

Portsmouth City Council Fostering

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 fostering service provided by Portsmouth City Council is located within three separate teams, each providing different types of foster care. The largest of the teams is based at Chaucer House, in the centre of Portsmouth. This team recruits and supports Level 1 and Level 2 carers who provide placements for the majority of young people assessed as requiring foster care in the city. The Skye Close project based at Cosham provides Level 3 carers who offer placements to young people with complex behavioural needs. The Family Link scheme based at Beechside in Drayton provides short-term care for young people with disabilities and complex health needs.

The fostering service works closely with the other children's services provided by Portsmouth City Council, including residential provisions for young people.

Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

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

Evidence collected through the inspection process indicates that young people receive individualised care and support to meet their specific needs. The service provides young people with opportunities to pursue healthy lifestyles and they are supported to access specialist health and medical services when required. The high incidence of placement stability indicates that young people are appropriately matched. Carers feel they are well supported by their workers and there are good monitoring systems of all placements. The service is well managed and operates with a team of well motivated staff and dedicated carers. The service is inclusive and involves young people and carers in its development. While there are two recommendations arising from this inspection, none are directly concerned with the quality of fostering provision which is outstanding.

Improvements since the last inspection

At the last inspection no actions were required; however, three recommendations were made and they have been addressed as follows: a new policy has been introduced that ensures that no young people in foster homes share bedrooms; staff utilise a range of communication techniques to ascertain the views of young people with disabilities; and the service has developed a policy and procedure for those wishing to pursue guardianship.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

The health and well-being of young people receive a high priority within the service. The service, through its matching process, aims to ensure that young people are placed appropriately. For example, young people with disabilities, who receive respite care through the Family Link service, are matched with carers who have the requisite knowledge, skills and appropriate facilities in their homes to meet their often complex needs.

Each individual entering the service is subject to a comprehensive health assessment and an annual review. The looked after children's nurse has been very successful in engaging with reluctant teenagers. All young people are provided with a health plan that identifies their health needs and provides guidance for carers on how they should be met. Young people are provided with access to a doctor, dentist and optician. Carers monitor the health and well-being of each young person on an ongoing basis and convey any concerns to appropriate parties. A record is kept of all medical appointments and interventions.

A specialised mental health professional is available to assist carers and will liaise with psychiatric services if a referral is required. All carers undertaking delegated health tasks, such as those in the Family Link service, are provided with appropriate training from a health professional. Specialist equipment is also available.

The service promotes the concept of healthy living and there is an expectation that young people will be encouraged to eat wisely and undertake regular exercise. Although foster carers undertake initial training in first aid and the administration of medication, they can also access regular training on health-related issues. Carers spoke in very positive terms about the advice and guidance that was available to them on health-related subjects. Evidence indicates that young people receive excellent individualised care and support that meets their specific health needs.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

The service operates with a very experienced manager who has been in post for a number of years. He is clearly aware of his role and responsibilities and the statutory obligations associated with providing a service for looked after children. The manager operates an 'open door' policy and provides advice and guidance for staff on request. The manager is held in high regard by both his own staff and foster carers, for his professionalism and child-centred approach. The manager is well supported by a team of experienced senior staff.

The service is currently experiencing an increase in demand for foster placements and is finding it difficult to satisfy this demand from within its current pool of established carers. While a number of new carers have been approved since the last

inspection, a number of long-standing carers have also resigned and as a consequence the number of available placements has not significantly increased. Staff report that recruitment within the city is made more difficult due to the existence of a relatively poor housing stock. Many potential carers are ruled out due to a lack of suitable accommodation. The service has clearly recognised this problem and is in the throes of developing more effective strategies to recruit new carers. A member of the foster care team is currently working with other council staff to develop a more focused approach that will target recruitment at identified sections of the population.

The service has a well-developed system of selecting and training foster carers. All prospective carers are subject to a thorough assessment process that includes checks on both themselves and family members. Health and safety assessments are also carried out in respect of their properties and pets. Prospective carers have to successfully complete a Skills to Foster training programme before being presented to panel for approval. During their initial training prospective carers are introduced to the concept of safeguarding and are made aware of carers' personal responsibilities in regard to the reporting of any child protection concerns. Foster carers reported that the assessment and training process made them fully aware of the possible social and emotional demands that fostering could place on them. The fostering service recruits carers from a wide section of the community and records indicate that the present group bring with them a range of skills and experience. The service monitors the performance of carers through annual reviews and will, if necessary, refer them to panel if they are not meeting the necessary standards.

Staff are clearly aware of the importance of appropriate matching and staff try to ensure that the specific care needs of young people are clearly identified prior to placement. The matching process takes into consideration, amongst other things, each individual's physical, social, emotional, cultural, educational and religious needs. Each placement is considered on an individual basis and carers have the right to refuse if they do not feel a placement is suitable. Level 3 carers are specifically selected for their ability to provide stable long-term placements. The service has been particularly successful in recruiting family and friends as carers.

Placement plans are comprehensive and provide guidance for carers on how a young person's care needs should be met. If the needs of a young person cannot be met by carers within the service an appropriate placement will be sought from an approved independent fostering agency. The relatively few placement breakdowns indicate that the matching process is successful.

Foster care staff are recruited to the service via a well-established process that requires them to complete a detailed application form, undertake a Criminal Records Bureau check and provide the names of referees who can comment on their knowledge and skills. All new staff have to undertake a full induction before assuming their full responsibilities. Once in post staff can access a range of training courses. The Criminal Records Bureau Checks on staff are updated at regular intervals.

The service has its own fostering panel that meets at regular intervals. Panel members bring with them a range of skills and experience. There are clear written policies and procedures for its operation. The panel maintains independent scrutiny of the fostering service and its members seek out information from prospective carers and service staff in a polite yet rigorous manner. Panel minutes are detailed and clearly reflect how decisions are arrived at. Training is provided specifically for panel members. A number of new carers reported that appearing in front of panel had been a positive, if somewhat daunting experience. All appreciated the efforts of panel members to put them at their ease.

During the inspection a number of carers were visited in their homes. All the properties visited were warm and welcoming and in good decorative order. Foster carers confirm they receive regular supervision and support. Foster service staff operate a duty desk during office hours and an-out-of hours service until 10pm. An emergency service is available after 10pm. There are well-established policies and procedures in the event of a young person going missing.

Young people's questionnaires indicate that they are generally happy with the degree of support they receive from their designated social workers. While the amount of contact varies it is clear that communication is maintained via text messages, emails, phone calls and face-to-face meetings. During home visits foster care staff often take the opportunity to meet with young people to elicit their views on the placement. Young people confirm that they are aware of how to register a concern or complaint.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The council, in its role as a corporate parent, has an expectation that all looked after children will have access to an appropriate educational placement. If a young person enters care with an existing educational placement, if appropriate, every effort is made to maintain it. Each young person has an education plan that provides a mechanism for monitoring their progress and identifying any areas of need. Education plans are discussed and updated at reviews. Educational support for carers is provided through training and resource material. Carers are actively involved in liaising with school staff and advocate on the part of young people to ensure they are being provided with access to appropriate educational resources such as additional tutoring. The exam results of looked after children have, since the last inspection, continued to improve and an increasing number are progressing on to further training and higher education. The service celebrates the achievements of all the children and young people in its care and holds a presentation evening to do this publicly.

Although carers are recruited from Portsmouth and surrounding areas, an increasing number are coming from families with larger homes in residential areas on the outskirts of the city. The service values diversity and promotes equality. Specific carers are sought for young people from minority communities. The selection and training of carers addresses diversity issues around gender, religion, ethnic origin,

culture, disability and sexuality. Evidence indicates that staff and carers confront discrimination and inappropriate practice.

The Family Link service continues to provide valuable support to families with disabled children. Although the number of active carers providing respite care has decreased, they are now providing more flexible care. Staff report that families are now requesting support from carers at key times in the week. As a consequence, the demand for overnight stays has decreased. Family Link carers are now involved in supportive activities in periods after school and in the early evening. Many of those involved in the Family Link service have been providing respite care for the same young people for many years and have established strong links with both the children and young people and their families. Family Link carers are fully aware of their responsibilities in regard to parental consent. A number of Family Link carers have undertaken specific training that allows them to carry out delegated health tasks with the young people in their care.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The service has developed policies, procedures and agreed working practices around contact. In general every effort is made to ensure that young people maintain regular contact with their family and friends. All contact arrangements are made explicit in placement plans and the role of carers established. Carers are provided with training on the management of contact and are helped to understand the often confused emotions that many young people experience. Although contact visit arrangements are regularly monitored and specific difficulties discussed, there is not a systematic recording system of young people's behaviour both before and after contact which would provide a better overview of its impact. The views of young people are taken into consideration in determining the frequency and duration of contact visits. Staff and carers indicate that many young people maintain regular contact with their family and friends via their mobile phones and in some cases computers.

Carers are encouraged to regularly seek out the views of young people about their care. In most instances young people reported they would raise any worries or concerns directly with the carers and social workers. Young people are consulted about their care as part of the appraisal system that assesses the quality of carers' provision. The high level of placement stability indicates that most difficulties within placements are satisfactorily resolved. The service is successful in involving young people in decision making about their futures and participation in reviews is high. All young people are, when entering care, made aware of how to raise issues of concern and register a complaint.

Young people are involved in the development of the service and their views are sought via consultation groups such as a Children in Care Council. Members of the Children in Care Council have, with the help of advocacy staff, produced a six point pledge that details their expectations of Portsmouth Council in its role as a corporate

parent. There is regular consultation between representatives of the Children in Care Council and the Corporate Parenting Panel whose members include senior officers and councillors. Evidence indicates that the service responds effectively to the often conflicting needs and demands of the young people in its care. Young people are provided with support and training to sit on interview panels and to assist in the delivery of training to new foster carers.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

The local authority now provides a range of options available to young people over 16 that include possible extensions to their existing placements, supported lodgings and hostel accommodation. An increasing number of young people are now staying with their carers until they are 18. The service will provide support to ensure that young people can complete their education or training. Young people are encouraged to develop independent living skills such as cooking and managing their own finances. All young people contribute to the development of their own pathway plans. Although much of this training is introduced post-16 a number of carers felt the introduction of a basic curriculum would allow them to develop such skills earlier. It was also suggested that the successful completion of a programme could be linked to an award. The service has two training flats that provide opportunities for young people to sample independent living. An effective after-care team has established key links with supporting agencies such as housing that enable young people make successful transitions to independence.

Individual placement agreements between the service and carers make clear the allowances to be paid in respect of each placement. Carers confirmed that their allowances are generally paid on time. However, the service still does not produce an itemised payment system. This remains a frustration for many carers, especially those who provide multiple placements. While only a few concerns were raised by carers about existing allowance levels, there was a general consensus that increasing demands on their time could deter prospective foster carers from applying to the service. A new finance module has been introduced into the preparation to foster training.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

The service has produced Statements of Purpose that detail the aims and objectives of each specific strand. The statements are written in clear unambiguous language. Each statement is subject to regular review and is updated in response to changing circumstances. Information packs have been developed for young people that outline what they can expect from the service.

The service operates with three teams that are located in three different areas. Although each of the three strands of the service focus on specific areas of need,

there is a common focus and professional ethos that underpins all. The culture of the service is open and the views of carers and young people are regularly sought. The service takes complaints seriously and will, if necessary, take foster carers back to panel if they feel they are not providing an appropriate service.

Staff and carers are proactive in working in partnership with a wide range of other people to ensure continual improvement of the service. Issues relating to equality and diversity are given a high priority. Managers are visible and make themselves available to staff, carers and young people.

Being a local authority service, it is subject to internal scrutiny via the committee system and external audit. Children's services, of which the fostering service is one, are striving to meet a number of key government performance indicators. The council has embraced the concept of corporate parenting and has invested in services to support the social development and educational achievements of looked after children in the city.

The service operates with a group of well qualified and motivated staff who are intent in delivering a high quality service for vulnerable young people. All staff are provided with job descriptions and undertake a full induction on appointment. Staff receive regular supervision and appreciate the manager's 'open door' policy that provides instant consultation. Staff are provided with opportunities to extend their professional knowledge and experience by engaging in development work. The expansion of kinship care and the introduction of a more comprehensive out-of-hours service are reflections of recent efforts. Staff have access to regular training opportunities and are encouraged to develop their professional knowledge and skills. The foster care team is supported by a number of extremely able administrative staff. Communication within each of the teams is good and there are regular team meetings during which areas of common interest are discussed and strategies developed. Although staff acknowledged they were always busy, they felt that work was distributed fairly and caseloads manageable. Staff are dealing well with the increasing demand from the courts for time-constrained assessments.

There is a well-developed procedure for recruiting and introducing prospective carers to fostering. All prospective carers are subject to a comprehensive assessment process. Carers must successfully complete a Skills to Foster training programme before appearing before panel for approval. Carers confirmed they are well supported during the assessment and approval process. Once approved, carers are expected to further develop their knowledge and skills, to meet the often complex needs of the young people they are caring for. An annual foster carer training calendar is produced that lists all available courses for the year. There is an acknowledgement that individuals learn in different ways and the service now provides training in different formats. Staff, carers and young people are involved in the delivery of training. There is an extremely high level of satisfaction amongst carers about the quality of training on offer.

Carers indicate that they receive excellent support from their designated workers. Carers receive monthly supervision and the occasional unannounced visit. Due to the

complex nature of the needs of the young people they are caring for, Skye Close carers have more regular contact with their support workers. In between supervision sessions, carers maintain communication via the phone and email. Carers feel they are listened to and that advice and support are always available. The service has produced its own website that is proving useful at keeping carers informed of developments and forthcoming activities. All carers are subject to an annual review that, amongst other things, examines the success of placements and checks domestic arrangements.

The service has established a mentoring service that provides new carers with access to the wisdom and advice of experienced carers. While some carers have formed informal support networks amongst themselves, those offering long-term placements access support from their families and friends. There is a system of practical support for carers that includes out-of-hours support, prompt payment of allowances, and insurance cover. In some instances carers are provided with funds to make alterations to their properties to improve the accommodation for the young people they are caring for.

Although it is not always possible in emergency situations, every effort is made to ensure that carers are provided with information on a young person's physical, social and cultural needs prior to placement. There are good working relationships between social work teams and information is stored on a computer system that is accessible to all. Plans are developed in respect of each new placement and are subject to regular review. While a number of young people reported that they did not meet in person with their social workers as often as they liked the majority said that communication was being maintained via regular emails and text messages.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding and staff and carers advocate effectively on behalf of young people in care to ensure they are not discriminated against. Carers are recruited from all sections of the community regardless of their race, creed or sexual orientation. There are good systems in place to ensure that the cultural needs of young people are identified prior to placement and strategies developed to meet them.

During the course of the inspection a range of documents and records were examined. All the records requested contained recent and relevant information. Confidential information is appropriately stored in locked facilities and electronic data can only be accessed by authorised personnel. Detailed records are kept of all complaints including investigation procedures and outcomes. The service operates from three different sites within Portsmouth. Each unit has appropriate facilities including dedicated meeting rooms.

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):

- introduce a more systematic approach to record young people's behaviour both before and after contact (NMS 10.9)
- develop a strategy for carers to assist young people acquire some key independent living skills at an earlier age. (NMS 14.1)