

Kingston upon Hull City Council Fostering Service

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

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Inspector	David Martin / Marcia Mackey
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Date of last inspection	09/05/2006

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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

Hull City Council's fostering service is currently based at the Gleneagles Centre but there are plans to relocate the service to a central position of the city. The stated purpose of the service is to provide care for children and young people who are looked after by the local authority and whose needs are best met in a family environment. Foster care is provided via a number of distinct fostering schemes including short break carers, respite carers and mainstream carers. The fostering service also has a service level agreement with Barnardo's, who provide a specialist service offering short breaks and long term care to children and young people with disabilities. At the time of the inspection, the total number of approved fostering households was 185 providing up to 346 places. The number of children and young people in placement was 260. There are 52 potential placements that are not available.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This inspection was carried out on an announced basis and took five days to complete. The purpose of the inspection was to assess compliance with the recommendation in the last inspection report and to assess the fostering service against key National Minimum Standards. The last inspection concluded that Hull City Council provides a good fostering service and consequently, a proportionate approach was used wherever possible on this occasion.

A small number of young people and foster carers were interviewed. Additionally, key members of staff spoke with the inspector and a visit was made to the out-of-hours service. Case files and other documentation were inspected as necessary.

Overall the fostering service continues to achieve good outcomes for young people and on the whole, provides them with positive experiences. It has undergone a major restructuring in the last year but has laid strong and substantial foundations on which to build a flexible, responsive and inclusive service in the future. Young people and carers are widely consulted and enabled to contribute their views about the service and their own individual circumstances.

No actions or recommendations are made in this report.

Improvements since the last inspection

From initial contact to approval, the process of recruitment, assessment and support has been evaluated and changed to ensure the fostering service provides the right

support to potential and existing carers.

The restructuring of the teams within the fostering service has helped streamline the referral process and helped to create a unity of purpose. The management of the service is more accessible and communication has improved.

The development of a residential resource to provide outreach work, out-of-hours support and crisis intervention has been welcomed by carers and fostering social workers alike. It is an innovative, valuable service and will be developed further in the future.

Training for carers is excellent. It is delivered in many different formats in order to reach the maximum number of carers. It is tailored to individual learning styles.

Foster carers have a very good understanding about the way in which children and young people are affected by issues relating to loss and attachment.

The fostering service is about to take on responsibility for payments to carers and this should minimise any delays and inaccuracies in the system.

The fostering service is well placed to move forward and develop in line with the principals outlined in the 'Care Matters' white paper.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

This outcome area has been looked at closely in the previous two inspections and the last inspection report noted that children and young people in foster care have their health and development needs promoted very well. The evidence gathered during this inspection confirms that this is still the case. Most children get the general support or specialist help they need to promote their good health. All young people are registered with a general practice and most receive regular dental checks. All young people have an initial medical assessment when they come into the Looked After Children (LAC) service. Placement plans detail each child's individual health needs and requirements and provide the carer with background and current health issues.

This inspection concluded that there are good links with health care professionals which include a medical advisor on the fostering panel, access to a clinical psychologist and health coordinators. The Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) provide good support for both foster carers and young people on an individual basis.

Carers have a good understanding of the need to promote healthy eating and young people also said they wanted to eat healthily.

Foster carers receive initial and follow up training to support them in identifying and

addressing children's health needs. They are clear about their responsibilities and work in partnership with health professionals to promote good health for the children they care for. Training on health care matters is good. Carers have an excellent understanding of attachment and loss issues and have clearly benefited from training on this particular topic.

In the next 12 months the service intends to promote the health benefits of smoking cessation. It also plans to introduce more training for carers who are looking after babies with post-natal withdrawal from drugs and suffering from the effects of alcohol abuse.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The last inspection concluded that staying safe outcomes for children are good. The report said that children and young people in foster care are kept safe from abuse and neglect and are well protected by the suitability of the fostering staff and carers, as well as being protected by the systems in place. The evidence gathered during this inspection supports this view.

Carers report that the approval process is thorough and that they attend the fostering panel. The quality of assessment documentation is good and all vetting is carried out as required. Pre- and post-approval training and support is very good and carers understand their responsibilities in connection with safeguarding issues. Young people said that they are not bullied and this was also confirmed by carers. Safety checks are carried out on carers' homes. Young people who spoke with the inspector said they feel safe.

On the whole the matching process works well and there is no evidence to suggest a high number of disrupted placements. The number of emergency placements is not high given the demand for placements and the fostering service is working on reducing the number of exemptions required.

The development of Merlin Bridge, a children's home, to provide outreach and out-of-hours support has been well received by carers. It has had a positive impact on the stability of placements, which the fostering service has prioritised. Further development of this service is expected in the next year.

The fostering staff undergo robust recruitment and selection processes and all are suitable qualified and experienced.

Inspection of the two foster care panels was not carried out on this occasion. Previous inspection reports have noted that the panels are properly constituted and quorate when they sit. In line with a recommendation in the last inspection report, two elected members have put themselves forward as panel members. As yet they have not attended.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The last inspection considered that outcomes for young people in their education and leisure are good. This is borne out by evidence gathered during this inspection.

The fostering service provides training for carers on diversity and equality issues and holds cultural days for carers and children and young people to attend throughout the year. All fostering social workers attend the Council's corporate equality and diversity training. The service is aiming to recruit more carers from Hull's ethnic minority groups.

All carers are aware of the importance of maintaining children and young people in school and on the whole arrangements for individual children are working well. Foster carers said that they always attend parent's evenings and are able to make a contribution to Personal Education Plan (PEP) reviews. 79% of Looked After Children currently have an individual PEP. The authority is working on improving this situation and plans to roll out a new format at the beginning of the next academic term.

Education coordinators in the city have provided some excellent work in maintaining the education of excluded children. The majority of schools in Hull have are aware of their responsibilities for looked after children and work well with partner agencies. There are five learning mentors based in schools across Hull who work exclusively with looked after children and are providing support to carers. The fostering service is targeting the literacy skills of foster children as an area for improvement in the next year.

The service provides a 'short breaks' function, which is coordinated from Aneurin Bevan Lodge and managed by a separate team manager. This service was not inspected on this occasion.

The young people in foster care are involved in a range of community based leisure activities and organised groups. The individual achievements of young people are celebrated and young people themselves are involved in making decisions about rewards for success. There are plans to recruit to a post which will coordinate and promote potential leisure experiences for young people.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The last report noted that children and young people have very good opportunities to make positive contributions to the service and care they receive and rated this outcome as good. The service was rated excellent in the way in which it consults young people and carers. The evidence gathered in this inspection indicates that the service continues to do this very well.

Young people attend their LAC and PEP reviews and are able to make both a written and verbal contribution. The service wishes to bring about further improvements in this regard and is planning to undertake training with carers to encourage and facilitate greater participation. Young people understand their individual plans.

The views of foster carers' own children are considered to be very important by the service and they too are widely consulted and included in assessment, approval and matching processes. They are encouraged to attend any activities involving Looked After Children and have their own group called 'Children Who Foster'.

The Rights and Participation Project (RAPP) is an independent group which advocates on behalf of Looked After Children and will often challenge the views of social workers. RAPP works with young people in a variety of ways and runs many groups in which they can participate.

Young people said that they have contact with family members. Carers confirmed that the level of contact is appropriate and in line with case planning decisions.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

This outcome area was rated as good in the last inspection. The fostering service pays carers in line with the Fostering Network guidelines. It also provides other expenses and has introduced the 'payments for skills' programme. Some carers are developing a portfolio of the skills, experience and qualifications they have and evidence of how these have been used. The fostering service has taken over responsibility for the payment of fees and this should eradicate delays and overpayments. The majority of carers are happy with the payment of fees.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The last inspection rated this outcome area as good. Overall, the service was considered to be well managed and provided good support to carers and young people. Since the last inspection the service has continued to develop and has been restructured to reflect its key tasks of recruitment, assessment, support and stability, and duty. Implementation of plans for further development has slowed because strict financial targets have been imposed by the local authority.

The fostering service is appropriately staffed and caseloads are manageable. Staff have regular supervision and have access to training. The new structure has improved communication between the teams. The service benefits from open, visible and enthusiastic management. The fostering social workers expressed a commitment to providing a high quality service and achieving best outcomes for the children.

Support of carers is a priority and the task is accomplished well. Carers feel well

supported and hold their link workers in high regard. The establishment of outreach and out-of-hours services is a welcome development for both carers and fostering social workers. Work will be focussed on this service with a view to broadening its impact. The service hopes to work with partner agencies to fast track carer support and in the process enhance the life chances of young people.

Case records for carers and children are electronic and well maintained. The system is Data Protection compliant and is subject to rigorous monitoring.

The service assesses situations where family and friends act as carers and support is provided as required.

The fostering service would like to improve the way it assesses the capacity of carer households, carers' skills development and support needs. This area will be addressed over the next year.