

Warwickshire CC Fostering and Adoption Development Team

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

Warwickshire Fostering Service provides a wide range of foster care services for children and young people who are being looked after, either temporarily or on a long-term basis. It makes available a wide range of foster carers in order to respond to the varying needs of those requiring a service.

Under the leadership of the Principal Operations Manager, the service is structured into five district fostering teams operating in each of the geographical areas of the county. They provide mainstream foster care services for their local area. A sixth team, the central fostering services team based in Rugby focuses on the marketing, recruitment, preparation and training of foster carers. This includes the Foster Care National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) Centre offering NVQ Level 3 in Caring for Children and Young People. A private fostering development officer complements the work of the central support team.

The emergency duty team maintains specific carers who can provide emergency out of hours very short-term placements. A discrete team, Family Link, provides short break care which, like the emergency team, operates on a countywide basis. These teams support the recruitment and preparation of foster carers, assess prospective foster carers, make placement matches and provide ongoing support.

There is an established fostering panel and commissioning arrangements for children and young people who are looked after by the local authority and placed with independent fostering agencies. A wide range of carers are recruited to serve the needs of children and young people in the local authority area. They include family and friends as carers.

Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

This key announced inspection was conducted over three days when performance against all the key standards was assessed. Some carers and children and young people placed with them were visited, however the fostering panel was not observed.

Improvements since the last inspection

At the last inspection the service was judged excellent and the recommendations made were of good practice to promote progress where the minimum standards were met but there was scope for development. The sole recommendation made in the area of staying safe was to cause the document outlining factors considered in

matching a child to a particular carer to be shared with the carer. This is so that they too are fully aware of those considerations and this has been done.

The recommendation, in the area of enjoying and achieving, to address some concerns about the number of children and young people excluded from school has been addressed. Some significant developments in supporting education, as detailed more fully in the report, have since been introduced.

Two recommendations related to staffing issues whereby staff were occasionally depleted. This caused a minority of carers to be concerned that some routine duties were not carried out efficiently, particularly when some supervising social workers time was diverted to supervising supportive lodgings arrangements. Since then vacant posts have been filled and a review of staffing has been conducted. There remain residual difficulties in this area. These recommendations related to the organisation of the service, as were two others. The first of these was to achieve the inclusion of conducting assessment in the staff induction programme, and the second, to assist carers and children to plan holidays and other family events more easily. That is, by ensuring necessary authorisations and documentation such as passports are obtained more efficiently. These matters have also been addressed.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

Children and young people looked after in the fostering service benefit from a coherent, comprehensive and robust set of measures that both promote good health and attend effectively to any health problems that they may have.

The fostering service ensures that the health and wellbeing of children and young people is promoted through a range of measures. Principally, prospective carers are made aware, during preparation training, of the part they will play, if approved, in attending the health needs of any child or young person that they look after. Their ability and experience to do this effectively is assessed and once approved as carers, their duty to care for children and young people's health is enshrined in the formal Foster Care Agreement. This, together with carers post-approval training and guidance issued to them, leave no doubt about what the service expects of them in helping to keep children healthy.

Carers are committed to ensuring that children and young people are maintained in good health and are supportive of the fostering service initiatives in this regard. For example, they make arrangements for the children and young people to have access to local primary health services, monitor and report on each child's health and respond appropriately to their known or current health conditions. Foster carers' homes are also equipped and maintained to a high standard. They are clean, orderly and warm, and provide sufficient space so that children and young people's health is not compromised by overcrowding. Children and young people who conveyed their experience of care of their health, by survey or directly, consider that they get the

support that they need when they are ill and to keep well. Half of those in the sample suggest that this happens always and a quarter believes this to be the case usually or sometimes, respectively.

The fostering service ensures that its foster carers and the children and young people they look after, have access to an excellent range of services to meet each child's or young person's individual physical or emotional health needs. In its Health of Looked After Children's (HELAC) strategy, the service provides access to dedicated nurses who, if required, assist carers in planning, attending and co-ordinating the care of children with health problems. They also assist the service in health promotion. The impact of this is that where a child or young person has complex health problems, in some cases associated to their disabilities, plans are made and put in place to meet their needs effectively. This includes any additional training the carers might need to carry out invasive home nursing tasks.

The local authority's corporate parenting group has featured the health of its looked after children as one of its key priorities for improvement in 2007 to 2009. The various initiatives arising from this benefit children and young people in foster care. Among those initiatives include dedicated doctor time in sync with the HELAC strategy, to ensure that children and young people in foster care have access to the best health services in the county. This translates into a care pathway in which the children's health is assessed at regular intervals, immunisations are up-to-date and other health surveillance measures are in place. Other resources that support this include dedicated specialist services such as children and adolescent mental health, substance misuse and that for those who have experienced or exhibit sexually inappropriate behaviour. These services are effective in that where a child or young person in foster care has mental health, emotional or behavioural difficulties the specialists work directly with them and support the carers so that their input maximises the impact of whatever work is being done.

Apart from the measures outlined above, carer's capacity to promote children's and young people's health is enhanced by training that the service provides them to ensure healthy eating, being alert to drug abuse and being able to administer basic first aid to a child or young person. Within the Care Matters agenda, the service has recently launched a promoting health and wellbeing scheme through leisure activities for children and young people in its care. The purpose of this is to enable carers to link with local activities co-ordinators to introduce children and young people to a range of leisure pursuits. This is to help them to discover talents and fire interest in pastimes that may lead to a sense of fulfilment, contribute to their health and wellbeing and, contribute indirectly, but positively to their formal education.

The impact of the service's exemplary inputs into caring for the children's and young people's health is that they consider that they are well looked after and, as a result, are enjoying good health. This is reflected in the vibrancy and robustness of those seen during the inspection. What is more, there are clear indications that the service's outstanding performance will endure given planned development to provide foster carers with even greater support and scrutiny in their efforts to promote children's and young people's health and wellbeing.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

Children's and young people are being kept safe from abuse and unfavourable treatment by the service's coherent and robust child protection measures, which makes paramount the welfare of the child or young person.

Currently there are no child protection concerns arising from the care of children and young people in the fostering service care. Where any concerns emerge, the service demonstrates that it takes the necessary steps to safeguard the welfare of the child or young person concerned and that the mechanisms for so doing are effective. This outcome is in keeping with the following assessment of the measures being taken to promote and safeguard children's and young people's welfare.

All those involved in managing the fostering service have been carefully ascertained to be professional and managerially competent to do so and have been established via a thorough vetting process as being suitable persons to be employed in the care of children and young people. A similarly robust approach to staff selection ensures that they too pose no risk to children or young people. Further, that they are appropriately qualified and of sufficient experience to provide foster carers the professional monitoring and support they require to look after those placed in their care safely and effectively.

The service adopts nationally recognised assessment instruments in assessing potential carers' fitness and capacity to be approved to look after children and young people. The service's approach to this aspect of safeguarding children's welfare is rigorous and wide ranging. It is deemed to be excellent particularly in establishing that there are no avoidable risk factors concerning those approved as foster carers, members of their households and its environment, which are likely to compromise children's safety. Events leading to concerns about the safety of children placed in the service's care, are few. Children and young people consider that they are safe in their carers' household and report no concerns about bullying within or outside where they live. This reflects the effectiveness of the local authority's anti-bullying strategy, which the service has adopted and about which foster carers have received briefing and training to equip them to support victims and help those who bully.

The system for determining approval of fostering households is itself robust and has in-built measures to assure safety and accountability. This is evidenced by a well-established and appropriately constituted fostering panel, members of which are drawn from various aspects of children services in, for example, health, education, fostering and mainstream children families social work. Chaired by someone independent of the service, the fostering panel exercises rigorous scrutiny of the quality of assessment of potential carers and uses its collective expertise to make recommendations about the suitability of carers and capacity of their household to promote and safeguard children's welfare. Accountability for initial and subsequent approval of carers is clear. It is vested in a senior manager of the local authority,

separate from the line management arrangements for the service, with the requisite professional background and experience. Essentially, this protects children because decisions about approval of carers is subject to independent scrutiny so that they are not influenced by either the practice or performance imperatives. The outcome of these measures is that children and young people are being care for in safe households with the capacity to meet their needs.

Children's, young people's and carer's best interests are demonstrated to be safeguarded by diligent measures to ensure that no child or young person is placed in fostering households, which are inappropriate to meet effectively their particular needs. In place is an established matching process that uses data of children and young people who are to be placed against those of carers to achieve the best possible match. A matching Matrix, employed in this regard, takes into account factors such as the child's or young person's needs arising from their disabilities, race, religion and other personal support needs such as emotional or behavioural difficulties. Assessment is made to establish the carer best suited to meet those needs and the child's particular interests. Where relevant, services such as that for children who exhibit sexually inappropriate behaviour and for recognising and celebrating children's heritage provide an input into the matching process to ensure placements are likely to be safe and in keeping with a child's or young person's best interests. This proves effective in ensuring that foster placements do not become risky or under undue strain because of any mis-match between carers' capacity and children's needs thus reducing the incidence of breakdown and unplanned endings.

Carers are satisfied with the training and support the service provides to enable them to safeguard and promote the welfare of children and young people. Their development as carers, backed by incentives, involves their completing specified child protection training and implementing agreed safe caring procedure for their particular households. The effect of this is that, where it is necessary, carers show that they are able to recognise and report, appropriately, child protection concerns.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Children and young people are being enabled to achieve personal fulfilment because the service helps them to recognise their potential, talents and interests and provides the support necessary to pursue them.

The service has, as part of its rationale for the care of children and young people, established principles and practices to ensure equity and precision in relation to the diversity of the children and families it serves. Systems such as that for referring a child or young person for accommodation and care in a fostering household and their match with carers, take full account of the individual's needs arising from his or her sex, race, religion, disability and communication or linguistic background. In essence, this ensures that a child or young person is matched to carers the capacity of whose household is best placed to meet the full range of his or her needs. An additional benefit, of this approach is that where the range of available foster carers is limited

and the matched carer is lacking the capacity to meet some needs, this is identified, documented and compensatory measures instituted. Demonstration of this shown where children are placed trans- racially or are unaccompanied asylum seekers being looked after by carers with limited knowledge of their religion, language and culture. Specific training of carers, resource pack of information and scrutiny and advice of the service's Recognising and Celebrating Children's Cultural Heritage are among the compensatory measures.

A discrete service for children with disabilities makes effective provision for their needs. Carers are specially recruited, trained and, where necessary their homes adapted to meet the needs of those with physical disabilities. Carers in this part of the service are largely drawn from those who have previous experience of the care and education of those with disabilities. With their ongoing training they are well placed to introduce children and young people to a range of social and leisure activities to promote enjoyment, personal development and informal learning. Essentially, having only one child placed with them at any one time enables them to give exclusive attention, practise and reinforcement of any skills in daily living such as dressing, which may be being taught.

The service has clear strategies for promoting education and its staff and carers demonstrate commitment to support children and young people to achieve. Carers are provided with training and guidance in how to support effectively children and young people's education and initiatives such as encouragement of reading with starter collection of books, provision of computers are some of the tangible ways in which the service demonstrates its commitment. Carers work closely with schools, are encouraging to learn both formally and informally and are keen to intervene to resolve any difficulties so as to avoid disruption to children's education. The effect of this is that 50 per cent of children surveyed consider that they always get the help they need with their education and the others report this to be the case usually or, at least, sometimes. Those whose cases were closely examined all attend school regularly even in some cases where there is previous and current residual disaffection. Of particular significance is that the children and young people were playing a full part in school life some representing their school in certain sports. Some young people's academic attainment in secondary education is outstanding and their confidence in plans to graduate to higher education characterises the impact of the service's inputs.

The appointment of a key educational specialist, the 'virtual head teacher', to co-ordinate resources, monitor and drive developments marks another significant development in the service's enablement of children and young people towards realising their potential. This, together with the service's initiative to ensure they have opportunities for meaningful occupation of their leisure, augur well for sustaining current remarkable performance and indicate a quest for progress.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

The fostering service has firmly established arrangements to facilitate children's and young people's contact with their family and friends. Wide ranging and effective processes by which the service consults and demonstrates that it is listening to children and young people result in their expression of content with this aspect of their care.

The service's commitment to promoting children's and young people's contact with their family and friends is reflected in a wide range of measures. All prospective carers in their preparation training and assessment have to show an understanding of the importance of children's contact with those significant to them. Expectation of carers to facilitate contact is also reflected in the Foster Care Agreement and individual Placement Plans. The fostering service actively encourages and enables children and young people to participate in their review, a standard agenda item of which is contact. They, therefore, have opportunities for their views to be heard when contact arrangements are being decided or varied. The process by which placements are made is subject to careful matching of a child or young person to a fostering household, which takes account of contact arrangements. Accordingly placing options, where possible, avoid a child or young person being placed at such distance away as to make contact difficult.

Carers are sensitive to the feelings of birth parents and recognise the importance of children's contact to maintain familial and friendship links. They are, therefore, keen to facilitate contact by transporting children to contact venues and carry out such other duties as might be required of them in this regard. The effect of all these measures is that children and young people are content with their contact arrangements. Where contact is restricted, prohibited or does not take place as arranged, young people are aware of why this is. Carers have completed recording and record keeping training and fulfil the service requirement that they record each child's or young person's observed reactions to contact. This information is intended to be used to monitor difficulties so that where they exist they might be resolved in timely fashion.

Embedded in the fostering service operation are exemplary practices to include children's and young peoples' views in matters concerning their care and their future. Carers training, supervision and their own commitment results in their establishing good relationships with those in their care and they work effectively to involve them in day-to-day domestic decisions to make them feel valued and comfortable. For example, it is evident that children are consulted about food, decoration and adornment of their bedrooms and their choice of leisure wear. In their response to the survey none of the children or young people reported having their opinions ignored by their carers. Indeed, the essence of their direct feedback is that they are treated 'normally' or as they expect to be treated by their carers.

The fostering service has permanent mechanisms for consulting children and young

people. Among these are regular participation events where children's and young people's opinions are sought on how they are affected by the way the service is operated. For example, they have been consulted on the conduct of reviews and the extent to which they are able to participate in them. Significantly, the service does not simply consult with the children and young people; it listens, informs and make changes taking account of their opinions. Changes such as those for conducting reviews and preparing children and young people to participate and more flexible use of certain allowances demonstrate the service's commitment to listening to children and young people and their carers. This has had the additional benefit of building young people's capacity to the extent that they are playing a major role in organising events such as their annual Festival of Achievement and for which staff are seeking to have their efforts accredited.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

Children and young people are benefiting from a service the efficient management and leadership of which keeps them safe and is effective in promoting their best interests.

A up-to-date Statement of Purpose setting out how the service is run is in place and accurately reflects its various functions, principles and practices. A children's guide and information in the Foster Carers' Handbook summarises the statement thus enabling them to understanding what level of service they might expect and what do if they fail to get it. Carers and children regard the service as exceptional in many respects and improving all the time. The Statement of Purpose extends to children and young people who are placed in the care of independent fostering agencies. Adopting the West Midlands Children Consortium Outcome Framework, which is monitored for compliance, provides a sound basis for promoting and safeguarding those children's and young people's welfare.

The service employs sufficient staff of requisite experience and qualifications, who are effective in causing the services to be provided to an excellent standard. For example, carers consider that they are well supported in looking after children and young people. They cite the guidance, supervision and training that their assigned workers in particular, and the service in general, provide. Staff and carers' training and development programmes, are well established within the service and the local authority Workforce Development strategy. These programmes enable both staff and carers to keep up-to-date with developments in practice and to acquire skills necessary to safeguard and promote welfare. Keeping children and young people safe and healthy, promoting equality and diversity and effective communication with

relevant disabled children in this regard, are amongst some of the areas covered. This, together with the rigorous standards applied in assessing potential carers fitness to foster establishes a safe framework within which to meet the needs of children and young people.

Organisationally, there are several components of the service. The mainstream operational aspect of it is divided into five area teams with dedicated local operational managers and staff. These teams respond effectively to local demand for foster care. For children and young people this means that mostly their care is provided and supported locally and since in some teams their social workers are based in the same local offices, this makes for efficient teamwork in the management of their care.

Some aspects of the service's functions are centrally based or organised on a county-wide basis. This results, for example, in recruitment and training of carers, which are centrally based functions, to be attended in a concentrated and focused way. Resources and expertise being so concentrated has caused the performance of the service's training centre to be one of excellence and substantial headway to be made in recruiting carers. The number of children and young people with disabilities awaiting short break placements is high leading to foster carer resources in this area being insufficient.

A daily duty system, operated collectively by the area teams, is established and responds well to circumstances where it is necessary to match and place children or young people with carers at short notice. This is complemented by the emergency team that supports carers to receive and settle, mostly, young people in crisis situations. Carers are unanimous in their view that the out of hour support arrangements is one of the outstanding features of the service and that this serves children and young people well. A small minority, however, report that occasional staffing difficulties have resulted in lengthy periods when they have not been supervised. Although this is not the case currently, if adequate contingencies are not consistently in place for occasional staff shortages this is likely to place in jeopardy the carers' support strategy.

All aspects of the service's operations are supported by good administrative resources reflected in efficient records being maintained in respect of children and carers, and as necessary for monitoring performance, practices. In this connection, the records are sufficiently detailed and current as to facilitate sound care planning, effective supervision and review of carers and the diligent monitoring of the service. Confidentiality of children's and carers' records is observed. They are securely stored in the various places where they are kept and clear policies and procedures are in place, and promoted to those concerned, about keeping and accessing personal records. Carers help children to maintain their own documentary of significant life events and, where required, in partnership with social workers assist them with life story work. The service provides training for staff and carers in this area by way of the importance it accords where it is relevant.

Family and friends as carers is positively promoted and an embedded aspect of the

service, which supports the children, young people and carers involved with equity, but is also sensitive to their pre-existing relationships. Those being looked after in these arrangements, and their carers, rate the inputs of the fostering service highly.

One remarkable feature of the service is that it is well integrated into the local authority children's services and, invested in it, are excellent supportive resources and require management and leadership at all levels. Developments seen, as outlined earlier, and those proposed augur well for maintenance of its excellent quality of service.

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):

- improve the recruitment strategy aimed at recruiting a range of carers to meet the needs of children with disabilities (NMS 17.1)
- investigate and, as necessary, act on some carers' concern that occasional staffing problems cause the frequency of their supervision to be less than in the strategy for supporting them (NMS 21.1).