

Liverpool City Council Fostering 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

Liverpool City Council's fostering service provides a range of placements for children and young people who are unable to live at home with their families for short or long periods. It is responsible for safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children who are fostered.

The service operates from council offices known as 'Parklands' in Speke, approximately eight miles from Liverpool city centre, however, meetings with foster carers and children take place in centrally located council premises. A principal officer leads the service and is assisted by three team leaders and approximately 40 social work and support staff. The fostering service works closely with the safeguarding unit and other local authority and health services including education and leisure services.

Summary

The overall quality rating is inadequate - notice of action to improve.

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

The inspection took two inspectors a total of nine days and involved interviews with staff and with other professionals who work closely with the service, observation of meetings and training events, inspection of records and visits to carers and children. Sixty foster carers and 60 children, their placing social workers and birth parents were sent questionnaires. Twelve questionnaires were returned from carers and seven from children. Five children were selected for case tracking, including one with treatment foster carers, one using short breaks, two sibling groups with family and friends carers and one child on a temporary assessment placement (TAP). All key standards were assessed.

Good corporate parenting has been established and continues to develop to provide children with a comprehensive range of services aimed at supporting their development and improving their life chances. A stable staff team is led by fair and competent team leaders who have done much to improve and develop the service since the last inspection.

There are some shortfalls in the procedures and practices designed to keep children safe.

Improvements since the last inspection

Action has been taken to address all of the requirements made in the last CSCI report.

An improved recruitment strategy has increased the number of carers going through the assessment process. Improved relations with the central switchboard has enabled people contacting the service to make contact quickly and easily. The addition of a direct telephone line has aided this.

Effective allocation of work and good communication between the team leaders and the whole team has enabled the introduction of improved practices in assessing, supporting and reviewing carers and recording work done.

Good staff management has reduced the staff turnover rate and improved staff morale.

Foster carers have all been enrolled in the Fostering Network and are encouraged to use this advisory body to provide additional support where necessary, possibly in the event of an allegation being made against them.

A drive to encourage family and friends carers to make their arrangements for children more permanent has increased the number of special guardianship and residence orders and enabled children to move out of the system.

Temporary assessment placements of up to eight weeks have recently replaced the former emergency bed (crash) system. This has created more stability for children and reduced the number of placement moves.

Foster carers report that the service has improved greatly over the last 18 months. Children report that they are well looked after.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Good systems ensure that children's health is prioritised. Carers receive training in health matters and children are enabled and encouraged to attend medical appointments. The service works closely with the LAC nurse to ensure that health needs are identified and addressed. Children's confidential files contain health plans and this information is shared with their foster carers. However, details of immunisations are not routinely recorded.

Children gave examples of how their health is promoted and many identified healthy diets. Foster carers gave information about excellent and comprehensive health training and first aid. A health development worker promotes the health of all looked after children in Liverpool, working with foster carers, providing training and delivering the 'Healthy Homes' award scheme.

Foster carers do not always have written parental consent to medication and on occasions this has resulted in a delay in children receiving appropriate medicines. Carers are issued with forms to record the administration of medicines.

A service level agreement between the city council and the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) enables looked after children to receive a fast track therapeutic service. Foster carers are also provided with guidance in meeting children's emotional needs and work closely with the therapists where necessary. In addition, a consultation clinic is provided weekly for foster carers by CAMHS, to give support in managing challenging behaviour and supporting children with mental health needs.

All children living within the city are issued with free passes to the local authority leisure centres. Free admission is also extended to foster carers who accompany looked after children to the leisure centre and foster carers said they are using these. Supervising social workers regularly encourage foster carers to provide children with opportunities for physical activity. Reciprocal arrangements with neighbouring local authorities are being pursued.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is inadequate.

The fostering service cannot demonstrate that they are meeting requirements in respect of the selection of staff. Records of checks and references are not held on file for all staff, neither is there evidence of qualifications or full employment histories. Systems are in place to monitor Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks for panel members. According to these records two panel members have not had their checks updated as required. Other checks have not been taken up on panel members.

Health and safety checks are carried out on carers homes and updated annually prior to the foster carer review. They do not always identify the sleeping arrangements. At least one child placed with carers for a temporary assessment placement (TAP) is accommodated on a bed settee in a communal room.

Information from carers indicated great variation in the amount and quality of information provided to them before and during a child's placement. A sample of foster placement agreements was seen to contain all relevant information to aid matching considerations, however, not all were up to date or signed by current carers.

There is a dedicated worker who focuses on family finding for children needing long term placements. Plans are in place to further improve the quality of the information gathered during the assessment of carers to facilitate better matching. Carers of asylum seeking children meet every three months and are provided with additional support to meet the specific needs of this group of children. Where a suitable match cannot be made with Liverpool foster carers, children may be placed locally with one of the independent fostering agencies that the council contract with. Good arrangements are in place for the supervision and monitoring of these placements.

The service does not have accurate figures to show the number of children in foster

care who have experienced three or more moves during the last year, although, figures for all looked after children show 14 percent have had three or more changes of placement. Placements that end suddenly are considered disruptions and are monitored. The record identifies 10 disrupted placements since the last inspection, however, there was evidence of at least one further disruption, that was not included in this list. Disruption meetings, chaired by a suitably experienced and qualified person, are held in some cases. Plans are in place to hold these meetings in the case of every disruption in the future.

The previous 'crash' system which accommodated children in emergency situations has recently been replaced by temporary assessment placements (TAP). Children live with a TAP carer for up to two months whilst decisions and plans are made. This period can be extended where there are good reasons. The service aims to reduce the number of moves for children, speed up decision making and improve care planning through the TAP system.

Children who need a high level of intervention to stay safe may be placed with treatment foster carers. This is a joint initiative between health and social care services and is led by the Royal Liverpool Children's Trust. Carers are well paid, supported, trained and supervised. They work closely with the therapists from the CAMHS LAC team. Children engage in individual therapy and there was evidence of children who receive this service making good progress in all areas. Plans are in place to further develop the treatment foster care service so that more children can receive the specialist help they need.

Foster carers have safer caring policies and there was evidence of them being updated with the arrival of each child and annually at the foster carer review. However, this practice is not consistently applied. Foster carers have received training in safeguarding children and been issued with a copy of the Liverpool City Council 'Safe Parenting' handbook which provides an invaluable range of information about safeguarding children in the home as well as in the wider community. The foster carer's handbook also gives clear information about safeguarding and child protection procedures.

Foster carers know that corporal punishment is not allowed. Some have had training in therapeutic crisis intervention (TCI) and plans are in place to roll out this behaviour management technique to all foster carers to provide consistency of care for children who move between foster care and children's homes. More in-depth training in TCI is to be linked to the 'payment for skills' programme being introduced in April 2008. Conflicting views were expressed about the use of restraint with foster children. Written information about the service's policy on restraint is available neither in the behaviour policy nor in the foster carer's handbook although it is clear in the Foster Care Agreement that restraint is not to be used. There have been no notifications of restraint.

Allegations against carers are investigated and referred to the safeguarding team where necessary. They are monitored by the team leaders. Foster carers can receive support from a specially trained foster carer in the event of allegations being made

against them and information about this is provided in the foster carer handbook. Carers may also receive support from the Fostering Network organisation.

All foster carers are assessed and supervised by qualified social workers. Unqualified support workers are directly supervised by the supervising social worker for the family with whom they are working. Foster carer files are stored part on paper and part electronically. There are gaps in information in some files including original assessment documents, details of exemptions and CRB checks that have not been updated within three years. Temporary changes in approval status are not always evidenced. Records show that unannounced visits are not routinely taking place every year.

The fostering panel is well organised and functions effectively to safeguard children through good quality decision making. The panel has clear written policies and procedures which are implemented in practice. Administrative support is available to panel and comprehensive minutes are produced. The local authority provides training for panel members.

The panel chair has appropriate experience and panel members bring a wide range of skills and expertise in areas which include health, education and safeguarding children. There is a medical and a legal advisor. Records demonstrate that the panel only makes decisions when properly constituted.

Prior to each panel a quality assurance group meet to scrutinise the quality of information being presented. The panel chair is of the opinion that this process has led to a marked improvement in the assessments presented which enables the panel to exercise good judgements based on full information. The assessing social worker and team leader attend panel for all assessments to answer any queries.

A panel meeting was observed during the inspection. It was well organised and efficiently chaired to allow all members to raise queries and express their opinions. Throughout there was a focus on the welfare of children.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

One young person described his foster placement as 'sound'. Others made similar comments. All said they were happy in their foster families.

Although the cultural diversity of the city is not reflected in the ethnicity of carers, actions to address this are underway. Careful consideration has been given to providing an effective recruitment campaign to attract carers from diverse backgrounds. Children's ethnic, cultural, religious and other needs are considered within the placement plan. Children receive encouragement and opportunities to develop their talents and interests.

The service is looking to improve its short break provision for children with disabilities

and is working corporately to ensure that children receive the best and most appropriate services to meet their individual needs. As a result there has been a reduction in the number of children needing short breaks. Plans are in place to improve training to these carers to equip them with more of the specialist skills required to look after children with more complex health needs.

Planning meetings are held prior to placement with short break foster carers. Long introductory periods enable the children to get to know the carers before they stay overnight. Foster carers are encouraged to work closely with parents. Parental consent to medication is provided along with information about the child's health and other needs. Foster carers receive supervision and support from the service in the same way as all other carers.

Children are encouraged to achieve educationally and foster carers are supported to establish effective working relationships with schools. Supervising social workers routinely consider education matters during their supervisory visits to carers and identify and record any concerns and actions to be addressed. Training is currently being rolled out to staff and to foster carers highlighting the importance of education and the use of Personal Education Plans (PEPs) and empowering them to work effectively with schools. Foster carers are not routinely included in the development and review of the PEP, which could lead to important information being overlooked. All foster carers are provided with a computer and are trained in internet safety.

Liverpool has a virtual school for its looked after children, known as Looked After Children Education Support (LACES). Team managers work closely with the LACES team to ensure that the education of the children within the fostering service is prioritised and children receive the support they need in school. All schools which looked after children attend receive additional funding and are expected to put in resources as necessary to promote the education of the looked after children. Additional support is provided through LACES where necessary and children's attainment levels are carefully monitored. There have been significant improvements in children's levels of attendance and attainment.

The importance of early years education is recognised and children and staff have been provided with guidance and support as necessary to meet the needs of particular children. Monitoring of this project has shown good outcomes for children. For example, foster placement breakdown and exclusion from mainstream school has been avoided. A number of children have been successfully integrated into mainstream school with settled behaviour in the classroom, needing little or no further educational support. All foster carers are encouraged to enrol young children into early years settings.

A 'reading recovery' project undertaken with Key Stage 1 children during 2006/07 has enabled many of them to catch up with their peers and early results indicate that they have continued to make good progress. This scheme is to be further developed to reach more children next year.

Additional support to Key Stage 2 and three children has included one to one

tutoring, the provision of a fortnightly homework club and individualised packages of support according to assessed need. LACES works closely with teachers and foster carers to identify the best way to help each child improve his level of attainment.

Grade A* - C in five or more GCSEs was achieved by 10 percent of looked after children in Liverpool in 2006 which is in line with similar local authorities. The service predicts that as a result of the additional levels of support to children, 13% of children should achieve five or more GCSEs grade A* - C in 2007. Predicted grades for all Standardised Assessment Test (SAT) results are also higher than in previous years.

School attendance is monitored and promoted and there has been a reduction in the level of truancy by children in foster care. Children who persistently truant have been identified and consideration has been given to the best ways to support each individual. Children are given incentives to attend school where appropriate. For example, children who have achieved 100% attendance have received free tickets to see an Everton football match. Wherever possible, children remain at their own school and schools are supported to manage unacceptable behaviours with the result that fewer children have been excluded from school. Where exclusion is necessary, the child is supported to attend alternative education or training.

Some foster carers expressed frustration at the lack of support for children leaving school and entering the work or college environment. The fostering service is working corporately to address this. Plans are in place to provide a small number of work placements and training opportunities for young people in foster care within the local authority.

An annual achievement award event recognises the efforts children have made to improve. Foster carers, social workers, teachers and others can nominate a child for an award. Children who have made significant improvements in school attendance or attainment levels also receive rewards, such as trips out.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Contact arrangements are included in placement plans and children who participated in the inspection know what they are and said they were happy with the arrangements. Supervising social workers regularly check that arrangements for contact are satisfactory. The importance of contact is emphasised at pre-approval and core training and foster carers are encouraged to facilitate contact where possible. Contact is supervised where necessary in accordance with the child's care plan or any court orders. Foster carers are encouraged to record the impact of contact on children. The service has recognised this is an area for development and plans to improve its consultation with children, clarity of planning and training of carers in contact issues.

Children's views are routinely sought prior to their own statutory review and the

foster carer review. Children are being encouraged to participate in the youth parliament and social work staff, teachers and foster carers have been asked to encourage looked after children to get involved so that their views are heard.

Senior social workers have taken responsibility for increasing children's participation in the development of the service to ensure their views are heard and where possible acted upon. All children in foster care have been invited to participate and those who have come forward have been involved in the development of a new children's guide and are taking part in a consultation group about safeguarding issues. Plans are in place to consult with children over a range of issues including how to engage more children in the consultation process. Finance has been made available to train and pay children to participate in recruitment and selection of staff and foster carers. Children's participation days are held regularly throughout the year, focusing on specific facets of the service.

Foster carers gave examples of children making a positive contribution to society by attending the deaf centre in order to learn sign language

Every child has received a copy of the children's guide. There is a service level agreement with the National Youth Advocacy Service (NYAS) to provide children with independent support and advice as necessary. Foster carers reported that children use this valuable service.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

Inspectors saw examples of good pathway planning, the young peoples needs have been assessed and actions have been identified to ensure they receive support in accessing further education and work placements. They receive support from carers and support workers who focus on identified tasks to prepare for independent living. However, this practice is not consistently applied and a number of foster carers and children highlighted poor planning and a lack of support for children moving on to independence, especially from family and friends placements. Foster carers expressed frustration about the lack of information provided to young people about financial management, attending university or living alone. Some said little support is given to prepare young people for future independent living and that some young people are encouraged to move into their own accommodation when they are clearly not yet ready to look after themselves. A respite carer said she has received no advice in how to help a young person with disabilities achieve economic well-being.

Foster carers receive above average allowances and expenses to cover the cost of looking after the child. Additional payments are available and are linked to the special needs of the child. Treatment foster carers receive a wage for looking after children with particularly complex needs and challenging behaviours. Family and Friends carers receive the basic level of the fostering allowance for mainstream carers. They are paid from the date of the date of the placement and not from the date of approval.

Plans are in place to introduce 'Payment for Skills' in April 2008 and foster carers are involved in the development of this system. Twenty six carers are currently enrolled

Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

The statement of purpose was updated in May 2007 and a copy provided to all foster carers. It clearly sets out the aims of the service. A colourful and informative children's guide is available. Following consultation with children, it is in the process of further development. In its current form it is not suitable for children who are not good readers of English.

Three team leaders manage the service jointly and each focuses on different aspects of the service. Team leaders are qualified and experienced in the delivery of fostering services and they work well together as a team. The procedures for monitoring the service and ensuring quality performance are not yet sufficiently robust and the service recognises this as an area for development. Clear lines of accountability are in place and known to staff. Good systems are in place for the monitoring of children placed at independent fostering agencies. Carers are provided with up to date, clear financial information.

Staff are well supervised and supported and are clear about their roles. They receive regular one to one supervision and team meetings are held fortnightly. A rolling programme of training is available to both staff and to carers and the content is regularly reviewed and updated to take account of the changing needs of the service. Staff are enabled to access external training to increase their skills and effectiveness in their role and to aid their professional development.

A range of successful, imaginative recruitment strategies has led to an increase in the number of carers being assessed. Prospective carers are responded to quickly and efficiently. The effectiveness of individual campaigns is monitored and the information used to plan future advertising. The quality of leaflets and publicity materials is high. The content is jargon free and contains diverse images and information aimed at reaching a wide cross section of the population. Established foster carers are consulted about recruitment and a group of them take part in events and are willing to be interviewed by the press and radio.

Competency based assessments are carried out at an assessment centre. Plans are in place to introduce the British Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) Form as the main assessment tool within the next few months. This is to improve the quality of the information gathered during the assessment process so that better matching can take place for children.

The service is now almost fully staffed and there has been a marked reduction in staff turnover, leading to greater stability for carers and children. The staff team expressed confidence in the team leaders and said their views are taken into account

in the development of the service. Staff described an inclusive, welcoming team where everyone's skills are valued and respected.

Each foster carer is supervised by a named, qualified social worker. Good corporate parenting ensures strong links are in place with education, health, employment and leisure services, children and carers can access support easily. This includes advice on behaviour management and children's mental health.

Not all family and friends carers are clear about the role of the supervising social worker. Supervision to carers is given at least once every three months or more often if required. Support workers provide specific advice and support where needed. Out of hours support is available. Most carers who participated in the inspection spoke positively about the level of support provided within the service. Comments include, 'our support worker is brilliant...always listens and helps if she can' and 'our social worker does a fantastic job and is always there when needed'.

Although not all foster carer reviews have been done in the last 12 months, a system has been introduced to ensure that by the end of this year and in the future, all reviews will be carried out annually.

Foster carers have been issued with an updated handbook that is well set out, easy to read and informative. Supervising social workers consider whether they are meeting the 'Every Child Matters' outcome areas for each child and check their recording at supervisory visits. A pro-forma is used to record the visit and the foster carer is issued with a copy.

Foster carer support groups include specialist groups for carers of asylum seeking children, men, family and friends carers and mainstream carers. Each is held every three months and include information giving and training. Carers are encouraged to attend training with varying degrees of success. The service is introducing new systems for enrolling on courses to make access to training easier as it is recognised that many carers are unable to attend during the working day. Plans include taking training packs out to family and friends carers, online training and evening and weekend events.

Most administrative records are held electronically and include records of allegations, complaints, unauthorised absences by children and disrupted placements. Inspectors found these records were not all accurate or up to date. Information obtained from investigations is used to inform the development of the service and implement practice changes where appropriate. Foster carer files are audited, however, it is not clear who will address shortfalls in the records or when these have been dealt with.

Paper files are also held on carers and contain the information that cannot be held electronically. Inspectors found gaps in the information held on some carers. Exemptions are not routinely recorded on the foster carer's record.

The premises used by the fostering service are shared with other Liverpool City Council teams. The premises management department is responsible for monitoring

and addressing security and health and safety issues.

The kitchen used by the fostering service is unsatisfactory. Crockery is kept on work surfaces and is not covered, some is chipped and cracked and cupboards are not clean. Portable electrical equipment, including fans and toasted sandwich makers, have labels which show that they have not been tested within the last 12 months.

Flexible working arrangements mean that there is sufficient space for staff, who can use any desk or workstation available. Staff are issued with a range of electronic equipment that enables them to work effectively and efficiently. Foster carers can easily contact the service by telephone or email.

The local authority has a large number of family and friends carers and has focussed on improving the services to them. It has clearly been successful in raising the levels of supervision, support and training they receive. Arrangements for emergency and immediate placements with a relative or friend are satisfactory. Full assessments, which are comprehensive and analytical, are carried out by the child's social worker and are presented to the fostering panel for consideration. The panel does not always receive information about CRB, referee and medical checks within the required timescales and prior to panel. There are robust systems for the panel to monitor the return and results of these checks.

Family and friends carers attend a Skills to Foster programme of pre-approval training as it is recognised they are more comfortable with this. They have access to the same training as mainstream foster carers.

Family and friends carers who participated in the inspection were unanimous in praising the support they receive from support workers and the children's social workers. The support workers have been successful in developing positive working relationships and helping family and friends members understand their role and responsibilities as foster carers.

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
6	ensure that where a child is placed with foster carers for more than 24 hours, the placement is consistent with the terms of the foster carer's approval status and foster care agreement (Fostering Service Regulations 2002, 33,34)	28/07/2007

12	review the arrangements for giving consent to medical or dental treatment (Fostering Service Regulations 2002, 34(3))	31/08/2007
15	ensure that all the information required by schedule 1 is evident on staff and panel members' files (Fostering Service Regulations 2002, 7 and 20)	30/11/2007
4	improve monitoring systems to ensure the service runs effectively and decisions are made in a timely fashion (Fostering Service Regulations 2002, 42)	30/11/2007
8	ensure records of disrupted placements are accurate and monitor all unplanned placement endings so that information gathered can be used to improve the quality of the fostering service and reduce the number of placement moves for children (Fostering Service Regulations 2002, 42)	31/08/2007

Recommendations

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

- record details of immunisations on the child's health plan
- identify who is responsible for addressing assessed needs in the child's health action plan
- ensure that all managers, staff, foster carers and children clearly understand the policy on the use of restraint in foster care
- make unannounced visits to all foster carers at least once a year
- make clear on the file audit form which actions are to be followed up and by whom
- establish closer working with the social work teams so that foster carers routinely have the opportunity to contribute to the child's Personal Education Plan
- make the children's guide more concise and publish it in different forms so that all children who use the service can easily access and understand it
- ensure the premises used for the fostering service are clean and safe
- identify children's sleeping arrangements in every foster carer's review
- check that foster carers are maintaining their records appropriately and encourage them to keep a daily diary
- approve carers to take children on temporary assessment placements according to their skills and competencies and ensure this is recorded on their terms of approval
- ensure that carers update their safer caring policies with the arrival of each new child
- ensure that updated CRBs are obtained on all members of the fostering household aged 16 and over and renew these every 3 years, in accordance with the service's policy
- ensure that the foster home can comfortably accommodate all who live there before granting an exemption
- notify the foster carer in writing of any proposal to exceed their approved number of children and retain a copy of the letter on the foster carer's file

