

Cambridgeshire County Council Fostering

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

Cambridgeshire County Council Fostering Service assesses, approves and provides on-going support to foster carers. The service's primary aim is to provide an adequate supply of quality family placements for children who are looked after by the local authority.

The service's Statement of Purpose clearly defines the nature of placement types provided as:

Time-Limited / Mainstream foster carers, Respite and Day-Care, Youth Care Scheme, Long-term and Permanent Fostering Placements, Kinship Foster Care and Family Link.

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 221 foster carer households and was providing placements for 353 children and young people.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This inspection was an announced inspection and all key standards were inspected. The inspection looked at the progress made by the service over the past 12 months. The service has worked hard to improve its service and this is reflected in the overall rating of good. There were some outstanding practices and outcomes for children in positive contribution, economic wellbeing and organisation. The service places a strong emphasis on ensuring that the views of children and young people are promoted, with some excellent practices being developed with young people to provide them with the opportunity to, not only give feedback about the service they receive, but enables them to be part of some of the training courses with foster parents.

The foster carers felt well-supported by a strong and experienced fostering team. Good systems and clear policies and procedures are in place to support and account for the safe care of children and young people. Managers have a very good overview of the activity of the service with robust monitoring systems.

Improvements since the last inspection

The service was required at the last inspection to ensure that personnel records contain full information and that the foster carer assessments include the details of any criminal convictions. The evidence gathered through examination of the files and

panel minutes confirm that these actions have been met in full. In addition, the service was able to demonstrate that they have over the past year comprehensively addressed all of the recommendations made by the previous inspection.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Children and young people fostered by the Cambridgeshire County Council Fostering Service benefit from appropriate health care which meets their needs for physical, emotional and social development. Staff and carers receive clear guidance from policies and procedures which enables them to effectively promote good health outcomes for the children they look after. Some care and placement plans contain thorough information regarding complex health needs of children. However, not all carers had received health care plans at the time of placement, particularly where placements had been made in an emergency, and had needed to request these for some time before they were provided. Carers felt their supervising social workers worked very hard to obtain information which was not always forthcoming from the child's social worker. The head of service is aware of this shortfall and measures are in place to develop robust health care plans and a system for monitoring and evaluating their use in conjunction with a newly appointed medical adviser.

Training for carers includes a range of appropriate courses relating to health issues. Fostered children are registered with local health professionals and feel they get a good level of support and advice about being healthy. Young people reported being taken for regular medical appointments as necessary. The service has effective working partnerships with other agencies and professionals to develop health care planning and access to resources. A specialist psychology service is available to provide support to carers and children in placement in addition to providing advice to staff regarding matching considerations. A Looked after Children's (LAC) nurse sits on the main panel and provides health advice to inform decision making.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

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 processes are in place for carrying out references and checks on staff employed to work in the service. Staff recruitment records are well organised and demonstrate that checks are carried out robustly.

Fostered children benefit from the provision of carers who provide a safe, healthy and nurturing environment. Unannounced visits to foster homes are carried out regularly by supervising social workers and the foster homes visited during the inspection provide appropriately furnished and decorated accommodation, which is clean, warm and appropriately furnished. Preparation and training for carers covers

required health and safety issues and they demonstrated a good understanding of their responsibility within this.

Fostered children and their carers felt that they were well matched in their placements. In some cases there was evidence of a very thorough planning process, during which relevant information sharing between all parties has informed decisions, involving all appropriate family members and professionals. Matching considerations were not recorded in all cases, although a robust referral form is in use to record this information, there was not a specific place on the form which could be used as a prompt to record decisions about matching. Despite this shortfall, young people say they are very happy where they are placed: 'it's fun living here', 'I want to stay here' and 'my carers are a good laugh' being typical comments. A range of professionals within the wider service expressed the view that carers are extremely effective in meeting the needs of the young people placed, and good at working to progress care plans to achieve positive outcomes.

Carers were observed to be child focussed and have a good understanding of the needs of the children placed with them. Appropriate systems are in place to collate and evaluate information regarding allegations regarding children in foster care and management monitoring of these is effective. Foster carers and social workers have attended relevant training and have a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities for the protection of children and young people. Fostered children reported no bullying within their foster homes. Carers are provided with clear and comprehensive written guidance on safe caring practices and safe care plans are in place for each fostered child. Young people are involved in the drawing up of these plans and reported being treated with respect and fairness by their carers. Carers are 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. The fostering service work hard to support foster carers in keeping young people safe and making sure that they get the help they need.

The fostering panels were not observed on this visit. Discussion with panel members and examination of minutes revealed that panel is 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. Children who require foster placements come from a wider range of ethnic backgrounds than the foster carers available to look after them. 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. Where children from a different ethnic background are placed, support is provided to enable their particular needs to be met. Interpretation and translation services are provided to enable children to express views about their care, and examples were given where carers work closely with birth families to develop skills and an understanding of the needs of the children they are looking after. Children report being treated fairly and equally. Matching records identify the ethnicity of young people requiring placements.

Young people benefit 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 school team provides 13 teachers who take responsibility for monitoring the educational progress of individual fostered children. 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 good level of understanding of the importance of education for fostered young people and participate fully in a range of education meetings. Personal Education Plans had been completed in respect for fostered children involved in this inspection. 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.

Short-term breaks are provided through the family link scheme. All parties are aware that the parent remains the main carer for the young person. Children and young people receiving short-term breaks from the respite service benefit from excellent assessments and the service is well-respected within the authority. Robust and regular communication takes place between all relevant parties which monitors and evaluates progress of the care plans. Experienced carers have expressed an interest in permanent care of disabled children and plans are under way to carry out relevant assessments.

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. Staff and carers clearly demonstrate they have a robust understanding of the importance of maintaining appropriate contacts with birth families and carers are appropriately assessed and trained to help a child maintain and develop positive relationships with family members. 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.

The fostering service has clear policies and procedures for complaints and these are outlined clearly in the Statement of Purpose and the children's guide to the fostering service. Complaints are generally addressed within timescales with a written response showing clear outcomes. Young people said they feel confident about speaking to someone if they are not happy or wanted to make a complaint. Fostered children are clearly supported by all involved professionals to participate in decision-making in statutory reviews. Carers have a robust understanding of their role within reviews and contribute fully also.

The Children's Participation Officer works strategically with specific responsibility for promoting the participation of looked after young people. This is achieved by a creative range of strategies including groups of children meeting to experience peer support and to ensure their voice is heard by strategic managers. Children can attend 'Question Time' style panels, where they can ask managers and council members questions and raise issues regarding their looked after status and fostering. Fostered children give feedback which informs panel recommendations at annual reviews, contribute to the training of carers and multi-agency professionals and are involved in the design of publicity and other leaflets. Fostered children feel listened to and well cared for by their foster carers for example, 'I have everything I need and more, I am listened to by my foster carers', and 'they listen to me and we negotiate on areas for discussion'.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

The Statement of Purpose contains clear aims and objectives of the fostering service, and includes information appropriately as required under the standard. A children's guide is available which summarises what the service aims to achieve for the children it looks after. The guide is not accessible for younger children and work is ongoing through the participation officer which aims to producing the guide in different formats which will appeal to a wider range of children.

There is a clear management structure in place which oversees an efficient and effective foster care service. Strong leadership ensures management delegation and responsibility which are clearly defined and appropriate for the skills and experience of the relevant members of staff. Managers have significant expertise and knowledge relevant to fostering. The teams are structured to ensure assessments, approvals and reviews of carers are managed and implemented effectively. There is an appropriate level of administrative support, and administrative procedures are carried out promptly and efficiently. The roles of fostering social workers and children's

social workers are clearly understood and they work collaboratively and effectively together.

The service has an adequate number of sufficiently experienced staff and a robust recruitment process which seeks to recruit a range of carers to meet the needs of the children who require a service. Managers are aware of particular groups of children for whom it is difficult to identify carers, and work imaginatively to resolve this where possible. Staff policies encourage staff retention, formal and informal supervision is carried out regularly and access to advice is effective as 'there's always a manager to talk to even if it's not your own'. Staff and carers report feeling well-supported. Foster carers can obtain advice and support out of hours which is provided by supervising social workers on a rota system in addition to the emergency duty team.

Prospective carers undergo a thorough, rigorous assessment process. Carers acknowledge the extensive and potentially intrusive nature of the assessment process and demonstrated a good understanding of the need for such depth of analysis. Carers viewed the process as positive and recognised this was managed sensitively. Carer competence and aptitude for fostering were considered in relation to pertinent child care issues.

A wide range of in-house training courses are available to staff, in addition to specialist external training where relevant. Staff are encouraged to complete post qualifying awards. Staff keep a log of training and development activities which informs their post-registration training log for General Social Care Council (GSCC) registration. All staff have personal development plans. The business plan clearly outlines expectations in respect of staff performance and development.

There is a clear strategy in place for working with and supporting carers. There are examples of excellent practice in respect of communication between fostering and area social workers but some carers have found that children's social workers did not always visit regularly or provide required information promptly. Where this was the case, carers felt fostering social workers 'went the extra mile' to provide necessary support as far as possible.

The service provides good quality supervision for foster carers and a process is in place to support development of their skills and experience. All carers receive a foster care handbook and each approved carer is supervised by a named and appropriately qualified social worker. Supervision meetings address issues arising under the Every Child Matters outcomes, record the views of the child and carer and are signed and dated. Overall payments to carers are made promptly and accurately. A clear policy is in place which identifies action to be taken in the event of an allegation and the circumstances in which a carer should be removed from the register. This is followed in practice.

The fostering service ensures that carers are trained in the skills required to provide high quality care and meet the needs of the children they look after. The Children's Workforce Development Council's (CWDC) new standards are in the process of being

implemented. Carers had attended workshops during the week of the inspection. All new foster carers receive induction training. Subsequent training of carers is managed proactively as carers training needs are addressed within supervision and they are encouraged and enabled to access a wide range of relevant courses. Carers viewed training opportunities positively and enthusiastically. A number of training courses had been cancelled for a range of reasons, however carers are able to access courses on a rolling programme.

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. A written policy on case recording is in place and outlined in the foster care handbook. Carers are familiar with this policy.

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. Records are stored confidentially and a clear policy is in place addressing how confidential information is managed. Recording is of a good standard being clear, legible, and accurate.

Family and friends are seen as a rich resource of potential carers for children in this authority in need of fostering. An equally robust assessment, approval and training process is in place as for other carers. Children's social workers spoke very highly of kinship assessments, as being extremely robust and reliable. The fostering service is sensitive to pre-existing relationships in assessing and approving family and friends as foster carers.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Recommendations

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

- ensure an accurate health record is provided and maintained by the foster carer/fostering service, is updated during the placement and moves with the child (NMS 12.4)
- ensure written agreements contain specific reference to elements of matching, which identify gaps in the match and how additional support will be provided if required (NMS 8)
- ensure the children's guide to the fostering service is produced in alternative formats to meet the needs of different groups of children (NMS 1).