

# Cumbria County Council Family Placement Scheme

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

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<b>Date of last inspection</b>	19/12/2006

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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

Cumbria Social Services Fostering Service currently has approved fostering households and this includes carers who are part of the family link services offering short breaks to families with children with disabilities, friends and family carers and specialist carers who look after young people who are on remand or are difficult to place.

The service has temporary carers offering placements in an emergency and medium to long-term care. The service has permanent carers who provide long term care as an alternative to adoption. The friends and family carers provide care to children who are known to them and this may be on a short or long-term basis.

### Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

This announced inspection was carried out over four days by two inspectors. The inspection included interviews with the head of service, general manager for Looked After Children (LAC), the fostering manager, panel chair, clinical psychologist, LAC nurse, various members of staff, head of education service for LAC, which is called Looked After Children Education Service (LACES) a reviewing officer, placement manager, complaints manager, a telephone interview with the children's rights officer and two team managers. Various files and records were reviewed and a case tracking exercise was carried which included visits to seven carers and discussions with children placed. A meeting of the south panel was observed in the week before the inspection. Questionnaires were sent to fifty children, carers and placing social workers, a good number of carers and young people returned these and many contain positive comments.

A monitoring visit was undertaken in December 2006 to assess the progress made on the requirements and recommendations made at the inspection in May 2006.

### Improvements since the last inspection

Since the last inspection in May 2006, the service has separated into two functions of fostering and adoption and a new fostering manager was appointed in late summer. Together with the general manager and fostering team managers, the manager has worked on the requirements and recommendations made at the last inspection and the fostering development plan. Overall, the service has made many improvements and this was confirmed by the comments made by staff and carers.

The health care plans created following the health care assessments are now

distributed to carers and the overall number of looked after children having a health care assessment has increased.

The staffing levels in all teams are now more stable and most of the staffing vacancies have been filled and plans are in hand to fill the vacant posts. No agency staff are employed at the present time.

The manager has developed a carer recruitment strategy and 14 more carers have been recruited.

A new independent panel chair has been appointed and new panel members have been recruited, new policies and procedures have been developed, and training has been delivered by the panel chair.

The matching of children to placements has improved with the appointment of a placements coordinating manager and a greater focus on finding appropriate placements for young people. In turn due to the increase staffing levels placements are monitored more robustly.

### **Helping children to be healthy**

The provision is satisfactory.

A good proportion of the young people placed have undertaken their health care assessments and plans are in hand to encourage older teenagers to attend their appointments. The LAC nurses and where appropriate health visitors, provide a good service to foster carers and young people and various initiatives including the healthy birthday scheme and the let's make it happen training have been developed in conjunction with young people and carers. Carers have copies of the health care action plans which are created following the health care assessments and all those interviewed are aware of the health care needs of the children placed.

The clinical psychologist for looked after children provides a good service including some individual consultancy work and training. Access to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) was reported to be good and access to community dentists is improving.

The managers are aware of the areas for development. These include an increase in the number of carers attending health based training, to develop appropriate policies and procedures on smoking, the effective implementation of the recording and notification of illness and medication and providing training on sudden unexplained death syndrome.

## **Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe**

The provision is satisfactory.

The head of service, fostering manager and general manager for LAC are suitable people to manage the service and have appropriate qualifications and experience to run the service.

The carers seen on this occasion and at the last inspection, are providing a good service. Children and young people are making progress with some positive outcomes. Those who were interviewed or returned their questionnaires are satisfied with their living arrangements and made positive comments about their carers.

The arrangements for matching have improved since the last inspection. A placement coordinator manager has recently been appointed and is responsible for arranging placements taking into account the views of the fostering staff. A commissioning strategy has not yet been developed although this is planned. The staff said that in their opinion they are not aware of any unsafe placements. The placements are monitored through the placement tracking panel which meets fortnightly, and the placement support panel if the placement is experiencing some difficulty, which meets monthly. The membership is drawn from a number of agencies.

The service has developed new policies and procedures for carers in relation to safe caring. However, not all carers have in place safe caring policies, up to date annual reviews, annually reviewed health and safety checklists and unannounced visits. The friends and family carers are not yet allocated although plans are in hand for this to happen at the end of July. No risk assessment has been undertaken to ascertain where there are areas of risk.

The majority of staff seen are competent, loyal, committed, aware of the needs of the service and the children placed.

The panel is chaired by an experienced, well respected social care practitioner who ensures that panel business is managed effectively and thoroughly. Carers are invited to the panel. The panel are rigorous and are seeking to improve the overall quality of the work presented. The panel membership meets the National Minimum Standards (NMS), Although the panel minutes are detailed, occasional errors can affect the meaning of the work. The head of service who acts as the agency decision maker is thorough in her work and has on occasion asked for additional information or amended a decision made by the panel.

## **Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do**

The provision is satisfactory.

The service receives a good service from the LACES team, who are aware of all the looked after children and monitor their progress. The team are available for consultation when young people need additional support or assistance. The team

have developed various initiatives to further develop the service and are currently working to increase the overall attendance of looked after children at school. Some of the young people have made good progress at school and the service is working to extend the opportunities for young people who cannot maintain full time school placements. Some young people have achieved good results in external examinations however, the service recognises that there are few opportunities for young people who are not achieving, particularly in years 10 and 11.

The service is aware of the issues relating to equality and diversity and this is a challenge to them. The service have a training programme and a new strategy has been implemented. Good practice was observed in the service being provided to a young person with disabilities.

The service recognises that the shared care scheme needs further development and was not inspected on this occasion.

### **Helping children make a positive contribution**

The provision is good.

Carers and young people are aware of their contact arrangements and some carers are managing complex contact arrangements. Although the arrangements are not very clear on the file, they were known to the carers and young people who said that they could see the people they wanted to. The service is aware of the restrictions made by the lack of suitable accommodation and the long journeys some children, particularly small children are having to make. The issue of transport for looked after children has been the subject of a consultation project with young people and the issues raised are being considered by elected members and the head of service. Contact issues are considered during the matching process.

Cumbria employs a children's rights officer who leads a team which includes advocacy workers and participation officers. The team have developed a number of projects which are well regarded by managers, social workers, carers and young people who have been involved. Some carers said that involvement in the work has increased the confidence and awareness of the young people concerned. The young people receive a regular newsletter and the various projects have included consultation on and participation in their statutory reviews, moving on from care and transport.

All young people who were interviewed or responded to the questionnaires were aware of how to make a complaint and the range of people they could talk to. The complaints officer currently deals with complaints from children and adults and some of the information is not child appropriate. There are plans in hand as part of the restructuring, to provide a complaints service just for children and young people.

It was reported that almost all statutory reviews are up to date and that the number of young people taking part in their reviews is increasing, although it is recognised that this remains an area for development.

## **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is satisfactory.

Carers are satisfied with their level of payments, which are higher than the rates proposed by Fostering Network and are paid according to their skills and qualifications. There remains some dissatisfaction with the payments of allowances and the managers are aware of this and are working to ensure the system for payment of allowances is consistent.

There was a mixed response from carers, staff, other professionals and young people regarding the pathway service with some positive comments given on how they had assisted young people to move onto independent living. The managers recognise that carers need more training on developing independent living skills with young people. That this can be a difficult time for carers and young people and more work is required in general understanding of all the issues by those concerned.

## **Organisation**

The organisation is satisfactory.

Since the last inspection, the service has split into the two functions of fostering and adoption and a new manager was appointed in late summer and has worked together with the general manager towards the development of the service. However, the service is facing more restructuring in the autumn to bring education, health and children's services into one service.

The restructuring has created three teams covering distinct areas of Cumbria and staff are now developing their new teams with revised policies, procedures and new methods of working. Most staff are satisfied with the new arrangements and reported that they receive regular supervision and training opportunities. The case loads and taking the challenges of travel into account appear to be generally manageable.

The service overall has a few staff vacancies and there are plans in hand to fill the vacant posts and some assessment work is being undertaken by staff on short term contracts.

The service has a recruitment plan and has had some recent success in recruiting carers and the work is ongoing. A senior practitioner has been appointed who will lead on recruitment which is seen as a priority for the service. However, because Cumbria still has an insufficient number of carers, matching children and making good placement choices for all young people still remains a challenge.

The standard of the assessments seen, varied in style and quality but overall consistency should be apparent as the panel's work takes effect. The manager recognises that there is more work to do to ensure that the assessment format is the



most appropriate for carers being assessed.

The majority of carers reported that they receive supportive service from staff but that this can be inconsistent and that some carers have until recently been without an allocated worker. However, carers are resilient and have coped without an appropriate level of support and have supported each other through informal networks. Carers receive regular supervision, access to training and support groups. Carers who were seen said that they found the support groups and training good. Although all carers have been provided with a revised foster care agreement, not all the agreements have been signed.

Although a range of training is offered to carers, the uptake of places is generally low as is attendance at support groups and the managers are aware of this and are working to improve matters in line with the NMS.

The records seen varied in quality, although there was some improvement in the organisation of the children's files held by placing social workers. Various documents were missing or not up to date. Staff do not routinely read the records kept by foster carers.

The various administrative records seen are satisfactory.

It has been of some concern since the last inspection that the friends and family carers are not allocated and although advised at the monitoring visit to carry out a risk assessment, this work was not completed. The inspectors were advised that following a new appointment these carers will have a dedicated worker.

## 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	create an effective policy on smoking for carers.	15/09/2007
12	implement effectively the revised policy on the notification and recording of medication and illness.	15/09/2007
12	provide training on sudden and unexplained infant death.	01/10/2007
9	ensure that all carers have individually written safe caring policies.	30/09/2007
6	ensure that all carers have a health and safety checklist in place and that this is reviewed annually.	30/09/2007

9	ensure that all carers receive at least one unannounced visit per year.	30/09/2007
30	ensure that there are procedures in place to ensure that all carers have an annual review	30/09/2007
32	allocate the friends and family carers to a named worker.	31/08/2007
15	ensure that all foster carers have a signed foster care agreement.	31/10/2007
2	make appropriate arrangements with ofsted for the manager to be the named manager for the service with a appropriate address for correspondence.	31/08/2007

## Recommendations

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

- continue with the review of the share care scheme.
- provide a children's complaints officer.
- provide training for carers and other professionals on development of independent living skills and leaving care issues generally.
- develop a process for the evaluation of the effectiveness of all the newly implemented policies and procedures for staff and carers.
- continue to recruit a sufficient number of carers to meet the needs of the children placed.
- review the training plan to ensure that the training provided meets the NMS.
- continue to encourage carers to attend training and support groups.
- ensure that staff read the records kept by foster carers.