

Family Services - Placement & Adoption Services

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

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Inspector	Stella Henderson
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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 fostering service, which is part of Wakefield Metropolitan District Council family placement service, provides care for children and young people who are looked after by the Council. The fostering service offers a number of different fostering arrangements which include emergency, short and long term, permanence, respite, remand and care with family and friends.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

The purpose of this visit was to follow up on recommendations made at the last inspection and to undertake a key unannounced inspection. Five outcomes were inspected: Being Healthy, Staying Safe, Enjoying and Achieving, Positive Contribution and Organisation. Key National Minimum Standards (NMS) are met and the service has several strengths. In some areas, national minimum standards are exceeded.

Improvements since the last inspection

At the last inspection the registered person was required to ensure that matching considerations were recorded in foster placement agreements, and that risk assessments were undertaken. These requirements have been met which means that children and young people are placed with carers who are capable of meeting their needs and protected from avoidable hazards.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

Children and young people benefit from a consistently well-managed health assessment and action process. For example, on coming into the care system children and young people receive a comprehensive health assessment. This is usually undertaken by the Looked After Children's (LAC) nurse, who will assess their health status and ensure that all immunisations and other routine procedures are up to date.

In line with good parenting, health information is shared with foster carers which means that children and young people have someone responsible for their health needs on a daily basis. One child reported that, when they are ill, foster carers 'comfort me'. There is a highly effective care planning and formal review process and opportunities for informal discussion with the LAC nurse. This ensures that the health

and well-being of children and young people is regularly monitored. Following one such review, a young person commented that the LAC nurse 'made sure I had all my booster vaccinations.'

Registration with dentists, general practitioners, and opticians ensures that the basic, routine health needs of children and young people are met. Expert advice is sought where necessary through prompt referral to specialist services such as the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) for example. The health and well-being of children and young people is further enhanced by the direct involvement and support of the LAC nurse in more specific personal problems, such as dealing with personal hygiene, handling morbid obesity and discussing puberty.

Children and young people are helped to understand and be aware of the benefits of healthy eating and healthy lifestyles. They are encouraged to take part in sport and leisure activities which helps to improve their health, self-esteem and confidence. Young people are also given information about, and the opportunity to discuss issues such as sexual health and drug use, which enables them to make informed choices.

The fostering service provides healthy, nurturing environments which in the majority of cases exceed minimum standards. For example, the fostering service ensures that prospective carers are in good health before they are approved. Those who smoke are not allowed to care for children under five years of age, and smoking generally is discouraged. This protects children and young people from the effects of passive smoking.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

Children and young people are safeguarded by thorough and effective assessment of prospective foster carers. For example, unsuitable candidates are screened out at an early stage of the process. On successful applications, all statutory checks are undertaken, and each applicant's background is explored and parenting capacity is assessed. References are taken up and referees are interviewed. Comment is made on how prospective carers engage in preparatory training.

Fostering applications are scrutinised by the fostering panel that is properly constituted. Any recommendations the fostering panel make are carefully considered by the agency decision-maker before a decision is made about approval, however in some cases the reasons for recommendations are not clear. This undermines the validity of approvals which compromises the successful matching of children and young people with appropriate carers.

Once children and young people are placed with foster carers, they are protected by effective safeguarding systems that continue to assess the suitability of foster carers as well as support them in the fostering task. For example, foster carers receive regular supervisory visits and spot checks, and their status as foster carers is reviewed once a year.

When there are concerns about a foster carer's ability to meet the needs of children and young people in their care, professional or strategy meetings are held and reviews are brought forward if necessary. There is a system for de-registering carers who are no longer suitable to care for children and young people. Children and young people are further protected by practical safeguarding measures such as risk assessments, safe caring plans and health and safety checks for the fostering household.

Children and young people benefit from being matched with carers who have the skills and abilities to meet their needs. Risk and needs assessments are taken into consideration as part of this process, and appropriate information about the child or young person to be placed is provided within reasonable timescales. One carer commented 'they only place children with me that they feel I am capable of giving quality care to'. A social worker noted that 'foster carers provide a safe environment for young people's development'. Several young people commented that they were happy in their placements.

The fostering service provides clear guidance, advice and support which further safeguards children and young people. One social worker noted that 'Carers are familiar with the missing person policies and procedures and who they should contact'. One young person commented 'I was bullied in school so I told my carers and they spoke to the school about it.

Children and young people benefit from being able to have access to an advocacy service which provides additional safeguards for children and young people. This ensures they can seek independent help, advice and representation. Several young people stated that they are familiar with the complaints procedures and named those to whom they could turn to if they had concerns. Exit interviews also take place, which provides children and young people with the opportunity to talk about their experiences in placement.

Good communication between social workers and the fostering service also helps to protect children and young people. One social worker commented 'any issues are dealt with by the fostering service efficiently and quickly'. Another commented that there is 'excellent communication and good working relationships' with the fostering service.

Children and young people are safeguarded by efficient recruitment and selection systems that ensure only those who are thoroughly vetted are allowed to work in the fostering service. For example, appropriate statutory checks are undertaken and young people form part of the interview panel for relevant posts.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The fostering service ensures that carers are familiar with how to gain support and information on caring for those from different ethnic backgrounds and children with disability. For example, carers are able to liaise with teams who have expertise in disability, or who provide translation services. This enhances children's and young people's sense of identity and self worth.

Children and young people benefit from the high priority attached to meeting educational needs. Young people are actively supported to be ambitious and go on to university or college. A social worker commented that 'carers work well with the education service'.

There is an expectation that carers will attend parents evenings and maintain communication with schools. A young person stated that 'I have enough space and the right things to help me to do my college work including a computer'. The achievements of children and young people, whether educational or extra-curricular, are celebrated. This recognition helps to promote their self-esteem.

A dedicated education team provides help and encouragement to children and young people which enables them to progress and achieve. For example, children and young people are individually supported with mathematics, English and preparation for examinations. The education team also works closely with schools and foster carers to prevent exclusions. Children and young people enjoy the best opportunity to succeed at school by being punctual, from regular attendance and not being allowed to have time out of school to begin holidays.

Children with disabilities who receive short term breaks benefit from the continued close involvement of their families when they receive respite care. They are protected because carers must go through the same approval process as for main stream carers and are subject to the same fostering service regulations. There is a special needs budget to cover participation in leisure activities. This ensures that all children and young people have equal opportunity to develop new skills and interests.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

Where this is assessed as safe, the fostering service encourages and supports contact with family and friends. This enables children and young people to maintain a sense of identity and belonging. The views of children and young people are consistently taken into consideration when making such arrangements and this promotes a sense of control over events.

Foster carers are provided with effective training and information about contact and

support in how to manage these arrangements. Any concerns about the impact of contact is conveyed to the social worker. This ensures that children and young people are safeguarded by their carers who have an understanding of the implications of contact.

At a corporate level, the fostering service is excellent in regularly consulting with children and young people and encouraging their participation in the running of the service. For example, young people facilitate 'Total Respect' training for managers, councillors and foster carers, and sit on interview panels for relevant posts. This enables young people to feel respected and valued by the service. There are highly effective forums of looked after children who meet regularly with managers who are influential in shaping the service, through the 'U 'n' Us' and the Advocacy group, for example. One stakeholder commented that the fostering service 'respects and values young people's views'.

Through these groups, children and young people regularly provide consultation and advice to the fostering service provider and this has an effective impact on policy and practice. As a result, children and young people experience very practical improvement in their lives. For example, a new policy on pocket money is being devised after a survey among young people identified this as a problem.

The high level of participation in the formal statutory review process demonstrates that children and young people see value in, and benefit from that process. Age-appropriate consultation booklets are used to ascertain their views, and the views of children and young people are clearly recorded in reports. On a day to day basis, young people think that carers listen to and value their views.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The statement of purpose and children's guide clearly sets out the services offered by the fostering service. This enables children and young people to understand how their needs will be met and how to, for instance, secure access to independent advocacy or how to make a complaint.

Children and young people are well protected by systems which ensure that assessments, approvals and reviews of carers are managed and implemented effectively. For example, the fostering service recruits a range of carers to meet the needs of children and young people who come into the care system. The experiences, skills and motivation of prospective carers is thoroughly assessed before they are approved and allowed to foster.

Children and young people benefit from a well-managed service. They are looked after by carers who are themselves supported and supervised by an adequate number of sufficiently qualified and experienced staff. Good practice helps to protect and promote the well-being of children and young people placed with foster carers. For example, once approved, carers receive regular supervisory and unannounced visits and their performance is reviewed annually by an independent reviewing officer. Foster carers' homes are assessed annually to make sure that they provide a safe healthy and nurturing environment and are free from avoidable hazards.

The majority of records kept on children and young people are comprehensive with clear recording that outlines their journey through the care system. This give children and young people an understanding of important events and experiences in their lives. However, on some files there are gaps and omissions in information which undermines this understanding and self-esteem of children and young people.

Children and young people who are placed with friends and family benefit from receiving care from people who are already known and familiar to them which helps to promote a sense of identity and belonging. In some cases, however, the quality of recording and pattern of visiting are below accepted standards, which means that the needs of those placed with friends and family is compromised.

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 written foster placement agreements contain specific reference to element of matching (NMS 8.4)
- ensure that the reasons for panel recommendations are recorded (NMS 30.1)
- ensure that a comprehensive record is maintained for each child or young person (NMS 24.1)
- ensure that the support needs for family and friends carers are met in the same way as for any other carers (NMS 32.3)