

Knowsley Council Fostering Service

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

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Inspector	Helen Humphreys
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Date of last inspection	16/10/2006

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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

Knowsley Fostering Team currently has 136 caring households who are caring for approximately 140 children. The service offers care in an emergency, short term, long term, permanent care and has carers who provide a service to children with a disability.

The service is appropriately managed and staffed and are part of a range of services provided by Knowsley Children's services.

The service recruits, assesses, trains and supports carers, experienced administrative staff provides assistance and support to the team.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This is good service providing appropriate levels of support to carers and there are good outcomes for children and young people placed. The service is well managed by a strong manager who supports a team of skilled and experienced staff who work well with carers. The service has good links with education and leaving care teams. The standard of work in relation to assessments, matching for long term care and training is particularly good.

The service is aware of the areas it needs to develop and these include work to develop the fostering panel, develop further opportunities for consultation and participation for young people and review all aspects on the arrangements for friends and family carers and make appropriate changes.

Improvements since the last inspection

The service is continually identifying and developing areas of practice to improve the overall service provided. The service has a action plan and managers are clear where deficiencies are evident and are seeking to develop this. Progress is monitored through the action plan.

Over the last 12 months the service has continued to review areas including the payment to skills scheme to carers, foster carers handbook and the training programme.

More fostered children have been invited to take part in carer's reviews and all have received a personal computer or lap top to help with education.

In the autumn the management structure was revised and two new senior managers were appointed. This has led to a re-structuring of the service and some long term vacancies which have been subject to 'acting up' arrangements have been resolved.

One of the most significant impacts on the fostering service was to change the decision making of the panels and now the role of the agency decision maker is at a more appropriate senior management level to ensure consistency and greater scrutiny.

Changes have been made to decision making in respect of friends and family carers and again these are now taken at a more appropriate level ensuring consistency and responsibility.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

The service promotes and supports the health and well-being of the children placed. Carers are provided with a range of training opportunities and this includes specific training for carers who are caring for children with additional needs. The carers are knowledgeable of health care matters and how to access appropriate services.

Most of the young people have had their health care assessments and plans are in hand to try and engage older children in the process. Access to the Community Adolescent Mental Health service (CAMHS) is good and all young people are screened for their emotional well being on admission to care.

Carers are supplied with appropriate health care information about young people. Good and appropriate advice and information is in the foster carer's handbook and a specific publication called 'Healthy, Happy Safe'. The service has engaged with a range of specific projects to raise health care matters with carers and young people.

The service has recognised that there is further work to develop and this includes updating the smoking policy in light of new guidance, incorporating the new induction standard for carers and obtaining more robust health care information on prospective carers.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is satisfactory.

There are appropriate procedures in place for the recruitment and selection of staff. However Criminal Record Bureau Disclosures (CRB) are kept on the files of carers and this practice does not comply with CRB guidance in relation to the storage of personal information.

The carers are providing a good service to the young people placed and most young people are making good progress. Health and safety checklists and safe caring policies are child and family specific and updated regularly. There is good use of unannounced visits which are undertaken at least annually. The carer's homes were found to be clean and maintained to good standards and most had adequate space to care for the young people placed.

The arrangements for matching for permanent and long term care are very robust. Carers are re-assessed and matching reports and assessments are presented to the Adoption and Permanence panel for review. The process and procedures are very thorough. The arrangements for matching children in an emergency creates some tensions which are acknowledged by the service, which is due in part to a lack of available placements for large sibling groups and older young people who have difficulties. There are few children placed with Independent Agencies and their use is pro-active and monitored. However the service uses incorrect terminology when placing children with carers outside their approval range, although appropriate procedures are in place and exemptions and changes of approval are monitored regularly at panel.

Carers are provided with appropriate training and advice on child protection and related matters. Issues of bullying and children being missing from home are noted and dealt with by staff and carers. Appropriate procedures are in place when allegations are made against carers and staff respond swiftly.

The service has recognised that the work of the fostering panel needs reviewing to ensure that it is acting robustly in all areas of its work and its decisions and role is respected within the authority. The panel membership does not meet the Regulations and does not review all initial annual reviews of carers, although procedures were amended during the inspection. The panel is chaired by a service manager at an appropriate level and the role of the agency decision has recently been changed to an appropriate senior manager. The panel minutes are detailed and robust.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The service has a very small number of children placed with specific cultural or religious needs. Carer's receive training on equality and diversity issues and assessments of carers addressed particular issues.

Carer's receive additional support if caring for children with disabilities and appropriate and additional training.

Children have access to a range of out of school activities and additional financial support is available.

Fostered children are supported to do well at school by their carers and by the service. A team of dedicated staff work in conjunction with schools to ensure that attendance and attainment is monitored and additional support is supplied if required. All young people in year 11 are provided with additional support and some young people had obtained good results in external exams and had positive futures. Young people are provided with support and advice to move into further and higher education and employment.

The service has engaged with a number of educational based projects including some relating to ensuring that fostered children have access to appropriate reading materials. Carers are provided with appropriate training.

The disability team and the fostering service work well together to provide a good and flexible service for families requiring short breaks. Carers are well supported with training and equipment and are knowledgeable about the specific needs of the children placed.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is satisfactory.

Contact arrangements are good and carers and young people were aware of them. Staff support carers when contact can create difficulties and provide training. Contact is taken into account in matching and is recorded on file.

The service recognises that it needs to do more to develop consultation and participation opportunities for young people. They have a service level agreement with the National Youth Advisory Service (NYAS), who undertake advocacy work and provides an independent visitors scheme.

The service operates Knowsley Action team for Youth-known locally as KATY which is a participation scheme run in conjunction with Merseyside Police to encourage looked after children in an activity and training programme. In conjunction with NYAS the service has recognised that it can consult young people on a developing new materials on a range of matters including complaints and in the development of a youth council. Fostered children are consulted during the carer's annual reviews.

However the leaflet for children to use to make a complaint is not age appropriate and although all young people knew who they would talk to if they had a concern, few knew about formal processes. The more recently placed children had not received a children's guide providing them with relevant information and none knew of their rights to read their own file.

All young people have statutory reviews within appropriate timescales. However the number of children actively participating either by consultation or attendance is limited and those who had attended had not found the process enjoyable.

The local association of carers is supported by the service both financially and by staff attending events and they provide a range of social activities for carers and young people.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

The leaving care service supports and helps young people who are aged over 15 and their carers well. All young people have an allocated worker and most have a written pathway plan. Young people are supported both emotionally and financially to stay within their foster placement beyond aged 16 and in some circumstances beyond 18. The service has specific projects to promote further education or employment and there are few young people aged over 16 who are not engaged in some form of employment or education. The leaving care handbook provides appropriate information and training is provided to carers and young people.

Knowsley operates a skill based payment scheme in addition to 'boarding out' payments. All carers who are on level 2 or above of the scheme receive payments which are above the nationally recognised rates. Some carers receive very good levels of payment. However level one carers which includes most of the friends and families carers are paid at a lower rate. Carers who provide care through the short break service often have to wait for payments and this is a long standing difficulty.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

This service is managed well.

The statement of purpose has been updated and distributed to carers. Few children had a copy of the Children's Guide and some of the information was not up to date. Some carers are not aware of the requirement that children have a copy of the document.

The staff are supported by a management structure and systems and processes are in place and are regularly reviewed. The staff have regular supervision and access to a range of training and development opportunities.

There is some difficulty at present with allocation of appropriate levels of administrative support to the fostering team, but this is being addressed.

The team has a vacancy and one member of staff is on sick leave this has had some impact on the service to some carers. The staff are well experienced, qualified and skilled in working with carers and young people placed.

The service has a range of carers and are aware of the need to continually recruit new carers and in particular those with specific skills. The recruitment strategy is well developed and the team are continually seeking to refine and improve this.

The standard of assessments of carers is good, in particular for general carers and those being assessed for long term or permanent care.

The service has a well resourced training programme and carers can access crèche facilities.

the standard of support provided to carers is good. Carers are very happy with the level of support they receive from the staff, this includes regular visits, phone calls, training, advice and information and access to services. However annual reviews of carers have taken place without the carer and initial reviews do not go to panel for review. Carers speak highly of the staff and in particular the manager and senior practitioner.

The majority of children's case records contained appropriate information and are well organised and ordered. Carers have appropriate information about the children placed.

Administrative records are accurate and up to date.

The arrangements for family and friends carers is subject to review and significant changes to decision making have recently been made, which is a positive move. The processes and procedures for all the arrangements from initial placement, assessment, allocation of staff, payment and support is to be reviewed. At present the panel is not able to influence effectively the time scales in respect of the completion of assessments which had affected the quality and viability of some placements. Most family and friends carers are not receiving the same service as general 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
30	ensure that the panel membership meets the Regulation. (Regulation 24(3) (5))	15/01/2008
21	review all initial carer reviews at the fostering panel. (Regulation 29 (5))	01/12/2007
21	ensure that the views of the carer is taken into account at the annual review. (Regulation 29 (3) (b))	16/01/2008

Recommendations

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

- ensure that Criminal Record Bureau Disclosures are stored in a way which

- complies with appropriate guidance. (NMS 25.4)
- ensure that the panel operates efficiently and effectively to ensure that good quality decisions are made and that it continues to perform a quality assurance function within the service.
 - ensure that all fostered children are aware of the processes for making complaints and that the system including the materials are age appropriate. (NMS 11.5)
 - ensure that there are effective methods for children to be consulted and participate in their statutory reviews. (NMS 11.3)
 - ensure that all fostered children know that they can access their files. (NMS 25.6)
 - ensure that carers providing short break care receive their payments in a timely way.
 - ensure that all appropriately aged children placed receive a children's guide. (NMS 1.5)
 - review all arrangements for the placing of children with friends and family carers.
 - ensure that friends and family carers are offered the same level of support and training as all other carers.