

North East Lincolnshire Council 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 North East Lincolnshire Council Fostering Service provides a variety of fostering placements that include, mainstream fostering, long term foster care, contract care, remand foster placements and short term breaks. There are close links with other professional agencies including, the Looked After Children's Team, Looked After Children's Health Care Team and Looked After Children's Education Team. The fostering service is led by a Service Manager who is supported by two Principal Social Workers. The team is based in an office that has good administrative support.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

The fostering service is very well managed and there are systems in place to ensure that high quality care is provided for the vulnerable children and young people who require foster care. Staff are highly motivated and there is a positive culture within the management team which values the staff and foster carers. The use of information technology to record information is established. This enables managers to access key information quickly and also to monitor the quality of the recorded information.

Foster carers are supported by experienced social workers and a robust training programme is in place for the development of their caring skills. The current manager has carried out an assessment of the service and areas for development have been identified. The children and young people who use the service benefit from safe caring foster homes and this stability supports them as they move towards independence.

The close links with other parts of the children's services and partner agencies, in particular health and education, provide a joined up service provision which helps to ensure that children and young people are given as much support as possible.

Improvements since the last inspection

The manager was asked to ensure that all foster carers attended appropriate training. There had been instances when some carers experienced difficulty in attending training events due to work commitments. Work is now well underway in developing training packages that enables some carers to make use of electronic training packages on home computers.

The weekly diary sheet completed by foster carers has been redesigned to include commentary about each of the outcome areas from Every Child Matters.

The manager was asked to explore the possibility of the provision of special car parking badges to enable short breaks carers to park safely and to be near facilities when taking children with disabilities out on trips. This has been successful and badges have been issued.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

This service has an excellent approach to health care provision to meet the needs of children and young people who are in foster care. All children and young people are given a comprehensive health assessment by the Looked After Children Health team, and the health plan is given to the foster carers. The plan details how the child's specific and general health issues are to be addressed and indicates clearly how services are to be provided. The fostering service is fully aware of what health resources are available, including specialist services, such as psychology, mental health and the community nursing services. Young people are able to access advice and guidance from the Looked After Children's Health team on personal health concerns. Where there are specialist health needs concerning a child, the foster carers are given any necessary training by the health professionals. Foster carers are aware of their role in ensuring that the health care needs of young people in their care is met. All children who are fostered by the authority are registered with a general practitioner (GP) and has access to dental care. The high priority given to ensuring that the children receive the best care available is demonstrated by the joint funding arrangements between the local authority and primary care trust. In addition, a consultant paediatrician is a member of the fostering panel.

Creative ways of engaging children and young people about health issues are used in enabling them to be aware and to make positive choices about their health. A recent 'Health Fun Day' involving children and young people, along with health professionals, was very innovative and proved to be successful.

Health outcomes for children and young people is taken seriously by the service and close links have been developed with other key agencies. Health professionals attend children's reviews to ensure that health issues are addressed. The fostering service actively works to obtain the resources required to promote and secure good outcomes for children. There is excellent support for foster carers in securing the best possible standard of health care for children and young people. Foster carers are confident about their responsibilities and have developed their own links with health professionals.

Children and young people live in foster homes that promote their health care needs and ensure that appropriate services are provided.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The service is led by a manager who is a qualified social worker and has a management qualification. All children and young people are placed with foster carers who have been thoroughly assessed. Carers are kept fully informed about the children and young people placed with them, and the fostering social workers ensure that full information is passed to carers about health, behaviour and any other important information about family background. Foster carers are also informed about any damaging effects of previous significant harm suffered by children, to enable them to work with the child or young person. Foster carers are very aware specialist help is accessed to help or treat a child who has been abused. There are good resources available for children and young people who require specialist help. These include child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS), psychology service and the children's looked after community nurse. These resources are readily available if requested.

Placements are carefully planned and the matching process is maintained at a pace which the child or young person and foster carer is comfortable with. The system meets the standards, although it would enhance the young person's involvement if they took part in the initial screening of the potential foster carers and their views sought about potential carers.

Foster carers receive good training in child protection awareness and they are confident in their role to protect the children and young people placed with them.

The fostering panel is well established and has good administrative support. The panel serves children well and can demonstrate good outcomes for children. The independent members of the panel include a consultant paediatrician who provides medical expertise. However, the panel would also benefit from having someone with educational expertise serving as a member.

The panel demonstrates a robust quality assurance function with regard to the assessment and review process for carers. The panel receives and acts upon good quality information, ensuring an overview of the range of carers and placements. Carers are always invited to attend the panel and to make a contribution to the proceedings. This is good practice.

The Children's Service has good links with other agencies who make up the Safeguarding Board. The Chair is currently the Director of Children's Services who is very positive about best practice in keeping children safe.

The staff and carers are clear about respective roles and responsibilities in safeguarding children and they work professionally as a team to ensure that children and young people are safe.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The fostering service has in place a departmental policy on valuing diversity, and this has been shared with foster carers as part of their initial training. Fostering link workers are aware of their responsibilities to promote equality and diversity. The number of ethnic minority children and young people is small within the foster care system, nevertheless where there are cases, a great deal of work has gone into ensuring that their cultural and religious needs are met. A similar approach is taken where children have a disability. This service recruits carers who can meet the diversity needs of the children it cares for. Young people and foster carers confirm that the service is very positive about promoting issues of religion, ethnicity, language and culture.

The service ensures that the educational needs of all children and young people in foster care are well met. Children and young people receive excellent additional support, which is characterized by innovative and creative approaches to education that addresses individual needs. The Education Looked After Team (LACE), ensures that an educational plan is prepared for each child, and this is given to foster carers to keep them fully informed about their role in helping to meet the child's educational needs. This plan details how the child's specific and general educational requirements are to be addressed by educational professionals. Any issues concerning attendance, exclusions, extra help with homework will be supported by the Looked After Children Team. Foster carers value highly this educational support. The children and young people are enabled and supported to engage in leisure activities and to have fun. The underlying philosophy of the service is that no child or young person is denied education.

The short breaks service works in partnership with parents and ensures that the role and responsibilities of parents is not undermined. This is a service that is positively supported by parents. Carers provide the children with stimulation and fun during short breaks stays. Communication is something that carers feel is very important and would welcome training in sign language.

The service respects cultural diversity and works well to ensure that children and young people achieve their full educational potential.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The service actively supports and promotes family contact where it is in the best interests of the child. This is emphasised through training and support for foster carers. The views of the children and young people are integral to any contact arrangements.

The service has established systems for children to participate in discussions about their placements and future plans. All children and young people are encouraged to attend their formal reviews. They are encouraged by foster social workers to let the review know about their thoughts and feelings concerning their placement and future plans. There is a children's guide provided to all children at the time of their placement, which gives information about how to make a complaint and includes the provision of useful contact details.

The Children's Participation Group known as 'Fabulous Friends', meets weekly and provides a valuable forum for the service to ask about views and opinions on service development and other related matters. Their contributions are taken seriously and where appropriate, acted upon. The participation group is self funding and therefore activities are curtailed when funds are low. They would benefit from some departmental funding to put their finances on a more secure footing.

Foster carers generally feel that communications within the service is good, although some felt that the child's social workers could improve communication by having direct contact with them, rather than going through the fostering link social worker.

Children and young people are encouraged to have a say in matters that have an impact on their lives and to actively participate in ensuring that their views matter.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

Foster carers play a crucial role in preparing young people for their independence. They take part where appropriate in planning meetings and to liaise with other professionals involved in the preparation for independence process. The service has links with other professional services, such as the leaving care team, to ensure that young people have access to good information and support. Foster carers are very aware of their important role in teaching the young people the rudiments of independent living in areas such as budgeting for food, electricity, heating, rent, social and leisure. Training opportunities are available for foster carers to develop their role in preparing young people for adulthood. Foster carers see their role extending beyond the confines of the foster home once a young person leaves them.

Where this is requested by the young person, foster carers are encouraged by the service to continue support with regular contact with the young person as long as this support is required.

Young people are supported as they prepare to move into independence, and the foster carers have an important role to play.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

The service vision and values are clearly stated in the Statement of Purpose. These values are evident in the service delivery, to ensure that foster carers are fully supported in providing safe and caring homes for children and young people. The fostering service works to very high professional standards, and the leadership of the service ensures that staff are very well supported and managed. The management team with day to day responsibility of the service are well qualified and experienced, and they are positively supported by the wider organisation. Staff benefit from a management team who encourage an open culture, and where support and professional development of staff is provided. It is evident from the day to day operations of the service, that managers ensure working practices, processes and systems support good practice among the team. The information technology system enables managers from within the wider organisation to carry out monitoring of case files as part of a quality assurance process. Staff within the team are confident that a manager is always contactable for advice and support. In addition a well established formal supervision and appraisal system is in place, to ensure that staff development and performance is appropriately monitored. Staff feel that they are provided with strong operational management and with excellent support.

There is a positive management commitment to the continuous development of staff and carers. This is evident from the training schedule and corroborated by staff and carers.

There is a high awareness and recognition among the managers and staff of what the service does well and where development is required. A detailed assessment has been prepared by the manager that addresses where improvements can be made to service delivery. This document will inform the business development plan for the service, which will be reviewed by senior management.

There is an established training programme in place for foster carers that includes induction training for all new foster carers. The foster panel plays an important role in monitoring the training undertaken by foster carers. Attendance on training courses by foster carers is good, although some carers because of work commitments, cannot participate as much as they would wish. The service is currently considering an innovative method of training by using a system known as e-learning. This involves the use of a home computer. Learning packages are sent out on compact disc to carers who can then learn at their own pace. Carers who work for the short breaks service have specific training needs due to the disabilities

of the children who use this service. Some carers have identified that their communication skills would be enhanced if they could attend sign language training.

The service maintains accurate records for each foster home that includes details of the child or young person placed. These records contain all the relevant information to enable the staff to monitor and support the foster carers. The children are encouraged to contribute to and to write their own comments on the review record. The administrative support is provided by a team of staff who are very committed to their work.

There are sound policies and strategies for work with kinship carers.

The service is led by experienced managers who promote clear vision and values, and they are supported by a team of highly motivated professional and administrative staff.

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 the independent members of the panel include as far as possible, expertise in education (NMS 30.8)
- improve the ongoing training programme of training and self development for short breaks carers and to develop their communication skills through sign language training (NMS 23.5).