

Coventry Family Placement 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 setting is a local authority fostering service. It provides the full range of fostering: mainstream, specialist, remand

Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

This announced key inspection was carried out over three days when the fostering service's (the service) performance was assessed against all the key National Minimum Standards (NMS). During the inspection visits were made to some fostering households.

Improvements since the last inspection

At the last inspection five requirements and four recommendations were made. Two of the requirements were in the Being Healthy outcome group. One was intended to ensure that foster carers (carers) are given written authorisation to arrange such medical and dental treatment as a child or young person they are looking after might need. This has been done. Carers have been provided with medical authorisation cards setting out clearly the scope of medical treatment they are permitted to arrange and health care they may give. The second was to address circumstances in which the fostering panel was not, on occasions, receiving full enough medical information. This issue has been resolved, as two doctors, one a member of the fostering panel, are available to provide medical opinion and advice.

The third requirement, in the Positive Contribution outcome area, was made to address a weakness in documenting contact arrangements and assessing for risk circumstances where carers are involved with a child's or young person's contact with parents or others. This has been attended in that contact arrangements are set out in a relevant document, which is audited periodically by service's senior staff. The other two requirements, all in the Organisation outcome group, focused on reported strain on the administration team and evidence of the Foster Care Agreement being out-of-date. Both of these issues have been addressed satisfactorily in that the administrative resources have been reviewed and plans are being made to act on the outcome from it and the Foster Care Agreement has been updated to reflect current standards and regulations.

All four recommendations have been fulfilled so that health and safety assessments of carers' households are now dated to enable them to be monitored and reviewed. The document setting out the factors taken into account in matching children with carers is now shared with the carers and the children's social workers. This facilitates

understanding and agreement of all concerned about the factors that inform a match and any compensatory measures that are needed where it is not ideal. The recommendation to achieve a better system of identifying carers' knowledge and skills deficits, and the training to address them, has been attended. This features in the fostering panel's (the panel) recommendations and in carers' supervision and review. Work has been completed, in respect of the final recommendation, on the services placement agreement, which, together with the Looking After Children documentation, provide carers with fuller information about the children they look after.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

Children and young people's health needs are attended effectively and their good health promoted by the fostering service's coherent strategy.

The fostering service has in place a well considered and effective strategy to address children's and young people's health needs and to promote well-being. At the outset, prospective carers are assessed to establish that their own health problems will not impact on their ability to foster or on a child's or young person's health. A process for matching children with carers takes account of health care needs so that a child with health problems is not placed with carers who are not sufficiently equipped to meet them. Children are benefiting from a clear process by which their carers are given full information about their health history, clear written authorisation to arrange or attend to their health care and, if necessary, to arrange medical and dental treatment. A new Looked After Children (LAC) health record has been introduced. It is designed to accompany a child or young person who needs to be transferred and might even be held by those of sufficient age and understanding thus encouraging their taking some responsibility for their own health. These measures together with training that carers receive establish a clear and sound basis for the excellent care they are enabled to provide in this connection. A small minority of carers cites examples of circumstances where they consider information and training is indicated to address the health care of children with unusual allergies and food intolerance.

The service makes accessible to children, young people and their carers a wide range of child health specialists such as doctors, a nurse and mental health experts. Carers value this and consider that access to these services is making a substantial difference to their ability to respond effectively to children and young people's health problems. For example, the annual health assessment, twice yearly dental and, as necessary, optical, checks are effective in monitoring health and have the potential to facilitate for a child or young person, identification and attention, at an early stage, of any hitherto undiagnosed health issues.

Carers consider that the information that the service provides through training information packs and signposting to other agencies helps them to promote healthy lifestyles in their households and educate looked after children in this regard. Healthy

eating and sports and other leisure activities that contribute to health and well-being are promoted and are backed by funds and take up of community initiatives such as the passport to leisure system. Children and young people are positively affected by these initiatives. They consider that they are being well looked after and are enjoying good health

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

Children and young people are being kept safe from abuse, harm and unfavourable treatment by the service's child protection strategy, which includes a number of safeguarding measures.

The fostering service is being managed by persons established to be suitable to work with children and of sufficient experience and qualifications to run it so that children and young people are provided an effective service. This also applies to staff who the carers unanimously regard as providing excellent professional support, which in turn facilitates them to achieve high standards in the care of children and young people.

There is a clear, coherent system for recruiting a diverse range of carers to reflect the demand profile of the population served. This is in sync with the rigorous assessment of potential carers that the service employs to ensure that children and young people will not be placed at risk by them or members of their households. The assessment and approval process also sets high but reasonable thresholds for evaluating carers' abilities to look after children and young people and the capacity of their households for this to be done so that the welfare of any child they look after will be acceptably promoted and safeguarded. These measures are deemed to be implemented effectively in practice demonstrated by the safe and comfortable home environment in which some children and young people are observed to be being looked after. Ongoing monitoring including unannounced visits and supervision by staff, which are augmented by annual review are all judged effective for assuring the suitability of carers.

The service demonstrates that its safeguard of children and young people from abuse, neglect, exploitation and other forms of prejudicial treatment is effective. It has adopted the child protection procedures of the Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB) and has effective systems for receiving, reporting and monitoring allegations or concerns about risks to children and young people. Events notified to Ofsted and the service's own monitoring activity shows, that where appropriate, the child protection procedure is invoked efficiently and effective systems are in place to respond to allegations or concerns in relation to either staff or carers' risk to children. Aligned to the child protection procedure is another for the event of a child being missing without authority. This properly recognises the vulnerability of looked after children and is deemed effective to secure their recovery in such an event.

Staff and carers are provided with relevant training to enable them to identify and respond appropriately to abuse or suspicion of it. Clear policies, guidance and

training is also made available on how to manage children's and young people's behaviour so as to diminish risk of abuse and unfair treatment. For example, the behaviour management policy, which forms part of the carers' handbook, makes clear the types of punishment which are prohibited and staff are given training in how to promote good conduct and deal acceptably with it when it is unacceptable.

The service has adopted the local partnership countering bullying strategy and has its own procedure for ensuring incidents of bullying, of or by children that it looks after, are taken seriously. It also monitors bullying so that it has the necessary information to be able to adjust its countering bullying measures in light of any emerging patterns. This proves effective since 90 per cent of children and young people report that they are not experiencing any bullying.

A well established fostering panel and safe and reasonable system for determining approval of prospective carers are in place. The panel is constituted and conducted in accordance with the relevant regulations and, the high quality of fostering households in which children and young people are being looked after, demonstrates that its decision-making processes are sound. This, therefore, represents another effective means by which the service promotes and safeguards the welfare of children and young people in its care.

Overall, the service's performance in this outcome is very good. However, two events highlight gaps in communication. One is in which a child was placed inadvertently while an investigation of carers had been initiated and another of children's social worker appearing to fail to convey to the service concerns about how children were being looked after in a foster home. This deficit in communication, if not addressed, has potential to compromise the safeguarding strategy.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Substantial investments that the service makes, in valuing children and young people's diversity, promoting equality and support of their education, are paying dividends in terms of stability in their school career and their achievements.

Evidence of a wide range of measures that the service has established are serving children and young people well in terms of equity of provisions and demonstration of value of their diversity. Active and well considered approaches have been taken to recruit carers of black and minority group background. This is to facilitate placement of children with those best equipped to meet needs arising from their race, religion and culture. Currently the service has capacity to do this in a significant number of cases. Where same race placements of a child or young person cannot be achieved, the process by which they are matched with carers identifies any shortfalls in the resources of the carers with whom they are to be placed. Compensatory measures, typically training, information, mentoring and access to specialist guidance, are put in

place. Carers consider that the support they are given in this regard is profitable in enabling them to provide the excellent quality of care to which children and young people attest.

Carers of disabled children and young people are being provided with the specific training necessary for them to meet their needs. They report positively on the resources made available for them to enable the children and young people to enjoy and achieve. For example, they are provided with ideas for leisure activities for the children and young people and the funds and additional support, where necessary, to promote this.

A supervising social worker, staff being assigned exclusively to the support of such carers and the service facilitating their support group are regarded as excellent initiatives. Carers consider that this together with formal training helps them to share knowledge and experience, a valuable skills mix for the service. Some of the more obvious benefits for children and young people are that these carers have an effective professional and social network which brings the children and young people together for leisure and other social events. It also means that where any respite care arrangements are needed the service has a pool of carers with requisite experience and to whom the child or young person might be known.

In keeping with the diverse and flexible services it provides disabled children, young people and their families, the service commissions short break foster care from a local independent fostering agency. This is organised on the basis of the birth parents retaining their main care status and that the quality of care that a child or young person receives conforms to laid down expectations. A steering group oversees this aspect of the service and monitors it for contract compliance thus assuring the safeguard of the children and young people.

The service performs exceptionally well in promoting the educational achievement of children and young people. It has instituted a number of initiatives which are proving successful. The local authority looked after children education service (LACES), to which children in foster care have access, provides effective support in the form of tutors, education mentor and reinforcing incentives to encourage looked after children and young people to learn and achieve. When considered alongside other initiatives such as establishing a small education provision for some children with unusually complex needs, the notion of the virtual school for looked after children has been established.

In terms of outcomes for young people, the service is effective in minimising disruption to their education by reducing substantially the number of placement moves and those permanently excluded from school. Some 46.6 per cent of those in the service's care beyond age 16 who on leaving care had one or more General Certificate of Secondary Education grade A* to D is a very good achievement. This is particularly so since a substantial proportion of the total number of children being looked after by the service or in special school are the subjects of statements of special educational needs. All children and young people in the sample consulted for

this inspection reported they receive the help they need to be successful in their education and their carers are of the same opinion.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

The effective arrangements that the service makes safeguard children and young people from isolation and lack of influence in matters concerning their own lives and the running of the fostering service.

Contact arrangements for children and young people to be able to maintain links with their family and friends are part of the service's embedded practices. Carers receive training and guidance in the importance of such contacts and the expectation that they will assist in these is reflected in their agreement with service and the plan of each child's or young person's care. Carers are committed to this and examples are cited of where they have been effective advocates in enabling children's requests for family contact to be honoured. Carers also recognise that entry to foster care and placements changes can fracture a child or young person's friendships and they assist them to either maintain their existing friendship group or establish new ones.

The service sets aside funds specifically to support contact arrangements, which are discussed and monitored during formal review of each child or young person's care. Contact arrangements are in place for all the children and young people who were visited during the inspection. Carers judged almost all the children's and young people's family, friends and community network as being at least satisfactory, suggesting that they are not isolated in their foster placements. Where contact is limited this is deemed not a shortfall in the service's provisions, but owing to official restrictions or where a child's or young person's difficulties restrict their ability to make and maintain friendships with others.

Children and young people report positively on being well looked after by their foster carers, being listened to and made to feel like one of the carer's own family. Some express appreciation for carers frequent checks to find out if they are alright both at school and in the foster home. They also feel valued by being consulted, so that they are not upset, when carers are considering the introduction of new children to the household.

In regard to their influence in the running of the service as it impacts on their lives, a number of avenues by which they are actively encouraged to contribute are established. Feedback is requested of each child or young person of appropriate age or understanding, relating to the quality of their care. This contributes to the foster carers annual review. Children and young people are routinely consulted about their experience of the service's performance and any review or development of new policies associated with how they are looked after. As a result of listening to the children and young people, the service has introduced some new measures. These include a safe caring working group and issue of information packs to assist staff and carers to plan and respond effectively to the needs of black and asylum seeking

children. It has also introduced measures to maintain placement stability and reduce avoidable placement transfers. Benefits derived from this are that children and young people are afforded greater permanence in their care arrangements and this helps to maintain their friendship group and continuity of schooling.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

Children's and young people's welfare is being promoted and safeguarded by this well resourced fostering service the management and leadership of which are effective in delivering good outcomes.

The service is underpinned by a coherent and up-to-date written statement of purpose (SOP), which has been approved and sets out the principles and methods on which it is run. The document is coherent, conforms to the relevant standards, reflects accurately the service's various functions and how its components fit together to deliver effective foster care. Children and young people are able to understand how the service operates from a summary of it which is set out in their guide and informs them of what they can reasonably expect of it.

Responding efficiently to the profile of children's and families' needs in the area that it serves, the service is structured and resourced by staff and carers to provide a wide range of foster care. There are 206 fostering households and a total of 31 staff including the manager, support and administrative personnel. Staff and carers are deployed in a structure that enables children and young people to benefit from a diverse range of services best suited to their needs. For example, mainstream fostering including emergency, time-limited and long-term is provided by an exclusive team and this also applies to remand, specialist, friends and families as carers, and foster care for disabled children.

Although managed so as to remain a unified service, carers consider that the way in which the service is structured with teams of staff and carers providing a range of specialist foster care, makes it effective for them and, therefore, of benefit to the children and young people. That is, staff have the expertise in their particular field and are, therefore, able to target supervision and training in a more focused way. Carers consider this enables them to be effective in meeting the needs of the particular children that they look after and to build up a body of experience and

expertise as they do so. Accordingly the majority of carers regard as excellent, the supervision, support and training the service provides. A minority of carers, however, reports that whilst their supervision is in line with the agreed strategy, lack of advance planning of some supervision visits is not helpful, as this does not take account of their busy schedule when looking after a child or young person. Some carers feel the arrangements for training limit their opportunity to take part because of lack of day care provision for those looking after pre-school children.

Staff, many of whom are long-serving, consider that they too are well supported. All supervising social workers being professionally qualified, means they are provided with professional supervision and in-service and post-qualifying training to update their knowledge and skills. This is reflected in the effectiveness with which they enable carers to look after children to achieve the good outcomes for children and young as outlined in the foregoing sections of this report. Social work staff who undertake assessment of carers are all relevantly qualified and have received specific training and guidance in this aspect of their tasks. The service approaches the recruitment of carers with requisite professionalism and efficiency. This also applies to the assessment of prospective carers, including family and friends as carers, which is being conducted using safe and rigorous nationally recognised frameworks, which fulfils the requirements of Standards 17.6 and 17.7 in relation to their competence.

Overall, this is a safe service. It is well resourced and operated with sound management and leadership. Children and young people are positive and content with how they are being looked after by their carers, who consider that they in turn receive brilliant support from the service. Importantly, those involved in it believe that it is innovative and it brings together, under one 'umbrella', a coherent, multi-disciplinary range of services effective in meeting each child's or young person's specific needs. The evidence bears this out.

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):

- provide additional training necessary to meet the health care needs of children and young people with unusual allergies and food intolerance (NMS 12.1)
- ensure that there is effective communication between the fostering service and children's social workers to safeguard each child from abuse, neglect, exploitation and deprivation (NMS 9.1)
- enhance the strategy for working with carers to enable arrangements of supervision visits to be on a planned basis and that support services are put in place to facilitate their take up of training (NMS 21.2).