

Leicester City Council Fostering Service

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

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Setting address	Leicester City Council, Social Services, 1 Grey Friars, LEICESTER, LE1 5PH
Telephone number	0116 299 5882
Email	muriel.scott@leicester.gov.uk
Registered person	Leicester City Council
Registered manager	Mark Tingley
Responsible individual	Mark Tingley
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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

Leicester City Council Fostering Service is the responsibility of Leicester City Children and Young People's Service and provides family placements for children and young people up to the age of 18 years.

The fostering service provides a full range of placements for children and young people from varying ethnic and cultural backgrounds. These include emergency, short and long term placements, a family link scheme, and contract care placements. Remand care is organised in partnership with the Youth Offending Service.

A service manager is responsible for the day-to-day management of the service, and overseeing the four fostering teams, each led by a dedicated team manager. The teams are organised into the pre-panel recruitment and assessment team, the post panel team, the kinship care team and the permanence team. Within each team there is a senior practitioner who undertakes development work in addition to holding a caseload.

Supervising social workers work within the four fostering teams in addition to the specialist posts i.e. development officer, publicity coordinator and enquiry officer. A dedicated administrative team supports the fostering service.

The service operates from a central location in Leicester in a building with an attractive reception area, open to members of the public to provide information about fostering and adoption, and to existing foster carers and adopters.

At the time of the inspection the fostering service was supporting 336 children in 231 households. There was 34 children being supported in independent fostering agencies.

Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

The fostering service continuously monitors and evaluates performance, anticipates change and looks at how best to improve placements for Looked After Children. There is strong leadership within the service and a motivated staff team. Sound systems are in place to keep children safe.

Very good working relationships exist between the fostering service and other professionals within the children's services. Good examples of partnership working were observed throughout the inspection. This has a positive impact on outcomes for children in placement.

There have been good developments over the past year within the fostering and administrative teams. Significantly the permanence team is now working more closely with the adoption team to improve planning for long-term placements. The kinship care team continues to provide positive support to family and friends placements. Good electronic systems supported by the administrative team enable swift and easy access to fostering information.

Panel functioning is excellent. An experienced fostering panel receives applications and the panel chair demonstrates a good overview of the activity of the fostering service.

Very good information is available to carers through an excellent carer handbook and a commendable training and development programme. The service is ready to implement the new Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) standards.

Improvements since the last inspection

No requirements or recommendations were made at the last inspection. Managers continue to be proactive in developing the service and strive for continuous improvement.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

Children's development and health needs are very well met. All children and young people are provided with a health file known as the Clayton file, for the recording of all health and medical information. Carers are expected to retain a record of important health events while supporting young people to maintain these files. Carers spoken to confirmed that they did this.

Carers are provided with an excellent and comprehensive health training programme and are made aware of useful health-related website addresses and contact points. They are actively encouraged to take responsibility for the healthy development of children in placement. A 14 week distant learning course is available to carers who wish to gain a qualification in nutrition and health. All carers attend a joint induction programme on the annual health assessment and the Clayton file.

The dedicated Looked After Children (LAC) health team works closely with the children's and fostering services. Several commendable initiatives have been implemented as result of good partnership working. A designated health nurse has assisted with the updating of the carer handbook and some health policies and guidelines have been strengthened since the last inspection. An excellent health training programme for carers has been devised to directly link in with the new Children's Workforce Development Council standards. This model will now be rolled out across the East Midlands following a successful financial bid. There has been a

positive increase in the number of health assessments completed within proper time-limits this year. Completed health action plans were seen on the files of children tracked and carers were very clear about their responsibility to support these.

Children are encouraged to engage in healthy activities. Swimming passes and summer leisure activity passes are provided to foster families. Young people over the age of 16 receive a gym pass. A consultation exercise was undertaken last year by a designated nurse for LAC with a group of 16 to 18 year olds leaving care in Leicester City and Leicestershire County council. Young people were asked about their experiences around health assessments and how they would like health services to be offered. Positive recommendations following the survey influenced the appointment of a specialist 16 plus nurse to support this age group with their health assessments.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

Children are kept safe through very strong safeguarding systems and practices. Safe care family policies are in place for all placements in addition to bedroom risk assessments and fire plans. These are reviewed and updated annually or as necessary. An excellent front sheet on all carer files indicates that the required safe care documents are in place and notes when they were last updated. Supervising social workers carry out annual unannounced visits and these are also recorded on the front sheets. A special form is utilised for checks to be undertaken at the time of unannounced visits.

A very good range of safe care and safeguarding training is available to carers. This training is ongoing. Carers are also made aware as to how they can access additional information about safeguarding issues from other sources e.g. on the internet. One carer said she had found information provided on the national web-site for self-harm very helpful when supporting a young person in placement. Training on 'promoting positive handling strategies' provides techniques for carers to reduce the need to restrain when responding to very challenging behaviours. Carers spoken to were clear about child protection procedures and the respective roles of supervising and placing social workers. The carer handbook provides excellent and accessible information about caring for children who have been subject to abuse.

The carer handbook has recently been updated to provide up-to-date information about child protection processes and the management of the investigations of allegations. Positive work is currently being developed between the fostering managers and an independent strategy meeting chair, to consider how to conclude allegations against foster carers better. The aim is to clarify outcomes and implications after an allegation has been investigated for both the carers and children involved. Representatives from the Leicester City Foster Care Partnership are available to support carers who are subject to an allegation and to accompany them to meetings. Very good systems are in place to collate and monitor information about

the management of investigations within the fostering service.

Placement agreements were seen for all children tracked along with other good needs-assessment and placement planning information. These were clearly signed and dated by all appropriate parties. Placements tracked were well matched. Carer profiles, provided to children and young people prior to placement, identify carer strengths. Carers and children are benefiting from good placement support from both supervising and placing social workers. In addition, the placement support team continues to provide valuable support focussing on progressing permanency plans and placement stability in long-term placements. Very good protocols and close working links are being developed between the fostering and adoption services to promote stable and enduring long-term placements for children. These ensure that long-term placement options are identified alongside plans for adoption.

Personnel files looked at for recently recruited fostering staff contained appropriate checks, references and evidence of qualifications.

A strong, experienced and well qualified fostering panel considers all fostering applications, including those for private fostering. The panel is appropriately constituted. The independent panel chair has considerable childcare experience at a senior level and ensures that all panel members are able to contribute to the decision making process. The panel was observed to scrutinise applications thoroughly and seen to perform a positive safeguarding function. An update and information session on kinship care was recently provided to the panel by the manager of the kinship care team. In addition to this a training day was provided to look at the 'Attachment Style Interview'. This interview measures adult attachment style in relation to their ability to access and utilise social support and is increasingly used in adoption and fostering work. The panel is routinely provided with very good information about the activity of the fostering service. The panel chair provides feedback to managers about the standard of fostering assessments. Panel minutes are excellent and clearly evidence panel discussion and list reasons for recommendations for approval.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Carers are provided with very good training on equality and diversity from their initial core training onwards. This now includes training on the needs of unaccompanied young asylum seekers and refugees. Carers are offered the opportunity to gain a qualification in equality and diversity through a 14 week distance learning programme. Workshops and training are provided to support the needs of placements for children with a disability. Carers who are looking after children with specific health and cultural needs are well supported and aware of how to meet these needs. Some have undertaken additional training and research.

There is a representative mix of foster carers within the service to generally meet the ethnic and cultural needs of children in placement. Ethnic minority carers are

supported to meet on a bi-monthly basis and new carers continue to join this group. A special placement panel monitors placements of all children from different ethnic and religious backgrounds to check whether cultural and religious needs are being met. Good evidence of this was seen in respect of one of the cases looked at.

Education related workshops and training are provided to carers to enable them to actively support the education of children and young people in placement. In one case tracked, very good attention is being given to a young person's school placement which requires a high level of support from carers and social workers. Good communication systems with the school are in place and strong personal education plans have been completed and updated at appropriate intervals.

The fostering service continues to work closely with the Raising Achievement of Looked After Children (RALAC) team to promote and improve educational achievement for Looked After Children. Every school has a designated teacher and a nominated RALAC worker. The team provides training for designated teachers. There are some very good education initiatives in place. These include a homework club for year 11's, school attendance monitoring, provision of books to all carers and a letterbox club. There is also an early years project aimed at targeting children before they start attending school and promoting educational achievement at an early stage. Carers of pre-school children are supported to assess the level of input a child in placement might need when they start school. A resource worker visits carers and children at home taking a range of resources to assess and promote literacy and numeracy skills. These resources are then returned and exchanged at intervals. Another initiative 'target 25' involves a multi-professional team identifying and providing support for children and young people who are not receiving 25 hours a week education. Some carers noted that there are pressures supporting this group of children.

Carers are encouraged to utilise community services to promote learning and are put in touch with these through the training news sheets. A computer allowance is awarded to all fostering households and a computer maintenance and replacement programme is in place. The carer handbook includes excellent information and advice about educational achievement.

A special leisure fund managed by the fostering team enables all LAC to pursue individual interests, hobbies and talents. Children and young people have enjoyed physical, educational and artistic activities through accessing this fund and have provided very positive feedback to the service about their activities through written comments and drawings.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

Good information and training is provided to carers about the significance of children having contact with their natural families where this is appropriate. Contact

arrangements are routinely risk-assessed and reviewed. Family contact is supported well by carers. An example was seen of very good support being provided to a carer who was facilitating complex contact arrangements. These were being properly recorded and monitored.

The views and thoughts of Looked After Children and young people are routinely and positively sought through a number of channels. Children are directly consulted, verbally or through a special form, about their placements at the time of carer annual reviews. They are also asked to contribute to their own LAC reviews through newly designed forms. The Stand Up Speak Out participation group for young people over the age of 13 continues to represent and raise issues on behalf of Looked After Children through a number of innovative projects. The group includes young people who are fostered. The group has produced an excellent DVD showing children and young people in care talking about their placements and about their experience of care. The DVD film also shows members of the group interviewing the Director of Children's Services. There is good evidence that aspects of children's services have been changed or developed as a result of children and young people being listened to. An example of this being the use of the 'about us' foster care profile which is drawn up by foster families. Within this profile there are photographs of carers. They also talk about their daily lives and describe themselves and their homes. Young people have been actively involved in monitoring and feeding back about the use of this profile.

There is now increased capacity within the dedicated children's rights service. Both the children's rights officer post and a participation officer post support the inclusion, representation and participation of children in care. The children's rights officer confirmed that carers and supervising social workers advocate well on behalf of children and will support them to contact the service if necessary. Quarterly newsletters are sent out to Looked After Children who also receive the national Care Matters magazine. The carer handbook includes information about the importance of listening to children and the role of the advocacy services. Their training also endorses this. Carers spoken to appeared to have a very good understanding about the need to value the views and experiences of the children and young people they were looking after.

Children and young people entering care are provided with very good age-appropriate information packs that include contact details about where they can seek help or make complaints.

There are 12 independent visitors approved to visit children in care, including some in foster care placements, who do not have visits from family members.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

The Statement of Purpose for the service has been recently reviewed and provides a good representation of all aspects of the fostering service. The Children's Guides are colourful, clear and age-appropriate. In addition to the guides, appealing storybooks about a fostered teddy bear are available for younger children. Children and young people are also provided with other information at time of placement.

There is an excellent demonstration of ongoing management monitoring and reviewing within the fostering service. Managers continually plan to improve and develop the service in line with the five outcomes. Team managers provided written reports for inspectors that detailed the team's activity over the last year, noting achievements and summarising future plans in all areas of service provision. Managers demonstrated a good awareness of the key strengths within their teams and noted where improvements needed to be made.

Staff in the Fostering Service are organised into four task-specific teams supported by an informed administration team, each headed by an appropriately skilled and qualified manager. The management team is strong and approachable and committed to working with colleagues to provide good quality placements for children. The recently constituted permanency team is now established and working more closely with the adoption teams to provide an improved and seamless service to children within long-term placements.

Supervising social workers continue to enjoy access to good professional training and regular supervision. Newly appointed staff receive solid induction programmes and a high level of supervision.

A number of carers have left the service for appropriate reasons. Ongoing initiatives are in place to recruit carers to meet the needs of the looked after population and managers acknowledge that this has been an increasingly difficult task. The service is currently targeting recruitment efforts to find carers for babies and teenagers. Some children are placed within independent fostering agency placements. There are solid systems in place for the commissioning, matching and monitoring these placements.

The fostering development officer continues to coordinate and deliver an outstanding training and development programme to carers. Community resources are utilised and joint training opportunities are arranged in partnership with health and education colleagues to offer positive learning experiences. Commendable commitment is being given to the implementation of the CWDC standards within the fostering service. A pilot project involving supervising social workers and carers is already up and running in order to identify where issues might arise in the future. Training opportunities already linked to the five outcomes are now being cross-referenced to the CWDC standards, as is information in the carer handbook. Work is currently being undertaken to review the carer payment scheme to make this more

equitable. It is planned that this will reflect carers skills and ultimately link in with achievement of CWDC standards. Carer's professional development groups continue to operate from carer's own homes providing a more informal delivery of training. Carers are provided with their own portfolio to maintain information about their training. They store certificates, newsletters and personal skills audits in these files. All carers are provided with an annual written training profile. Joint training with social workers, carers and other professionals is encouraged.

Carers are provided with very good support from the fostering service and those spoken to made very positive comments about the accessibility of both social workers and managers. Excellent written guidance is provided to carers in the attractive updated carer handbook which is routinely reviewed. The carer handbook will be the key reference tool for the CWDC standards.

There is a new committee for the Leicester City Foster Care Partnership. Membership has increased and there have been positive developments in the work and role of the group. Good support from committee members is available to carers subject to allegations or needing representation.

Records looked at were very well maintained. Information is easily accessible and essential documents are properly dated and signed. Good recording tools are in place to track incidents of concern and to identify when safety checks are due. Annual reviews are thorough and the children of carers are consulted at this time. The fostering service maintains a small file containing essential LAC paperwork and other health and education documents for each child in placement. The work of the fostering teams is supported by robust administration systems. Fostering records are securely stored in locked cabinets in rooms that are locked at night.

The kinship care team continues to process a high number of family and friends applications. Kinship placements are positively supported. A successful kinship carer's day was held last year and a team study day focussed on refining and improving kinship processes and practice. Kinship carers have access to all foster care training and events. A leaflet has been designed for kinship carers. The use of Special Guardianship orders is routinely considered at LAC reviews for children in permanent placements but this is only pursued when the placement is deemed to be secure. Very good social work and financial support is being offered to kinship placements looked at.