

Cumbria County Council Family Placement Scheme

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

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Inspector	Helen Humphreys / Sarah Oldham
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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

Cumbria Social Services Fostering Service is part of the overall service delivered to children, young people and their families. The service currently has 244 approved fostering households and this includes carers who provide long and short term care, short breaks to families who have children with disabilities, friends and family carers.

At the time of the inspection, 224 fostering households were approved providing a potential 445 placements.

In the 12 months leading up to March 31st 2008, 26 new fostering households were approved. However, 12 of these were family or friends placements for specific children.

The service is located in three offices across the county in Barrow, Kendal, Workington and Carlisle. The service is managed by an acting service who works in close cooperation with the adoption service.

Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

This was an announced inspection and included a review of all the key National Minimum Standards (NMS). This is a large fostering service providing a good service to the majority of children and carers involved. In particular, outcomes are good for health and education and young people have opportunities to be involved in participation and consultation events. Staff and carers are well supported and access to developmental and training opportunities are good. The panel is robust, thorough and well chaired. The service is continually striving for improvement and have recently won a bid to set up a treatment foster carer's service.

However, there are staffing vacancies in all teams but this is most acute in the south of the county and has started to impact on the visiting and allocation of carers. A further restructuring on the service is imminent and this has caused some unease amongst staff. A long standing difficulty relating to foster carer agreements has almost been resolved but this does mean that not all carers have accurate agreements in place and not all exemptions are accurate or in place. Not all friends and family carers have received an annual review and until recently, had not been visited on a regular basis. Information is not given to young people about how they can contact Ofsted if they have concerns, although they have access to a range of other services and complaints are investigated well. Young people's views are not consistently sought for carer's annual reviews and these are not all carried out within appropriate timescales.

Improvements since the last inspection

The service has made good progress on a number of actions and recommendations made at the last inspection. However, work is still outstanding on four actions and some recommendations.

A smoking policy has been devised and implemented as has the revised policy on notifications and recording of illnesses and medication. Training has been provided on sudden and unexplained death in infants. The majority of carers have safe caring policies in place and up to date health and safety checklists. The short break service has been reviewed, although more work is ongoing. The training plan has been reviewed and now includes training on the new Workforce Development Council Standards. More carers are involved and attend training and support groups and the head of service has visited many of these meetings. Work is ongoing to recruit more carers and there has been some success in the previous 12 months.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

The service promotes the health and welfare of the young people placed and supports carers in delivering a good service. The service is supported by two Looked After Children nurses, school nurses and health visitors who provide training and general support. The number of children who have had their health care assessments has improved and access to community dentists is also improving.

The carers have access to an appropriate training programme including the 'Fostering Changes' course run in conjunction with the Clinical Psychologist who is employed to support looked after children. The carers have access to the Community Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAHMS) and the clinical psychologist and his team for support and advice and consultation.

During supervision and carer's annual reviews the promotion of healthy lifestyles, accidents and illness are discussed and monitored and records of medication are checked.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is satisfactory.

The service follows appropriate recruitment and selection procedures and staff are not appointed and start work until all the appropriate checks are in place.

The majority of carers are providing a good standard of care to the young people placed and outcomes for young people placed, particularly in the long term, are good. Most carers have up to date safe caring policies and health and safety checklists. All children who responded to the surveys indicated that they were satisfied with their care arrangements.

The arrangements for placing children has recently changed and this task has now been returned to the fostering staff, which is bringing additional pressures. There is some use of agency placements and these are monitored carefully. Some staff expressed concerns about matching for short term placements and in particular those made in an emergency. There was, however, good practice seen for long term matches and short break service. Placements are monitored through the placement tracking meeting, which is chaired by the head of service. Managers are confident that inappropriate matches are identified and that all children placed are safe. The manager has audited all the friends and family carers during the inspection to ensure that appropriate procedures have been followed, following concerns raised in the inspection. The arrangements for the use of exemptions where carers are looking after more than three young people are not always accurate and on file. The long standing difficulty in relation to the signing of foster carer agreements is almost resolved.

Carers have access to child protection and safe care training, although not all have attended and there are some outstanding training needs. The service has responded appropriately to all recent allegations against carers and the policy and procedures are robust and available to staff.

No young people said that they were being bullied and all incidents of bullying and children missing from home are considered and monitored. The service has responded to the findings of a recent report (Wakefield) and implemented an action plan and shared this with carers.

The panel is chaired robustly by an experienced social work practitioner, with good attention to detail. The panel membership meets the NMS and the panel is also supported by panel advisors including legal and education. Good use is made of advice when given. Carers are treated with courtesy and made to feel welcome and that their contributions are valued. The panel has undertaken training and more is planned.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The service has appropriate policies and procedures in place in respect of ensuring that the needs of children who are disabled or have specific religious and cultural needs are met. Carers and staff have access to training and additional resources.

The support provided for Looked after Children in respect of their education is outstanding. The service has employed a 'virtual head' who has worked with the existing education support team to ensure that every looked after child is receiving a good standard of education. The overall outcomes for the children are good, attendance has improved and their educational progress and achievements are monitored. Additional support in the form of booster classes, support to carers, educational mentors and lap tops are provided quickly to meet unmet need. There is creative use of external funding opportunities. Training is provided to carers, designated teachers and head teachers to ensure that the LAC are supported. Carers

and young people talk positively about this service.

Staff in the service are aware of the leisure commitments of the young people and this is monitored during supervision. Young people are accessing a range of activities and playing musical instruments. Formal activity days are provided by the education service and the children's rights service. Money is made available for special holidays and other activities.

The share care scheme is providing a good service to a limited number of families. Although the care provided is appropriate, overall the service requires updating and additional funding. The managers are aware of this and have plans in hand including a report which is due to be consulted on, which includes closer working with the children with disabilities team and additional funding. A working group has been formed to take this work forward.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The service supports and promotes contact and these arrangements are taken into account when matching children. Finding appropriately placed venues and transporting children remains a challenge to professionals but carers are clear on their responsibilities in relation to contact and receive training and advice. Some carers supervise and facilitate contact in their own homes.

The service has an active children's rights officer and participation worker. In particular, the Action 4 group is very active in a range of matters and this group is attended by elected members and the head of service. Young people and carers speak positively of this group. A range of changes have been made as a result of consultation work undertaken by this group.

A very good number of young people participate in their statutory reviews and these are increasingly held at appropriate times and venues and are child centred. Some young people are able to chair their own reviews with the assistance of the reviewing officer. The reviewing officers would like to develop further the scope of participation but are restricted due to staffing levels. Not all young people are consulted consistently in carers annual reviews as this remains the role of the placing social worker.

The arrangements for young people to be able to make complaints are appropriate. Leaflets and information is distributed on a regular basis and information is contained within the children's guide, Statement of Purpose and foster carer's handbook. However, information on how young people could complain to Ofsted is not included. The process for investigating complaints is good and thorough. Quarterly reports are available which include learning points and any patterns and trends emerging. Training for staff on handling complaints is provided.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

The service has over the last 12 months developed their after care service and this now includes a supported lodging scheme and more opportunities for young people to stay with their current foster carers. An increased number of young people have a pathway plan in place and more young people have been able to access further and higher education and have been supported to do so financially. This is contributing to the overall good outcomes for older young people and in particular, young people in long term placements where placement stability remains good.

Young people who are also known to the Youth Offending Service are supported well by their carers and none have gone on to commit further offences. The authority has plans in hand to develop further their service for providing care to young people on remand to try and alleviate the pressure on the service and provide additional support.

The service has a clear payment scheme and no carers raised concerns about payment and allowances. Long standing problems in relation to payments of allowances are gradually being resolved by active work by the head of service.

Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

The Statement of Purpose was revised during the inspection and meets the National Minimum Standards and provides appropriate information for the carers and other users of the service. The children's guide is bright and colourful and provides appropriate information.

The service appointed an acting service manager in February, who is capable and is currently managing the service well. However, a further restructuring of the service is imminent and this is causing some unease within the staff teams. Furthermore, there are staffing vacancies across all the teams but this is quite acute in the south of the authority. The impact of the staffing vacancies means that not all carers are allocated and visited on a regular basis. The majority of staff are qualified and well experienced and are supported well through policies and procedures, training and other developmental opportunities. Appropriate policies and procedures are available on the web site and in a compact disc format.

The service has recruited some new carers over the last 12 months and have an ongoing recruitment strategy in place. Staffing vacancies are affecting the ability of staff to recruit and assess carers in the South, although some success remains in other areas. The standard of assessments varies. Overall, the standard is appropriate but there is scope for further improvements. The panel adopts a quality assurance function in addition to other systems for the monitoring of the quality of assessments.

The carers receive a very good standard of support from carers and all carers reported that they are satisfied with the level of support they receive. This includes regular visits, supervision, out of hours support and training. The training programme is extensive and in particular, the service have piloted and launched the new Workforce Development Council standards for foster carers. Although there has been recent improvement, not all carers including friends and family carers have had their annual reviews within appropriate timescales. The views of social workers, in particular children in placement, are not consistently sought.

The majority of records for carers' files, young people's files and administrative records are appropriate and well organised. However, some of the files had relevant papers missing including review minutes, personal education plans and up to date foster carer agreements, although visits are recorded and carer supervision records are in place.

Until very recently, the friends and family carers in the south of the county were not allocated and had not been reviewed. A staff member was appointed a few weeks prior to the inspection and an audit of the carers took place during the inspection to establish terms of approval and other matters.

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
8	ensure that all exemptions for the authority to exceed the normal fostering limit meets the requirements of legislation (Children Act Schedule 6)	16/07/2008
8	ensure that all carers have up to date foster carer agreements which reflect their current approval (Reg 34 (1 c))	01/08/2008
17	ensure that there is a sufficient number of suitably qualified, competent and experienced staff working for the fostering service to ensure that carers are appropriately supported and children are safeguarded (Reg 19 (a, b))	01/08/2008
21	ensure that the views of young people and placing social workers are taken into account in carers' annual reviews (Reg 29 (3) (b)).	01/08/2008

Recommendations

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

- ensure that young people know that they can complain to Ofsted should they wish to (NMS 11.5)
- create an appropriate independent process for the carers' annual reviews to ensure that they are carried out within appropriate timescales (NMS 21.2)
- ensure that friends and family carers are provided with the same level of support and as all other carers (NMS 32.3)
- ensure that all carers have up to date training on safeguarding and safe care (NMS 23.6).