

# Peterborough 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

Peterborough City Council's fostering service is managed within Children's Specialist Services. The fostering service has been separated from the adoption service since the previous inspection.

The service is responsible for the recruitment, assessment, approval and support of foster carers. These foster carers provide a variety of placements: long and short term; family and friends; task centred; respite and parent and child. Within the fostering team a dedicated worker has responsibility for supporting link carers for children with disabilities and a designated worker within the 16 plus Team assesses and supports carers providing supported lodgings placements to young people aged over sixteen years. A remand fostering scheme is separately managed within the Youth Offending Service.

At the time of completion of the fostering dataset, in March 2007, the service was supporting 188 carer households providing placements to 245 young people.

### Summary

The overall quality rating is inadequate - notice of action to improve.

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

This inspection was undertaken by two inspectors and covered all of the key National Minimum Standards.

During the inspection the inspectors visited a number of carers and young people, spoke with carers by telephone and examined written records relating to carers and young people. Inspectors additionally spoke with a range of personnel involved in service delivery.

Questionnaire responses were received from 30 young people, five placing social workers and four foster carers. Young people made some very positive comments about the care they received: 'My carers give me a warm bed, be kind to me and spoil me rotten'; 'We eat healthy food and drinks like council pop (that's water)'; 'They are my mum and dad. I am a forever child'. One young person wanted the inspector to put in the report: 'Thank you everyone for sending me to my foster home'.

A number of shortfalls have been identified during the inspection, particularly in relation to the service's capacity to evidence that young people are always matched to safe and appropriate placements. The Peterborough City Council Fostering Service has been under-resourced for some years with insufficient carers to appropriately meet the needs of young people requiring placements and a serious staffing shortfall. During this period there have been some inappropriate and potentially

unsafe placements. A large number of exemptions to the usual fostering limit have resulted in excessive numbers of young people being accommodated in some fostering households and some young people have been illegally placed with unapproved family and friends carers for long periods. Placement records, currently retained by foster carers, do not always contain essential information in an accessible format.

Throughout this inspection senior managers have evidenced a full awareness of the current shortfalls within the fostering service and have demonstrated a clear insight into measures needed to properly address these in a timely manner.

### **Improvements since the last inspection**

An independent review of Children's Services by external consultants has identified some critical areas requiring restructuring and increased investment, one of these being the fostering service. There is a stated commitment within the Specialist Services Business Plan 2007/10 and within the Fostering Service Business Plan 2007/08 to invest in and improve the fostering service. The Chair of the Corporate Parenting Group confirmed that elected members were aware of and supportive of proposed developments and were working closely with the Assistant Director and the Interim Service Manager for Children's Specialist Services. A capacity bid has resulted in the allocation of additional funding to the service and it is proposed to appoint eight additional full time equivalent social workers within the fostering team. Advertising of these posts has already commenced and currently three agency social workers are occupying additional posts within the team. The inspectors are advised that the service plans to recruit a minimum of 70 new carers by 2010, with 25 being recruited by March 2008, to improve placement choice. The service plans to use a professional adviser for next foster carer recruitment campaign.

Eleven requirements were identified during the previous inspection. Some of these have been addressed but fully meeting others remains reliant on increased staffing and the recruitment of additional foster carers. As detailed above, many placements remain over-subscribed but an Access to Resources Team has now been developed with responsibility for placement allocation and for ensuring the appropriate commissioning of independent fostering placements where this is necessary. The shortfalls in the assessment and approval of supported lodgings carers have been addressed. Both the fostering team and placing social workers told inspectors that communication between them had improved and management say that future plans to co-locate these teams should prompt further improvements. Changes have been made to the procedures for investigating allegations against carers and these changes have improved investigation timescales. Young people are being better supported to access further education opportunities. Fostering service staff say that formal supervision is more frequent and that informal support is good. Foster carers spoken to and who completed questionnaires spoke highly of the support provided by their supervising social worker. Records of foster carer supervision indicated that visits to them were now regular and focussed on outcomes for young people.

## **Helping children to be healthy**

The provision is satisfactory.

The designated Looked After Children (LAC) Nurse is a member of the fostering panel and is able to advise panel members on children's health issues. She and her team provide an invaluable input in raising foster carers' awareness of health issues through training, in initiating and monitoring annual health assessments for young people in foster care and in being accessible to both carers and young people for specific advice. The withdrawal of funding for one post within this team, with a specific remit around substance misuse, prevents the team using their existing relationships with young people to provide this input. Currently young people are provided with a health kit bag when attending for their annual health check. This encourages young people to attend and carers have commented on its value in promoting improved hygiene awareness. This incentive was initially funded from Quality Protects money and, although supplies of these kits are almost exhausted, continued funding has not been agreed.

A good range of training, covering both general and specific health issues, is available to foster carers and staff. Some of the courses available are specifically targeted at foster carers on the link scheme and provide information about conditions such as Aspergers and autism.

The young people tracked and visited during the inspection were in good health and were being appropriately encouraged and supported to access necessary health interventions. Some young people were receiving additional services from health professionals in relation to alcohol and drugs, enuresis and sexual health.

Currently the fostering service requires carers to retain a single record (blue book) in relation to each young person in placement. Some of the blue books examined included details of young people's health appointments and their outcomes. Not all carers are retaining these records. Only carers on the link scheme are currently recording the administration of medication to young people in placement. Carers are not retaining a separate health record for each young person placed. In some cases carers are not storing medication safely and the health and safety risk assessment, carried out annually by the fostering service, does not currently require any check on this.

## **Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe**

The provision is inadequate.

Several foster carers are accommodating more than three young people, the usual fostering limit under the Children Act 1989, with exemptions in place. Some of these exemptions, when referred to the fostering panel, were considered by them to be unsafe and were not ratified. In those cases, the panel recommendation was not accepted by the Agency Decision Maker. A requirement was identified for the service to address this practice, during the previous inspection in November 2006 and during

the inspection in 2005. Some of the carers with exemptions in place are additionally providing supported lodgings placements to ex foster children and are on the Emergency Duty Team (EDT) rota to receive additional emergency placements. The stated terms of approval of some carers suggest that they are able to accommodate three young people and provide emergency placements, which is not legally permitted without the granting of an exemption.

The above is an unsafe and sometimes illegal way to accommodate young people and seriously jeopardises the capacity of foster carers to promote positive outcomes. A long standing shortfall in the number of fostering households available in house has combined with long standing under funding of the fostering service generally, to allow this culture of multiple placements to become established. Recent increased financial commitment to the fostering service provides for additional recruitment of both foster carers and social work staff and the service has begun to take positive action to reduce the numbers of young people in some individual placements. The number of exemptions in place has been reduced from 75 to 58 at the time of this inspection but still affects 16 households. Foster carers have been advised of the fostering service's intention to further reduce this as young people move from their current placements. There will be no disruption to current placements, where these are dependent on exemptions already in place, since this would be detrimental to young people's stability.

The foster homes visited during the inspection provided warm and comfortable accommodation to young people placed, though some of the multiple placements are considered to compromise young people's need for privacy and space. In many cases young people are sharing bedrooms and this arrangement has not been appropriately risk assessed.

All fostering households have a safe care policy in place and a fire plan and are subject to annual health and safety checks. Copies of all three documents are submitted to the fostering panel as part of the foster carer annual review process. Some of the safe care and fire plans examined during the inspection were good but some safe care plans, especially where several young people are accommodated, need to be more robust and some carers need to be more aware of their content. Often these documents were not dated, making it difficult to confirm appropriate ongoing review. Some carers had a good awareness of the value of these documents in terms of protection of themselves, in respect of potential allegations and of the young people in their care. Foster carers and staff have access to a very good range of training opportunities covering safe caring and child protection, both internally and through the Local Safeguarding Children Board. A Foster Placement Agreement (FPA) is integral to the Looked After Children (LAC) paperwork and the fostering service has previously been recommended to ensure that this includes full information as required by the Fostering Service Regulations. The service has introduced a Placement Meeting Agenda as an addendum to the LAC FPA, which includes the necessary information and is completed prior to a planned placement or at the 72 hour meeting following an emergency placement. This paperwork needs to be appropriately dated and signed, to constitute an agreement, when used to support the LAC FPA.

Currently records relating to carers and young people do not indicate how matches have been achieved. There is no evidenced consideration of the foster carer's experience and skills in relation to the individual needs of the young people in placement, although staff say these considerations would be part of the process of placing a young person. There is also no evidenced consideration of the needs of young people already in placement and the potential impact of accommodating an additional young person, although carers say that they always discuss this with young people. As part of the reorganisation of Children's Services within Peterborough City Council a new Access to Resources Team has been established. Inspectors met with two members of the team who confirmed that robust procedures were being developed in relation to placement finding for LAC. A draft referral procedure was shown to inspectors and a good understanding was evidenced of the importance of demonstrating that a selected foster placement is equipped to meet a young person's identified individual needs. The project manager stated that in future, where an appropriate foster placement was not available in house, an external placement would be procured. An example was provided of a recent placement having been made with an independent agency despite vacancies existing with Peterborough carers. Currently meetings are taking place with independent fostering agencies to establish working relationships and the project manager confirmed a commitment to drastically reducing the use of exemptions.

The Fostering Panel was observed as part of this inspection and the Panel Chair was interviewed. Panel members were noted to be knowledgeable, confident and competent and to ask searching and appropriate questions of applicants. The panel has a good overview of the operation of the fostering service and the Panel Chair has a good awareness of current shortfalls. There have been occasions in the past when the panel has felt ineffectual because recommendations reflecting concern for young people's welfare, particularly in relation to multiple placements, have not been accepted. The Chair said that this was no longer a concern and that she met quarterly with the Agency Decision Maker and the Assistant Director to discuss any concerns arising. Earlier this year the panel were unhappy with the quality of form F assessments being provided by external assessors, as was the Fostering Service Manager, and the company providing those assessments has had its contract terminated. The panel is provided with appropriate training opportunities and last year had joint training with the fostering team. Currently there are no written guidelines issued to panel members.

Four personnel files were examined during the inspection and these contained all required information. Senior staff in the fostering service are appropriately qualified and experienced.

### **Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do**

The provision is good.

Foster carer training opportunities around promoting young people's educational achievement are good. The Education Team for Looked After Children (ETLAC) Team



Manager has recently increased her involvement in carer training and foster carer core training now involves extending carers' skills to raise young people's aspirations and levels of achievement. Additional courses such as 'Craft, create and educate' and 'Supporting children's literacy' are also available. The ETLAC team are responsible for convening Personal Education Plan (PEP) meetings for LAC and ensure the involvement of carers and young people in compiling the plans. The team are able to act as intermediary between carers and schools if issues arise relating to young people's school placements and are able to fund the provision of personal tutors to support young people at key stages of their education. One team member is specifically working with carers on encouraging young people to read. The team are also able to provide impressive 'story sacks' to carers to support specific work with young people in placement. ETLAC would welcome a greater emphasis in carer recording, on individual performance and the extent to which progress is made, to facilitate more accurate data collection in respect of young people's achievements.

All young people visited and tracked during this inspection were achieving well in education, some having gained awards for attendance and achievement. At present young people do not all have access to computers. Such access would support educational achievement and the Fostering Service Manager has undertaken to look into this.

The service has introduced training to raise foster carer and staff awareness about equality and diversity issues and is working to address the current ethnic imbalance within its staff team, its panel and its foster carers to appropriately reflect the diversity of the Peterborough population. Portuguese language and culture lessons are currently being introduced for carers and good links have been established with New Link, Peterborough City Council's asylum and migration service.

The Link Fostering Scheme is viewed positively by placing social workers and there are good working relationships between the scheme and the Disability Team. The scheme co-ordinator has worked well to establish clear expectations of carers and good communication systems between carers and parents to promote positive experiences for young people using the service. Specific training opportunities are available to link carers and the scheme co-ordinator is involved in presenting targeted sessions for prospective link carers within pre-approval training. Placements with link carers are generally carefully planned to ensure appropriate matching and young people have good introductions to prospective placements. The Link Scheme Co-ordinator is an unqualified social worker and she is currently carrying out assessments of and providing supervision for foster carers.

### **Helping children make a positive contribution**

The provision is inadequate.

The young people visited and tracked during the inspection were being well supported by their carers to retain contact with their families. Issues were raised, however, by some young people, about long standing requests for initiation or change of contact arrangements, which had not been addressed. Some young people

had been told that contact arrangements could not be implemented because they had no allocated placing social worker. Foster Placement Agreements do not always fully clarify responsibility for establishing and maintaining contact and not all carers are retaining appropriate records of the impact of contact on young people. Risk assessments are not always in place covering contact arrangements occurring in carers' homes.

Foster carers continue to raise concerns about arrangements for transporting young people to and from school and contact. There is currently a heavy usage of transport services for this purpose and the fostering service does not clearly detail its expectation of carers in respect of transporting young people.

The service has good pro-formas for obtaining the views of foster carers, placing social workers, young people in placement and birth children at the time of the foster carer's annual review. The views obtained are valued and taken account of by the panel. The link scheme additionally has a pro-forma to seek the views of parents about their child's placement. Carer training is available to support effective communication with young people. An Independent Reviewing Officer chairs all young people's LAC reviews and the independent review process is developing to bring consistency for young people in having the same officer chair all their reviews. Young people are able to complete a form prior to their LAC review to provide their views about their care. There is the facility for this form to be completed electronically on the newly purchased 'Viewpoint' system but this assumes that young people have computer access. Only four young people accessed the site during September.

The Respect Course is held three times each year to train young people to assist with foster carer pre-approval training. The Children's Rights/Participation Officer has recently returned to work following a long absence and is aware that links with young people and foster carers have been lost and require rebuilding. Young people's questionnaires indicate that many of them are unaware of how to make a complaint.

## **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is satisfactory.

There are no key standards under Economic Well-Being.

The 16 Plus Team work with LAC aged 16 and over and are responsible for the development of young people's Pathway Plans. One worker in the team has designated responsibility for assessing and supporting carers specifically providing supported lodgings placements. A good range of pro-formas has been developed for this purpose and the placements often provide continuing support for young people moving on to higher or further education. Many mainstream foster carers also continue to provide supported lodgings to such young people and some of the young people visited valued the opportunity to remain in a stable placement. A range of training opportunities are available to carers in relation to preparing young people for

adulthood and carers generally spoke positively about the input from the 16 Plus Team. It is proposed to link the 16 Plus Team with the Fostering Team in terms of service management and accommodation. The worker currently assessing and supervising supported lodgings placements is an unqualified social worker.

Foster carer allowances are clearly stated and are linked to the age of the young people accommodated and the experience and qualifications of the carers. Any recommendation for changes to the level of a carer's payment is made to the fostering panel. Almost 50% of the authority's foster carers have achieved or are currently completing National Vocational Qualification(NVQ) Level 3. This is good evidence of a commitment to improving carers' skills and knowledge.

## **Organisation**

The organisation is inadequate.

The Fostering Service Statement of Purpose clearly details the service structure and services provided. Current wide ranging changes will need to be appropriately reflected. A range of children's guides are available to clarify the implications of being looked after and of being placed in foster care. Guides for children and young people are available in a range of formats for different ages and abilities.

Despite long term staffing shortfalls within the fostering team, resulting in very high caseloads, staff members spoken to were positive about and committed to providing good support to carers to promote positive outcomes for young people. Staff at all levels demonstrated a sound awareness of current shortfalls and a strong optimism in relation to proposed developments. Although carer support and supervision has not been consistently maintained at a desirable level, all carers spoken to during the inspection spoke highly of their supervising social workers. Four experienced foster carers also offer support and advice to new and inexperienced carers from the point of initial application. The fostering service additionally organises activities and outings for carers and young people and holds an annual ceremony to recognise carers' commitment and to present carers with long service awards. Some of the fostering team workers, involved in providing carer supervision during the last two years, are not qualified social workers. The service has begun to address this issue and currently has three qualified agency social workers within the team and has launched a campaign to recruit eight full time social workers. The Foster Carer Handbook covers an appropriate range of topics but often in insufficient detail. The handbook is currently under review.

The service has a range of appropriate pro-formas for the completion of foster carer annual reviews. All foster carer reviews are considered by panel members with the first and subsequently every third review going to a full fostering panel. Carer reviews are not always taking place annually. Staff and foster carer training opportunities are good and a record is retained of training undertaken by carers with details being included in the annual review report. Training courses offered have a points allocation and the Recruitment and Training Officer detailed the expectation that each carer household must commit to six points each year. This expectation is

not stated in the Foster Carer Agreement and currently some carers are not accessing training appropriately. Shortfalls in attendance at training are often being identified by the fostering panel.

Both administrative records and records relating to foster carers are safely and appropriately stored. The fostering service does not hold separate records in respect of young people placed. Young people's records are retained by Child Care Operations Teams. Foster carers are required to retain a 'blue book' record in relation to each young person placed. Some of the blue books examined provide a colourful and detailed narrative of the young person's placement and examples were seen of memory boxes prepared with young people during placements. Not all carers are retaining appropriate records of young people's placements, despite encouragement from supervising social workers. Carers are provided with training in record keeping. The current carer recording system makes it extremely difficult to isolate information about how young people's health needs are met or about their individual educational achievements.

The fostering service is aware of the need to urgently review its systems for the assessment, approval and support of family and friends carers. Evidence was noted during this inspection of a number of placements of young people with family and friends carers, which constituted illegal placements because they were allowed to continue for very long periods without appropriate checks on the household or the carer. Policy and procedural guidelines detail that family and friends carers are assessed, approved and supported as rigorously as other carers and this is not evidenced. There is a stated commitment within the Fostering Service Business Plan 2007/08 to address shortfalls in relation to the management of family and friends placements.

## What must be done to secure future improvement?

### Statutory Requirements

This section sets out the actions, which must be taken so that the registered person/s meets the Care Standards Act 2000, Fostering Services Regulations 2002 and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider(s) must comply with the given timescales.

Std.	Action	Due date
16	review the current approval status of its foster carers to ensure that no carer's approval status permits the automatic accommodation of more than three young people. Where an exemption is granted to allow a carer to exceed the 'usual fostering limit' there must be evidence that the placement decision is in the best interest of the young person (Regulation 33(b))	30/11/2007
22	ensure that staff have the appropriate qualifications for the work	30/11/2007

	they are to perform. Each approved foster carer must be supervised by a named, appropriately qualified social worker (Regulation 20)	
21	undertake reviews of each foster carer's approval status at intervals of not more than a year (Regulation 29 (2))	30/11/2007
32	ensure that, where a young person is placed with someone who is not an approved foster carer, the proper legislative procedures detailed under Regulation 38 are followed (Regulation 38)	01/11/2007

## Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further the registered person should take account of the following recommendation(s):

- provide carers with a written health record for each young person placed in their care to be updated during placement and move with the young person. The administration of any medication should form part of this health record (NMS 12.4)
- include a check on foster carers' arrangements for the storage of medication in the health and safety risk assessment process (NMS 6.6)
- ensure that each young person's accommodation arrangements reflect the assessed need for privacy and space and that, where bedroom sharing is necessary, there is an assessment of risk (NMS 6.4; NMS 6.5)
- ensure that all elements of the foster placement agreement are appropriately dated and signed (NMS 8.4)
- provide written procedures for panel members, clarifying the operation of the panel and the service expectation of members, to include the decision making process when all members are not in agreement (NMS 30.1; NMS 30.2)
- clarify and formalise the expectations of carers in relation to providing transport for young people where this is needed in relation to contact or school attendance (NMS 10.8; NMS 13.8)
- ensure that responsibility for establishing and maintaining contact is fully clarified and takes account of the young person's views. Where supervision of contact is needed, a risk assessment must be in place and foster carers' records must indicate the outcomes of contact arrangements and the perceived impact on the young person (NMS 10.2; NMS 10.4; NMS 10.6; NMS 10.9)
- raise the profile of consultation with young people, ensuring that their opinions and views on all matters affecting them are ascertained frequently and that they are fully aware of how to raise concerns or complaints (NMS 11.3; NMS 11.5)
- ensure that foster carers have a clear understanding of training expectations and comply with them (NMS 21.2; NMS 23.1)
- Review the current foster carer recording system and ensure that all carers are aware of and comply with identified recording requirements (NMS 24.1)