

Surrey County Council 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

There are approximately 277 fostering households approved by Surrey County Council. There are two fostering teams, one covering the East of the county and the other covering the West. The senior managers of the service are responsible for the whole of the county.

The service aims to recruit, assess, train and support foster carers who can provide safe and nurturing care to young people who are unable to live with their own family.

The service includes a Family Link Scheme that provides short breaks to young people who meet the criteria for registration on the Surrey Children with Disability Register.

The fostering service provides permanent and time-limited placements for young people from birth until independence.

Approximately 30 carers and four young people directly contributed their views during this inspection.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

At this key, announced inspection, all key national minimum standards were assessed. This is a good service with some outstanding features.

There are outstanding arrangements in place which help to keep young people safe. These include strong recruitment practices which help to attract suitable carers and strong matching policies and procedures. Carers trust the service and say placements are made in a very professional way. This helps to promote placement stability and good outcomes for young people. Carers feel valued and have strong support and consistency from the service. Carers are empowered through excellent training opportunities, support, and opportunities for being involved in the service. One carer said 'I would not work for anyone else'.

Staff feel well supported and empowered and they show a strong commitment to achieving good outcomes for young people. Young people's views continue to be highly valued and excellent work goes into creating ways for listening to young people. Participation from young people and carers in the development of the service is strong.

This is a well-managed service with good quality monitoring arrangements for ensuring that work is directed in areas that is needed. All recommendations set at the last inspection have been well addressed.

Improvements since the last inspection

The registered provider was asked to improve the ways that older young people access health services, to ensure each child with a disability receives specific services and support. This includes appropriate equipment, to maximise their potential and to improve the arrangements for ensuring that foster carers prepare young people for independence. Positive action has been taken in these areas and this helps to promote the well-being of young people.

The registered provider was also asked to ensure that the fostering panel minutes provide evidence of adherence to the regulations with regard to membership and to review the confidential information strategy to include confidential information about carers. Positive action has been taken in these areas and this goes some way to ensuring young people's welfare.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

There are strong arrangement in place for promoting young people's health and well-being. A foster carer said 'We are expected to provide a healthy diet and age-appropriate exercise for young people'. Another said of the service 'The child's health is paramount, they have helped with doctors, dentists and hospital appointments'. Another said that their supervising social worker was 'Very supportive and provides links to a range of services'. A young person said of their foster carers 'They make sure I am healthy'.

Information about young people's health needs is made available in statutory looked after children's documentation and this information is made available to all those who need it. Carers strongly advocate on behalf of young people in relation to their health needs and know where to go for support in this area. The council has a designated doctor and nurse who are available for consultation regarding health issues. Strong links are maintained with the child and adolescence mental health service and carers say that this has been particularly helpful in meeting young people's emotional health needs.

The service makes clear to carers their role in terms of helping to promote young people's health needs. The training provided to carers informs them with the skills and information they need in this area. This includes mandatory training in areas such as the safe handling of medication and first aid and more specialist training aimed at meeting the specific needs of individual young people.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

This is a well-managed service that provides suitable foster carers. Excellent efforts are made to recruit suitable carers through regular recruitment evenings and advertising campaigns. Both carers and young people are involved in recruitment which helps to give new recruits a realistic idea about what fostering is all about. The service is robust in its checking of the suitability of carers' homes. Checking includes annual health and safety inspections and unannounced visits. Carers are given clear expectations about what is required of them in terms of the standards of cleanliness, safety and comfort of their homes. Clear information is also provided regarding the need of all young people, other than sibling groups, to be provided with their own bedroom.

The service matches the needs of young people with the competencies of carers when making decisions about the best placement for each young person. One foster carer said 'The fostering team have always provided me with enough information to assess the viability of any placement before we agree to accept them and if not enough information was available they have sought out more from the necessary sources'. Another said 'They carefully match the young people to us before they are placed'. Carers trust the service to provide them with all of the information they have regarding a potential placement and to help them to make a decision about whether to agree to a placement. This practice helps to promote placement stability and prevent placement breakdown and this promotes young people's well-being.

The arrangements in place regarding child protection promote young people's safety. Staff and carers are provided with on-going training in child protection and this helps them to clearly understand their roles in protecting young people. All carers have safe-care guidelines which are understood by all household members and any young people placed with them. There is a bullying policy and clear guidelines for when a young person goes missing and carers are helped to understand these. These measures help to ensure that young people remain safe. A young person who is fostered said 'I am safe'.

The policies and procedures for both staff and foster carer recruitment are robust and help to promote young people's welfare. A wide range of checks are made on individuals and this includes carrying out a fresh Criminal Records Bureau check every three years. There is an effective, professional and efficient fostering panel. The foster panel provides a quality assurance process in relation to the assessment process and training. Clear written policies and procedures are in place for the panel which are implemented in practice. Membership of the panel includes expertise from health, education and from foster carers and users of social care services.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

This is a service that values diversity. The learning and development programme includes a training course to help foster carers meet the cultural needs of young people from different minority ethnic groups. Foster carers are expected to attend training on 'building a positive identity' and 'caring for children from different cultures, faiths, ethnicities and abilities'. Racial matches are made where this is possible. There are supervising social workers who specialise in work with young people who have a disability. These social workers offer additional support, information and guidance to foster carers who care for young people with both learning difficulties and physical disabilities. A foster carer said 'I am well prepared for the special needs of the young people'.

The service places a high value on education. All current young people are attending education and foster carers feel confident that they will be supported by the service to ensure that young people's educational needs will continue to be met. A foster carer said 'They supply a tutor to help with maths'. A kinship carer said 'Their support is very helpful, it really had a good impact on my brother's education'. All young people have an entitlement to out of hours learning and carers are encouraged to offer educational activities. An education conference was held by the service recently to increase carers' knowledge about education and due to its popularity has become an annual event. The virtual school provided by the service is reported by carers to be 'Excellent'. The aim of the school is to provide advocacy for young people in schools, to promote their education and to reduce exclusions. Personal education plans are kept up to date and this helps to ensure that young people receive the support they need with education in a consistent way.

There is an effective short-term break service, the arrangements of which recognise that the parents remain the main carers of the young people. One carer who provides short breaks for young people said 'Day to day arrangements are made by parents'. Another carer confirmed that the parents remain the key decision makers in the young people's lives. There is a robust matching process which is based on the young people and their parents' needs and the abilities of the carer. There is good communication between the service and its users and this helps to ensure that the service is effective.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

There are excellent arrangements in place for ensuring that young people are consulted with and listened to and young people know that their views are taken seriously. One foster carer said 'Our young person is asked regularly in looked after children reviews about their opinions'. A fostered young person said 'I am listened to'. Another said 'They take notice of my opinions'. There are many ways in which young people are able to have a say about their lives, and about the way in which

this service is run. This includes a care council that meets regularly with senior managers. Young people are able to give many examples of things changing following consultation, such as improvements in the way that sleep-overs at friends are organised. Young people participate in the training and recruitment of both carers and social work staff. There is an on-line system for young people to express their views before reviews and the service provides incentives to encourage young people to use this system. Foster carers also feel extremely well consulted with. They say that the carers committee is very good way of the service listening to them and for disseminating valuable information. One carer said 'It allows carers to speak up. It is very positive'.

There are strong arrangements for promoting the contact arrangements for young people. One foster carer said 'Our last placement had lots of contact with family members'. The parent of a fostered young person said that 'They provide a good service' in relation to contact arrangements. Carers receive training specifically around promoting contact. Support is provided to carers to arrange and facilitate contact and to help them understand it's importance.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

The service is good at preparing young people for adulthood. Clear written requirements of what is expected of carers in terms of preparing young people for independence is available. Training is also available to carers which helps them to provide good moving-on care. Most eligible young people have a pathway plan and have been involved in the decision making process for this. The council has a service called 'Catch 22' whose responsibility it is to support young people in their transition to adulthood. The council have also recently developed a supported lodgings scheme that provides more intense support to care leavers who need this. The service recognises that training for independence starts early in young people's lives.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

There are outstanding arrangements for learning and development in this service and this empowers staff and carers to meet the wide ranging needs of young people. There is a clear strategy for the training and development of carers. Staff and carers say that this helps them to advocate on behalf of young people. Training is highly valued and carers say they receive excellent opportunities to learn and develop. This helps to ensure positive outcomes for young people. The service is creative in the ways it delivers training in order to make this training accessible. This means that training is provided over a range of venues and at different times. Carers are also supported to learn through the facilitation of support groups, mentoring and buddy schemes, conferences, on-line learning, access to the service resource centre and regular supervision with a supporting social worker. A carer said 'The multi-agency support group is incredible'. Carers feel well-prepared to foster following the initial

skills to care training. A carer said of the training provided 'The skills to foster course was invaluable'.

There is a clear Statement of Purpose which sets out the aims and objectives of the service and is reviewed annually. This ensures that stakeholders have the information they need about the service. The service is well managed by experienced, skilled and competent staff members. There are clear lines of accountability. There are strong arrangements for the monitoring of the quality of the service. Staff feel well supported, empowered and show a strong commitment to achieving good outcomes for young people. They say they have excellent opportunities for learning and development and benefit from working in a well-organised service. Professional development is promoted through regular formal supervision, team meetings and training. Improvement and development is high on the agenda for this service and this can be evidenced through a number of new initiatives which have been developed. For example a range of support groups and the supported living programme. One staff member said 'There is a culture of hard work, support and child focus in this team'. There is excellent communication in the service with a range of other organisations and carers, this helps to ensure that young people's needs are met.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. Young people are treated as individuals and have their individual needs met. Foster carers are provided with a wide range of training which helps them meet the cultural needs of young people from different minority ethnic groups. Social workers who specialise in working with young people who have a disability are available to support carers. Carers speak very highly of the support they receive from these social workers.

Record keeping in this service is strong and this ensures that there is an up-to-date, comprehensive case record for each young person. All relevant people have access to the information they need to ensure that young people's needs are met. There are strong arrangements for ensuring confidentiality. The local authority service recognise the contribution made by friends and family carers. Once clearance has been received from the Criminal Records Bureau, friends and family carers undergo the normal recruitment and support process. These measures help to promote young people's well-being.