

North Lincolnshire Council Fostering Team

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

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Inspector	Michael McCleave
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Setting address	The Grove, 38 West Street, Scawby, Brigg, South Humberside, DN20 9AN
Telephone number	01652 656005
Email	gordon.everatt@northlincs.gov.uk
Registered person	North Lincolnshire Council Children's Services
Registered manager	Gordan Everatt
Responsible individual	Michael James Gibbs
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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 service aims to provide a range of high quality foster placements to meet the needs of the looked after children of North Lincolnshire Council.

A service manager leads the service and a team leader has day to day management responsibilities for the service. The team leader is supported by a well qualified and experienced team of family placement officers and a dedicated administrative team.

The service is responsible for the recruitment, assessment, training, support and development of all its foster carers. There is a single fostering panel.

The service provides a variety of foster placements including: mainstream fostering, long term fostering, contract care, single placement care and short term breaks. The service caters for children and young people aged 0 to 18 years.

The service operates out of premises situated in a village near to Scunthorpe. No adverse comments were received from foster carers regarding the buildings accessibility. The building lends itself to foster carer training and or formal/informal meetings and groups.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This was a key inspection which examined how the service performed in each of the outcomes. The service is well managed, and there is a high level of satisfaction by foster carers of the support they receive from the fostering team. The young people feel safe living with their carers, and they are satisfied with the level of care provided.

Recommendations made at the last inspection have been acted on by the management.

Improvements since the last inspection

During the past year the local authority has set up a team dedicated to organising contact arrangements. This has been very much appreciated by foster carers and social workers, who welcome the efficiency this move has brought to this aspect of fostering.

Resources have been provided for the setting up of an education unit where young people can go if there are difficulties attending full time school.

Following on from a recommendation at the last inspection, a social worker has been appointed to support and monitor private fostering arrangements.

The information technology (IT) system has been improved with Care First, which is a new recording tool for staff. Information concerning children can be inputted into Care First from any professional and this will appear on the electronic case file.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

The health of the young people is appropriately managed by the service. Their health care needs are clearly recorded in their files and the foster carers know how to obtain health resources as required. The children spoken to said that their foster carers discuss health matters if this is necessary, and they confirmed that they are registered with a local general practitioner. Advice and support is available from the health care group on all health related matters including drugs.

At the interview, foster carers reported that they generally received good quality and timely information concerning a child's health care needs, although some placing social workers are slow at providing this information. Foster carers, demonstrated a clear understanding of their role in promoting the health and development needs of young people. Evidence of carers fulfilling their health care responsibilities to children placed with them, was seen on files and other documentation examined.

The foster carer handbook provides detailed guidance on carer responsibilities regarding health, and gives advice on ways to promote the health of children, and to ensure their safety. Foster carers receive initial training during induction to support them in identifying and addressing children's health care needs. Foster carers would receive additional training if children with special health care needs were placed with them.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

Children and young people live in safe foster homes. They are placed with foster carers who have been assessed as being able to meet their needs, and to ensure that their welfare is safeguarded.

There is a good awareness among the foster carers about the effects of bullying on children, either at school because they are fostered, or within the local community because they are viewed as outsiders. However, some foster carers felt that they would benefit from having updated child protection awareness training refresher courses. The service consults with young people on safety issues and a group of young people, known as the Garage Patch Kids, have designed posters on anti-bullying. This is good practice. Children are listened to and their views and

experiences are taken seriously. This service values feedback and listens to the young people.

There are robust recruitment procedures in place, to ensure that staff and foster carers are appropriately checked before they are appointed.

The fostering panel is appropriately organised, and can demonstrate that sound decisions are made when considering applications from prospective foster carers. The chair of the panel provides good leadership, and applications are rigorously assessed. Administrative support for the panel is good and reports are received by panel on time. The panel is able to maintain independent scrutiny of the fostering service and makes comments on the quality of reports to the agency where appropriate.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

North Lincolnshire has a policy of seeking to recruit carers who can meet the diversity needs of the young people placed with carers. There is a policy on equality and diversity, and the service ethos is one of valuing the contribution made by staff and carers from all social and ethnic backgrounds.

The team ensures that foster carers are provided with as much information as possible prior to a placement, and they are fully informed and consulted, about educational plans for the young person. All looked after young people have a personal education plan (PEP), and a copy is given to the foster carer. The local authority has invested resources to set up an educational unit, where young people can go and receive a planned programme of education if they become excluded from school. There is an active looked after education support group, who will set up a plan with the school to return the young person with support as quickly as possible. This is good practice. Financial support is given to young people who go on to university or other higher education.

Children who participate in the short breaks scheme, continue to have their educational needs met at their local community school, and parents retain responsibility for this. The child's social worker is responsible for making sure that the school are aware of the child's situation, and for the carers to be kept fully informed about educational matters. There is a positive approach taken by the service in respect of attempting to achieve good educational outcomes for children.

The young people are encouraged to enjoy life and participate in appropriate leisure activities. Foster carers want the young people to be like their peers in the community, and not be disadvantaged because of their care status. The young people receive weekly pocket money and monthly clothing allowances. Like any young people, they all wanted to be given more allowances.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The service consults young people on a wide range of issues, and the young people's group known as Garage Patch Kids, is used extensively. All young people are actively encouraged to participate in their statutory reviews and planning meetings.

The fostering service supports any planned contact arrangements that has been agreed, and a dedicated contact team has been set up to organise and supervise all contact arrangements. During the initial assessment of foster carers, contact with families is discussed with potential carers since this could prove difficult for some of them, especially where emotional ties develop between the child and the carers. The team take the views of the young people seriously despite communication abilities. A questionnaire that is user friendly, has been developed and the young people are encouraged to give their opinion about how contact is working. The children's guide is also presented in a style that is easily understood by most of the children. It is commendable that imaginative planning has gone into these documents.

The effectiveness of any consultation is evaluated by the manager, the findings are shared with the team and the outcomes are reviewed to determine if there are any improvements that can realistically be made to the service.

The service works in partnership with the parents in respect of the short breaks service, and to ensure that the roles and responsibilities of the parents is not undermined.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

Foster carers are fully aware of their responsibilities to prepare young people for independence, and to support them during a transition period like any good parent would. The fostering service has links with the local authority social workers and the pathway team, to ensure that those young people approaching the time to leave foster care, have access to the resources to necessary to make the transition as smooth as possible during what could be an emotional and difficult period.

All the carers receive full allowances and expenses that meet the cost of caring for the child/young person and to meet their daily living needs. This authority pays above the national rate. Carers said that they are paid on time and are fully satisfied with the administration of the system of payments. The allowances support the children to pursue education including university and other higher education as well as their leisure activities. The children are able to purchase good quality clothes from their allowance, and this enables them to have a sense of identity and be like other children and young people in the community. This service pays agreed allowances above that recommended by the National Foster Care Association. In addition there

is financial support for foster carers in approved cases to enable them to purchase a suitable car.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The service vision and values are clearly of a high standard and this is evident in the day to day operations of the service provided to the foster carers. However, the service is currently without a service manager, and the team manager is currently covering two roles. It is important that the service manager post is appointed to as quickly as possible due to the demands being made on the manager. The manager must be able to provide scheduled one to one supervision with staff, and be kept up to date of how the service is operating. One home visited did give the impression of slight overcrowding. The management and organisational culture is open and inclusive thereby creating a positive and stimulating environment. The manager has a system in place to ensure that required monitoring of records takes place regularly ensuring that standards are maintained.

There is a high awareness and recognition by the manager of what the service does well and where development is required. The manager has a clear vision of where the service is, and how it should develop and expand. There is a clear back up system to cover the manager's absences.

The support and supervision of foster carers is very good, and foster carers are positive in their comments on how they are supported. The manager demonstrates a proactive approach to working in partnership with a range of other key professionals, to ensure continuous improvement of the service to children and foster carers. Foster carers are encouraged to attend training courses funded by the agency, and those spoken to had taken part in a range of training. However, some carers have not had updated child protection awareness training. Short breaks carers provide a valuable service to families and this aspect of the fostering service is very much appreciated by parents. Short breaks carers would however, welcome periodic meetings of short breaks foster carers as a group. They would also welcome specific identified training to cover the specialist care needs of the children they foster.

The organisation recruitment procedures include a thorough check on applicants for employment and there is a positive approach to encouraging recruitment of a range and diversity of staff.

There is a supervision policy and procedure in place. However, due to the added pressure on the manager to cover the service manager role, this has led to occasions when formal planned supervision has not taken place with members of the social work team.

There is regular evaluation made of how the service works and the manager is required to produce reports for the senior management team on the functioning of the service.

Foster carers are encouraged to attend training courses funded by the agency and those spoken to had taken part in a range of training. Some carers however, have not attended refresher training in child protection. It is important that all carers receive up to date training.

The foster carer records kept by the agency contain the required information, however, it would be good practice if visits indicated whether these were announced or unannounced. It would be good practice to record if a visit was announced or unannounced. A new IT system is now in place known as Care First which collates information from any professionals who record information on a particular case.

The office where the service is based is suitable for purpose and has sufficient space to conduct day to day operations. All records are kept safe in secure cabinets and the office is suitably alarmed.

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 formal one to one supervision takes place at least monthly.
- ensure that foster carers complete periodic reports on outcomes for the children and young people.
- ensure exemptions information is shared with the Foster Panel.
- ensure foster carers receive updated child protection training.