more senior person could be identified for this role. There has been no impact on children, young people or foster carers as a result of this shortfall.

The agency has a dedicated referrals team who consider all requests for placements. Extremely detailed and comprehensive referral information is taken and shared with the Registered Manager. Agency staff ensure that all necessary information is gained, prior to agreeing placements with placing authorities. Foster carers also report feeling very much included in this initial stage. They feel able to ask further questions of the placing authority and in being key to the decision-making processes. This has led to some very successful and well-matched placements being made. Records reflect the high levels of scrutiny and consideration of every referral and decision-making processes. Managers diligently record all requests for additional or missing documentation from placing authorities and other agencies.

The agency ensures that at the time of a placement being agreed, delegated authority is fully considered and set in place for all new placements. This further supports foster carers to provide care and support to children and young people in all areas of their lives and prevents them from being disadvantaged. Excellent systems are in place to monitor and track care plans, looked after reviews and other plans and documentation. Agency staff ensure that minutes from meetings are chased and that care plans reflect the current needs of a child or young person. Research clearly

informs practice within this agency. There is clear evidence of staff taking on lead roles, of facilitating training for all staff and in their practices leading to sustained improvements to the lives of those children and young people placed.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

Children and young people report feeling very safe and well cared for by their foster carers. They report knowing how to make a complaint and who they can contact for support. The agency children's rights worker also maintains regular contact with all children placed to offer independent support and advice. Some children and young people have recently met to consider the children's guide and assist agency staff in reviewing and updating it. A number of birth children of foster carers have also been involved in child protection awareness training. As such, children and young people feel fully engaged and listened to. The children's rights worker has also undertaken regular consultation with children and young people to elicit a range of views on the care they receive and any concerns they may have.

Placement plans and risk assessments clearly reflect the needs of children and young people and how foster carers should meet those needs. Formal supervision sessions are used by agency staff to consider all relevant plans and ensure they are reviewed and updated. This also includes safe caring policies for each foster carer, which are amended following any incidents. This provides children and young people with highly effective protection and support throughout their time in placement. The agency also employs mentors, who undertake specific time-limited pieces of work with children and young people. Examples of work done by mentors include assisting young people to access leisure interests, completing a CV and learning how to use public transport unaided.

Managers within the agency rigorously monitor all incidents of missing from care and actual or potential sexual exploitation of children and young people. A member of staff within the agency has a lead role as child protection coordinator and oversees all safeguarding issues which arise. This person has extensive experience within the child protection arena and brings a wealth of skills and experience to the role. Managers use their own internal monitoring systems to further consider all incidents and to ensure that plans, risk assessments and other documentation are reviewed in a very timely manner. The agency and foster carers work very closely and proactively with placing authorities and the police to consider any child at risk. Risk management meetings are held with the local police for any child or young person where missing incidents are a concern. The monitoring and tracking of such concerns have led to significant improvements for some young people and a noticeable reduction in such concerning behaviours over time.

Foster carers display a highly detailed understanding and awareness of signs and symptoms of abuse. A social worker for one young person reported: 'This young person had a history of frequent absconding and risky behaviours. The foster carer has been a constant advocate for the young person, while ensuring they have clear

boundaries and understand expectations about their behaviour. I am pleased to say that in the past few months, the young person has shown a dramatic change in their risk-taking behaviours.'

The recruitment and vetting procedures are excellent and prevent any unsuitable people from working for this agency. Checks are undertaken not only of foster carer applicants, but also of mentors, contact supervisors, transport providers, babysitters and foster carer supporters. Such checks are regularly reviewed and updated, including Disclosure and Barring Service checks. One foster carer praised the agency for their commitment to ensuring the safety of children placed with them. They were also very impressed that training is also offered to foster carers' family members and birth children. This promotes a safe and well-informed foster family environment, in which children and young people thrive and feel safe. Agency staff also undertake unannounced visits to foster carers' homes twice a year. Children and young people are met with during these visits. This enables them to share any concerns or issues they may have and provides further safety and scrutiny of the care provided.

All agency staff demonstrate a detailed understanding of any actual or potential safeguarding issues and take prompt action to ensure the safety of children and young people. All child protection or safeguarding issues are overseen by the child protection coordinator within the agency.

Any allegations against foster carers have been referred immediately to the local authority designated officer (LADO) and placing authorities. Exceptionally detailed records are kept of all such incidents and action taken. Early foster panel reviews are convened, where appropriate, to consider the approval of foster carers. Foster carers receive the necessary independent support during such processes and report feeling very confident in how the agency deals with allegations and the support offered to them. Wherever possible, children and young people remain in their placements during investigations into allegations, with clear and close working with placing authorities and the police. This promotes high levels of support and safety for both foster carers and those children placed with them.

The agency regularly reviews and updates all safeguarding policies and procedures. Training is provided to both foster carers, children and young people and includes birth children of foster carers. There is a real learning culture within the agency, informed by local and national legislation, guidance and research. Staff within the agency take on lead roles to facilitate a range of training and information sharing with foster carers through their regular support group meetings. This has led to an exceptionally well trained and informed foster carer group and a demonstrable improvement in the outcomes and progress made by children and young people.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

The Registered Manager has been in post for over six years. She has the necessary qualifications, skills and experience for the role. Managers and staff within the

agency have forged very positive and close working relationships with a range of agencies and professionals. Feedback from all placing authorities contacted during this inspection was highly praiseworthy of the strong and inspirational leadership shown by the Registered Manager. An example of this relates to the Registered Manager sourcing clinical support and supervision for all agency staff. This has been in place for over four years and is provided to all agency staff and managers. The clinical supervisor praised the Registered Manager for sourcing this, stating that it has led to increased emotional well-being for the staff and managers.

The agency has a proven track record of placement stability and significant improvements in outcomes for children and young people placed. One education provider stated: 'It is refreshing that when we need to prioritise a child in crisis or identify some proactive intervention strategies, we always seem to be able to meet in some capacity. This highlights the quality of the leadership and management structure and promotes the multi-agency approach in supporting the carers and the children in our care. The management team in the agency have proven to be reflective practitioners and this is paramount.'

A placing social worker also praised the managers and staff as follows: 'The package offered to children and young people is also very comprehensive and includes therapy which is flexible depending on the needs of the child, supervising and facilitating contact, transporting etc. The agency demonstrates a commitment to a child and if a placement has to end, they look within their own resources and try and match to alternative carers.'

Another social worker stated: 'My child has gained a sense of belonging to his carers and has informed me that he feels loved and cared for by the carers. His speech has improved and he is able to express his feelings to his carers. He is happy in the placement and has requested that he stay with the carers until he is old.'

Managers ensure the full and active participation and engagement of all children and young people placed with their foster carers. A wide range of fun and interesting events have been provided since the last inspection. This has included arts and music workshops, fun and open days and regular consultation events with children and young people. Foster carers also actively promote and support children's engagement with local clubs, activities and events. This further promotes their sense of belonging within their foster family and the wider community.

The Registered Manager regularly reviews and monitors all aspects of the care and services provided to children and young people. A key strength of the agency is its regular consultation with children, young people, foster carers, birth children and involved agencies. Information gathered from such consultations is used to inform how the services need to develop and improve. There is a very evident learning culture within the agency, led by managers, who continually strive to improve the services and support they provide. The agency does not currently have a development plan. This would further assist in confirming any changes made to the services provided and plans for future development. There has been no impact on children and young people as result of this minor shortfall.

The Statement of Purpose and children's guide for the agency are clear, comprehensive and informed by consultation with children and young people. A significant amount of consultation was undertaken with foster carers last year on the Foster Carers' Charter. This has been shared with all foster carers through support group meetings and underpins the ethos and work done by the agency and its staff. There has been only one complaint recorded since the last inspection, which was resolved quickly and to the satisfaction of all involved. The agency has a very detailed complaints policy, which is known and understood by staff, carers, children and young people and placing authorities.

The Registered Manager and senior managers consider and review the recruitment of foster carers and take action to ensure that they employ carers with the necessary skills to fulfil the needs of children and young people placed. The responsible individual understands the service well, has regular meetings with the Registered Manager and agency staff and is committed to improving outcomes for children and young people. The development of lead roles for agency staff has led to impressive and detailed data collection and analysis of all aspects of the care provided to children. This includes how carers meet their health, education and social needs. Managers and staff see consultation and feedback as key to improving outcomes for children.

Staff within the agency are appropriately qualified, experienced and skilled. They receive regular supervision, which is well recorded and fully incorporates consideration of targets set as part of the annual appraisal process. Training provided to staff is of a very high quality. Staff spoken with report very high levels of satisfaction at the type and quality of training provided. They feel it meets their developmental needs and that they are able to request other training and development opportunities, which are also met. Foster carers' supervision records are similarly detailed and robust, with clear action plans set following each session. Such attention to detail means that the holistic needs of children, young people, foster carers and staff are identified and responded to in a very timely manner.

The agency ensures that all relevant events are notified to the appropriate agencies, including Ofsted, in a very timely and detailed manner. Excellent recording and monitoring systems enable the Registered Manager to have clear management oversight and tracking of all events and incidents relating to children and young people.

The requirements and recommendations made at the previous inspection have all been fully addressed. Specific health plans have been introduced for all children. Matching information is more detailed and clear in the referral process now. Staff appraisals include clear setting of targets and monitoring of them. Safe care policies make specific reference to mobile phone safety. All documentation is clear and has been standardised. Staff have received training and support in relation to running foster carer support groups.

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, to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards and to support services to improve.

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 the inspection of independent fostering agencies.