

# Lincolnshire County Council Fostering Service

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

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<b>Unique reference number</b>	SC043826
<b>Inspection date</b>	13/12/2007
<b>Inspector</b>	Jane Barton
<b>Type of inspection</b>	Key

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<b>Date of last inspection</b>	04/09/2006

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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

Lincolnshire Local Authority Fostering Service is managed by Lincolnshire County Council Children's Services and has recently been separated from the adoption service in a modernisation programme to deliver the Children and Young People's Plan. 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 fostering north and fostering south, which each have a team manager. A development manager is also in place. 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 placement types provided as task centred, respite, permanent, placement plus and kinship 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 259 foster carer households and was providing placements for 385 children and young people.

### Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

This was an announced reduced key inspection. The service was assessed as meeting or exceeding all but four of the key National Minimum Standards in September 2006. This service had been inspected three times in the year of the last visit, and will have a full inspection of fostering, private fostering and adoption services. To reflect this high level of inspection activity, a reduced inspection has been carried out on this occasion, which has focused on placement plus carers who are paid a specialist rate to care for the most difficult and challenging children and young people. Extensive information relating to the service as a whole has been provided by managers.

For the purposes of this inspection two placement plus foster carers and six young people in placement were tracked through the inspection of case files, home visits and discussions with placing social workers and supervising staff. Records relating to a number of other carers and young people were accessed to support findings. Questionnaires were returned by nine foster carers, 11 young people and two placing social workers.

During the inspection the inspector spoke with the head of service, the fostering manager and team managers. A fostering panel was not observed during this

inspection but two sets of panel minutes were examined and the panel chair was interviewed.

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

At the last inspection the registered person was asked to ensure that full evidence of matching considerations was kept in respect of all placements. This recommendation has been carried out in full. The policy in respect of matching has been revised and records now summarise any potential shortfall in relation to the match, and how these will be addressed. Consultation with children already in placement is recorded in the running records. It was also recommended that the registered person ensure that safe caring guidelines are provided for each foster home, in consultation with all household members. This has also been carried out fully, safe caring guidance is provided in the foster carer handbook, and a thorough safe care agreement with a risk assessment has been drawn up in respect of all placements. The service was also asked to ensure consistency of carer recording practices. A clear recording policy is in place and carers are required to complete weekly records in respect of each child in placement. The registered person was asked to ensure that all foster carers are provided with a written health record for all children, which can be updated throughout the placement, and which should include the administration of medication. This has not been carried out, however, there is now a team in place which includes relevant health professionals and this work is planned to take place in early 2008. All carers are now required to attend first aid training every three years.

### **Helping children to be healthy**

The provision is good.

Young people in placement benefit from health care which meet their needs for physical, emotional and social development. Young people reported being taken for regular and appropriate medical appointments, and felt their health needs were being looked after in placement. The Foster Carers' Handbook includes a clearly stated expectation of carers in relation to registering young people with health practitioners and organising appropriate appointments. Carers were aware of the need to record any medication administered to young people on weekly progress sheets. A range of specialist health services are available for young people and carers to access which include advice about sexual health issues and substance misuse. A specialist Child Adolescent and Mental Health Service (CAMHS) post specifically supports foster carers in dealing with mental health issues. Young people are involved in decision making in respect of how their emotional health needs can be addressed therapeutically.

The agency provides a good range of carer training on health issues: 'Sexual health seminar'; 'Harmful sexual behaviours'; 'Eating disorders and the role of food seminar'; 'Self harm seminar', in addition to which, as part of the modular training programme for foster carers, module three focuses on promoting a healthy lifestyle, good diet and exercise. Foster carers are required to attend mandatory first aid training on a three year cycle. The core programme is supplemented through special

interest seminars on ADHD, autism and asperger's syndrome. Guidance to staff and carers on smoking has been revised to reflect current British Association for Adoption & Fostering (BAAF) good practice guidance.

Panel membership includes a nurse specialist from CAMHS.

Health records on young people's files were scant. A full written health record for the young people they are looking after has not been made available to foster carers, plans to action this have been delayed due to unavailability of key health staff. The head of service is confident that this matter will be addressed early in 2008.

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

The provision is outstanding.

All managers with responsibility for the service have appropriate qualifications, skills, experience and knowledge of child care and fostering, and are suitable people to safeguard and promote the welfare of children. Effective leadership of staff and the operation is demonstrated. The service is well organised, managed and staffed to deliver the best possible child care.

The carers' homes visited were warm, appropriately furnished, decorated and well maintained. Children said they liked their bedrooms and their needs were met by the accommodation provided. Preparation and training for carers covers required health and safety issues and they demonstrated a good understanding of their responsibilities.

Children and young people benefit from being placed with carers following robust and effective matching considerations. A thorough planning process takes place, during which relevant information sharing between all parties has informed decisions, involving all appropriate family members and professionals. Young people reported being welcomed to their foster homes, and excellent support is provided by carers to existing young people in placement. Young people say they are very happy where they are placed: 'We get treated like one of the family', 'They're good parents', being typical comments. Social Workers expressed the view that the carers were extremely effective in meeting the needs of the young people placed, and significant progress made by the young people in placement was demonstrated. The matching process is clearly recorded. The consideration given to existing children in placement is thorough, however this is recorded separately.

Carers were observed to be extremely child focussed. Appropriate systems are in place to collate and evaluate information regarding allegations regarding children in foster care and management monitoring of these was extensive. Carers worked hard within homes and with outside agencies to minimise bullying, no young person reported having been bullied in their foster homes, although several said they were being bullied at school. This information was passed to managers during the visit.

Carers are provided with clear and comprehensive written guidance on safe caring

practices and safe care policies are in place for each fostering household. A new placement specific risk assessment has been introduced. The Foster Carers' Handbook contains detailed guidance in respect of appropriate forms of behaviour management, and young people reported being treated with respect and fairness by their carers. Carers seen were knowledgeable about attachment theory and the challenging behaviours which can arise from attachment difficulties. Assessment of safety appropriately includes transport used by the carer and any household pets.

A good range of training is provided for carers including: 'Safe Caring', 'Communicating with children and young people' and 'Avoiding and handling disruption'.

The agency has a consistently robust staff recruitment process and all personnel files examined contained evidence of appropriate checks and a thorough interviewing process.

The agency has an excellent Placement Agreement pro-forma which includes clear detailing of the roles and responsibilities of the agency, the carer, the placing authority and the young person.

The panel was appropriately constituted and makes effective decisions in respect of the approval of foster carers. Good quality reports are provided by social work staff in relation to foster carer approval and annual review and these are thoroughly scrutinised by panel members.

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

The provision is good.

The service records clear statistical information in respect of the diverse needs of children and young people placed in foster homes. All carers for the service are white European, which reflects the majority population in Lincolnshire. Where children from a different ethnic background are placed, extensive support is given to enable their particular needs to be met. Interpretation and translation services are provided to enable children express views about their care, and examples were given where carers work closely with birth families to develop skills and understanding of the needs of the children they are looking after. Preparation training covers how to provide care which respects and preserves each child's ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic background and further training is provided which develops carers' knowledge and experience of diversity and equality issues. Children report being treated fairly and equally. Matching records identify the ethnicity of young people requiring placements, however, how any needs arising from ethnicity are to be met, has not always been recorded.

Young people benefit significantly from the priority the fostering service gives to education and promoting achievement. Placement planning reflects educational considerations. Young people say they feel well supported in their education by carers going into school or helping them with homework. Young people previously

excluded or struggling to maintain education placements have been supported to overcome their difficulties. A virtual head and education link worker liaise with education professionals to support all children in public care and fostered children in particular, and exclusions are prevented as a consequence of this work. Work is also taking place which focuses on developing carers' personal roles in raising attainment and aspirations in fostered children who are at secondary school. Carers demonstrated a high level of understanding of the importance of education for fostered young people and participate fully in a range of education meetings. The service acknowledges that completion of personal education plans in respect of all young people has not yet been achieved, however these were in place on files examined during this visit.

The service promotes opportunities for young people to widen their horizons and develop their potential in a range of imaginative ways. Young people list a variety of hobbies and interests which are supported by their carers: camping; swimming; football; biking; day trips to a variety of locations. Some young people have attended a residential activity centre, others have had the opportunity to participate in a range of creative activities; music, video and dance were used to develop individual expression and to widen the participants' skill base. A social worker particularly commended the opportunity provided by carers to win awards in horse riding championships.

The service has information systems which clearly demonstrate the education attainment of children and young people in their foster care services, and to demonstrate the number excluded from school, and these are monitored regularly.

The fostering provision for short term breaks was not inspected at this visit.

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

The provision is outstanding.

Young people placed with foster carers benefit from being encouraged to maintain and develop family contacts and friendships. Young people's views are sought in respect of contact and young people report being very satisfied with arrangements for contact and visiting friends. Contact arrangements are addressed at the planning stage of placements and clearly recorded. Consideration is given to the distance from home when making every placement, all efforts are made to place children near home where possible and appropriate. Carers are appropriately assessed and trained in respect of their ability to help a child maintain and develop appropriate relationships with family members, and have the skills required to encourage and facilitate contact. Carers spoken with demonstrated a thorough understanding of issues relating to family relationships and contact. The role of carers in contact is clearly outlined in the relevant agreement and financial support is provided to carers in respect of contact. Carers record outcomes of contact arrangements and their perceived impact on the child appropriately.

Young people benefit from the fostering service ensuring their opinions and those of



others significant to them are sought over all relevant issues. Foster carers demonstrated an extensive understanding of the need to be child centred and focused which includes listening to children and seeking their views. The service has developed a range of creative ways to seek the views of children and young people about their care, daily life and futures. This happens on a regular and frequent basis, and the information obtained is used to inform practice. Children for whom English is not their first language are provided with interpreter and translation services. Children in foster care are provided with thorough information advising them how to make a complaint, and were familiar with the process.

### **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is not judged.

This outcome was not inspected at this visit.

### **Organisation**

The organisation is outstanding.

The children's directorate of Lincolnshire Children's Services have this year undertaken an extensive modernisation programme in order to deliver the Children and Young People's Plan. The Statement of Purpose was written prior to this modernisation, however comprehensive and detailed information was provided which demonstrated the refocusing of the fostering service within children's services. Some staff concerns about the impact of modernisation and working within the ensuing uncertainty were expressed, but no evidence that this has impacted negatively on outcomes for young people was found. Strong and confident leadership is in place within the fostering service at team manager level and above. Clear and accessible guides to the fostering service are available for children and young people. The service have been consulting young people about the use of these packs, and are aware of the need to update the information with the relevant contact details for Ofsted, in addition to updating the foster care handbook with this information also.

Modernisation has refocused the fostering service, which is now separate from the adoption service. Comprehensive aims and objectives for the service are in place, with a clear management structure and lines of accountability. Although acknowledging tensions created by this period of change, staff reported regular and supportive supervision, and demonstrated a clear understanding about how supervising social workers and children's social workers work effectively together. Carers demonstrated a sound understanding of the differing responsibilities of these roles. Assessments, approvals and reviews of carers are well managed and implemented effectively.

The service has a staffing complement in terms of quantity, experience, skill and qualifications which effectively meets the needs of the service and fulfils the statement of purpose. Staff retention is good, staff report being offered good training and beneficial terms and conditions. Fostering recruitment strategy is focused at

recruiting appropriate carers to meet the needs of children requiring placement, and the assessment process is robust and thorough, considering all relevant issues. Training opportunities are available including external courses to update knowledge and skills and maintain professional social work registration.

A clear strategy is in place for working with and supporting carers: All required arrangements are in place in respect of training and development, support groups, supervision and specialist professional advice and support services. Development of a formal out of hours service is planned for 2008.

Children in foster care benefit from up-to date comprehensive case records being maintained, which clearly outline the nature and quality of care provided and contribute to an understanding of their life events. Carers retain photographs and memorabilia to support young people's life story work. A detailed written policy on case recording is in place, and outlined in the foster care handbook. Carers are familiar with this policy. The service ensures that carers are provided with information which summarises why the child is in foster care and the basis for the placement, its duration and purpose and details of the child's legal status. Carers are supported to record significant life events for young people they are looking after. Carers store information in a secure manner in their homes.

There is an ongoing commitment to improving the service and systems to evidence positive outcomes for children and young people are in place. Foster carers report confidence in the agency and the support and training offered is relevant to their needs. The administrative records held by the fostering service contain all significant information relevant to the running of the service and as required by regulations. Separate records are kept as appropriate for carers, children, staff, complaints and allegations.

Regular monitoring and auditing are carried out, which inform senior managers of pertinent information about the service. Records are stored confidentially and clear policy and procedures are in place addressing how confidential information is managed. Recording is clear, legible, accurate and of a high standard. Records of checks and references and their outcomes are kept.

## **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):

- ensure that all foster carers are provided with a written health record for all children, which can be updated throughout the placement. Recording should include the administration of medication (NMS 12)
- ensure that any needs arising from the ethnicity of a young person requiring

- placement are clearly assessed and recorded (NMS 7)
- ensure the children's guides to the fostering service and the Foster Care Handbook are updated to include the relevant contact details for Ofsted (NMS 1)