

Lincolnshire County Council Fostering Service

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

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Setting address	Lincolnshire County Council, Social Services, Orchard House, Orchard Street, LINCOLN, LN1 1BA
Telephone number	01522 554476
Email	Janice.spencer@lincolnshire.gov.uk
Registered person	Lincolnshire County Council
Registered manager	
Responsible individual	Peter Duxbury
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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

Lincolnshire Local Authority Fostering Service is managed by Lincolnshire County Council Children's Services. The assistant director of Children's Services is the responsible individual for this service. The head of regulated services has specific line management responsibility for the fostering service which is divided geographically into north and south teams, which each has a team manager. The aims of the fostering service are to provide high quality and safe care within a family setting for children and young people who are unable to live within their own families. The service's Statement of Purpose clearly defines the nature of the main placement types as task centred, respite, permanent, placement plus and family and friend carers.

The service assesses and approves foster carers in addition to providing support, supervision and training to existing foster carers. At the time of this visit the service was supporting 294 foster carer households and providing placements for 413 children and young people.

Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

The overall quality rating of this full, announced inspection is outstanding and there are no recommendations. The recommendations from last time have been addressed. The fostering service provides a consistently high level of service to all children and young people in its care. The levels of quality assurance and consultation are exceptional and there is a remarkably high level of integration between staff and between agencies. Staff and carers are well motivated with training taking a high profile; new initiatives and projects are accepted eagerly. Children and young people are treated as individuals and every effort is made to provide them with permanent placements. This means that the service contributes substantially to ensuring the vision statement is met and that every child in every part of the county achieves their potential.

Improvements since the last inspection

The last inspection occurred in 2007 and made three recommendations. The medical assessment of children and young people has been improved significantly and a system implemented to ensure that carers have up-to-date information about children's health. Individual needs, including those arising from ethnicity, are now clearly assessed, recorded and addressed. Systems are in place to ensure that all children and young people receive up-to-date information about who to complain to.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

Children and young people experience an excellent level of attention to their individual health needs. Routine health checks occur so that weight gain and other issues are addressed to the benefit of children and young people. Imaginative services are geared towards identifying and addressing individual issues, such as emotional problems, as early as possible; significant success is achieved in this area. For example, substantial effort has led to the creation of a team of doctors who undertake all medicals and who have received special training in the emotional needs of children and young people in the care system. While some children and young people commented that this leads to greater travel times to medicals, the overall benefits are substantial in terms of greater expertise and identification of individual difficulties. The results of these and other new developments are carefully monitored to ensure they are effective. This means that children and young people's health is promoted thoroughly. As a result, they are more able to fully benefit from the other opportunities that are provided and are less likely to become disillusioned with their placements. A recurring and highly significant feature is the effective collaboration between agencies in this and other areas of care, which contributes to improved year-on-year outcomes for children and young people in foster care households.

Foster carers understand the general and also special health conditions presented by children and young people in their care and are appropriately supported by professionals. For example, specialist equipment and advice on specific treatments is provided promptly for carers of children and young people who have disabilities. Foster carers are strong advocates for children and young people in their care. In one case this led to a new and more appropriate psychological assessment of a child. Similarly, any individual needs arising from religious or cultural issues, such as arise amongst some asylum seeking children and young people, are appropriately discussed and addressed. Support social workers ensure that foster carers are able to implement any health plans. Procedures for staff are kept up-to-date and reflect the latest professional guidance, which is a positive reflection on the management of the service. Managers use any shortfalls they identify through self-evaluation to improve the service. For example, improvements are in place to ensure that carers receive sufficient health information about children and young people at the start of placements.

Good health is also promoted by the provision of suitable accommodation. Households provide single bedrooms and comfortable surroundings, which are regularly checked.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

Foster carers consistently show a high level of understanding about children and young people's safety. They are given thorough training in the challenges presented

by children, young people and their families. The associated risks, both in the home and outside, are assessed and addressed thoroughly with regard to all the children and young people in the household. This is undertaken in various ways, including safe-care policies in each household that address issues such as bullying and privacy. The needs and wishes of carers' own children are always taken into account. Comprehensive arrangements are in place to review such plans regularly. This means that looked after children and young people benefit from particularly close attention to their well-being.

The authority as a whole has recently been assessed separately as providing an outstanding level of safeguarding to children and young people. Support social workers as well as children's social workers are readily accessible to foster carers, including during evenings and week-ends; other professionals are also easily contacted. This common source of frustration is largely avoided. This is acknowledged by the majority of foster carers to be a critical and consistent feature of the 'excellent' support they receive. Some foster carers noted that the level of support is substantially higher than in other services. It also represents the particularly high level of commitment shown by staff at all levels. This means that concerns about children and young people are shared promptly and addressed as early as possible. Professionals who are independent of the fostering service consider that a high level of protection is maintained.

Foster carers are particularly pleased about the training they have received regarding internet safety. Several gave examples in which, as a result of increased foster carer awareness, children and young people had been protected from harm via social networking sites. Training is adapted to meet individual needs but all foster carers understand the need to avoid and deescalate challenging behaviour and not to restrain children and young people. Foster carers and staff also understand the importance of alerting managers to any shortfalls in the practices of other people (whistle-blowing). Effectiveness in keeping children and young people safe is also represented by the very low incidence of children and young people going missing or being absent without authority. The successful avoidance of placement breakdown is credit-worthy and is a substantial contribution to positive outcomes for children and young people.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

As in other areas of care, the excellent integration of services is also a highlight in the area of enjoying and achieving. Staff from different disciplines attend joint development workshops to share ideas and reinforce effective co-working. In children and young people's education, for example, the virtual school is particularly well integrated with foster carers, schools and social workers. One carer commented that the education team 'really know their way round the legislation and help get things sorted out.' A project has been completed with designated teachers in schools to improve their understanding of the impact of the emotional needs of children and young people who are in care. Staff consider that this has improved teaching staff

responses and supported improved attainment levels. Personal education plans are followed for each person and there is an extensive mentoring project available. Children and young people's accounts show that such measures enable them to recover lost ground. Specialised support is also available to those who are gifted and talented. Children and young people also enjoy the discreet way in which tutorial support is provided, sometimes over extended periods of time. Children and young people contribute to the planning of new projects and consider that their views are taken seriously and affect how projects operate. These arrangements lead to academic and vocational success stories as well as emotionally resilient and self-confident children and young people.

Of particular note is the extent to which the service is successful in achieving permanent placements, for example through kinship carers or permanent foster placements. Successful projects with older young people have led to foster carers being able to provide care and accommodation for longer and reduce the vulnerability of young people when they leave the care system. When combined with the effective integration with health services to ensure that emotional issues are prioritised, this provides a strong basis for individual successes. Strong support is provided to children and young people with disabilities. Foster carers report substantial improvements, for instance in social integration, communication skills and independence of children with learning disabilities. Throughout the organisation there is a clear emphasis on boosting self-confidence by celebrating successes and this is represented at annual events.

Reasonable financial support is provided by the authority to ensure that children and young people in foster care receive good social and recreational opportunities. Children and young people attend music and sports groups, for example, and some are organised by the service. There are also subsidised services that the authority as a corporate parent provides. Foster carers are alert to the difficulties many children and young people experience in social situations and encourage and facilitate appropriate networking. All households engage in a range of recreational activities and many have pets, which children and young people appreciate. Children and young people consider that the rules that are set for them by foster carers are usually fair.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

Children and young people receive a consistently high level of consultation and there is an effective team of independent reviewing officers. It is also clear that children and young people know how to complain and feel that their concerns are heard and addressed whenever possible, although formal complaints are very few. Support social workers routinely consider the individual needs of each child or young person in placement. This critical thread runs throughout the service and is an essential factor in achieving high standards. There is exemplary use of an advocacy service and also a children and young people's representation group. Not only are individual needs met thoroughly, including in large households, but children and young people

have ample opportunities to engage in more formal groups. If individual cultural or religious needs, for example, cannot be met from amongst existing carers, appropriate consideration is given to placing outside the county. Ways of consulting with children and young people who have communication difficulties are reviewed regularly. The impact of the substantial distances involved in the county is minimized by the provision of an effective transport service and localised services and meetings.

Such consultation starts with the initial matching when most children and young people receive details of the foster family in advance. Improvements are in place which mean that the emergency duty teams now have a range of information about carers in addition to their approval details. This helps to speed-up placements as well as make them as appropriate as possible. Almost all placements are gradual and include preliminary visits. This enables children and young people to be admitted sensitively. Although the opportunities for children and young people to make choices about their placements are limited, the efforts made on their behalf mean there is a high degree of success. Sibling groups are usually placed together. As a direct result of this approach, one young person said, 'I feel like I have a real family here, where I belong; they treat me as one of their own.' The support social workers also ensure that the views of foster carers own children are given sufficient priority, sometimes over many years.

Partly as a result of consultation, the authority has introduced a family contact support team. This helps to ensure that family contact occurs at the required frequencies with minimal disruption to foster-households. Contact is promoted well because of effective liaison between services and consultation with birth-family members. Careful consideration is given to planning contact arrangements and social workers are routinely involved, which helps ensure that such meetings are in each child or young person's best interests.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is outstanding.

Young people are prepared well for independence because of strong collaboration by staff and carers with an independent agency. Thorough planning and implementation means that young people have excellent preparation for adulthood. Every young person who is leaving care has a support plan to which they contribute. Foster carers say that 'young people are encouraged to learn how to look after themselves gradually in the normal course of family life.' Foster carers display a high level of commitment to the ongoing care and support of young people into adulthood; many provide supported lodgings, which is a critical contribution to their long-term well-being. Support groups are also used to help ensure that young people have sufficient knowledge and skills. As a corporate parent, the authority actively provides apprenticeships to young people from foster care. Innovative work is underway regarding parent and baby placements in foster households, which includes suitable training for all involved.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

The service benefits substantially from clear, effective leadership and detailed monitoring at all levels. Routine monitoring occurs as well as annual surveys, and questionnaires are directed to specific groups. In practice, strong leadership is shown by effective collaboration between agencies and between staff within the department. New initiatives are undertaken with enthusiasm. Currently, the service is applying for funding for a project for young people at risk of custodial sentences; one member of staff described the service as 'energising'. In particular, there is excellent attention to meeting individual children and young people's needs and ensuring that they have as much involvement in decision-making as possible. The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. Consultation and meeting children and young people's individual needs is of a high order. Appropriate arrangements are made to meet the needs of children and young people who have disabilities and to integrate them as much as possible into their communities. Foster carer recruitment has targeted single adult households and people in same sex partnerships in order to provide the most representative range of carers. Consultation with children and young people makes a difference to the service they receive.

Clear strategies are set by the management team, for example regarding carer recruitment. This means that, depending on the service's requirements, recruitment may be targeted on minority groups; carers with particular skills or interests, or those who live in specific geographical areas. This is sufficiently effective to gradually increase capacity, which increases the range of households and has a direct benefit for children and young people. The recruitment processes and checks for both staff and carers are robust. As indicated above, even at current rates of recruitment, matching is highly effective in the majority of instances. There is also only a small number of households that have more than three foster children and there is close control of these circumstances. Internal surveys show that the vast majority of young people feel they are suitably placed.

There is a high level of qualification, experience and continuity in the two support social worker teams. Team managers ensure that there is also a high level of consistency of practice, for example in the assessment of new foster carers. The appropriate matching of children and young people means that placing with friends and families is always considered first; such families are then provided with the same level of service as other foster carers. Assessment and ongoing support are provided by the fostering team so a high degree of continuity and understanding is provided. Any placement disruptions are carefully reviewed to see how they could have been avoided.

Support social workers receive appropriate training reflecting high professional standards. This helps to ensure that the vast majority of applications to panel are successful. In addition, the panel is rigorous in its analyses. Observations by the panel chairperson are integrated into practice. Effective management is also demonstrated by the fact that staff and foster carers benefit from integrated training

between themselves and specialist staff in residential services. Support social workers feel that the support they receive is excellent. There is a comprehensive catalogue of training and the authority continues to support a significant number of staff to become professionally qualified every year. This benefits children and young people by contributing to continuity of staffing and encouraging personal investment by staff. Foster carers too are extremely complimentary about the support and ongoing training they receive. The training in particular is highly valued. For example, the training received recently on the emotional obstacles experienced by children and young people contributed substantially to their skills. The service ensures that all carers receive induction training and receive further training every year. It is to the credit of the service that most carers are positive about the payment arrangements. A further area of improvement is in the engagement of experienced foster carers as 'buddies' for new carers. This supplements the already comprehensive support provided. One experienced carer said, 'it's getting better all the time.'