

Blackpool Borough Council - Children's 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

Blackpool Borough Council is a unitary authority, which provides the full range of fostering services to looked after children under the management of the director of children and young people social care, education and leisure department.

These include long term permanent placements including friends and family carers, short term placements, emergency placements, short break placements, preparation for independence, parent and child placements.

The aim of the service is to provide safe and secure foster care for children. The service has 110 fostering households who are providing a total of 217 placements for looked after children. Eleven places had been commissioned from Independent Fostering Agencies. In the 12 months to the 31 March 2007 a total of 18 new fostering households were approved.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This announced key inspection included meetings with the fostering manager, the designated teacher for children looked after, social workers and support workers from the fostering team and the team administrator. Responses were received in writing from the chair of the fostering panel and members of the fostering team.

The inspector visited three foster carers and two young people. Records of the agency and three foster carer files and three young people's files were inspected. Papers and minutes from three fostering panels were seen.

The inspector received completed questionnaires from six young people in foster care, five foster carers, two social workers who have children placed with the fostering service, and a member of the quality assurance team.

Improvements since the last inspection

Systems are in place to allow for effective monitoring of the quality of care children receive, including those children placed with independent fostering agencies. Recording of supervisory visits is improving to allow for better management monitoring.

There have been improvements in the quality and range of health and safety checks and guidance to foster carers.

Reviews of foster carers and unannounced visits are now taking place annually.

An independent chair has been appointed to the fostering panel.

Children's case records are largely up to date and comprehensive.

The training programme for foster carers has been developed to build on the initial training they receive. A range of support groups have been set up in consultation with foster carers.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is satisfactory.

The fostering service ensures that children and young people's health needs are identified and met. Foster carers expressed satisfaction with the amount of health information they receive, usually at the time of placement. Foster carers record the administration of prescribed medication and do not give children non-prescription medicines without taking advice first. Foster carers work together with health professionals to meet young people's needs.

Children are registered with a doctor, health visitors are involved and children have access to dental and optical check ups. Statutory review minutes demonstrate that health needs are monitored. Over 70% of looked after children have received an annual health check in the last 12 months. Where specialist health services are needed, young people have access to these, including the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service.

Foster carers receive training in basic first aid, healthy eating, sexual health and substance misuse. The schools' team and health visitors are involved in delivery of the training.

The provision of the specific and correct equipment, particularly when a child or young person has complex needs, is not satisfactory.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The persons managing the fostering service have appropriate qualifications and experience. A comprehensive checklist has been compiled for all staff recruited by the fostering service, which allows the manager to monitor that all necessary actions have been taken. As there have been no new members of staff since last year it was not possible to see the use of the monitoring tool in practice.

All foster carer's homes are inspected annually by supervising social workers against a standard health and safety checklist. In the last year, requirements for carbon monoxide alarms and car seats, under new legislation have been added. The

fostering service has an agreement with Lancashire Fire Service. The local fire safety communications officer visits foster homes, fits smoke alarms and compiles a fire safety plan for the home. This has been completed with 30 foster homes so far and plans are in place to provide all foster carers with this service. Foster carers have been sent information on the risks of mobile phones and internet use and formal training is planned. The foster homes visited during the inspection provide a suitable environment for young people. Children are consulted prior to sharing bedrooms and the arrangements are monitored.

Foster carer assessments are carried out by qualified social workers and reports produced for panel are quality assured by the manager. These are largely comprehensive and contain full information and analysis of the strengths and experience of carers. They identify areas for future training and additional support. The manager acknowledged that further training on assessment needs to increase consistency. All checks are carried out before presentation to panel and criminal records bureau checks are renewed every three years.

It is evident that the fostering team know their carers well, and make considered matching decisions based on children's assessed needs, within available resources. Matching and family finding is discussed at the weekly team meetings and there is evidence of effective planning meetings taking place. These are held before placement whenever possible or soon afterwards in the case of emergency placements. The recent introduction of electronic records has resulted in difficulties in recording foster placement agreements. Interim arrangements are in place which are satisfactory. The fostering service continues to have a high rate of placement stability and unplanned endings are monitored by the manager.

A permanence policy is in place and panel procedures were approved in May 2007. The panel has yet to be set up and the policy implemented.

The fostering service has a system in place for granting exemptions from the usual fostering limit of three children, which allows for effective scrutiny by the manager, service manager and fostering panel. Examples were given where foster carers looking after more than three children have access to a range of extra support, including weekly contact from the fostering team, help with household chores and involvement of other services.

Foster carers receive appropriate training to equip them to safeguard young people in their care. All foster homes have an individual safe caring policy which is reviewed annually. Foster carers and young people in their care are aware of the safe care and privacy rules. Supervising social workers ensure that foster carers carry out the policies in daily practice. Where young people have been subjected to bullying, action is taken to address this.

From discussions with supervising social workers and foster carers it is evident that reasonable strategies are used for dealing with young people's behaviour, which are mainly positive and based on praise and encouragement. Physical interventions are monitored by the manager. Foster carers know the procedures to follow when a

young person is missing from home.

Complaints, allegations, child protection incidents and absences from the foster home are monitored. Each foster carer has a specific incidents book in which significant events are recorded then communicated to the child's social worker and the fostering team. All incidents have been handled in an appropriate manner, with the involvement of the safeguarding team as necessary.

Since the last inspection, the service has appointed an independent chair of panel. Minutes of the last three panels demonstrate that the panel is properly constituted, is child focused and scrutinises the assessment of foster carers thoroughly. Meetings are well organised and all members are encouraged to participate and have a wide range of expertise. Applicants attend the panel when their approval is considered.

The panel has an established quality control function and additional information is sought as needed, in order to make informed recommendations. It is clear that the quality of information provided to panel is improving. There are appropriate policies and procedures for panel functioning.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Blackpool has a race equality scheme and a diversity plan. Foster carer training groups consider young peoples' gender, religion, language, culture and ethnic origin. The social workers acknowledge the need to work harder to meet the needs of children from ethnic minority groups. Examples were given where foster carers were supported to meet young people's needs.

Blackpool's children and young people's strategic partnership includes key officers in social services and education and meets regularly. In addition, a children causing concern group focuses on children experiencing difficulties and includes representatives from children in public care services, educational psychology, educational diversity and the police. Effective partnerships are in place from senior officer level to individual foster carers working with individual teachers, which benefits looked after children.

The fostering service can demonstrate that the education of children and young people is promoted. Foster carers have effective working links with schools and communication is good. Of all looked after children, school attendance is 93% and 79% of care leavers are in education, employment or training.

The fostering service works closely with other services and agencies to improve the educational outcomes for looked after children. The designated teacher is a member of the fostering panel, delivers training to foster carers and provides support to young people either directly or in conjunction with their foster carers. As the designated teacher is based in the same building as the fostering team, there is opportunity for consultation and they are alerted to new placements very quickly.

The family link scheme provides short breaks in foster homes for children with disabilities. Foster carers who provides short break care were visited during this inspection. There is evidence of good planning, matching and introductory visits. Positive relationships have been built with children's parents, who are consulted about the care of their children on a regular basis. Foster carers providing short breaks receive adequate levels of support and are monitored and supervised in the same way as mainstream carers. The manager acknowledges that the scheme needs further development in order to provide more placements. This is included in the team's business planning.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

The service can demonstrate that contact arrangements are promoted and that young people are supported to maintain or develop family contacts and friendships. Foster carers are aware of the department's expectations in respect of contact and receive training on working with parents and grandparents. The fostering service arranges transport and support to ensure that contact takes place as a high priority. Contact centres are used and their staff supervise contact as necessary. Arrangements are clearly outlined in planning meeting minutes and care plans. Foster carers are clearly committed to transporting children for family contact and building appropriate working relationships with parents and family members where possible.

The fostering team continues to encourage foster carers and young people to contribute to decision making and to the development of the service. A high number of young people attend and contribute to their statutory reviews. They are also asked to give their comments on the quality of their care, which is part of the foster carer review process, as are the sons and daughters of foster carers. A young people's focus group is in place. As a result of listening to children, a group of younger children have been brought together for activity based events. The service is consulting with young people with a view to re-launching the children in foster care group. Young people who spoke with the inspector or completed questionnaires were all positive about being asked for their opinions and listened to in foster care.

The fostering service works to empower foster carers to take part in decision making. The foster carer forum meets four times a year, is well attended and provides opportunities for consultation, discussion and exchanges of views and information.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

Clear guidelines are available on financial issues, carers receive prompt payments of allowances and fees at three-weekly intervals. Foster carers receive advance

payments when necessary. They have a named person in the finance department who they can contact. No foster carers raised any problems with payments.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The fostering service has a clear statement of its aims and objectives and the services provided. This has been updated in September 2006. A business plan is also in place which outlines areas for development and improvement and the service can demonstrate that it is working to improve and exceed minimum standards. The service is well run and effectively managed. The manager has clear roles and responsibilities and job descriptions are in place for all staff. Lines of accountability are clear. The manager stated that fostering is high on the agenda of the department and that decisions and changes can be implemented quickly.

The fostering service is an integral part of Blackpool's services for children and the manager is involved in strategic planning and decision making. A major strength is the established practice of working with other specialists and disciplines to meet the needs of looked after children in foster care, including education and health.

Management systems monitor the standards of care and outcomes for young people. A specific incidents book has been provided to foster carers recently, which gives details of what should be recorded and how to communicate the information to the fostering team and social workers as soon as possible. Supervising social workers are working with foster carers to ensure that the information is of good quality.

There have been improvements in the monitoring of children placed with independent fostering agencies. The manager keeps inspection reports and the service manager attends meetings of the north west consortium. The quality assurance team chair statutory reviews and feedback information. A commissioning officer manages the contracts with independent agencies.

There is a stable, experienced and enthusiastic staff team with the necessary qualifications and skills to support and supervise foster carers to improve outcomes for young people. Regular staff meetings allow for effective communication and exchange of ideas. Staff are very positive about the way they are managed and the support they receive.

It is not possible to assess the adequacy of administrative support due to the recent introduction of electronic record keeping which has yet to be fully completed. It is to the credit of the service that they are setting up interim systems to compensate for the present problems in electronic records, which have not yet been rectified.

A new recruitment strategy is in place and the team are actively recruiting in order to increase their range of foster carers and provide better placement choice, in line with business planning. A joint open day with the adoption team was held recently which produced a good response, and radio and local press advertisements are continuing.

A reward system is available for foster carers who introduce new applicants. The effectiveness of advertising is monitored. The team provide a timely service to respondents. Enquirers are contacted to arrange an initial visit within seven days. All checks are carried out prior to training. A rolling programme of pre-approval training cuts down waiting time and Blackpool fostering service have an arrangement with another local authority to share training groups.

Foster carer reviews are largely up to date, excluding those carers who are resting, and the manager is monitoring progress. Good quality information including feedback from placing social workers and young people is included in foster carer review reports. First reviews are presented to the fostering panel.

All foster carers who completed questionnaires or were interviewed for this inspection were united in praising the levels of support they receive from the fostering team. A senior manager is now available to the out of hours team for consultation on placements. A variety of support groups are available.

A new format for reports of supervisory visits has been implemented which outlines how foster carers are meeting the needs of children and young people under the five outcomes of Every Child Matters.

Training for foster carers is developing and improving. Some sessions are geared to specialist areas such as life story work. The service has a strong commitment to increasing the skills of their carers who are encouraged to attend and participate. Feedback is invited after training and comments are positive.

Friends and family carers receive a good service. Alternative legal routes are being explored and funded, so that young people do not remain in the looked after system unnecessarily. Improvements have been made in the decision making process to avoid delays.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Statutory Requirements

This section sets out the actions, which must be taken so that the registered person/s meets the Care Standards Act 2000, Fostering Services Regulations 2002 and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider(s) must comply with the given timescales.

Std.	Action	Due date
12	ensure that each child is provided with such aids and equipment which are required as a result of particular health needs or disability.	01/09/2007

Recommendations

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

- continue with plans to implement a permanence policy and panel.
- continue with plans to improve foster placement agreements and ensure they contain full information.
- continue with plans to develop foster carer assessments.
- update the foster carer handbook in line with new policies and procedures.
- continue to develop the short break service for children with disabilities.