

Derby City Council Fostering Service

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

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About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to assure children and young people, parents, the public, local authorities and government of the quality and standard of the service provided. The inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000.

This report details the main strengths and any areas for improvement identified during the inspection. The judgements included in the report are made in relation to the outcomes for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and the relevant National Minimum Standards for the service.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding: this aspect of the provision is of exceptionally high quality
Good: this aspect of the provision is strong
Satisfactory: this aspect of the provision is sound
Inadequate: this aspect of the provision is not good enough

Service information

Brief description of the service

The fostering service forms a part of the Derby City Council Children and Young People's Services.

The service provides a full range of fostering placements, including family care, and also supports carers who provide short respite breaks to families.

The two fostering teams, led by two service managers and a head of service, are responsible for all aspects of the fostering task including the recruitment, training and support of carers.

At the time of the inspection the service was supporting approximately 260 placements in 178 households.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

Health care support to children in placement and to carers has significantly improved following the appointment of another Looked After Children nurse. Separate health passport records have yet to be fully implemented.

Good systems and clear policies and procedures are in place to support and account for the safe care of children and young people. Risk assessments, safe care plans and matching processes account for how children will be kept safe within placements, although some areas have been identified where these need updating.

The inspection looked at short break scheme placements. The service currently provides 32 such placements. These are delivered through an Integrated Disabled Children's Service which provides a range of respite services for children with a disability and their families. There were very good examples of partnership working between the fostering and inter-agency disability teams to ensure that the children's placement needs were fully met.

Children and young people are able to express their views through a range of excellent and innovative mechanisms. A range of informal and formal opportunities are available for them to give feedback about the services they receive and there is good evidence to confirm that their comments are taken seriously.

Placements are provided by a motivated and experienced fostering team. Managers have a very good overview of the activity of the service and can evidence strong

monitoring systems. Increasing responsibilities that have come about as a result of national developments could impact on the capacity of the service to develop. Records maintained by the service are of a good standard. Carers are provided with good information, training and support but some carer responsibilities should be routinely confirmed during their supervision to ensure clarity.

Improvements since the last inspection

An additional Looked After Children's Nurse has been appointed to support the current nurse post. This has greatly improved the capacity of the service to positively promote and support the health of children and young people in placement. Health action plans, following statutory health assessments, are now shared with foster carers who should be clear about their role in ensuring important health activities and appointments are carried out.

Placement risk assessments have been introduced to assess any potential placement risk and a matching pro forma has been developed to account for matching processes in some placements. This will assist with identifying where placement shortfalls exist and indicate how they will be addressed.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is satisfactory.

The health needs of children and young people are generally well met. Good examples were seen of health-care support and specialist advice being provided to carers. Foster carers who provide short breaks and respite care through the Link Scheme have direct access and advice from the health and nursing professionals based at The Lighthouse. This is an integrated service for children with a disability. Carers also have good regular links with a clinical psychologist, who is available to provide training and advise on a sessional basis.

Good health related training is made available to carers. A two day Health of Children Looked After course is coordinated by the Looked After Children's Nurse and includes presentations from specialist guest speakers about the different health and developmental needs of children and young people. All carers are now expected to undertake a Paediatric First Aid training course. Carers also receive health support and information through their regular carer support meetings.

Free passes to the city's leisure facilities are provided to fostering households and carers confirm that they use these and encourage children to participate in healthy activities. Records confirm that routine health and medical checks are taking place. Young people receive appropriate advice and guidance about their sexual health and development.

Since the last inspection a second named nurse has been appointed to improve services to Looked After Children (LAC). The current lead LAC nurse is due to retire

in the near future and inspectors were informed that this post will be promptly replaced. Most of the LAC population are receiving their statutory annual health assessments within appropriate timescales and the resulting health action plans are now shared with carers to support implementation. Good health profiles and records were seen for children who are receiving a respite service through the short break scheme. Carers in other areas of fostering are currently not maintaining a separate health record that will move with children when they leave placement. The fostering service has recently introduced a new recording system to carers that will assist with capturing health information, however not all carers have received this and current practice of health and medical recording varies.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The fostering service is managed by two qualified and experienced managers who continue to receive good professional and management training. Records show that carers and staff who work for the service are subject to full recruitment and checking processes.

Good policies and procedures are in place to protect and safeguard children. They are represented along with guidance and advice in the carer handbook.

Carers have a good awareness of safe care and health and safety. Some good examples of car and pet safety assessments were seen on files. Annual health and safety checks are closely monitored by the fostering panel and shortfalls are recorded in panel minutes in order to track subsequent action taken. A very good programme for computer safety has been developed and implemented to enable remote monitoring of computer use by the fostering service. This will alert the service when young people might be accessing unsafe or inappropriate information. Placement risk assessments and bedroom risk assessments were seen on some short break placement files.

Good and regular training is provided to carers on Safe Caring, Safeguarding, Attachment and Child Protection. Many of these courses are presented by national speakers. Carers said that they valued this training highly. This year a training session will be provided for men in foster care following requests for this from some male carers. Good examples were seen of young people receiving valuable therapeutic support provided by the child sexual abuse unit.

Safe care plans are drawn up at the time of initial carer assessment and these are confirmed as being in place at the time of annual review. It was evident on one file looked at that the safe care plan was not appropriate to the needs of the current placement and that this could leave the young person and carers vulnerable.

Matching processes for the link scheme placements are thorough. The placement needs of children and young people are well evidenced through referrals, planning

forums and waiting lists. A book has recently been introduced to track the matching and allocation of placements. A very good matching pro forma is utilised for long-term and mainstream placements backed up by a risk assessment. This notes how children's needs are matched to named carers and identifies how any placement shortfalls will be met. Short break placements are carefully planned and properly discussed with parents and carers.

There has been some change to the panel membership over the last year. A new fostering panel chair has been appointed. The new chair was previously a panel member and has a good working knowledge of panel processes and protocols. She has significant experience in the field of education. The panel is appropriately constituted and includes a member who has had experience of being in care. The current list of panel members suggests that two individuals share one panel place, however the head of service has clarified that this represents two periods of six month membership. She confirmed that the membership list would be amended in accordance with the regulations. Panel minutes are very good and provide good evidence of panel discussion and decision making processes. They also represent a record of routine monitoring of service activity and health and safety checks.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The fostering services gives good attention to equality and diversity. Panel minutes indicate that carer applications are carefully considered to ensure that carers are able to provide placements that appropriately meet the religious and cultural needs of children, in addition to other different or special needs. There is routine carer training on diversity. During the inspection some fostering social workers were preparing large colourful posters for use with a carer group to challenge misconceptions about gender stereo-types. Training is also provided by appropriately qualified professionals where necessary to ensure that placements meet the needs of children who have more complex health and medical needs.

Links with the integrated disability service are excellent. Good examples were seen of creative partnership working between professionals to provide a service tailored to meet the needs of individual children and their families. Carers are provided with appropriate information, equipment and resources when providing placements for children with a disability, both for short breaks and children looked after. There is a dedicated support group for carers providing these placements which carers said they found valuable. A dedicated independent reviewing officer undertakes all LAC reviews of children who have a disability and is aware of the need for children and young people's placement experiences to be represented at their reviews. A special consultation booklet has been introduced for some reviews using the widget signs and symbols system. Other ideas for obtaining a pictorial means of feedback are being introduced.

The dedicated LAC education team continues to positively support the education of

children in foster placement. Commendable initiatives and activities are in place to raise the profile of children's education and to help children and young people enjoy positive learning experiences. Carers are provided with education training and advice from the team. Some school placements are directly supported by the team who have developed good working relationships with school personnel across the city and the neighbouring county. Although two teaching assistant post have been lost from the team, resources are now being appropriately sign-posted and accessed elsewhere within the education department. The team continues to monitor personal education plans and regularly meet with independent reviewing officers to discuss these. Good recognition is given to children's individual achievements and children may choose how and where these will be celebrated.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

Carers providing placements for children with a disability through the short breaks scheme work closely with parents to ensure that identified health and medical needs are being properly met. All carers are provided with training on understanding and managing contact before approval and contact training is now available post approval. Good examples of contact planning, recording and evaluation were seen during the inspection. Young people are appropriately consulted about contact arrangements.

There is a clear and commendable commitment by the local authority and the fostering service to consulting all children and young people. This includes children who are looked after. Children and young people have access to a dedicated participation officer and independent advocates. There is very good evidence to show that children are consulted and listened to and that their views are valued. Young people's views and comments about their placements were recently collated through an exit interview project and fed back to commissioners, providers and independent reviewing officers. This resulted in some changes to several young people's placements.

The Kids in Care in Kontrol (KICK) group, a young people's group for over twelve's, continues to meet every fortnight. Last year this group produced a list of standards for education staff that have been included in a model policy for the education of Derby City's looked after children. There are also other groups, newsletters, forums and a website for children and young people to represent their views. A group of Derby City's children in care recently prepared a drama which they presented to a multi-agency conference. From this drama project messages printed on a leaflet have been produced for their corporate parents. This has been distributed to all local authority staff with their salary slips.

The children's complaint form has been simplified to make it easier for them to represent a complaint. The fostering service Children's Guide also provides contact numbers and website addresses for children to make representations or complaints.

Children and young people are consulted about their placements at the time of their carer's annual review. Carer's own children are also routinely spoken to and consulted. Records show that there is a commitment to engaging and facilitating all looked after children to contribute to their statutory reviews.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The Statement of Purpose has been reviewed and updated and provides a clear summary of the service provided by the fostering team. The filo-fax style Children's Guide is attractive and accessible. Special leaflets are produced for children and adults to describe the range of services provided at The Lighthouse.

Very good systems are in place to monitor and report the activity of the fostering service. An annual report is provided for the Director of Children and Young People's Service and for Corporate Parents. Monthly highlight reports are also produced by the head of service and are being used to track key trends and performance indicators.

The two fostering service teams are organised broadly into pre and post approval tasks. Both teams undertake assessments and are involved in training. One of the two service managers takes responsibility for the short breaks and fostering service for disabled children. The management structure is clear and the management team is experienced and approachable. The social work teams are experienced, stable and established. They reported very good support from managers, regular supervision and access to external professional training opportunities. Good formal and informal networks have been developed with other professionals and these contribute to good placement outcomes.

Good marketing and recruitment strategies are in place. The recruitment and publicity budget has been increased and the service reports a gradual increase in the supply of foster carers. Excellent information packs are sent out to carers. These are creatively collated and well presented, containing accessible pertinent information. Foster carer assessments looked at were thorough, competency based and included a good analytical element.

An additional half social worker post will be recruited to the service in the new financial year, however there is an increase in the responsibilities delegated to the fostering teams as a result national service developments. The team now processes

Special Guardianship Order applications and is preparing to implement the Children's Workforce Development Council's new standards in April 2008. Both pieces of work have had a significant impact on the team and on management capacity especially. The minimal increase in staffing hours may not be sufficient to cover the additional work being taken on by the service.

Carers feel well supported by their fostering social workers and managers. They confirmed that they receive regular supervision, good pre and post approval training opportunities and advice whenever they need it. They make use of the very good support groups where they receive both support and developmental training. The carer's handbook has been updated.

Although there are written guidelines in the carer handbook and training is provided to carers about recording, this is not clearly understood by all of them. They reported different systems for maintaining placement records. Carers also demonstrated a lack of clarity about some financial information that the fostering service confirmed has been provided to them in writing.

Carer and children's files, maintained by the fostering social workers and children's placing social workers, are well organised and easily accessed. Examples of excellent running records and thorough assessment processes were seen. Records are appropriately stored. Carers are aware of their responsibility to collect evidence for life-story work and are aware of their responsibility to support this process.

The fostering service maintains a summary record of allegations and complaints. This provides a good overview of all investigations and complaints and appropriately notes the outcomes of these. Numbers of allegations are low and have reduced by half since last year.

The fostering service continues to provide support to a substantial amount of family and friends placements, however many potential kinship placements are now proceeding to Special Guardianship Orders arrangements rather than remaining within the service. Managers have adapted and streamlined the initial assessment reports undertaken in respect of family carers, to assist with the applications for Special Guardianship Orders should this be necessary.

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 an individual written health record is maintained by foster carers that can move with the child when they leave the placement. (NMS 12.4)
- ensure that safe care plans are placement specific and are reviewed and updated

- at the time of each new placement. (NMS 9.3)
- ensure that information and advice provided to carers has been understood and confirm expectations of carers through their supervision systems. (NMS 21.2)