

Nottinghamshire County 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 is overseen by an assistant director with responsibilities being delegated down to a service head and subsequently to a service manager with day-to-day management responsibility.

The service consists of nine fostering teams located across five district office bases. Five of the fostering teams provide services to mainstream carers with the remaining four dedicated to recruitment and publicity, fostering futures, short breaks and emergency/remand.

The service provides a number of different types of foster care: long and short term mainstream foster placements; support care placements, which support the child's main placement; short term breaks for disabled and non-disabled children; emergency foster placements for children needing a placement of 6-8 weeks; fostering futures placements where the carer is self-employed and receives a salary from the Children and Young People's Department; remand foster care for young people remanded to the care of the local authority and child-specific or kinship placements. The fostering service also supports persons wishing to apply for a non-agency adoption order and adopted adults who are seeking to trace their families via adoption counselling and supports disabled children permanently living in the community through a sitting/befriending service. The service additionally provides a daily home finding service to children entering the care system or needing to move within the care system and also a permanent home finding service to children in need of such a service.

The Fostering Service has two Fostering Panels, each held monthly, one on a Friday and one on a Tuesday. The two panels have different members.

The Fostering Service has 402 approved foster households (as at 1st January 2008) and has 355/360 children living in foster care, as their main placement, at any one time. This represents, at any one time, 65 - 70% of the total number of children looked after by the local authority.

Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

The fostering service is well managed with clear lines of accountability and a low staff turnover, which promotes stability and continuity of service delivery. Young people are generally well matched to foster placements, which provide safe care and promote their development. Young people are well supported by their carers to access appropriate health care, to achieve academically, to engage in leisure and sporting activities and to retain contact with friends and families. Foster carers are

well supported by their supervising social workers and some good examples of partnership working, between foster carers and placing and supervising social workers, were noted to be promoting positive outcomes for young people.

The electronic recording system has some shortfalls in that it is unwieldy and very time consuming and appears, in some respects, to be unresponsive to the needs of the fostering service. Tracking young people's care is sometimes difficult and some essential documents, such as foster placement agreements and health care plans are not sufficiently accessible. The service is unable to demonstrate that signed foster care agreements and foster placement agreements are always in place.

Carers do not always receive appropriate health information in respect of young people, when they are placed, and the fostering service is not able to demonstrate that supervising social workers are pro-actively supporting carers to obtain this information, in a timely manner. Carers are also concerned that payments are not always made promptly. The arrangements described by some carers, for the provision of transport for young people's contact arrangements, are neither safe nor appropriate and have the potential to cause young people distress and to seriously compromise their safety

Personnel files relating to staff are not retained in a standardised format and do not always demonstrate that essential checks have been undertaken.

Improvements since the last inspection

Five good practice recommendations were identified during the previous inspection of the fostering service.

Foster carer recording was inappropriate with carers recording placement information, relating to all children in placement, in one diary and receiving no post approval training in relation to recording. The National Minimum Standards require that 'an up to date, comprehensive case record is maintained, which details the nature and quality of care provided and contributes to an understanding of his/her life events'. Carer recording, particularly in relation to young people's health, was minimal. The service now provides training for carers to clarify recording requirements and has developed written guidelines detailing expectations in relation to placement records. Carers have recently been provided with individual files for each young person in placement, which are sectioned to cover key development areas including health and education. The health section requires carers to retain a record of all medication administered.

At the time of the previous inspection some panel members, listed as independent, were in fact employees of Nottinghamshire County Council. The service has reviewed the membership of both fostering panels and both are now constituted in accordance with the Fostering Services Regulations. Operational guidelines for panel members have been further developed to clarify the decision making process.

The fostering service was recommended to ensure that it retained full evidence of

matching considerations in respect of each placement made and advised that this record should indicate any potential shortfalls in relation to the match and how these would be addressed. A placement request form has recently been uploaded onto the electronic recording system. The pro-forma includes details of matching considerations and requires any shortfalls, and how these will be addressed, to be detailed but this pro-forma is very new and it has not been possible to assess its impact in providing a better demonstration of matching.

The inspectors recommended that written guidance be issued to staff in respect of the implementation of the 'framework' system, to ensure that crucial information was not lost in the transfer process from written to electronic records, paying particular attention to the essential documents, which needed to be loaded into the system before paper files were archived. Staff are now much more familiar with the electronic recording system and have a better developed awareness of the location of documents, but, this inspection demonstrated that some essential documentation has become inaccessible as a result of the transfer.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is satisfactory.

The introduction of a new carer recording system requires all foster carers to retain separate records relating to young people's health appointments and to record any medication administered. The looked after children (LAC) health team were involved in the development of these records and in compiling advice on their appropriate completion. Some carers, and the inspectors, are concerned that this record does not move with the young person, for example when respite is provided, with the implication that the health record retained by the main carer may have gaps and that the only complete record is that held electronically by the social worker. Information relating to young people's health is sometimes difficult to locate on the 'framework' system, with current health care plans were not always found in relation to the young people tracked during this inspection. Changes to LAC documentation mean that signed consent, for carers to agree to medical treatment for young people in placement, is not always traceable although the Foster Care Agreement details that carers will receive this.

The LAC health team are involved in providing training to foster carers and have led a health seminar covering physical, social and emotional well-being and healthy eating. Carers have a good awareness of, and a commitment to meeting the health needs of young people in placement. Many carers are concerned that health information supplied at the commencement of a placement is often poor and sometimes not received for several weeks. Annual health assessments are prompted by placing social workers and they receive copies of the health care plan emerging from this assessment. These plans are not currently shared by the health service with fostering social workers and are currently not always being shared, by placing social workers, with carers.

All foster carers have access to a specialist LAC nurse, to staff working in the

teenage pregnancy service and to staff working in the drug and alcohol teams and a new LAC child and adolescent mental health service (CAMHS) co-ordinator has recently been appointed to support referrals for mental health interventions.

The inspectors note the excellent prioritisation of the health needs of young people receiving care through the short breaks service. The team includes a paediatric nurse and an occupational therapist, whose input ensures that carers are fully trained and equipped to meet specific and often complex health needs. Carers involved in this service say that they receive good information about young people's health needs, always receive signed consent to medical treatment from parents and are provided with regular training around both general and specific health issues. One placing social worker commented 'Family link carers have shown excellent skills in meeting the physical health needs of physically disabled children and have undergone appropriate training'.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is satisfactory.

Personnel files are not retained in a standardised format and this makes it difficult to confirm that essential checks and references have been undertaken. In one file examined there was no evidence of appropriate criminal records bureau (CRB) clearance or of a social worker's registration with the General Social Care Council (GSCC). The manager of the fostering service confirmed that she had seen both these documents and was able to demonstrate that these checks had been undertaken. The authority has a clearly stated recruitment process and all staff working for the fostering service are appropriately experienced and qualified. There is a low staff turnover within the service and this promotes stability and continuity.

A health and safety risk assessment is conducted in respect of each carer household as part of the annual review process and any shortfalls identified are well monitored by both supervising social workers and the fostering panel. Carers are provided with comprehensive guidance on safe caring within the safe care policy document, which constitutes a signed contractual agreement to provide a safe environment for young people in placement. The document is individualised to the fostering household and is reviewed annually as part of the annual review process. The safe care policy is not in a very child-friendly format. Good guidelines are included for carers on dealing with bullying, appropriate and non-permissible punishments and reporting requirements when young people go missing. The fostering service does not have a written policy on bedroom sharing and staff and carers seem unclear about the circumstances under which this arrangement would be reasonable, which has the potential to lead to inconsistency. Senior staff confirmed that risk assessments are always completed in relation to bedroom sharing arrangements involving a young person who has been abused or who has abused another young person.

Young people feel happy, safe and well cared for: 'they have always loved and cared for me-they're the best'; 'I get pocket money, food, entertainment and a roof over my head along with lots of love from everyone in the family'.

A good range of training is available for carers around safe care, child protection and behaviour management, including courses on 'management of actual and potential aggression' and 'managing challenging behaviour'.

The young people tracked during the inspection were noted to be well matched with their carers although some of the files contained no information to demonstrate the matching considerations which had informed the placement. The staff and carers spoken to confirm that matching is an important consideration in the making of placements. Individual offices operate their own duty system and are able to receive referrals for placement, using the 'framework' system to access information about current vacancies and details of those carers. A placement request form has recently been uploaded onto 'framework', to replace the previous hard copy form, and will be completed by all placing social workers requesting foster placements. The pro-forma includes details of matching considerations and requires any shortfalls, and how these will be addressed, to be detailed. This pro-forma is very new and it has not been possible to assess its impact in providing a better demonstration of matching. A commendably robust initial risk assessment is completed in relation to all young people placed with foster carers, which is developed into a risk management plan, and this strongly supports placements that promote young people's safety. Carer skills are well evidenced through competence based assessment and progression through four skill levels.

The service is unable to demonstrate that signed foster placement agreements are always in place. Changes to LAC paperwork, which previously included the placement agreement, and the transfer to electronic records, without always uploading a copy of the initial placement agreement, leaves the fostering service unable to demonstrate that a signed, dated agreement meeting regulatory requirement is in place.

The fostering panels are appropriately constituted and reflect strong positive leadership by knowledgeable and committed chairs. Clear guidelines covering panel procedures are in place and the panel has a strong quality assurance role, receiving regular updates on the operation of the service and having good opportunities to report to the service manager about the standard of assessments. Both panel chairs demonstrate good awareness of the panel's independent status and its safeguarding role. Members of both panels receive appropriate training opportunities and have good access to specialist advice. The panel minutes do not accurately reflect the panel membership, since both the panel advisor and the panel co-ordinator are currently incorrectly listed as members. This was rectified during the inspection and future minutes will separately list these personnel. The position of vice chair has been a nominal rather than an active role but the service has recognised that this does not meet regulatory requirement and is currently in the process of appointing new vice chairs to both panels.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Black and Asian communities are positively targeted for the recruitment of foster carers as the fostering service endeavours to develop a diverse range of fostering households to promote positive matching of young people to appropriate placements. A new training course, on meeting the needs of asylum seeking children, was provided in 2007 and a new policy, for meeting the needs of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) children, was launched in June 2007 with staff receiving training to support the implementation of this policy. Training was also available in 2007 on the recruitment and assessment of gay and lesbian carers. Placement choice for disabled children has been significantly enhanced by the appointment of contract carers within the short breaks scheme. The black children and families overview group produces a quarterly monitoring report to demonstrate close monitoring of assessments completed of BME children. Independent reviewing officers (IRO) have a role in monitoring that care planning for BME children is appropriately undertaken and one senior IRO is member of the BME working group. One IRO specialises in children with disability reviews and another specialises in identity needs and is involved in carer training on this. The fostering service accommodates a high number of asylum seeking young people and has developed its use of independent fostering agency placements to more effectively meet the specific needs of this group.

The Nottinghamshire short breaks scheme has recently been awarded pathfinder status and been awarded government funding subsequent to the 'Aiming High for Disabled Children' review. The inter-disciplinary nature of this service equips it well to meet the very diverse and complex individual needs of young people with disabilities. The scheme recruits, assesses and trains its own carers who also have access to all training opportunities available to mainstream carers.

All young people tracked during this inspection are achieving well educationally and are supported and encouraged to access a wide range of sporting and leisure pursuits. Some young people are especially successful in sporting achievements playing rugby and football for school and local teams. One placing social worker commented that a young person was: 'showing signs of developing into a healthy and empathetic young man'. Additional allowances are available to foster carers to promote educational achievement or to facilitate access to activities specifically designed to build self confidence.

All young people currently in foster care have a school placement and very good results were obtained this year at Key Stage 2. An annual achievement award day is held to recognise and reward young people's educational and personal successes. A dedicated LAC education team comprising 3.5 teachers is available to support young people who have no school placement or require very specific input. Foster Carers have access to training on educational matters and are supported by a dedicated corporate parenting consultant.

'No Less than Success' is a document produced by corporate parenting to outline the key duties and responsibilities for all local authority staff and carers to actively

promote the educational achievement of looked after children. An East Midlands regional protocol for looked after children was launched, in the Summer of 2005, to ensure that children who move over county boundaries receive a consistent education package.

The proportion of young people in education, training or employment at the age of 19 years increased from 75% in 2004/2005 to 85% in 2005/2006.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is satisfactory.

Foster carers retain records relating to young people's contact arrangements and share the outcomes of any contact visits with young people's placing social workers. Some very clear contact planners are in place demonstrating that foster carers and social workers support and encourage young people to retain good levels of contact with friends and family, where this is appropriate. Young people are consulted about contact arrangements through the LAC review process. Risk assessments are undertaken and arrangements for supervision and transport are agreed with the foster carer. Foster carers, however, raised some concerns regarding transport arrangements for young people's contact. Some carers feel that communication, between placing social workers, transport providers and themselves, is poor. Transport services are generally provided by volunteer drivers or by taxis and carers express concern about drivers turning up unexpectedly, or not turning up when they are expected. There are additional concerns about drivers arriving without identification, without legally required car seats and, for young children, without escorts. The arrangements described by some carers are neither safe nor appropriate and have the potential to cause young people distress and to seriously compromise their safety.

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 aware of their role and are supporting young people to raise issues of concern when necessary. NYAS circulates the 'who cares' magazine to all looked after children and is able to provide access to a number of specialist advocates in relation, for example, to young people with disabilities or asylum seeking children.

Young people complete a consultation document prior to their annual LAC review and independent reviewing officers report that the majority of young people contribute to reviews and almost 100% are currently held within timescales. Young people additionally complete a placement feedback report for their foster carer's annual review. Fostered young people are also offered opportunities to meet with other looked after children, for example at 'chill out' days, at the annual fostering conference and at various achievement events where they can share their views and experiences, which are fully taken into account in planning future events.

Currently significant dedicated youth worker hours are allocated to each of the authority's residential children's homes and to the adoption service. No hours are specifically allocated, at present, for young people in foster care, although consideration is being given to the allocation of half of a new youth worker post. There is a youth service website available to older looked after children but the newsletter, which used to be included in the focus magazine, for fostered children has been withdrawn.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The fostering service produces a statement of purpose clearly detailing its aims and objectives and the services it provides and this is regularly reviewed and updated. Two excellent guides are available to children and young people and both include good information about being fostered, the rights of looked after children and access to advocacy. The guide for younger children is particularly commended for its colourful, interactive format.

There is a robust management structure within the fostering service with clear lines of accountability. A stable and committed management team is in place and their leadership is valued by the staff. Staff comment positively about access to team managers and say that both formal and informal support systems are good and workload allocation is fair. Staff are appropriately qualified and experienced and have good access to appropriate training opportunities.

The service has a dedicated recruitment and publicity team and this team consults well with the team managers to ensure that recruitment of carers is targeted according to the needs in particular geographical areas. Placing social workers are generally happy about placement choice and speak highly about the quality of foster placements provided 'The service provides excellent foster carers who treat young people as their own and who go the extra mile to support them'. The fostering panel has a strong quality assurance role in relation to the standard of carer assessments.

A good range of post approval training opportunities is available to foster carers and, although the service does not currently have a stated expectation for carers to access a certain number of training courses each year, the fostering panel monitors that training is being appropriately undertaken. Carers are expected to complete an annual learning and development plan with their supervising social worker to develop their capacity to meet the specific needs of young people in placement. The fostering service is fully aware of the carer training implications of the implementation of the

Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) standards from April 2008 and plans to launch this to carers through a series of workshops. Foster carers are provided with regular supervision to a standard agenda covering how the needs of young people in placement are being met as well as the carer's own development needs. Carers value the support provided by their supervising social workers: 'our fostering team is excellent'; 'I have found fostering for Nottinghamshire to be a rewarding and positive experience'. An annual foster carers' conference is held and this provides the opportunity to share good practice and to recognise carers' loyalty and achievements. A good range of carer support groups and a dedicated out-of-hours duty service provide additional support for carers. The carers' handbook is limited in that it details service policy in key areas but is not inclusive of practice guidance or information which could provide a tool of reference for carers.

The carers' handbook includes a breakdown of the foster carer allowance and also gives specific information regarding carers' tax and insurance liabilities. The fostering service operates a skills level payment system for mainstream carers, with progression through the four levels being determined by the acquisition of competencies and being decided by a levels panel. Some carers, particularly those providing respite placements, are unhappy about delays in the receipt of allowances and carers also report lengthy delays in re-imbursement of money spent on essential equipment.

The 'framework' system is unwieldy and very time consuming and appears, often, to be unresponsive to the needs of the fostering service, for example in the capacity to extract important management information. There is inexplicable, differential access to the system, which is currently being addressed, for example for fostering service staff and child care operational staff. This does not accord with the existence of a holistic, integrated children's service and this apparent restricted access to information does not support positive outcomes for young people. Records retained by the fostering service and by carers are securely stored and there are appropriate policies in relation to access.

The fostering service recognises the need to update the foster care agreement to reflect changes to LAC documentation used by Nottinghamshire. A foster care agreement was not in place in relation to one of the placements tracked but this shortfall was addressed during the inspection.

The fostering service has improved the process for obtaining temporary approval for family and friends carers providing placements under Regulation 38 (2), pending the completion of a full assessment. Some good examples of partnership working by placing and supervising social workers were noted, particularly in relation to family and friends placements. Family and friends carers are being supported well and are being encouraged to access appropriate training opportunities to equip them to meet the identified needs of the young people placed.

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 foster carers are provided with as full a description as possible of the health needs of any young person placed, either before placement or as soon as possible after. This must include clarity about consent to medical treatment (NMS 12.3)
- retain records of checks and references that have been obtained in relation to staff, and their outcomes (NMS 3.4)
- demonstrate that written foster placement agreements, covering the matters specified in schedule 6 of the Fostering Services Regulations, are in place in respect of all young people placed and contain specific reference to elements of matching which were taken into consideration in agreeing the placement (NMS 8.4)
- ensure that there are clear procedures for setting out how appropriate contact arrangements for young people are to be established, maintained and monitored and that these take full account of the requirement for transport provided for young people, for these purposes, to be safe and appropriate to their needs (NMS 10.2, NMS 6.8)
- demonstrate that systems for the practical support of foster carers include prompt payments (NMS 22.7, NMS 29.1)
- ensure that a foster care agreement is in place for each carer, which is in line with Schedule 5 of the Fostering Services Regulations (NMS 22.4).