

City of York 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 City of York Council operates its fostering services through two teams that are part of the Learning, Culture and Children's Services department. The Family Placement team recruits families to work with children who are looked after by the local authority and the Sharing Care team recruits families who offer short term breaks for children with disabilities. All the carers are approved to act as foster carers.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This was an announced inspection which involved an assessment of the service's performance in all outcome areas excluding Economic Wellbeing. The visit included a review of the recommendations made at the previous inspection regarding the approval status of a number of carers, staffing levels in both teams and training for carers. The improvements in these areas are outlined in the section below.

The fostering service is a well managed and child-focussed service which provides children and young people with a good quality of care. The service is highly effective in its use of multi agency partnerships and this has led to some outstanding work in enabling children and young people to access education and involving them in effective consultation about matters affecting their lives. The service provides skilled and motivated carers who have particular strengths in helping children and young people integrate fully into family life and in extending their range of positive life experiences.

Improvements since the last inspection

Since the previous inspection, the service has reviewed the approval status of some of its carers to ensure that this accurately reflects their skills and experience.

The service has increased the staffing levels in the Family Placement Team and is currently reviewing the temporary contract arrangements in both teams to ensure that there are sufficient staff to maintain the current volume and quality of work.

Since the previous inspection, carers have been given further training regarding their roles and responsibilities when children and young people are taken into custody. This has helped them to support children and young people more effectively if they are arrested. The service has also ensured that carers are clear regarding the information they are permitted to share with children and young people and how they should do this.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Children and young people's health needs are identified via a statutory medical assessment and a record of this is maintained on their individual files. The information from these assessments is given to carers and is generally sufficient for them to meet the needs of the children and young people in their care. A minority of carers in both sharing care and mainstream fostering feel that individual healthcare plans do not consistently give up to date or accurate information and this has, at times, affected their quality of care. The service has made changes in response to these issues and carers feel that this is gradually improving the quality of health information they receive.

The service demonstrates a strong commitment to improving health outcomes for children and young people by effective multi agency working with the Primary Care Trust (PCT) and the establishment of a Young People's Health Group. This group undertakes research to identify key health issues which impact on Looked After Children (LAC) and to identify how these should be met. In addition, the LAC reference group and the LAC health group consult regularly to ensure that the service is consistently meeting children and young people's needs.

The service provides a comprehensive pre and post approval training programme which equips carers with the basic health training they require. Sharing carers are offered a wide range of training specific to the health needs of children and young people with disabilities.

Children and young people have access to the specialist services they need to maintain their health and wellbeing, including a fast track to support from the Child and Adolescent Mental Health team (CAMHS). The attachment training offered by CAMHS is described by carers as 'excellent' and has provided them with a very good understanding of Looked After Children's unique emotional needs. Carers are knowledgeable about attachment issues and this knowledge is evidently impacting on the quality of their care. Carers of teenagers feel that it has substantially improved their understanding of the needs of young people and their practical skills in responding to these.

Children and young people feel that their health needs are met and they have a good awareness of how to maintain their own health by, for example, eating healthily and undertaking regular exercise. The service has responded to children and young people's requests for increased confidentiality about health issues during reviews. Professionals' opinions are now sought prior to the review process and are shared on a 'need to know' basis. Children and young people prefer this system because it reduces the duration of reviews and means that sensitive information is not widely disseminated.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

Carers receive 'Safer Care' training and have a sound understanding of their roles and responsibilities in protecting children and young people from harm. They understand their health and safety responsibilities and provide children and young people with safe accommodation. The service is rigorous in its investigation of allegations and concerns and maintains very good records of these incidents.

Prospective foster carers are subject to a thorough assessment procedure and the quality of Form F assessments is sound. All carers are subject to checks by the Criminal Records Bureau and approvals take place via both the fostering panel and the agency decision maker (ADM) who provides effective quality monitoring of the process. The panel is quorate and maintains clear written records of its decisions. However, the panel is not consistently rigorous or thorough enough in its discussions.

The service is highly child focussed and ensures that planning is holistic, including each child and young person's emotional, physical, educational, spiritual and cultural needs. The service ensures that children and young people are matched with carers who are most able to respond to their individual needs and both teams recognise that this is central to the stability and success of placements.

There is an effective recruitment process for staff and carers which ensures that children and young people are cared for by safe adults.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The service has developed very good policies and procedures relating to diversity. York has a small minority ethnic population and this presents a significant challenge, both in terms of maintaining the high profile of diversity issues amongst staff and carers and in recruiting a range of carers who are representative of the community. The fostering service is proactive in approving carers who would not traditionally have been considered and actively seeks to recruit carers who can meet the diversity needs of the children it serves.

The fostering service places a high priority on meeting the educational needs of each child and young person in placement. Carers have done some excellent work in encouraging children and young people to return to mainstream school and their efforts reflect a strong commitment to helping children and young people achieve their full academic potential. In addition, the fostering service has developed a number of imaginative initiatives to support children and young people who are finding reintegration difficult and all initiatives are underpinned by highly effective multi agency working. York has piloted the Supported Learning Project (SLiP) which provides concerted input for children and young people who have specific school and

home related support issues. In addition, LAC education professionals have developed a training programme for teachers and support staff which focuses on the impact of emotional issues on children and young people's educational attainment and the way in which these can be addressed by schools.

Children and young people are provided with a range of accessible and enjoyable leisure activities which reflect their own interests and abilities. They are fully included in the lives of their foster families and gain a great deal from experiencing family holidays and celebrations. The Max Card system provides free access to leisure and cultural activities for the whole family, including birth children, and this has also helped foster children to integrate more fully into the families who care for them. Children and young people are encouraged to take pride in their Looked After status and have been actively involved in the organisation of celebratory events to support this.

Sharing carers are actively engaged in supporting the education of children and young people with disabilities, including visiting children and young people in school and contributing to educational reviews. The Sharing Care service has identified a range of inclusive activities for children and young people with disabilities, including a recent link with the National Railway Museum who are organising a special event for the Sharing Care families.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

The service has made significant improvements to the way in which it consults with children and young people about their care. Improvements have focussed on ensuring that children and young people are provided with a prompt response to their suggestions or concerns. The department for Learning, Culture and Children's Services (LCCS) provides a range of forums such as the 'Show Me That I Matter' and 'I Matter Too' groups, which allow children and young people to present their views to elected members of the council. The fostering service has made changes in response to these views, including an increase in places provided by the specialist fostering scheme and a reduction in the number of professionals present at reviews.

The Children's Rights Officer (CRO) has been proactive in making personal contact with all Looked After Children in the area and arranges regular events to obtain their views. The CRO is able to maintain an appropriate level of autonomy by working within the Quality Assurance Independent Reviewing Service which is located separately from the LCCS. This is leading to the increased and sustained impact of the messages received from children and young people. There continue to be gaps in securing the views of children and young people with disabilities although the Sharing Care Service regularly consults with families and carers regarding the service they are offered. The service is currently developing a consultation tool to enable more effective input for those children and young people who have limited communication skills.

The fostering service gives specific guidance to carers regarding the importance of children and young people maintaining links with family and friends while they are in placement. Children and young people feel that they are supported in their contact arrangements and that their carers try to ensure that this is a positive experience. Parents of children and young people who access the Sharing Care service remain the primary carers. The close relationships they develop with carers make a major contribution to the positive experiences of children and young people in placement.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

The service has a clear Statement of Purpose (SOP) which accurately reflects provision. Both the fostering and sharing care services benefit from strong leadership by well qualified and experienced managers who are highly child-focussed in their approach. Staff receive regular, good quality supervision and feel that their work is valued by their managers and the families they support.

Both staff teams have the skills needed to recruit, assess, approve and support a diverse range of foster carers. They undertake a significant amount of recruitment work and feel that their ability to do so has improved since an increase in staffing last year. A number of posts in both teams still remain temporary although these are currently under review by the senior management team in order to ensure that both teams can retain the current volume and quality of their work.

The support offered to carers is excellent and makes a significant contribution to the stability of placements. Carers report that they can always contact a member of staff for advice and guidance although there are occasions when the out of hours service does not provide the support requested. The monitoring processes for carers are clear and include regular reviews of strengths and areas for development. Carers are provided with training which equips them with the expertise and practical advice they need for their role, although some events are held at venues which are inaccessible for wheelchair users.

The quality of case recording is of a high standard. Children and young people and their families are aware of the information they are able to access and are encouraged to do so. Carers understand their role in providing good quality written information for the review process and understand their responsibilities in relation to maintaining confidentiality.

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 before a placement begins the carer is provided with a full description of the health needs of the child (NMS 12.3)
- ensure that fostering panels are thorough and rigorous in their approach to decision making (NMS 30.5)
- ensure that foster training is accessible to all carers (NMS 23.3)