

Somerset County Council

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

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Inspector	Paul Clark
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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 fostering service of Somerset County Council is part of its children and young person's directorate which embraces both its social services and education provision. The directorate is divided into four geographic regions of Somerset with an area manager in each. The area manager for the Taunton region has overall responsibility for the fostering service and line manages the Registered Manager of the service who is also based in Taunton. The Registered Manager has direct management responsibility for the county wide, home based care team who place more challenging young people with specialist foster carers; the recruitment and assessment team who recruit and assess foster care applicants; and the private fostering service (which is the subject of a separate inspection).

There are two fostering support teams which mainstream fostering placements; short term fostering placements for disabled young people and carers who provide parent/child placements. The fostering service operates two fostering panels, one in the west of the county and one in the east.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This announced key inspection found that the fostering service provides a good level of care for children and young people. Carers are all well supported by social workers and support staff who in turn are well supervised and managed. Carers and staff are well trained and the management have a commitment to ongoing staff training and the development of the service. The Registered Manager should achieve an appropriate management qualification, the policy on carers smoking must be more explicit, the contact details of Ofsted needs to be contained within the young person's guide and the foster panel should have a member in attendance who has medical expertise.

Improvements since the last inspection

After consultation with the children in care council the agency have decided not to implement the recommendation of the previous inspection in regard to the provision of a personalised health record for the individual use of children placed. All staff and foster carers now have enhanced criminal record bureau (CRB) checks in place and there is a system in place to ensure that these are updated every three years.

For one of the two fostering panels the agency has now successfully appointed a more diverse panel membership and a member with expertise in child health. The agency will now, when required, provide individualised guides for any young people

with disabilities who use the short term break scheme. This is prepared in a user-friendly format. After consultation with their advisors on disability the agency have decided that a section on their website specifically for disabled young people using the short term break scheme would not be a useful use of resources.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

There are good systems in place to promote the health and well-being of young people. Foster carers receive training, guidance and supervision to ensure that they register young people with a general practitioner, dentist, optician and arrange for routine health checks to be carried out. These registrations and checks are properly recorded. Children receive an annual medical check up with the looked after children nurse. The Responsible Individual stated that after consultation with young people the service has decided not to implement the recommendation of the previous inspection in regard to the provision of a personalised health record for the individual use of children placed. Having regular health checks and access to health services helps to ensure that a young person's health and development is being properly attended to and monitored.

Young people benefit from psychiatric or psychological assessments if the service have any concerns about them. There is a social worker who is a trained in developmental psychotherapy including attachment and developmental trauma issues as they relate to looked after children. This worker provides a consultation service for carers, do one-to-one work with looked after children and also leads training events for carers and social workers in this area of work. Providing specialist care to meet an individual young person's needs demonstrates that a good level of health care is available within the service thus helping young people's individual health needs to be met.

Carers record details of the meals they provide for a young person. Young people's food likes and dislikes are balanced with the need for a healthy diet. Supervising social workers check in their supervision visits that the food provided by foster carers is balanced and nutritious. The placement agreement details the required activities that will take place to promote the young person's fitness and good health. The council has a large range of leisure and sporting projects and opportunities available for looked after children. This careful scrutiny of diet and availability of sporting opportunity helps to promote the general health of young people.

Carers are trained in first aid as part of their core training and this is updated every three years. The Registered Manager and the supervising social workers are mindful of their responsibility in promoting the sexual health of young people. Carers receive training courses in the promotion and awareness of sexual health.

The agency provides foster carers with training on promoting health and well-being which includes how to give help and advice to support young people who may misuse drugs or alcohol. The detail of any necessary individualised support is

included in care plans which are appropriately reviewed. The agency policy on smoking does not allow children under five years, or who have a respiratory condition to live in an environment where carers smoke. These support systems help to improve the health of young people and carers. However, the policy does not make explicit that carers should not smoke in front of young people placed with them.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The fostering service takes rigorous steps to ensure that young people placed are kept safe. The Responsible Individual and the Registered Manager are both professionally qualified social workers and are registered with the General Social Care Council (GSCC). Both have many years experience in child care management and practice. The Registered Manager does not have an appropriate management qualification. All social workers working for the fostering service, have professional qualifications and are registered with the GSCC. All management and staff are appropriately recruited and vetted and have enhanced CRB checks in place and these are updated every three years. Strict vetting systems ensure that children are not placed at risk from staff working for the agency.

The process of foster carer recruitment, vetting, assessment, approval, supervision and training is rigorous and appropriate. Assessment areas include health and safety checks on the household and living environment. Enhanced CRB checks are in place for all foster carers and members of their families living with them, where age appropriate. Foster carer applicants undergo a three day 'Skills to Foster' preparation course as part of their training and which also stands as part of the assessment process. The appropriate checking of carers and their living environment helps to ensure that children placed are kept safe.

The foster panel deliberates on the carer assessment and their annual review, and any de-registrations and makes its recommendation to the agency decision maker. The panel chair and all members of the panel are recruited and appointed subject to appropriate approval. Although there is professional expertise amongst the panel membership and medical advice can be accessed, a medical practitioner is never in attendance. All members of the panel are suitably vetted and CRB checked.

The matching of young people with carers is thorough and appropriate. Complete information on a young person is taken from the placing social worker. Team Leaders look for a potential 'young person/carer' match. Carers' conditions of approval include the age and gender of young person to be placed and whether the placement can be short term, intermediate or long term. A summary of the young person is presented to the potential carer and detail of the fostering household is returned to the placing social worker for their consideration of suitability. A planned induction will take place if circumstances allow. Full information about the young person is given to the foster carers and a pre placement planning meeting occurs where a placement plan is drawn up. Careful matching of child and carer minimises

the likelihood of placement breakdown and the negative effect that this might have on a young person.

The agency has clear written policies on safeguarding children, bullying, the use of physical restraint, complaints, action to be taken in the event of a child going missing. Carers and staff receive appropriate training in these policies. Staff have to sign to record that they have read and understand these policies. The agency's young person's guide does not inform children that they may make a complaint about the service directly to Ofsted, neither does it give them the contact details of Ofsted. Overall, clear policies for care offer direct guidance to staff and carers and help to keep children safe.

All carers are currently undertaking the Children's Workforce Development Council training course and five carers have the National Vocational Qualification Level 3 in health and social care, caring for children and young people. Training carers in core skills ensures that they are suitable to care for the young people placed.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The everyday practice of the agency values diversity. The foster panel membership is diverse in terms of its representation from black and minority ethnic groups, areas of disability and people with personal experience of fostering. The agency has corporate and service specific policies on equal opportunities and potential carers are not prohibited from application or approval because of their single status, sexual orientation or disability.

Young people are supported in attending to their educational achievement. Young people have personal education plans (PEP) in place and carers are expected to attend PEP meetings at the school. Foster carers attend school evenings and will liaise directly with schools. Young people of the relevant age have a pathway plan in place. The service has a system of chasing placing social workers at the pre-placement meeting if these education plans are not made available for carers.

The fostering service works closely with the local education authority's 'virtual school' in supporting fostered young people. This support may include providing a consultation service for carers and/or social workers about behaviour management issues related to education and the provision of higher level teaching assistants who will support teachers in the classroom. A multi-agency group has produced a practice guidance document to support all fostered young people in meeting educational achievement. There is an alert system in place to let the 'virtual school' know when a young person changes their foster home placement. The school will contact the new carers to advise them of the child's current educational situation. All fostering households have internet access which young people may use for educational purposes. The agency ensures that this equipment is suitably safeguarded for the use of young people and there is agency policy on safe internet use. There is a panel member with educational expertise. These additional measures of educational

support for looked after children demonstrate an outstanding commitment to their educational development.

The service provides a short term care for disabled children. Designated supervising social workers support specialist foster carers in working for young people with a disability. Carers receive specialist training in caring for a particular child's needs including their medication needs. Children are given consistent placements with an identified carer.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Clear and supportive arrangements for contact are in place, including training for carers. Contact arrangements are discussed, agreed and reviewed regularly in placement plans. Foster carers actively support contact including facilitating this in the foster home.

There is a good level of consultation with placing social workers, young people, birth parents and carers to elicit their views about placements and the service in general. Carers have been involved in developing the recruitment practice and training programmes. Birth parents may raise any concerns about the service with their social worker or through their complaints system.

A programme of meetings and activities is arranged by fostering support workers for foster carer's birth children and systems are in place to support them in their involvement in the fostering provision. These active arrangements ensure that all stakeholders have an opportunity to participate in the fostering service and assist with service development.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is outstanding.

The council have a specialist leaving care service who are linked to a young person after their 15 year birthday. In addition to providing individual support, the service provides a training course for young people on preparation for independent living. The foster carer's handbook gives advice and guidance to carer's on the way that young people should be prepared for independence. This is also covered in the 'Skills to Foster' and the CWDC Induction Standards. The service provides a training course on this subject for carer's. All young people over 15 years of age have a pathway plan in place and have been contacted by the Connexions Service.

Fostering allowances are consistent with the Fostering Network recommendations. In addition, there are allowances for the home base, and parent and child scheme. Carers are reimbursed for events such as birthdays, contact and summer holiday.

The service provides a support service for carers' birth children called WeCare2. This

involves social trips and activities, newsletters and a website. Fostering support workers will undertake individual work with birth children if a need arises.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good.

The council has a clearly written corporate policy on equal opportunities and there is an equal opportunities and anti-discrimination policy contained within the fostering service policy document. The council have produced an information dvd to advise staff about the effects of racism. Carers receive core training in equality and diversity. Published materials about the service include the portrayal of service users from a variety of racial and cultural backgrounds. The fostering panel and the children in care council have representatives from a number of cultural backgrounds, in addition to personal experience of fostering or of having been fostered. There is a short break fostering service for disabled children. Promoting equality and diversity helps young people to develop their self-esteem and respect for other members of society.

The service has a clearly written Statement of Purpose which outlines its aims and objectives and which has been reviewed and updated in the last few months. There is a young person's guide which is presented in user-friendly formats for young people and which provide young people with a wealth of information about the service, including the right to complain. There is a foster carer's handbook which summaries the service aims and objectives and its policies and procedures. The service has an information website which includes an on-line application system for potential carers.

As previously stated, The Responsible Individual and the Registered Manager are both professionally qualified social workers and registered with the General Social Care Council (GSCC). Both have many years experience in child care management and practice. Both have enhanced CRB checks in place and these are updated every three years.

Supervising social workers are supervised monthly by their team leaders. Team meetings occur at least monthly and are appropriately minuted and recorded. Supervising social workers feel that their workload levels are appropriate, they are all appropriately professionally qualified and they feel that they receive the training necessary for their role. All staff and management undertake an annual performance appraisal which identifies their training and development needs.

The training programmes for carers and staff are comprehensive and cover all areas of key skills. Carers state they are supported to access all training that they feel is necessary for their role. They also state that they feel well supported by supervising social workers and management in undertaking their role as carers. All carers are currently undertaking, or have undertaken the CWDC induction standards. Five carers have achieved the NVQ Level 3 Award in 'Health and Social Care, Caring for

Children and Young People'. A further three are currently registered as candidates for this award.

The service has a suitable number of staff with responsibility for administrative management. The recording in the files of carers, young people and staff is well ordered, up to date and is comprehensive in content.

A review of the quality and direction of the service was conducted in June 2010 and a report was produced.

There are development plans in place to improve the service schemes; foster carer qualifications; information evenings; and consulting with birth parents.

What must be done to secure future 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 Registered Manager obtains an appropriate management qualification. NMS 2.2
- ensure that the service policy on smoking makes it explicit that carers should not smoke in front of young people placed with them. NMS 12
- ensure that the Young Person's Guide informs children that they may make a complaint about the service directly to Ofsted, and that it gives them the contact details of Ofsted. NMS 1.5
- ensure that there is a fostering panel member who is a medical practitioner. NMS 30