

Essex Local Authority Fostering Services

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

This local authority fostering service responds to the needs of children who require a family placement. The service operates from four teams covering different geographical regions of the county, plus a separate recruitment team. Services provided include respite care, short-term placements and kinship and long-term placements.

Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

This inspection was an announced inspection covering all key standards. The fostering service is committed to achieving best outcomes for children. Foster carers are meeting children's needs well, although some placements are made outside of the assessed suitability. Most foster carers feel well supported, but others feel that improvements need to be made particularly when carers have allegations made against them. When dealing with allegations and complaints the service has not always investigated in a timely manner; this can be stressful for carers. The impact of staff vacancies and the implementation of some new systems has left the fostering service unable to fully meet national minimum standards.

Improvements since the last inspection

Previously the fostering service was required to make improvements to their systems when responding to allegations. Ofsted are notified of safeguarding allegations, and systems are in place to track cases. The service was also required to ensure that relevant checks were made prior to staff being employed. Staff now have most checks in place, however, the verification of why staff had left previous positions working with children or vulnerable adults was not robust. Although marked improvements are in place to review foster carers, reports are not consistently referred to panel in a timely manner. Improvements to safe care guidance, supervision and training for carers have not been fully implemented. Issues in relation to the renewal of Criminal Bureau checks, updating the children's guide and the signing and dating of records have been addressed.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is satisfactory.

The fostering service generally promotes the health of the children. Background health information is provided at the time of placement, using essential information

forms and placement agreement forms to ensure medical needs are identified. Consent is recorded for routine medical care. There is a clear expectation that carers will register children with a general practitioner, dentist and optician and will support them to receive appropriate health care. There are looked after children's nurses in each of the four areas, who participate in the Health Performance Steering Group. This group focuses on ensuring that looked after children have had their health, dental and optician checks. Figures supplied by the fostering service detail that, in November 2009, 82.6% of young people in foster care had received an annual health check. The fostering service has good working relationships with the child and adolescent mental health service.

Carers understand their role in health promotion and support children in attending health care appointments. Supervising social workers check that the health needs of children are met during supervision visits to foster carers. However, in respect of one placement, tracked during this inspection, a child's severe and complex health issues had not been subject to appropriate risk assessment as recommended six months prior to this inspection. Additionally, where specific training is highlighted as a need for carers the issue has not been adequately addressed. This potentially puts children at risk.

Carers have access to first aid training; however, accurate records are unavailable to determine how many carers have undertaken the training. This limits the services ability to assess the quality of health care provided to children and young people, or the ongoing training requirements of foster carer.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is satisfactory.

Managers with responsibility for the service have appropriate qualifications, skills, experience and knowledge of child care and fostering. Those responsible for managing the service have all been subject to the local authorities' recruitment and vetting procedures. Managers from across the service were present throughout the inspection.

The assessment process includes the an evaluation of carers' homes, including a health and safety check. Annual checks are then undertaken by the service to ensure that foster children remain safely accommodated. The foster carer's preparation training includes information on health and safety issues, and they are provided with written guidance on their health and safety responsibilities. The service ensures that all foster carers are able to provide accommodation which is comfortable, suitably furnished and meets the needs of children. A pro-forma safe care policy document has been introduced to the service and provides carers with guidance under appropriate headings to enable them to compile their own household safe care policy. However, these are not consistently in place, and some are generic rather than focusing on the needs of the individual child.

The service has procedures in place for matching children with prospective carers.

Information on matching is recorded on the carers' files. The placement team is responsible for matching all planned placements. Assessments and reviews clearly identify where foster carers do not have the skills or clearly do not wish to care for children in certain age groups. Guidance in place indicates that all new carers are being approved to care for 0-18 year olds with a preferred age range. Existing approvals are also having the approval amended through panel in line with this guidance. Staff say that placements are not made outside the carers preferred range, or if this is the case the supervising social worker (SSW) is involved in the placement matching. Evidence seen demonstrates that this guidance is not consistently followed. This has resulted in carers accepting placements outside their preferred age range and not in line with their assessed suitability. This may impact on the care and support that children receive.

The Permanency Fostering Team seeks permanent placements for children. They prepare a detailed profile which identifies the child's specific individual needs. Potential long term foster carers are visited and introductions to the chosen foster family are carefully planned prior to the child being placed. Permanent foster placements are formalised at fostering panel by linking the child to the foster family. Evidence of the foster family's capacity to meet the ongoing needs of the child is provided in a linking report.

Child protection training is covered in the three day 'Skills to Foster' training that carers receive prior to their assessment. The service takes allegations made against carers seriously. Child protection incidents are recorded and reported to the safeguarding co-ordinator and to Ofsted. Carers receive some support through the Essex Foster Care Council who have developed a 'Carer to Carer' support service for foster carers who are subject to child protection, or serious standard of care, allegations. However, some carers feel that they are not well supported by the management during the investigation. In particular, they feel that the service does not keep them fully informed. The fostering service now maintains a central list of all allegations made against foster carers. This provides managers with a clear overview of the numbers and nature of the allegations. However there continues to be long delays before investigations are completed. This is potentially stressful for both children and foster carers.

Foster carers are fully aware of their role in reporting any significant issues relating to the welfare and safety of any child. They are provided with relevant information on acceptable forms of discipline and this is known and understood by them. Information and guidance relating to bullying, and children missing from placements are in place. Incidents are clearly recorded on carer's files. Children are protected by the local authorities' recruitment procedures; however, verification of why staff have left previous employment when working with children or vulnerable adults is not consistently undertaken. Such practice reduces the robustness of the systems in place.

The panel is appropriately constituted, has access to medical and educational expertise, and has an experienced and knowledgeable independent chair. Membership of the panel is in accordance with regulations and training is made

available to the panel members. The panel performs its quality assurance role well. Written reports are returned to team managers on the standards of assessments presented to panel. There are clear policies and procedures in place that covers decision making and where there are differences of opinions these are clearly explored and documented. Panel meeting's minutes are of a good standard. Foster carers are provided with clear information about the panel on how they operate.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Training is available to both staff and carers on diversity and difference. Foster carer training highlights how children who are looked after may be discriminated against. Children with disabilities have access to specially approved carers whose skills specifically relate to providing care for them. The service makes good efforts at providing additional support for children to meet their individual needs.

The fostering service promotes the educational achievement of looked after children. Personal education plans and statements of special educational needs are current and are appropriately reviewed. Foster carers actively participate in school based meetings and activities. The virtual school team monitors attendance and attainment of young people in mainstream foster placements. The service liaises with schools on behalf of carers and children regarding educational matters. Relevant information is available to carers regarding children's educational needs, SSW's address any issues through the carers supervision visits. The fostering service provides placements with additional support if necessary. For example, outreach workers are available to work with children and young people who may be excluded from attending school. Children and young people are provided with laptops when required.

Foster carers and staff of the service encourage and facilitate children's involvement in hobbies and leisure activities. The fostering service keeps foster carers informed of local events and activities. Additional funding is also available to support the individual recreational interests of children. Surveys completed by children indicate that they are happy and well supported by their foster carers.

Policies and procedures are in place to meet the needs of children receiving short term breaks. Primary responsibility for ongoing health and education needs remains with parents in these cases. The service offers short-term breaks on a planned basis.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is satisfactory.

Children who live with foster carers have a number of ways in which they can contribute their views about their daily lives and futures. They are provided with written information explaining how concerns and complaints may be expressed. However, complaints are not consistently addressed within timescales. Records demonstrate that at times there are significant delays in responding to complaints,

and there is a lack of evidence to show the outcomes and actions taken.

Children and young people are seen by supervising social workers during foster carer's visits. Supervision records demonstrate that children's views are obtained during these visits. Outreach workers also work with individual children when required, this provides them with an opportunity to express their views about particular issues. The service arranges good opportunities for children and young people to access a variety of planned activities, and training events which provide them with the opportunity to express their views.

The service also provides support for the sons and daughter of foster carers. This group have been involved in the creation of the DVD which aims to alleviate the anxieties of becoming a family who foster. This project has been awarded Youth Bank UK Award for the most innovative project.

When a permanent placement is being sought for children and young people they are fully engaged in the assessment process and are encouraged to attend panel. This ensures that their views are heard.

Children and young people who live with foster carers have their contact needs identified in placement agreement forms, identifying any plans for ongoing contact or any restrictions in contact. Records seen demonstrate foster carers provide children with practical and emotional support to help them maintain contact with family members. Foster carers are aware of the importance of contact for children and encourage and support them to maintain regular contact. Contact arrangements are reviewed as part of the statutory review process, ensuring that children and young people are able to contribute to the process for determining contact arrangements.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is satisfactory.

The fostering service prepares young people for adulthood and leaving local authority care. Foster carers and staff of the fostering service work well with other departmental children's teams to prepare and plan young people's transition to independent living. Foster carers support young people with practical tasks to assist their developing independence. These include budgeting, shopping and cooking skills. Young people are provided with good opportunities to develop new interests and experiences. Staff and carers support young people in achieving their hopes and ambitions. Supervision records demonstrate, and discussions with carers confirm, that young people are valued as individuals and that their personal, educational and social development is promoted.

Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

There is a statement of purpose in place that includes the aims and objectives of the service. This document indicates the expectations in relation to staffing levels in order to support foster carers. However, this is not adhered to in practise. Staff raised concerns at the high work loads. Some staff carry caseloads in excess of 30% higher than recommended. There are two separate guides for the service. One is designed specifically for younger children and one is for older children and young people. They include all relevant information and are in clear, easily understood language.

The fostering service is staffed by people with good knowledge and who are committed to achieving best outcomes for children and young people. However, there are vacancies in the staff team and this has clearly impacted on work loads. Staff morale has improved and individual staff members generally feel well supported by their line managers. However, work loads and limited administration support were the common concerns that staff raised during this inspection. Management are aware of shortfalls in the current service provision. Much work has been undertaken to develop systems which monitor the service. The management are confident about effectiveness of the systems which are being implemented.

The recruitment of foster carers is of central importance for the authority. There continues to be a promising number of enquiries and there are carers currently going through the assessment process. Foster carers participate in training to prepare them for fostering. Assessment and approvals of foster carers are managed and implemented effectively. Foster carers are complimentary of the assessment process. The quality of the assessments is monitored well through the fostering panel. Foster carers are provided with some relevant information once approved. However, the foster carer's handbook is out of date and is not currently in use. Updated guidance is expected to be available for carers next year. In the interim carers have access to policies and procedures which are relevant to the care and support that they provide to children in their care.

There has been marked improvement in the frequency of the household reviews (HHR) since the last inspection. However, there is on occasion a significant delay in presenting the reviews to panel. For example, where panel have requested a review be completed in six months there is a delay of four months in presenting to panel. Such delays make the information being presented out of date and possibly not an accurate reflection of the current situation. This may impact on decisions made at panel.

There is evidence that some of the supervision for foster carers is of a good standard. They are generally supervised by a named and appropriately qualified social worker. Some foster carers feel that they have effective and supportive relationships. However, some feel support is poor both to them and the children they care for. Where there are staff vacancies some foster carers do not have an

allocated SSW. They receive some support through a duty system. This may impact on the quality of support provided to carers. Individual agreements are in place but visits are not consistently in line with the supervising agreement. Additionally, some of the unqualified outreach staff conduct unannounced visits on behalf of the SSW. Carer's supervision and support is not consistently effective.

Foster carers have access to support groups and the service provides out of hours support which is a useful provision. The fostering service also provides respite care for foster carers. Some staff say that there is good communication between SSW and children's social workers. However, some SSW report that the communication is poor. In particular, the HHR provides the opportunity to discuss any relevant issues relating to the care provided by the carers and children. The expectation is that the children's social workers seek the views of the fostered children prior to the review being conducted. The HHR reports evidenced that children's views are not generally sought. Without consultation with all relevant parties, in particular children, the review fails to provide a view from all perspectives.

Training programmes are available to carers, and some carers are very complementary of the quality of training provided. There is a newly developed post that is specifically working towards meeting Children's Workforce Development Council's standards and other training objectives. However, the carer's files and systems in place are not up to date and as such the actual training that carers have undertaken could not be verified. Without accurate information the quality of training cannot be determined.

Separate case files are maintained for children and foster carers. Staff report that the service is lacking in administrative staff to support them. Therefore staff are completing administration tasks which impacts on their time. Separate records are kept for complaints and allegations. Records are stored confidentially and a clear policy is in place addressing how confidential information is managed. Recording is generally of a good standard and documentation is generally signed and dated. All foster carers have signed carers' agreement on file. The fostering service provides kinship carers with the same level of support as other carers. Separate support groups have commenced to offer carers with additional support.

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 have basic training on health and hygiene and first aid (NMS 12.5)
- shall promote the health and development children of children placed with foster carers who receive suitable training to meet their individual needs (breach of

regulation 15.1)

- ensure that the service provider shall take into account the recommendation of its fostering panel to enable careful matching with a carer's capability of meeting assessed needs of children (breach of regulation 28.3)
- ensure that procedures to be followed in the event of any allegation of abuse or neglect are followed in all cases (breach in regulation 12.1)
- ensure that where a person has previously worked in a position whose duties involved work with children or vulnerable adults, so far as reasonably practicable verification of the reason why the employment or position ended (breach of regulation 20.3 schedule 1)
- ensure safe care documentation is completed for each household, and is appropriate to meet the needs of children placed at the home (NMS 9.3)
- ensure that young people receive prompt feedback on any concerns or complaints raised and that all staff are clear about their individual responsibilities in relation to implementing this (NMS 11.5)
- ensure staffing is adequate to meet the needs of the service as outlined in the Statement of Purpose (breach of regulation 3 (5))
- ensure that reviews are undertaken no more than a year after approval, and thereafter whenever the service provider considers necessary. Refer this report to the fostering panel promptly (breach of regulation 29.2)
- ensure there is good communication between the fostering service social workers and the child's social worker (NMS 21.5)
- seek and take account of views of any child placed with the foster parents, subject to their age and understanding (breach of regulation 29.3.b)
- ensure that on approval carers are given a handbook which covers policies, procedures, guidance, legal information and insurance details (NMS 22.5)
- ensure that foster carers receive appropriate supervision in line with their individual supervision agreements (breach of regulation 21.4.a)
- ensure that supervising social workers complete unannounced visits at least once a year (NMS 22.6)
- monitor and evidence the training that carers receive to develop their skills and tackle any weakness. (NMS 23.5)