

Northumberland 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

The family placement service of Northumberland County Council provides a range of foster carers for children and young people looked after by the authority. The service recruits, assesses, trains and supports foster carers. Children in need of a range of placements, including short term, long term and respite care are placed with foster carers assessed to meet their needs.

The team is based in Tweed House, Hepscott Park. At the time of the inspection it was providing a service to 161 approved foster carers. 155 girls and 179 boys were in placement across the county.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

The fostering team provides a good service to children and foster carers. Carers and children are well matched. Education and health needs are identified and a range of resources is available to provide support in these areas. Foster carers are well supported and do not feel pressurised to take children whose needs they are not able to meet. The independent reviewing process of foster carers provides quality assurance information about carers' abilities and needs.

The fostering panel is effective, experienced and well chaired. It provides robust independent scrutiny of the family placement service. The family placement team is well staffed and well managed. Areas of improvement, some of which the service was already aware, are identified and have been responded to positively by the manager.

Improvements since the last inspection

A system has been introduced to manage the placements of children under Regulation 38 of the Fostering Services Regulations 2002. This ensures more effective assessments of carers, particularly relative carers. It has improved the overall management and monitoring of the process.

A new and more effective 'Safe Care' agreement has been introduced to ensure key issues are identified. The reporting and recording systems for allegations and significant events now provides more effective monitoring of practice. Staff files contain all the information required by the Fostering Services Regulations 2002. Children and young people are provided with information to enable them to know how to complain if necessary. Out of hours support is effective and appreciated by the foster carers.

Foster carers' reviews are completed on time and presented to the fostering panel

where required.

A number of systems have been introduced to ensure the views of young people are obtained for their reviews.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

The fostering service promotes the health of children and young people through a range of policies, procedures and practices. Foster carers are aware of their responsibilities to ensure that children's health needs are identified and met. They are supported by social workers from both the placing teams and the family placement team.

The initial placement planning meeting sets out the key issues to be dealt with. The progress of the child's placement is checked both through the contact and supervisory meetings that are the responsibility of the placement worker and the statutory review process. The review monitors all aspects of the child's care and sets out actions that need to be taken.

Children are well cared for. The service can demonstrate that it works with foster carers to improve children's health. Children are registered with GPs, dentists and opticians. They also have access to specialist health care where this is required. Foster carers receive training in a range of health-related topics.

The designated nurse for Looked After Children (LAC) is based in the Children's Services Department. This arrangement promotes the integration and coordination of support to foster carers. The designated nurse provides support and training to foster carers and liaises with local health services. She has the primary responsibility of ensuring that all children's health assessments are carried out. The nurse has extensive knowledge of children in placement and the foster carers with whom they are placed.

Not every foster carer is clear about their delegated consent to obtain medical treatment for children in placement. The main way in which consent is provided is through the 'Looking After Children' documentation system. Not every carer has written consent or is able to demonstrate that it is available. An additional documentary system for providing consent has been introduced. This has not yet been provided to all carers.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is satisfactory.

Children are placed with foster carers who can meet their needs and care for them safely. Foster carers' homes are subject to health and safety checks at the time of initial assessment. These checks are updated every year or if circumstances change. The health and safety checklists are not always signed or dated. It can therefore be difficult to assess to which period they relate.

Foster carers look after children within the terms of their approval. The services use

the LAC documentation as the primary source of information to be provided to children. It is not clear as to which of these documents is to be provided for different types of placements, or within what timescales. Some foster carers do not have all the information on children in placement, or have information relating to previous placements. This includes the availability of birth certificates.

The service produces a document to co-ordinate with the LAC documentation as the foster placement agreement. This takes different forms, is not signed by the relevant parties and does not always relate to individual children. It is not clear how often it is reviewed to ensure it is an accurate description of the key elements of the placement.

A range of policies, procedures and training is provided to foster carers to ensure they are able to care for children safely and know how to respond if problems arise. Training for foster carers emphasises their responsibilities to children. The service is looking at the development of a range of different forms of learning for foster carers.

Carers are able to demonstrate how they support children in sometimes difficult and challenging circumstances. Young people recognise the support they receive from their foster carer and how it enables them to feel secure and cared for.

Staff are employed with the recruitment and selection procedures of the County Council.

The fostering panel works well in approving and reviewing foster carers. It is developing its role to provide advice and guidance to staff on a range of issues relating to the family placement service. It has a strong and experienced membership that offers robust and independent guidance on all matters presented to it. The panel does not yet have an independent member who has been placed with foster carers, or whose child has at any time been placed with foster carers.

There are plans for the panel to review and develop its performance so that it can continue to fulfil its responsibilities effectively. Although the panel has a clear role in quality assurance it does not yet formalise that information into the production of a written report.

The panel chairperson is planning to develop the relationship between the panel and the independent reviewing officers. They are responsible for the reviews of foster carers. Joint training is planned for the panel and reviewing officers.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Although the demographic make up of the area is predominantly white British the fostering service sets out to recruit carers from all ethnic backgrounds. It also works to ensure foster carers have access to a range of policies, practices, resources and training to promote issues of ethnicity, cultural difference and sexual orientation.

The fostering service works with other parts of the County Council to promote the

educational achievement of children. Children placed in the fostering service have their educational needs identified. They are provided with a range of resources and support to ensure they achieve their potential.

Education issues are identified in initial assessments. They are incorporated into placement planning issues and monitored through the statutory review process. Foster carers receive regular support and supervision from their identified family placement worker. This supervision addresses the educational needs of children in placement and the abilities of the carer to provide support.

The Education Support for Looked After Children (ESLAC) team provides direct support to children and carers. This includes specific assistance by a designated mentor. There are two teachers and a youth worker who all work with children where additional educational assistance and liaising with schools is required.

The Education Psychology Service has two educational psychologists to work directly with schools and children and provide support, training and advice to carers. Foster carers and young people recognise the value of this support.

Foster carers are the main point of contact with schools. They receive training in education matters and are provided with education-related information from the point of their approval. They contribute to a child's personal education plan. Carers receive financial assistance in providing uniforms, equipment, school trips and activities. Children taking GCSEs are given laptops to guarantee their access to a computer.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The contact needs of children in placement are identified at the beginning of placement. Foster carers are aware of their responsibilities in promoting and supporting contact for young people with a range of family members. Training for carers emphasises the significance of contact for children in placement and the role of the carers in supporting that contact. Young people describe the contacts they have with their families and how they are supported by a range of people, especially the carers, to have that contact.

Contact issues are monitored through the statutory review process. The family placement workers ensure that contact issues are dealt with through regular supervisory visits to carers. The ability of the foster carer to manage contact is checked through the annual review process.

Carers are not always clear if they have the necessary documentation, particularly copies of legal orders, where a restriction of contact is in place.

There is a range of practices designed to encourage children and young people to express their views and feel involved in the planning and delivery of their care. Young people are encouraged to attend their review meetings. A computer based system which allows young people to share their views by completing an electronic questionnaire has been introduced.

The authority has commissioned an independent advocacy service and this includes a dedicated worker for looked after children. The authority has also produced a

questionnaire specifically for looked after children.

The role of the independent reviewing officer and the children's Participation and Information officer provides young people with the opportunities to become involved in focus groups and consultation projects about specific issues of service delivery and development.

Children say they feel well looked after and are able to talk to people, particularly their foster carers. Social workers responsible for the children in placement visit regularly and see the children alone. Young people are encouraged to complete a questionnaire at the end of their foster placement.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

Training is available to enable foster carers to support young people in the move into independence. Staff involved in the Leaving Care service provide advice and support to carers. More advice and guidance is provided to carers in the foster carer's handbook.

Young people looked after by the authority receive 'pathway' assessments to identify the support that is needed to move successfully into adulthood. Young people and carers are involved in the preparation of the assessments and plans. A supported lodgings scheme assists young people who reach 18 but who are not ready to become independent.

Foster carers receive the allowances and payments recommended by the Fostering Network. There is a written policy on fostering allowances and this is included in the handbook. Foster carers are clear about the payments they should receive and whom they should contact if the need arises. Payments are made on time and in full.

Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

The service's Statement of Purpose, currently being revised, refers to long term fostering being located with the permanence team. There is no reference to the nature of health support that is provided by the service.

The service provides good and effective support to foster carers. Foster carers comment very positively about the quality and availability of the support they receive, including out-of-hours support from a variety of people. Foster carers receive regular support and supervisory visits from their designated family placement worker. They also receive unannounced visits, although it is not always easy to identify from the file when these have taken place.

Foster carers have access to a wide range of training both pre- and post-approval. The service is aware of the difficulties of getting foster carers to attend the training that has been identified as important to them. The problems arise in part from the size of the county and the location of most of the population. Strategies are being devised that seek to improve the amount of training and development undertaken by

foster carers.

Each foster carer has a file. The structure of the file is not clear, and information is not always located in accordance with the agreed contents. The basic information front sheet provides very little information about the foster carer. The service creates a file on all children in placement. Again the structure is unclear and different files hold different information. The children's files do not replicate the files held by foster carers on children placed with them. As a result effective monitoring and auditing of files is compromised. Some files have been audited but the evidence of the audit is not always available.

Foster carers have a medical at the time of their initial assessment. They only have further medicals if their health circumstances change.

Foster carers have an annual review. The first of these is presented to the fostering panel. The fostering panel is also looking at a sample of other reviews to identify practice and procedural issues. The foster carer reviews are chaired by the independent reviewing officers. Statistical information highlights some of the issues which the service is planning to improve. This includes feedback from social workers on issues arising from placements that have ended. The fostering service is planning to improve both the quality and quantity of this information to enable it to develop its foster care and ensure that the reviewing process focuses on the practice of the foster carers, not the family placement service.

Supervising social workers are responsible for monitoring the quality of foster carers' practice. This includes the availability and organisation of documentation relating to children in placement. There is insufficient clarity about the specific tasks associated with this monitoring and consequently foster carers are operating differently in such areas as organising documentation and case recording.

Foster carers are required to keep records on the children placed with them. Practice varies between foster carers. Foster carers are not clear about what they should record or how or when they should record. The access of the young person subject to the recording is not always clear. Foster carers record in different formats. The location of the completed records is not clear.

Although a letter containing the terms of a foster carer's approval is sent, the foster care agreement itself does not contain information about the foster carers' terms of approval.

The service provides support to an increasing number of relative carers. Although this has not been organised into a specialist provision within the family placement team the assessment and support of relative carers is good. A new system of "staged" assessments ensures that placements are made within the Fostering Services Regulations 2002 and that the numbers of these placements are monitored. The family placement service and the fostering panel recognise the issues associated with this area of work and policies and practices continue to be reviewed in order for them to provide support to carers and children.

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 every carer has effective delegated consent to medical treatment for children in placement (NMS 12)
- ensure that foster carers receive all the appropriate information on children placed with them within the defined timescales (NMS 8)
- review the current foster placement agreement to ensure it provides information about specific elements of matching and support in accordance with Schedule 6 of the Fostering Services Regulations 2002 (NMS 8)
- ensure that the fostering panel produces a regular report on the quality of assessments and other matters presented to it (NMS 30)
- review the structure and content of children's and foster carers' files to ensure effective monitoring of practice (NMS 25)
- review the role of the supervising social workers so that foster carers operate effectively and consistently (NMS 21)
- review the policy and practice of foster carer recording to ensure it is implemented consistently and effectively by all carers (NMS 24)
- ensure the foster care agreement contains information about the foster carer's terms of approval. (NMS 22)