

Calderdale 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

Calderdale fostering service provides foster carers who are recruited, trained, assessed, reviewed and supervised by the service and form part of a full range of accommodation for looked after children and young people.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

The purpose of this inspection was to check the progress of the service against all of the five outcome areas, Being Healthy, Staying Safe, Enjoying and Achieving, Positive Contribution, Economic Well Being and Organisation. Actions and recommendations made at the last inspection were also reviewed.

As a result of this inspection, three actions have been made. This includes the implementation of a clear smoking policy, behaviour management policy and the need for increased staffing to meet the needs of the service. Recommendations have been made regarding training, risk assessments, pathway planning process, statement of purpose, supervision of foster carers and the safe storage of information. However, there are significant strengths in the service that are sustained with good outcomes that are protecting the safety and welfare of children.

Improvements since the last inspection

At the previous inspection two actions were made. One relates to the arrangements for training foster carers who's first language is not English. This has now been met.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

The service promotes the health and wellbeing of children who are benefiting from a healthy lifestyle. Children are registered with relevant health professionals and those who need specialist health care are receiving these services. Foster carers are aware about helping children to keep healthy. Comments from foster carers include, 'They arrange an annual medical through the school nurse and remind us to arrange optical and dental checks. With regard to healthy lifestyles that is left to us to educate and inform together with small inputs from school'. Children seen in placement are thriving.

The service has very positive contacts with the Looked After Children's (LAC) nurse.

Children receive annual health checks and issues are picked up and addressed during this process. Foster carers are actively involved and will proactively raise any issues that have not been picked up during a health assessment and these are acted on. Children's health needs are monitored through their statutory reviews and the health steering group that includes input from the LAC nurse, fostering service and members from different parts of the local authority serves to ensure that issues do not get missed and their health needs are met. Comments from children include, 'Foster carers tell me about being healthy; sometimes school does too. I have a medical, I go to the dentist. I have my eyes tested'.

Foster carers have had basic training in health, hygiene and sexual health matters. However, not all have been trained in first aid. Positively, foster carers are taking appropriate advice and know what to do if an emergency situation arises, therefore, the outcome for children are not affected.

Some foster carers smoke and have not been given clear guidance about this from the service. Staff from the fostering service understand that foster carers who smoke no longer have children under five placed with them. It is also understood that foster carers should not smoke in the same room as children and should smoke outside. Not all foster carers are clear about the policy to ensure that children are free from smoking environments.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The manager is suitably qualified and experienced to run a fostering service and is currently pursuing a management qualification. There are sound systems in place to ensure that people who work in and for the fostering service are safe and suitable to work with children and young people. This includes all of the checks that the service is required to do, which includes taking up written references, followed up by telephone contact. The manager confirms that every staff member, foster carer and all adult members of the foster households has had a Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) check. Issues that may arise following a CRB check are thoroughly explored, recorded and considered through the assessment and panel process. All fostering social workers have appropriate qualifications and experience and are registered with the General Social Care Council (GSCC).

Visits to some foster care households indicate that children are receiving good quality care in healthy and nurturing environments. However, not all placements necessarily meet the accommodation standards but this has not affected the outcomes for children. For example, one of the placements visited only supports children and young people once in a four week period. Foster carers presented as clear about their responsibilities in terms of health and safety. Health and safety checks, including risk assessments of animals, are undertaken, however, these are not reviewed annually to take account of changes to the home or when placements change. Practice has improved in relation to checking car insurance and MOT details of foster carers. This is now done annually.

Children are matched with foster carers who are meeting their needs and the fostering service has a system in place that has been reviewed to improve the way that they record the process. Written foster placement agreements contain matching considerations, however, some lack consistency. For example, health and education information is sometimes lacking in detail, however, placement plans are in place which meets this shortfall.

Foster carers are generally very clear and well informed about the purpose of placements and describe how they carry this out. Foster carers say that there are very good planned pieces of work undertaken to introduce them to children and their families. Foster carers demonstrate a clear understanding of the need to work in partnership and communicate effectively with the families of children.

Some negative comments have been about instances when there is insufficient information provided by the placing authority before a placement is made. Comments include, 'No information was given about the past and behaviour problems. We have not received a great amount about the past so far'; 'The information we received was adequate but we have since found more information from social services which would have been helpful to have at the time of the placement'. Where children have unallocated social workers the matching process falls short as the needs of the child is not adequately known and it is not always possible to clearly assess whether a placement is appropriate due to sporadic involvement of field social workers' input. In these instances, the outcome for children has not been detrimental.

The fostering service has made imaginative use of resources and placements in the interests of supporting placements and raising outcomes for children. They are working creatively in terms of providing a service that is beneficial to children. Disruption meetings take place when there are breakdowns in placement and fostering social workers use lessons learned to inform them of future placements. The fostering service also recognises their own limitations and purchases out from agencies who are better at supporting emergency placements and same race placements. Reciprocal arrangements are in place with other local authorities whereby foster carers can be accessed if this is a more appropriate match.

All foster care households have safe care policies. These include the arrangements for appropriate dress, layout of the home, visitor's policy, Internet access, behaviour management and environmental constraints. This reduces the risk of unsafe practice and is designed to encourage best practice. Clear guidance is also in place for the foster carers regarding enhancing safe practice. They have a clear understanding of their plans and discuss how they put this in place to safeguard children and reduce the risk of allegations being made. Preparation training looks at child protection issues and making carers aware of how to keep children and themselves safe. There is information specifically provided for male carers in this respect also.

Foster carers spoken with are well informed about the background of the children placed with them and they have been able to seek information from family. However,

in some instances, lack of information from the placing authority means that those looking after children do not always have a clear knowledge of what is needed.

Foster carers know that corporal punishment is not an accepted form of behaviour management. This aspect is explored during initial visits, preparation group and assessment process and they sign the foster care agreement to this effect. Foster carers demonstrate that they understand the need to report significant events to the fostering service and are aware about the procedures when children go missing from home. There are systems in place to inform the service about the numbers and outcomes of allegations and complaints. Children know how to complain and are able to raise concerns that the fostering service act upon. Foster carers and young people are aware about the possibility of bullying behaviour. Comments made by the majority of children indicate that they are not bullied with the exception of a child who said they are bullied in school.

Foster carers have not seen the restraint policy. The fostering service is looking into specific behaviour management training for foster carers but this has not yet been agreed. The fostering service acknowledges that although restraint is not encouraged, it may need to be used on occasions and training in restraint would need to be delivered on an individual basis. There have been no incidents of restraint reported to the fostering service and a foster carer spoken with about restraint has developed appropriate means of managing behaviour without the need to resort to restraint.

The panel is properly constituted and includes membership from education and child health. The elected member vacancy is due to be filled. Observations of the fostering panel indicates a robust and democratic process whereby all panel members have a say that contributes to good safeguarding mechanisms. The fostering panel considers assessments to recommend approval, matching young people to long term foster carers, exemptions to the usual fostering limit, annual reviews and deregistration of foster carers. Recommendations are only made after full exploration of the issues presented and reasons for recommendation are clearly recorded. The fostering panel has an effective quality assurance role and reports back to the fostering manager, identifying any practice issues that may arise. Members of the fostering panel have recently received training and this has been positively received by them.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The fostering service has a proactive and positive approach to delivering a service that promotes diversity and equality to enhance the lives of the children. Overall, foster carers said that equality and diversity issues are dealt with very well. The fostering service focuses on attracting a wide range of foster carers from different backgrounds, taking into account the demographics of the area. Equality and diversity issues are explored during preparation training and foster carers agree to abide by the equality statement as part of the foster carer supervision agreement.

The fostering service works effectively to meet children's needs in relation to their ethnic origin, gender, religion, sexuality, disability, language and culture. Children are encouraged to pursue their hobbies and interests and are enjoying this. Workers from the fostering service are seeking advice from the Children with Disabilities Social Work Team with respect to meeting the needs of children with a disability. Children who are in trans racial placements are looked after by foster carers who can demonstrate that they are meeting children's needs with appropriate support and advice.

The fostering service promotes the educational achievement of children. They are very well supported by the Looked After Children Education (LACE) service. This is a very motivated and dedicated team who involve foster carers in all aspects of educational matters. Through a variety of educational projects and proactive support, children are encouraged to aim high and there are a number of educational packages to support them to do well educationally. These are well attended and children are making good progress in line with their abilities. Award events are held to recognise children's achievements. Foster carers describe the level of educational support to the children as 'excellent' and 'good'. Comments from foster carers include, 'My children never take time off school unless in an emergency. My children have been very well supported with their education', 'LACE service has been invaluable to us and the children over the past five years'. Comments from children positively indicate that they 'always' and 'sometimes' get the right help to be successful in their education. LACE also support young people who are reaching the age of leaving care into training and will support them with their college placements and job centre contact if needed. The fostering service has information systems in place to show educational attainment and numbers of children excluded from school. Foster carers with the appropriate skills are providing educational support to excluded children. This is time limited and has proved successful.

Short-term breaks are properly organised by the fostering service. Foster carers clearly recognise that they are respite carers and the main carer is central to meeting children's health and education needs.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Foster carers clearly understand the importance of promoting contact and are facilitating these arrangements as appropriate. Children are consulted about contact and their views are listened to. Foster carers are actively working in partnership with parents who are kept fully informed about the progress of their children. The service promotes contact by ensuring that foster carers are equipped at preparation training with the knowledge to help them to be involved in contact and planned introductions which may involve relatives. Restrictions about contact are made clear and are recorded. Foster carers are encouraged to discuss any difficulties about contact in their supervisory visits with their supervising social worker. Foster carers are recording and reporting the demeanour of children following contact visits.

The service ensures that children are consulted and are able to raise any concerns that they have about their care. All of the children who responded to questionnaires confirm that foster carers listen to them and take notice of their opinions. Children are contributing to their statutory child care reviews but sometimes these are held during the day when they cannot attend. Positively, foster carers are advocating on behalf of children in adult lead arenas and this along with the children's consultation documents ensures that the wishes and feelings of children are heard and taken into account in the decision-making process. Young people who responded to questionnaires confirm that they know how to complain, had information about the complaints process and said that they would talk to their foster carer about their worries. Children have access to the children's rights service who's prime remit is to advocate on their behalf.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is satisfactory.

Leaving care services to young people aged 16 plus is delivered by an organisation, commissioned by the fostering service. Young people get referred at 16 for pathway planning to take place. The organisation works primarily with the young person to take account of their wishes and copies of this plan are given to the young person and placing social worker. However, fostering social workers and foster carers are not routinely given copies of the pathway plan. This is not shared with the foster carer in case the young person says something detrimental about the placement. This process of consultation is not clear and does not lend itself to partnerships with foster carers or the fostering service. Despite being excluded from this process, foster carers are actively promoting opportunities for young people to develop the life skills that they need in preparing for adulthood. There is a clear commitment from the fostering service to help foster carers to undertake this task, for example, training and providing resources as appropriate.

Foster carers are paid a weekly fee and fostering allowance, which is updated annually. Foster carers are paid based on four levels of competency and in recognition of their skills. Payments are made 52 weeks whether or not a child is in placement. This system shows respect for the fostering task and encourages retention and stability of foster carers.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The statement of purpose clearly reflects the facilities and services provided and sets out the aims and objectives of the service. This document has not been formally approved by elected members. It is updated annually.

There is a sound management structure with clear lines of accountability. The management team is very experienced and they have the appropriate qualifications and skills to manage the service. Fostering social workers clearly understand their

role and that of the managers. They say they feel supported and are receiving appropriate supervision. New fostering social workers are provided with a proper induction and good support to undertake the fostering task. Training is ongoing and is based on a personal development system of plans and appraisals. External training is also available to them to develop their practice. The manager has good line management supervision and support from an external mentor.

The fostering service has sound systems in place to prioritise the workload and the fostering team are fully informed about the issues. However, there is insufficient staff to meet the needs of the service and there are some foster carers who do not have an allocated fostering social worker. Allocation meetings are regularly taking place and where there are no assigned workers these are managed by a duty system and tasks are promptly responded to. Although this issue is competently managed and the outcomes for children have not been affected, this is reactive management and not conducive to providing a proactive package of support for foster carers and indeed children. Positively there is a low staff turnover and staff feel well supported by managers and colleagues and are very committed to supporting placements.

There is good cross departmental working to ensure funding is available to meet the needs of children and fostering social workers understand the role of the placing social worker. There are reciprocal arrangements whereby if there are unallocated workers in either service the worker will pick up some of the responsibilities of the other worker. However, there is no written protocol of roles when the fostering social worker picks up the responsibility of the childcare team to ensure a clear understanding of roles.

The fostering service has a clear recruitment strategy for foster carers, which is informed by the children presented by the local authority. The designated publicity and recruitment officer is responsible for advertising and responds and deals with enquiries from prospective foster carers. The service is targeting foster carers through a number different media to meet the range of needs, such as short-breaks, support care, emergency fostering, short-term and long-term fostering. This system continues to work very well.

Foster care assessments are thorough, competency based and appropriate checks have been undertaken. Assessments are properly scrutinised during the panel process to ensure they demonstrate that children are placed with foster carers who can care and keep them safe. Fostering social workers show a sound understanding of the key issues in assessing the qualities, competences and aptitude for fostering and have received appropriate training. Foster carers say that the support and training they receive is 'superb'. Other comments made by foster carers include, 'We value the support they provide'; 'It provides information about the child and family. Continuous support and meetings with social workers. Initial courses and ongoing courses about foster caring'; 'Excellent input from our key worker - when we get one'.

The role of the supervising social worker is clear to foster carers who feel able to access support at any time. Foster carers say that they have requested visits sooner

than arranged and these have taken place. Support groups are held and newsletters following these meetings are sent to foster carers. Foster carers confirm that they are informed of support group meetings and can choose to take part or not. Foster carers feel supported and enabled to seek advice from a range of services but are particularly positive about the levels of support they receive from the fostering service. Foster carers without an allocated fostering social worker are not receiving monthly visits. They are aware of the duty system and say they always get the response they need.

The children's records detail the nature and quality of care provided and the information is relevant and informs the foster carer about placements. Foster carers are storing information about children. However, not all foster carers have a lockable facility to store information as required by the service. Foster carers are actively helping young people to make sense of their history and are supporting them, for example, supporting life story work. There are separate records maintained for foster carers, children, complaints and allegations. Records are stored confidentially, are well looked after, clear and in the main, accurately reflect the reality of a placement.

Family and friend carers are given the same attention to detail as other foster carers. Fostering social workers clearly understand the needs of the family and have offered some imaginative support packages for kinship families to provide children with a range of experiences and provide a break for kinship carers. Training and support is also offered to these carers and the outcomes for the children are positive.

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
9	ensure that the smoking policy is reiterated to foster carers and made available to them (Regulation 15)	31/01/2008
9	provide clear guidelines to foster carers and staff about physical restraint (Regulation 13.1)	29/02/2008
17	ensure that there is a sufficient number of experienced and qualified staff to ensure all foster carers have an allocated worker (Regulation 19)	30/06/2008

Recommendations

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

- ensure that foster carers are provided with training in first aid (NMS 12.5)
- ensure that a system is established which monitors and reviews risk assessments on the environment in foster care households (NMS 6.6)
- ensure that foster carers and fostering staff are involved in pathway planning (NMS 14.1)
- achieve a common understanding of the service level agreement with the pathway team (NMS 14.1)
- ensure supervision to foster carers that will facilitate consistent delivery of high quality care (NMS 22.3)
- ensure that children's information is securely stored in foster placements (NMS 24.8)