

# East Sussex County Council Fostering Service

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

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## 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.

This report details the main strengths and any areas for improvement identified during the inspection. The judgements included in the report are made in relation to the outcomes for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and the relevant National Minimum Standards for the service.

## The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding:	this aspect of the provision is of exceptionally high quality
Good:	this aspect of the provision is strong
Satisfactory:	this aspect of the provision is sound
Inadequate:	this aspect of the provision is not good enough

## Service information

### Brief description of the service

The East Sussex fostering service is responsible for the recruitment, preparation, assessment, supervision and support of foster carers. There is a placement support service which provides specific specialist input to ensure placement stability. The fostering service is based in Eastbourne and is part of the integrated services for children provided by East Sussex County Council.

### Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

This is an overview of what the inspector found during the inspection.

Young people make excellent progress in all areas of their lives. They are provided with excellent support which helps them to thrive in nurturing and safe environments. Foster carers feel exceptionally well supported. They have outstanding opportunities for training and development and for accessing help. These measures help to ensure that young people are cared for by knowledgeable, confident and competent carers. There is a clear emphasis on promoting young people's health, and ensuring that they reach their full potential educationally. Young people moving into adult life feel well prepared for this as there is a strong ethos in the service of preparing them for independence. Staff and carers have high aspirations for young people and this promotes their welfare.

The service actively seeks out the views of its stakeholders and uses these to improve the service on an ongoing basis. This ensures that stakeholders feel highly valued and that the service reflects the needs of its users. This is an exceptionally well run service. Staff are motivated and well supported to promote young people's safety and well-being. They strive to make improvements in all areas of their practice and are well supported by management to do so. Outstanding quality assurance processes help to ensure that any problems are put right quickly.

### Improvements since the last inspection

The provider was asked to include the fostering service's commitment to support diverse heritage for young people in the Statement of Purpose and to develop an evaluative process for attendees at panel. The Statement of Purpose has now been amended and social workers and foster carers are now asked to comment on how they were treated by the panel. This information is evaluated and used to make improvements to panel processes. These positive measures help to improve the delivery of the service, which promotes positive outcomes for young people.

The provider was also asked to ensure that all current personal education plans are kept on file. Furthermore, they were asked to ensure that the information technology system reflects the current status of all criminal record checks. A new system has

been developed for monitoring missing documents and a further system has been developed for prompting social workers to update the Criminal Records Bureau checks of carers. This action helps to promote safer outcomes for young people.

The provider was asked to evidence that safe caring guidelines are considered at each foster carer's review and to ensure that records reflect that missing documentation is being sought from the relevant professionals. Safe care policies are now rewritten at every carer's review and records reflect that missing information is being sought. This helps to ensure that young people's welfare is promoted and protected.

Finally, the provider was asked to ensure sufficient staffing levels for the fostering service. Three new social workers, a practice manager and a children's services case worker have been recruited since the last inspection. This has helped to ensure that young people and their carers receive excellent levels of support from the service.

### **Helping children to be healthy**

The provision is outstanding.

Young people receive outstanding support which helps them to lead healthy lifestyles and this promotes their well-being. They make excellent progress in relation to their health as staff and carers are skilled in ensuring that they receive the services they need. The service has developed effective partnerships with health services at a strategic level and this results in strong support for young people. For example, young people have been able to access specialist services to address issues such as post traumatic stress disorder. Others have received specialist support for the trauma experienced as a result of sexual abuse. The child and adolescent mental health service is based within the fostering service. This helps to ensure that young people benefit from excellent support in relation to their emotional and psychological needs without any unnecessary delays. All of these measures help young people to benefit from positive mental health. Looked after children's nurses are also very closely engaged with the fostering service and this helps to ensure that young people have equal access to health services. Carers are helped to remove barriers to good health for young people as they are provided with access to services such as occupational therapy or physiotherapy. Access to aids and adaptations within carers' homes have supported carers to promote young people's independence.

Young people's wishes and feelings are sought and taken into account in relation to all areas of their health care. Health records fully reflect young people's individual needs and young people have access to these. This ensures that young people feel valued and listened to regarding their health. Carers have access to a wealth of training in relation to health and health promotion. Specific training is provided in relation to the individual health needs of young people. This helps to ensure that carers are confident and competent in meeting young people's health needs. A young person said: 'I always get advice about being healthy.'

## **Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe**

The provision is outstanding.

Extensive measures are in place to ensure that young people are safe and feel safe. This includes ensuring that young people have access to a number of adults that they can trust. Young people are regularly consulted with, which helps to ensure that they feel safe. For example, they see their social workers and the supervising social workers regularly and they attend every review and planning meeting if this is appropriate. Young people have opportunities to talk to workers on their own during these visits. Carers talk to young people so they know how to protect themselves. The service has recently provided training to young people in internet safety, which young people say helps them to feel safe. There is a clear understanding among all involved in the service that carers should generate a culture of openness and trust. Risk assessments are completed and understood by those involved in young people's care and this helps to keep young people safe.

Carers receive a comprehensive package of training in relation to safeguarding young people. This includes child protection training and training for protecting young people who go missing from home. Extensive efforts are in place to reduce the risks to young people who go missing. These include close working with the local police and robust safe care policies. There is a clear protocol for responding to missing young people that is compatible with the local Runaway and Missing From Home and Care procedures. Effective measures are in place to promote the safety of disabled young people. This includes ensuring that they have appropriate measures of communication, privacy, and safety barriers appropriate to their age. There are also excellent policies and procedures in place for ensuring that carers and staff have the skills needed to communicate with young people for whom English is not a first language. Bullying is high on the agenda and staff and carers help young people to feel protected from bullying.

Young people's physical safety is highly valued, promoted and protected. They live in homes that provide them with good levels of comfort, security and safety. This is well monitored as the service carries out regular checks of the home, including an annual unannounced visit which focuses on health and safety issues. Foster carers have easy access to training in health and safety issues and this ensures that they have the skills and knowledge to keep young people safe.

## **Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do**

The provision is outstanding.

Young people enjoy sound relationships with their foster families. Excellent efforts are made to consult with them regularly to ensure that they are happy and comfortable in their placements. This helps young people to thrive. Young people are enthusiastic about the support they receive and say that they are treated fairly. A 'wrap around' service is provided, and this results in carers receiving support from a number of areas including child and adolescent mental health services, the virtual

school and social worker, in order to ensure that placements are successful.

Carers are given clear expectations and guidelines about how they should manage the behaviour of young people. This ensures that young people are treated fairly, safely and know what is expected of them. Excellent support is provided by the placement support service, and carers say this is invaluable in supporting placement stability. Staff from this service are highly motivated and creative in their work and this results in excellent support to carers which leads to excellent outcomes for young people. The services fit around the individual needs and preferences of young people and carers in an imaginative way. For example, some have benefited from one-to-one work, others have been supported by the babysitting service and some have benefited from life story work.

Young people have excellent opportunities to enjoy their individual interests and are encouraged to make a positive contribution to the community. Individual placement plans clearly detail the service's commitment to promoting individual young people's enjoyment of leisure. In practice, this means that young people are regularly able to partake in a wide range of activities in the community. It also ensures that carers have clarity about their role in agreeing and facilitating these. The service has recently facilitated a successful outdoor pursuits holiday for young people. Young people's social workers and supervising social workers were involved in this activity and this supports the development of positive relationships between them and young people.

Young people have an excellent record of school attendance and are making good progress educationally. A young person's social worker said: 'The child has made significant progress at school since being placed with foster carers.' A carer said that the service had encouraged them to support young people in placement 'to reach their full potential'. Carers are fully involved in young people's education and act as advocates on their behalf. They attend all personal education plan meetings and liaise with schools regularly in order to support young people's progress. Young people also benefit from the services of a virtual school. These measures help young people to feel valued and to reach their potential. A young person said: 'My carers are always encouraging me to go to university.'

## **Helping children make a positive contribution**

The provision is outstanding.

Young people are integral to decision making in the service and their views make a difference to the running of the service. Young people say they feel listened to and valued. A carer said: 'Everything has been done to support the child's wishes.' Another said: 'Young people are always consulted with about decisions affecting them and invited to make comments before looked after children reviews and personal education plan meetings.' A young person said: 'My carers always listen.' Young people understand that their views matter and this helps them feel valued. The service has a strong working relationship with the local advocacy services and this translates into young people's views being heard where it matters. This includes

the views of disabled young people, or those who speak English as a second language. The role of the independent reviewing officer is also highly valued and this helps to ensure that young people's views are valued. A children in care council has been established and is valued by the service. The council meets regularly, and young people confirm that they feel listened to. For example, they say that two caravans have been purchased as a result of their requests and these are used for young people to enjoy leisure activities.

Young people are provided with highly personalised care that promotes all aspects of their individuality. This helps them to develop a positive self-view, emotional resilience and a good knowledge and understanding of their background. They all have a clear, up-to-date placement plan that sets out their needs. This ensures that there is consistency in their care and this helps young people to feel safe and settled.

Young people are supported to have appropriate contact with family members. Clear guidelines are in place regarding contact and this helps to ensure that contact is successful and in young people's best interests. Foster carers help young people to explore their identity and background and this helps young people to develop a positive self-image and to flourish. The arrangements for preparing young people for their placements are strong and ensure that young people feel welcomed into foster homes and leave in a planned and sensitive manner. There are clear guidelines for introducing young people to new placements and for moving them on which are made known to all involved in this process. This helps young people to feel valued and cared about. Preparation plans are comprehensive and involve home visits, visits to new schools, meeting families and overnight stays. Moving-on plans are equally comprehensive.

### **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is outstanding.

Significant planning is involved in preparing young people for independence and this prepares and supports young people positively in their transition to adulthood. Young people have transition plans developed promptly when they reach an age where this is relevant. Robust planning takes place to ensure that structured transition pathways are in place for disabled young people until they are 25 years old. Transition plans fully address areas where young people need support. For example, young people are supported to establish positive social and sexual relationships and positive self-esteem. They are also prepared for the world of work and for managing their finances. An excellent initiative has been developed by the placement support team which provides young people with work experiences through voluntary work. It also allows young people to develop vocational skills through first aid and food hygiene training. This goes some way to helping young people reach their potential and economic well-being. Young people speak highly of the opportunities they have when visiting the support team caravan. They are supported to gain skills for independence such as cooking or using public transport.

There is a multidisciplinary approach to supporting young people into a positive

adulthood. The supervision offered to foster carers is used to talk about helping young people plan for independence. A social worker said: 'The virtual school, social worker, carer and health services all have high aspirations for young people and are creative in offering options to promote independence and offer a bright future.'

## Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

Excellent efforts are made to ensure that young people benefit from carers who can best meet their needs. There are strong recruitment and assessment processes that ensure that carers who can meet young people's needs are available. Recruitment strategies are creative and robust and include financial incentives for the introduction of suitable carers. A significant financial investment is available within the fostering team to increase the number of foster carers available to the service. Carers are sought from a range of backgrounds such as minority ethnic, religious, and lesbian and gay communities and this helps to ensure that young people benefit from carers who have a wide range of skills, knowledge and experiences to meet their needs. Applicants' ability to reflect diversity and promote equality is assessed before they are considered suitable people to care for young people placed by the authority. Carers confirm that the assessment process is thorough, but professional and relevant. Six personal references are required, as well as employment and other references. This robust approach to the assessment process protects young people's welfare.

The fostering panel provides a strong quality assurance function and this ensures that young people have their welfare promoted. A foster carer said: 'You are prepared well for panel.' Matching arrangements are also strong and ensure that young people have their needs met effectively. Carers feel confident that they will only be asked to care for young people who have needs that they can meet. Staff say that a matching meeting always takes place before placements. A social worker said: 'We make sure that carers know the issues for the child, we predict possible future issues and look at any necessity training. It's all about predicting.' Matching processes fully consider the needs, feelings and wishes of carers' own children. These measures help to ensure placement stability and reduce the likelihood of placement breakdown.

There is a Statement of Purpose that accurately and comprehensively sets out the service's approach to working with foster carers and the service it provides. There are age-appropriate young people's guides which include pictures and give young people useful information about being fostered and who they contact if they have concerns or worries.

Excellent opportunities exist for the training and development of foster carers. There is a clear framework for training and strong systems for identifying training needs. This helps them to carry out their roles effectively. Carers say that the training provided is relevant, and provided at times and venues that promote their attendance. A staff member said: 'We try to keep the training alive to meet different

learning styles.' Recently training has been provided in anti-bullying, attachment theory, babies, child development, caring for young people who have been sexually abused, valuing and promoting diversity, neglect and resilience. This wide range of training provides carers with the skills required to promote positive outcomes for young people. Other resources include an in-house library and funding to access community-based learning.

Foster carers say they receive excellent support from the service and that this helps to ensure that young people make excellent progress. One foster carer said: 'They are excellent at communication, very transparent and have an open-door policy.' Other foster carers describe their supervising social workers as 'fantastic' and 'on the ball'. Another said: 'We feel proud to be part of East Sussex fostering service. Carers are motivated as they receive support that fits in with their day-to-day arrangements. For example, there are systems for effective around-the-clock support including support groups, a duty and out-of-hours service, supervision sessions and social events. Excellent communication between all those involved in young people's care enhances the support carers receive. One social worker said: 'The fostering service and other agencies working with the young person all communicate effectively to ensure that information is known by all professionals working with the young person.' Kinship carers say they feel valued and well supported and this ensures that the needs of young people placed with them will be met. As well as being highly supported by the service, foster carers also benefit from the support of the East Sussex Foster Care Association. This is a charity developed and run by carers employed by the local authority. The strong relationship shared between this organisation and the service ensures that fostering families and young people receive focused support in line with their needs.

Allegations and suspicions of harm are well handled and this ensures that young people are kept safe. Carers and staff understand the child protection policies and procedures as there is regular training in this area and clear guidance. Significant events are reported to the appropriate authorities and this ensures that young people's safety and welfare are promoted. There are effective quality assurance systems which help to ensure reflective practice. This also helps to ensure that areas for development are identified and dealt with in a timely fashion. The service is managed effectively by people with the appropriate skills and knowledge to do so. Financial viability ensures the smooth running of the service. Young people have their welfare promoted as there is careful selection and vetting of staff, volunteer and fostering households. Identity checks, Criminal Records Bureau disclosures and written references are obtained prior to any appointment.

This is a learning organisation and this ensures that young people and carers receive a service from staff who are competent and able to meet their needs. One social worker said: 'We are always striving to do more to promote best outcomes for young people.' Opportunities for training and development are wide and there is a focus on this during regular supervision sessions. Staff supervision is valued, reflective and used to challenge and praise staff appropriately. Staff say that a great strength of the organisation is the high level of support provided by management. This helps them to effectively and efficiently deliver a service that meets the needs of its users.

Effective record keeping ensures that there are good systems for providing a consistent approach to young people's care, and contributes to an understanding of young people's lives. Placement plans are comprehensive and kept under review and this promotes positive outcomes for young people.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. There is a clear focus on providing a service that meets the individual needs, and enhances the progress, of all young people. Young people using the service are treated as individuals and their care plans reflect this. Where young people have a specific need in relation to their background, disability, race, religion or culture, training and information are provided to carers to ensure that this need is met. This helps young people to develop a strong sense of identity and grow into happy adults.