

Isle of Wight Authority Fostering Service

Inspection report for LA 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 Isle of Wight Local Authority Fostering Service is based at Ryde Social Services Centre in Lind Street, Ryde, Isle of Wight. The service has approximately 140 approved fostering households offering a variety of placements including long- and short-term foster placements, family link for young people with disabilities, respite care and kinship care. At the time of the inspection there were 210 young people in the care of the Isle of Wight Council of which 25 were being accommodated by independent fostering agencies. The service recruits, trains, assesses and supports foster carers across the Isle of Wight. There is a dedicated fostering panel.

Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

This announced inspection assessed the key national minimum standards for fostering services.

The service is still emerging from a very unsettled period characterised by inconsistent leadership. The appointment of a new senior management team is now providing much needed stability. The staffing crisis is being addressed and a new looked after children team structure has been put in place and is settling down. Unfortunately the benefits of these positive changes are just beginning to be felt.

The overall outcomes for young people fostered through this service are satisfactory, with the outcome areas of staying safe and economic well-being being judged as good. While the service has made considerable progress in a number of key areas since the last inspection on 24 September 2007 its overall effectiveness has been compromised by the effects of staff shortages within looked after children's services. For example, the shortages have had a negative impact on the amount of contact young people have been able to have with their designated social workers. The lack of a children's nurse over a twelve month period has also resulted in a large number of medical reviews not being completed within appropriate timescales.

However, evidence indicates that in spite of operational difficulties the manager of the fostering service and his team have continued to further develop important aspects of the service. The service has received a regional award for its successful campaign to recruit carers. The service operates with a pool of well-motivated carers who are intent on providing good quality care to looked after children on the island. The family link service has been reorganised and is now offering flexible care that is more responsive to the needs of young people with disabilities and their families. The matching of young people to appropriate carers has greatly improved and there has been a significant increase in placement stability. Placement breakdowns have also

been reduced by the introduction of placement stability meetings. These initiatives have decreased the need for crisis intervention. Evidence indicates that carers are appropriately supported and supervised to promote the well-being of the young people placed. Carers spoke in positive terms about the support they received from their support workers.

Although there are a number of recommendations arising from this inspection, they focus on the further development of the service.

Improvements since the last inspection

The service has addressed the recommendations to improve practice made following the last inspection. The looked after children's nurse is exploring new venues, such as sports centres, to carry out annual health checks. Household reviews and health and safety checks are now carried out within established timescales.

The local authority have now reviewed staff contracts and increased salaries to attract more qualified staff into key posts. Training has been provided to carers on the provision of special educational needs. A new system has been introduced that itemises carers payments. Additional support for young people has been provided by support workers who meet with them during their regular home visits.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is satisfactory.

The health needs of each young person are identified prior to any placement and arrangements made to ensure they can be appropriately met. All young people are provided with access to a doctor, dentist and optician. Specialist equipment and guidance is made available for carers, such as those in the family link service, who care for young people with disabilities.

On admission to care there is an expectation that each individual will undertake a full medical, however, the service was operating without a looked after children's nurse for almost a year and a backlog of such examinations has developed. A new looked after children's nurse was appointed and she has already made great strides in addressing this problem. Health checks are currently being undertaken at a local hospital. While this is functional, it is not particularly conducive to attracting older teenagers.

The fostering service is effective in promoting the concept of healthy living and there is an expectation that young people will be encouraged to eat wisely and undertake regular exercise. Each young person has a health plan that identifies specific needs. Carers monitor the health and well-being of each young person on an on-going basis and convey any concerns to appropriate parties. A record is kept of all medical appointments and interventions. The foster care team includes a therapist who provides advice and guidance to carers on social and emotional issues.

Although foster carers undertake initial training in first aid the administration of

medication, they can also access regular training on health related issues. Recent training has included the misuse of alcohol and drugs. Information is also provided to foster carers on development areas such as sexual awareness. Further advice is available in the foster carer's handbook.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The fostering service is managed by a well-qualified and experienced manager who has been in post for a number of years. The manager is also responsible for the management of the adoption team. The manager operates an 'open door' policy and makes himself available to staff for advice and support. Although staff are clearly appreciative of this approach, his other commitments often demand he is away from his office. The current lack of a deputy manager has resulted in a number of senior staff having to assume additional responsibilities. The manager has clearly provided effective leadership to his team during a recent period of change and uncertainty. The service has continued to make significant progress in a number of key areas such as the recruitment and retention of carers.

The service has recently completed an extremely effective recruitment campaign for carers which was recognised by the Chartered Institute of Public Relations in 2009 as worthy of a Gold Award in the category of integrated communications. The service maintains a high profile around the island and staff and carers regularly access large community events such as the Garlic Festival and Chale Show. It also runs a series of promotional events in its annual fostering fortnight. This proactive approach has resulted in 16 new households being approved for fostering between 1 April 2009 and 31 March 2010. The service can currently access just over two hundred placements.

Staff are of the opinion that the service has responded appropriately to the changing nature and demands of the young people requiring placements. There is now an expectation that foster carers will be capable of providing care and accommodation to a wider range of young people including those that experience social and emotional difficulties. Such young people often have attachment difficulties that inhibit their ability to form and retain relationships. Foster care staff clearly recognise the demands that can be made on carers and are, as a consequence, very selective in their approach. Although all prospective carers are invited to undertake a skills to foster training course, only those that are likely to be approved are presented to the fostering panel.

All carers, including family and friends, are subject to a comprehensive assessment process. Health and safety assessments are carried out in respect of their properties and pets. Carers feel that the assessment process, though intrusive, is necessarily thorough. While appearance at panel is for many a daunting experience, carers reported that they are appropriately supported and treated with respect by panel members. Once approved, the performance of carers is monitored by support workers during regular supervision visits and an annual review. If it is felt a carer is

not meeting the required standards they will be referred back to panel.

Foster care staff feel that the service now operates with a pool of quality carers who can, in most instances, meet the needs of the young people requiring care. The current pool of placements normally provides a number of alternatives. In the recent past, options were often extremely limited. More effective matching is reflected in the significant decrease in placement breakdowns. The matching process takes into consideration, amongst other things, each individual's physical, social, emotional, cultural, educational and religious needs. Placement plans are now developed within 72 hours of admission and this has helped to clarify the expectations of both young people and their new carers. The need for crisis intervention has been greatly reduced by the introduction of placement stability meetings. These meetings provide a mechanism through which difficulties can be addressed before a placement breaks down.

Although the pool of family link carers has decreased since the last inspection, the service is operating much more effectively. The service now focuses on addressing the specific respite needs of young people rather than limiting itself to regular respite stays. A new flexible approach has been developed in which family link carers offer support at different times throughout the week. In some instances this can involve picking up a young person after school and in others providing a weekend break. This targeted approach has proved to be an effective way of providing support at times when it is most needed. Foster care staff are now working closely with members of the child disability team to provide a more integrated approach.

Staff shortages within the looked after children team have significantly curtailed the amount of support available to young people from their designated social workers. In response to this difficulty, members of the foster care team have increased the support they offer during their routine visits to the carers. Foster care staff now offer opportunities for young people to meet with them in private to discuss their lives within their placements. Any concerns are conveyed to the young person's social worker. Though this is not an ideal situation, it is a positive response to a difficult problem. It is envisaged that the current situation will be resolved by the appointment of a number of new looked after children social work staff.

The service has developed a number of policies, procedures and working practices to keep young people safe. For example, staff undertake unannounced visits to carers and always discuss any protection concerns during their visits. All carers receive training in child protection and those spoken with were clearly aware of their responsibilities in regard to reporting any protection concerns. A number of options are available for young people to express their views about the service and all are made aware of how to register a concern or complaint. The service provides an out of hours service for all carers.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is satisfactory.

The service values diversity and recruits staff and carers from all sections of the local community. When needed the service seeks out specific carers for individual young people. In the recent past carers have been recruited from within minority ethnic communities. Equality and diversity issues form part of the training programme for carers. Part of selection and training of carers addresses diversity issues. The family link service recruits carers with the ability to meet the needs of young people with disabilities.

Foster carers support young people with their education and attend personal education planning meetings, parents evenings and reviews. Although looked after children generally do well in primary school, their success, like many other young people on the island, drops significantly when they move on to their middle and high schools. A high proportion of looked after children have statements of educational needs and experience learning difficulties. Although, the looked after children education service has introduced a number of initiatives to improve educational attainment, its impact has been curtailed by recent financial cut backs that have resulted in its workforce being halved. It is now focusing its attention on making existing educational provision more inclusive and responsive to the needs of looked after children.

Although it can no longer provide individual tutoring for young people in care, it has been successful in providing them with access to computers and the internet. The service has also been successful in working with schools to decrease exclusions, however, non-school attendance remains a problem amongst a minority of older adolescents. It is hoped the recent appointment of a headteacher to oversee the individual performances of looked after children will have a positive impact on results. The service now supports young people until they complete their education and a number are currently in the process of completing their degrees. An annual award ceremony provides a forum for recognising young peoples educational achievements.

Foster carers support young people in a variety of ways and are proactive in advocating on their behalf to ensure they are not disadvantaged. Some foster carers have also supported young people through the criminal justice service, attending court with the young people, and supporting them to put strategies in place in order to reduce unwanted or anti-social behaviour that continues to get them into trouble. Placements are often kept open for young people to return to following periods in secure settings.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is satisfactory.

The service produces clear guidance for carers on the type and frequency each young person can have with their parents, relatives and friends. If there are any restrictions, they are made clear to all parties. The local authority has a contact centre where supervised contact can take place. Carers are asked to observe the behaviour of young people both before and after contact visits. Any concerns are passed to their social worker. The views of young people are taken into consideration in determining the frequency and duration of contact visits. Carers confirmed that contact arrangements are always discussed at review meetings.

Although staff shortages have clearly impacted on the amount of support young people have received from their social workers, foster care staff have offered additional support. The service has been successful in involving young people in making decisions about their futures and there is high participation in the reviewing process. Young people are consulted when there are concerns raised about the quality of care in their placements. Responses from young people indicate that they are aware of how to access the services complaints process. Young people are supported if they raise a complaint and are provided with access to an independent advocacy service.

The participation of young people in the development of the service has significantly improved and there are now representatives on recruiting panels and an ex-foster child now sits on the foster care panel. Young people can discuss their experience of care with members of the Children in Care Council. There is evidence that the views and suggestions made by young people are taken seriously and responded to appropriately. While opportunities exist for most young people to have their say consultation arrangements for young people with disabilities could be developed further.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

As a corporate parent, the local authority aims to ensure that their looked after children receive appropriate care and support until they are ready to move to semi-independent and independent living. For those wishing to stay in their existing placements support will be offered until they are 18 years old. If they wish to reside beyond this and their carers agree, arrangements are made for them to move across to a supported living scheme.

The authority has a dedicated post-16 social work team that helps young people prepare for their futures by providing options and independent living-skills training. The team has dedicated facilities including a training flat. A specially modified mobile home has recently been acquired that will offer specially adapted facilities for young people with disabilities. Although the team intervenes in advance of each young

person's 16th birthday, a number carers feel that young people would be better prepared if they embarked on their independent skills training earlier. The post-16 team have established good links with other agencies so that young people can access housing and training opportunities.

Carers expressed the view that the system for paying allowances and expenses has significantly improved. Carers are now paid on a nationally recognised rate and although a number of carers indicated that payments can be slow, there is an appreciation that they are now provided with itemised accounts that details the specific nature of each payment. The service recognises the contribution made by carers and rewards long service.

Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

The service has a Statement of Purpose that clearly details its aims and objectives. The statement is subject to regular review and updated to reflect significant changes. Young people's guides have been developed in two age-appropriate formats. One for those under, and one for those over, 11 years. Both guides provide details of how to report any worries or concerns.

The service is just emerging from a destabilising period of uncertainty during which a number of senior posts were filled by interim managers on short term contracts. According to staff, this led to a period of inconsistent leadership with frequent policy changes and a lack of longer term strategic planning. A re-organisation of social work teams has now taken place. Staff feel that the new structure will lead to more integrated and effective working. The role of young people's social workers is clearly defined as different from the foster carers supervising social workers. In spite of often conflicting demands and pressures, relationships between members of both teams is good. A clearer understanding of each team's responsibilities has emerged since a number of staff have moved teams to gain experience. Both team managers are proactive in addressing concerns before they develop into serious problems.

Staff reported that following a period of uncertainty, the new senior management team are now providing much needed stability. Although the fostering service has managed to provide a service throughout this period, its effectiveness has been compromised by staff shortages in both its own and other social work teams. For example, the service operated without a looked after children's nurse for almost a year and the important deputy manager's post still remains unfilled. Carers are clearly aware of the situation and feel that the service is being managed well in difficult circumstances. Being a local authority service, it is subject to internal scrutiny via the committee system and external inspection.

Foster care staff are organised effectively and there is good use of individual skills and experience. The team consists of social work and support staff. Specific staff are allocated responsibility for developments in areas such as family link and family and friends fostering. Being a small team, staff have opportunities to develop their

knowledge and skills in a number of different areas including placement planning, assessment and training. Staff said they enjoy the variety of work that is available. Staff clearly support each other and are flexible in their approach. Work loads have to be regularly reassessed in response to changing circumstances such as edicts from court. Caseloads are, according to staff, manageable. Although there is administrative support, staff normally carry out their own administration. There was a degree of frustration amongst staff that incompatible computer systems was causing unnecessary duplication in recording. Staff have regular team meetings and minutes are produced. Supervision is given a high priority and provides regular opportunities for staff to reflect on their practice.

The service has improved its recruitment and training of carers. Each carer is now subject to a training analysis that identifies specific gaps in their knowledge, skills and experience. Training is now delivered in a number of different formats, including computer based learning packages. A foster carer training calendar has been produced that lists all available courses for the year. There is an expectation that foster carers will complete at least three courses a year. A brief overview of each course highlights the course aim and learning outcomes. Recent training has been provided on: attachment, alcohol and drug misuse, child protection, the role of education, separation and loss, sexual health/personal relationships and sexuality and autistic spectrum disorders. Carers recorded a very high level of satisfaction with the quality of the training and were very appreciative of the support they received from the trainers.

Many carers have formed informal networks of support with other carers. Carers confirmed they receive regular supervision from their support workers and appreciated the opportunity for discussion such meetings provide. Support workers also undertake unannounced visits. Support workers now have to complete a pro-forma that requires them to comment on key areas such as safeguarding, health and education. All carers are subject to an annual review that checks domestic arrangements, family composition, pets, accommodation, safety, record of young people fostered, concerns or allegations, training, after care, views of foster carers and recommendations.

Many carers have formed informal networks of support. In many permanent placements carers have sought support from family and friends. This appears to work well and enables young people to really feel part of a family. The service has established a mentoring system in which experienced carers offer support to a number of new carers. Although this system is working well, the role of mentors needs to be made clear to all parties including looked after children social workers.

Carers are encouraged to attend support group meetings that are held at regular intervals around the island. These meetings provide an opportunity for carers to meet together in an informal setting and discuss issues of common concern. Such meetings often include a talk from a visiting speaker and a buffet lunch. Although such meetings are open to all, a number of carers who are currently fostering young children, reported that a lack of crèche facilities was prohibiting their attendance.

During the course of the inspection a range of records and documents were examined. All the documents requested were readily available and contained recent and relevant information that were written in clear accessible language. Information in files was accessible through an effective indexing system. Confidential information is stored in appropriate locked facilities.

Although the service operates within an accessible local authority setting in the centre of Ryde, it does not offer very suitable accommodation. Being open planned it does not provide much privacy for confidential calls. The limitations of the existing premises have been recognised by the local authority and plans have been made to relocate to another facility in Newport.

The promotion of equality and diversity is satisfactory. Carers are recruited from all sections of the local community. Staff within the service have established effective links with members of minority communities and have been successful in recruiting carers to address specific needs. Staff and carers are effective advocates for looked after children and try to ensure that young people taken into care are able to remain on the island. This is reflected in the success the service has had in identifying family and friends as potential carers.

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):

- assist foster carers in introducing independent living skills training for young people at an earlier age (NMS 14.3)
- provide crèche facilities to enable carers with young children attend support group meetings (NMS 21.2)
- ensure the role and responsibilities of mentors are understood by all interested parties including looked after children's social workers (NMS 21.2)
- make available a kit of essential supplies for carers who, at short notice, provide emergency care for babies (NMS 22.7)
- ensure that all vacant posts are appropriately filled by suitably qualified staff (NMS 17.2)
- introduce compatible computer systems to avoid the unnecessary duplication of records. (NMS 25.3)