

Nottingham City Council Fostering Service

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

Unique reference number	SC049579
Inspection date	10/01/2008
Inspector	Sharon Treadwell
Type of inspection	Key

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Date of last inspection	02/10/2006

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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

At the time of the previous inspection, in October 2006, Nottingham City's fostering and adoption services were jointly managed and staffed. The service was reconfigured in July 2007, to effectively separate these two services, and a dedicated fostering service manager is now in post and is supported by four fostering team managers and dedicated social work and administrative staff. The fostering team is responsible for the recruitment, training and support of foster carers but works in partnership with a private provider in respect of the completion of foster carer assessments.

The statement of purpose for 2007/2008 details that 181 carers are currently being supported to provide placements to 214 young people. The following types of placements are provided: emergency and short term; bridging; long term/permanent; parent and child; home from home; supported lodgings; foster lodgings.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

The fostering service has focussed well, during the last year, on strengthening its capacity to demonstrate that young people's health and well being is prioritised, that they are well safeguarded, appropriately consulted and that they are supported to achieve their full potential.

The separation of the fostering service from adoption and the appointment of a permanent manager, with a clear vision and a dedication to improving outcomes for young people fostered in Nottingham, has raised the profile of the fostering service within the authority's provision for looked after children and brought clarity to management and staff roles and much better defined lines of accountability. Service development has been positively supported by senior management, with appropriate investment of both finance and additional specialist staff roles. A range of new policies, procedures and processes have been developed to better guide the practice of social workers and carers and a new recording system has been introduced for carers to promote standardisation and better access to records for young people.

The fostering service has greatly improved its capacity to demonstrate that young people are appropriately matched to placements but does not appropriately reflect this when granting exemptions to the usual fostering limit. Social worker support for

carers is good and carer support groups are strongly encouraged but the service currently has a disparity in the funding of venues for its carer support groups.

A new carer payment system has been introduced. Payments are clearly stated and are in accordance with new national minimum allowances.

Administrative records and individual records relating to carers and young people are generally well retained but many documents are not dated making it difficult sometimes to establish a true sequence of events. Central records relating to allegations and complaints do not include sufficient detail.

Improvements since the last inspection

One requirement was identified during the previous inspection, which related to issues of concern in respect of an identified carer household. A full independent investigation was arranged by the fostering service and the outcomes were notified to the inspector. The requirement was addressed in a timely and appropriate manner.

Nine good practice recommendations were made.

The fostering service was advised to review its foster care agreement to ensure that it included all elements required under the regulations and to clarify its expectation of carers in respect of training. A new foster care agreement is now in place which, in addition to containing all elements required under Schedule 5, details the requirement for carers to attend three training courses each year.

The fostering service was recommended to develop a written policy on fostering allowances, to include this in the carers' handbook and to clarify the breakdown of the allowance. A new payment scheme was introduced in October 2007 and is clearly explained in both the carers' handbook and the statement of purpose. Allowances are now linked to the experience and qualification of carers as well as to the age of children placed. Clear information is now provided to carers about how to claim any additional allowances.

The service was asked to develop a recording policy for carers to promote consistency and to make records more accessible to young people. It was recommended that carers' records in respect of young people's health needs should be separate and should be retained in such a manner as to enable them to move with the young person. Carers have now been supplied with individual file records in respect of each young person placed. There are clear guidelines about how these records must be retained and the files incorporate separate pro-forma recording sheets for the noting of health appointments and medication administration.

At the time of the previous inspection the fostering service was not demonstrating how young people were matched to potential foster placements and there was no indication that other young people, already in placement, were consulted about further placements. No risk assessments were being undertaken when young people

were sharing bedrooms. The fostering service was recommended to review its matching processes to address all these concerns. A placement service became fully operational in October 2006 and is now responsible for responding to all requests for fostering placements. Good pro-forma are now in place to demonstrate full consideration of young people's assessed needs, full assessment of all potential risks and consideration of prospective carers' skills. A written policy on bedroom sharing has been developed to support any consideration of this happening.

The service was recommended to review its systems of communication with other local authority departments since carers were often confused by mixed messages and lack of clarity about roles and responsibilities. During the last year one of the team managers from the fostering service has worked in a peripatetic role across the authority to raise the profile of the fostering service. This work has been invaluable in raising awareness of the fostering service role and in developing robust relationships with many other departments, such as sport and leisure, which have positively impacted on outcomes for young people in foster care. In addition the fostering service has been separated from the adoption service and a permanent fostering service manager is now in post who is dedicated to developing the service to improve outcomes for young people. Her enthusiasm and commitment have also raised the profile of the service and regular meetings now take place between the fostering service team managers and the child care operations team managers. The appointment of a proactive head of service for looked after children has also supported closer working relationships.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Young people and foster carers confirm that good health care is appropriately prioritised and that young people are actively encouraged to eat healthily, take regular exercise and attend medical appointments as necessary. Healthy eating and carers' knowledge about child development and a variety of common childhood illnesses are strongly promoted through the quarterly magazine (FACE), which is circulated to all carers, with the inclusion of informative articles and recipes. The carers' handbook also includes good guidance on the promotion of physical and emotional health and well being.

Foster carers generally receive appropriate health information about young people at the time of placement, or soon after, and are provided with good access to medical advice where needed. Carers now have access to the results of young people's annual health assessments and the resulting health care plans. A range of training opportunities is provided to both staff and carers including a three day course covering education, health and social welfare as well as specific training around issues such as asthma, diabetes, childhood illnesses and self harm. The looked after children health team are actively involved in delivering this training and are also available to support carers with specific health concerns or to support referrals for specialist services. A representative of the looked after children health team and a representative from the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) provide

good health input as members of the fostering panel.

Newly implemented carer recording systems require carers to retain a separate record relating to each young person's health and this includes details of all health appointments and medication administered. The record is updated throughout placement and moves with the young person.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The fostering service has focussed well, during the last year, on strengthening its capacity to demonstrate that young people are appropriately safeguarded. A range of new policies have been developed around the management of allegations, bedroom sharing, unauthorised absence and permissible sanctions and restraints. New procedures have been well summarised for carers in the new carers' handbook. A placement service became fully operational in October 2006 and is now responsible for responding to all requests for fostering placements. A new referral form, which must be completed by the referring social worker, and new matching pro-forma, well supported by individual risk assessments, provide a much clearer demonstration of the appropriate consideration of young people's identified needs. The new system illustrates that young people's individual needs are considered in relation to prospective carers' skills and that identified shortfalls in any proposed match are addressed at the time of placement. Appropriate links are being established with independent fostering services and staff confirm that the use of external placements is now determined in accordance with young people's needs not financial implication. A specialist marketing advisor has been seconded to the recruitment team and has supported the development of innovative, targeted recruitment strategies by identifying a profile of likely carers to inform the recruitment campaign. A number of new carers are currently undergoing assessment. The foster placement agreement is an integral element of looked after children (LAC) paperwork and, as such is retained on the young person's file, which is held by the child care operations team. The fostering service manager has given an undertaking that a copy of this document will be placed on carers' files to demonstrate the carer's signed agreement to meet each young person's identified needs.

Exemptions to the usual fostering limit are authorised by the fostering service manager. Some carers are regularly being granted exemptions with the stated reason being that they are 'experienced carers and have the room'. Exemptions should only be granted where a clear matching process is demonstrated and the fostering service can show that needs of other young people, already placed, will not be compromised.

Good safe care policies are developed with carers and these are appropriately reviewed and updated to reflect the individual needs of young people placed. A health and safety risk assessment of the carer's home is undertaken as part of the initial assessment process and is updated as part of the carer annual review process. Carers are able to access good training opportunities in relation to safe care, child

protection and behaviour management and have particularly valued the Webster Stratton training course in providing them with very successful alternative strategies for managing inappropriate behaviours.

Young people feel safe and well cared for: 'I feel safe because I am treated nicely'; 'I feel safe, happy and wanted'; 'I am happy in my placement and never want to leave'.

Appropriately qualified and experienced personnel manage the fostering service at all levels. Personnel files examined during this inspection demonstrate that the recruitment, interview and selection process for fostering service staff is wholly appropriate and that appropriate documentation is forwarded to the authority's human resource department. However, much of the personnel paperwork in one file had clearly only been undertaken immediately prior to this inspection, despite the post holder having been appointed in April 2007.

Clear, written policies and procedures are in place covering the operation of the fostering panel and the chair confirms that these are implemented in practice. The panel has good access to medical and educational expertise and the panel minutes are completed to a good standard demonstrating a well informed and strong panel, which asks clear and appropriate questions of prospective carers and exercises its quality assurance function well. The fostering panel currently has only three fully independent members and, as two independent members are needed for quoracy, their absences have to be closely monitored.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The educational support team (EST) is a dedicated team of education professionals who work closely with the schools attended by young people in the care of Nottingham City Council as well as with designated teachers, foster carers, social workers, other key professionals and regional partnerships to secure positive educational outcomes for looked after children. The EST has an active role in monitoring the PEP process and ensuring that these are accurate, current and appropriate for every looked after child. The team has written a very informative chapter in the new carers' handbook detailing the foster carer's role in promoting young people's educational achievement and providing a range of useful information about key topics such as exclusion, learning difficulties and/or disabilities and key stages. Reorganisation of educational support services for looked after children, within the last year, now ensures that every young person has an allocated support worker. The team organises and supports some very positive initiatives, such as a 'letter box club' promoting literacy and numeracy and a weekly homework club, to encourage young people to develop the skills and capabilities to get the most out of their education. Young people's achievements are well recognised and appropriately celebrated and they generally feel well supported: 'I have extra private lessons to help me with education'.

The fostering service has developed good links with the sports, leisure and parks service and uses these to promote sport and leisure opportunities to foster carers and fostered children, for example young people in foster care have been provided with leisure passes and supported to attend sport coaching camps during school holidays. A number of leisure activities and outings have been organised for foster carers and young people such as bowling and ice skating. Young people visited during the inspection were being actively encouraged to pursue a range of positive activities, some having successfully completed the Duke of Edinburgh award and some being active members of forces cadets. Placing social workers feel that young people in foster care are well supported to make good progress: 'The fostering service puts the child at the centre and as far as possible supports them to meet their full potential'.

The recruitment team has targeted its recruitment campaigns to promote applications from carers from a range of diverse backgrounds. This is evidenced in the material produced to support recruitment and in the targeting of church groups and areas of the city where cultural diversity is prevalent. The fostering service has a very positive work force balance in terms of culture and gender. The service provides a good range of training, for carers and staff, around equality and diversity issues. All foster carers receive pre- and post-approval training focussing on parenting in a multi-cultural society and good training is provided to equip carers to fully meet the needs of young people with disabilities. There are dedicated support groups for both black carers and carers of young people with disabilities. The home from home scheme, which supports carers providing short breaks, is managed by the health and disability service. There are close links with the fostering service and the support group for carers of young people with disabilities is attended by mainstream and home from home service foster carers, but is currently the only carer support group whose venue is not funded by the fostering service.

The fostering service is able to financially support carers with home adaptations, where appropriate, to facilitate the accommodation of a young person with a specific disability. The home from home scheme has produced a range of consultation paperwork for young people, appropriate to their range of abilities. Carers providing short breaks for young people value the support they receive: 'The home from home scheme is a brilliant scheme and excellent support is provided by social workers and the support group'.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Nottingham City Council has its own contact centre, which opened in May 2004. The centre provides a high standard of accommodation to facilitate contact arrangements, with supervision, where needed, by experienced staff. Clear contractual arrangements are negotiated with all parties and transport can be provided. Parents are made to feel welcome at the centre, which is very secure, and a range of individual rooms are available providing good facilities according to need, for example there are bathing facilities for parents of young children to bath them as

well as cooking facilities where families can prepare and eat a meal. Carers receive training on working with young people and their families and are required to retain written records of young people's contact with their families. Young people appear happy with current arrangements for them to see their families and friends and are able to raise any concerns during their LAC reviews.

A children's participation team is in place to implement and monitor that appropriate consultation is taking place with looked after children. An annual survey is undertaken, by the fostering service, to secure the views of fostered children of their current placements and two fostered young people are part of the 'Voice of Care' group, which represents looked after children. The National Youth Advisory Service (NYAS) is contracted by the authority to provide a children's rights service and an independent visitor scheme and produces a quarterly report detailing its involvement with young people. NYAS also produces a good information leaflet for foster carers to clarify their responsibility to support young people to appropriately access advocacy services. Carers are very aware of their role and are supporting young people to raise issues of concern when necessary.

The fostering service has developed a more robust process for consultation with young people for carers review with the development of pro-forma questionnaires for carers' children and looked after children. Young people have been actively involved in developing these questionnaires and have also been involved in developing their own newsletter, with a first edition circulated in November 2007. Two service guides are produced for children and young people and these are well presented and contain good information about how foster carers should support young people to achieve positive outcomes and prepare them to move successfully into adulthood. Young people feel that their views are considered: 'I am always listened to'.

Two 'Children who foster' groups are well established and meet regularly on a social basis. Carers confirmed that birth children were well consulted during the assessment process but some birth children feel that their input with fostered children is not always recognised well by the fostering service: 'you'd think they could just send me a birthday card just to say thank you'.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

All looked after children have access to 'after care' services provided by the leaving care team. The service has designated Connexions workers, welfare rights workers and designated CAMHS support. There is good involvement of the corporate parenting group in providing work opportunities for looked after children. In 2007 19 young people sat GCSE examinations and seven young people are moving on to university. An award ceremony was held in October 2007 to recognise the achievements of young people and 27 awards were presented in the five 'Every Child Matters' outcome areas. Foster carers are supported to continue to accommodate young people post 18, on a lodgings basis, particularly where those young people remain in education. Young people visited were being well supported to develop

independence skills and, where appropriate to pursue further education and training to equip them to follow their chosen careers.

During the previous inspection the foster carer payment system was severely criticised by foster carers and by supervising and placing social workers. A new payment scheme was introduced in October 2007. The new scheme is welcomed by carers and provides a basic fostering allowance, which varies according to the age of the child, and a skills fee, which increases in accordance with experience and qualification of the carer and the nature of the placement. Payments are clearly stated and are in accordance with new national minimum allowances.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The fostering service statement of purpose is reviewed and updated annually and contains fully appropriate information about service provision and operation. Two age-appropriate service guides for children and young people provide appropriate information in attractive formats and clear, easily understood language.

The separation of the fostering service from adoption has brought clarity to management and staff roles and much better defined lines of accountability. The fostering service manager is dedicated and enthusiastic and has effectively led positive developments in service provision since her permanent appointment to this post. Since the previous inspection a service manager appointment, head of children in care, has also been made. The profile of the fostering service within the authority's provision for looked after children has been raised and there has been appropriate increased investment in developing the service to better meet young people's needs. Staff morale and commitment is much improved under the clear leadership now provided. The activities of the fostering service are now being well monitored to ensure ongoing performance improvement. A development officer post was established to support the manager in moving the fostering service forward and this has been valuable in the development of much clearer policies, procedures and processes within fostering.

Priority is currently being given to recruiting additional carers with assessments outsourced to an independent provider to enable fostering service staff to concentrate on recruitment and support tasks. Panel minutes demonstrate that the quality of assessments is well monitored and that a high standard is expected. The fostering service has fully clarified its expectation of carers in relation to training in the new foster care agreement. An excellent training programme is provided for both staff and carers and the requirement for carers to undertake three training courses each year is improving attendance figures for training. The workforce development unit is fully aware of the requirement to implement the Children's Workforce Development Council's new standards from April 2008 and has already made preparations to ensure that this happens in a timely manner. Carers are actively encouraged to complete National Vocational qualification (NVQ) Level 3.

Carers feel well supported by the fostering service: 'I have an excellent service from all involved, even when they are short staffed. I can only sing their praises'; 'I have always felt that my opinion counted and have been included in helping to plan the child's placement'. A number of carer support groups operate and carers receive regular supervisory, support and unannounced visits from their supervising social workers. A new carers' handbook has been developed, which clarifies fostering service policies and procedures and also includes a good range of useful information.

Supervising and placing social workers report improvements in communication between child care operational staff and the fostering team with improved understanding of and respect for one another's roles. Team managers from the two services now meet regularly. The establishment of the placement service helps to encourage more effective matching of placements and better targeting of resources to promote consistency and placement stability.

Both carers and staff speak positively of the developments, which have taken place over the last year, saying that it has been hard work but worthwhile in terms of improved quality of service: 'They're wanting the best from you and they're giving you the best'.

General administrative records and individual records relating to carers and young people are generally well retained but many documents, such as safe care policies and central records relating to allegations and complaints, are not dated. Young people, accessing their records, will be unable to establish a true sequence of events if paperwork is not dated. Central records relating to allegations and complaints do not include sufficient information and do not always fully detail outcomes of investigations. One allegation, detailed on a carer's file, is not included in the central record.

A specialist family and friends social worker has been appointed to undertake assessments and provide support and supervision to these carers. She meets regularly with colleagues from other authorities with similar roles. The fostering service has consulted with other local authorities to investigate 'best practice' in developing its own policies and procedures. There is good awareness of the need to develop targeted training for family and friends carers.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Recommendations

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

- demonstrate, in relation to the granting of exemptions to the usual fostering limit, that each young person placed in foster care is matched with a carer capable of meeting his/her assessed needs and that the needs of other young

- people in placement are considered (NMS 8)
- review the current disparity in the funding of venues for carer support groups to demonstrate that self helpgroups are encouraged for all foster carers (NMS 21.2)
 - ensure that records relating to complaints and allegations contain all significant information relevant to the running of the fostering service and as required by regulations and that all records are dated (NMS 25).