

North Yorkshire County 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

North Yorkshire County Council provides a fostering service through the Children's Services Department. There are three teams that are responsible for the recruitment, approval, support and monitoring of foster carers. Each team is managed by a Service Manager who in turn is accountable to the General Manager. The services include respite care, permanent foster carers, family and friends carers, specialist carers and treatment foster carers. There are three foster panels for the county which relate to the geographical areas of the county, which are Scarborough and Ryedale, Richmond and Selby, and Harrogate and Craven.

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 an inspection of all the key National Minimum Standards (NMS) excluding NMS 31 as the short break service is contracted out to voluntary organisations and are registered and inspected separately.

This is a service that has some strengths but weaknesses remain. The majority of these weaknesses have been identified and a report prepared by the General Manager. A number of these matters, although not all, are addressed within the Children's Service's Plan and matters are in hand to address them. The strengths include the support to carers which they clearly value. Carers are providing a good standard of care, outcomes for young people in long term care are good, staff support contact well and some creative contact arrangements are in place. The panel arrangements are robust with good attention to detail by panel members, the arrangements for the interim approval of friends and family carers are very strong and staff are committed and experienced.

However, there are some breaches of Regulations. The most serious are that Placement Agreements are not always in place and do not meet the Regulations, and some carers do not have authorisation for medical consent and treatment. Foster Care Agreements are not updated when carers' approval changes and the process for the annual review of carers is not robust. The service appears to have an insufficient number of staff to carry out the full range of tasks required, so systems which are in place are not delivered consistently. For example, not all carers have health and safety checklists which have been updated, the safe care policy is in draft and has not been implemented, record keeping by carers is not appropriate, few carers receive unannounced visits and the role of the supervising social worker is not clearly defined. There is no policy on accidents or on the storage and administration of medication by carers. There is insufficient management capacity to ensure that any monitoring system is undertaken effectively, and time to develop any new policies,

procedures and strategies is limited, for example, the implementation of the Children's Workforce Development Council standards. There is no foster carer training plan in place and opportunities for carers and staff to access training and other developmental opportunities are limited. Friends and family carers do not always receive the same level of service as other carers, even though they are caring for Looked After Children (LAC).

Improvements since the last inspection

No actions or recommendations were made at the last inspection.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is satisfactory.

Carers and the staff within the service promote the good health and wellbeing of the young people placed. Young people say that carers give them healthy food to eat and encourage exercise and healthy lifestyles.

Some carers and young people receive a very good service including access to advice, training and support. However, there is a shortage of LAC Nurses in the county. In the central area, Northallerton and Selby, the LAC nurse time is very limited and they are only generally able to complete the health care assessments and provide limited advice. There are plans in hand to address this matter with the Primary Care Trust. The arrangements for the health care assessments are good including all initial health care assessments which are undertaken by a community paediatrician.

There is no ongoing training programme providing carers with training on health care matters, although this has been identified as a concern by the service.

Not all carers, including respite carers, have up-to-date placement agreements which set out clearly the health care needs of the young people and appropriate medical consent. There is no overall policy and procedure which is implemented for carers on the storage and administration of medication, illness and accidents. These matters are not monitored by staff from the fostering service as part of any monitoring procedure for the whole service.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is satisfactory.

The arrangements for the recruitment and selection of staff are good and staff personnel files contain appropriate documentation.

Carers are generally providing a good standard of care and for some children, particularly those placed long-term, outcomes are good. However, health and safety checklists and pet care assessments are not always in place and are not routinely

updated or renewed. Training for carers on health and safety matters is not consistent.

The staff are committed to ensuring that young people are appropriately matched and are aware of the principles of good matching. The number of placement breakdowns are low and good systems are in place for long-term matches and initial placements of children with friends and family carers. However, there is a concern that placements in an emergency are not as good and the pool of carers is diminishing. Not all placements are supported by placement agreements which meet the Regulations, fully completed and circulated to carers. In particular, respite carers rarely have placement agreements. There is some confusion amongst staff regarding the use of exemptions to go over the fostering limit and variations of approval of carers. Carers who are granted an exemption are not formally notified as required by the Children Act.

Generally children are safely placed in the service and there is a proactive response to child protection matters. However, access to training for carers beyond the initial training is patchy and not consistent. The safer care policy is in draft and has been subject to review and consultation. Some carers have safe care agreements but these are not routinely updated or changed when a new child enters the placement and do not match the new policy.

The arrangements for the panels are good. The panels are chaired by senior managers and the minutes are clear and concise. The panel members receive annual training and the panel membership meets the Regulations and NMS. The panels are thorough in their decision making and clear in their role. The agency decision making is shared by two General Managers, both of whom are experienced and pay attention to detail.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

North Yorkshire Council has distributed guidance for staff and carers on equality and diversity which provides good information and guidance. In addition to this, carers who are caring for young people who are seeking asylum are provided with a range of leaflets created by the British Adoption and Fostering Society, which also provide good quality information and guidance. The majority of children the service cares for are white British children and therefore there are few developed services or facilities for children who are not. However, good practice was seen in relation to the care of children seeking asylum despite community facilities being limited.

North Yorkshire Council has a well developed service for the education of Looked After Children. The majority of schools reported that they have a good relationship with carers, children's services and other professionals. Information provided indicates that Looked After Children are doing well in schools and have access to a range of additional services including mentoring, dedicated teachers, lap top loan system and personal education plans. Young people in year seven who change

schools receive a 'goody box' with all the items they could possibly need to ease integration into senior school. The education team works proactively to avoid exclusion and provide additional support to schools to assist Looked After Children and ensure that they do well.

The short break service is contracted out to voluntary organisations and the services are separately registered and inspected.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The staff have a high commitment to contact and ensuring that contact is carried out and is appropriate. Staff are able to give good examples of where contact has improved not only in quantity but quality for many young people. Carers and young people are aware of their contact arrangements and these arrangements are listed on the young people's files. Carers are actively involved in contact arrangements.

Young people are aware of how they can make a complaint and there is evidence that complaints are investigated well. Information is available to carers and young people. However the information in the Children's Guide is out of date, as it lists details of the previous regulatory bodies and not Ofsted.

The service has a children's rights officer in place who is undertaking a number of initiatives and is known to some fostered children. The service has a written participation and consultation strategy which includes meetings with elected members and staff with Looked After Children, which is well developed. Young people have been involved in developing a number of projects including the 'Look Beyond' project, to encourage the recruitment of carers for teenagers.

Young people have opportunities to be involved and attend their statutory reviews and complete consultation documents.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

The service has recently received funding via the 'Stay Put' initiative to develop services for young people aged over 16 and to allow them to stay with existing foster carers. Most of the young people aged over 16 had pathway plans and good practice was seen in the development of independent living skills amongst young people.

The service pays 40% above the government recommended rates for carers and the payment system is under review. Most carers are satisfied with the payment system, including the payment of allowances. However, there is some delay in the payments to respite carers, which staff are aware of.

Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

The service has a number of weaknesses and breaches of Regulations, the majority of which have been identified by the General Manager in a report which has been submitted to the senior management team. There is acknowledgement of some of these matters and these are being addressed through the Children's Services Plan.

The statement of purpose has recently been updated and provides clear and accurate information for staff and carers. The children's guide is provided in two formats so that younger children have more age-appropriate information and the complaints guide is shown pictorially. However, the guide does not include information about how to contact Ofsted.

There are no formal monitoring systems in place which meet the NMS. Staff do not regularly and systematically review the matters outlined in Schedule 7 of the Fostering Services Regulations, including accidents, illness, medicines, safe caring documents, health and safety checklists, and checking that documents are securely stored. It is not clear if there is sufficient management capacity to undertake a formal monitoring system. Not all carers receive unannounced visits and there is no system in place to ensure that these visits have some purpose.

Overall, it is not clear if there is sufficient staff to carry out the full range of tasks as specified in Regulations, to ensure that carers receive appropriate documentation and access to training, and to supervise placements. Staff are committed to the service; most are aware of their responsibilities and some have thorough knowledge of the Regulations and NMS and are well experienced. There is limited development of policies and procedures and the implementing of new practice. There is limited management capacity as this is delegated to three Service Managers, all of whom have additional areas of responsibility. Although there is no reason to doubt the competency of the managers, they are limited by the huge task set with no additional support in the form of a management structure, for example, the use of senior practitioners who could take on some of the day-to-day matters. Decision making regarding the implementation of new policies, procedures and systems is hampered by the size and geography of the county.

At the present time, the service has enough carers to meet most of the needs of children placed. However, managers and staff are aware that this pool is diminishing and have strategies in place to recruit more carers, including an increase in the marketing budget and the 'Look Beyond' campaign. The standards of assessments of carers varies with some good practice seen particularly in the Treatment Foster Care Service. Some assessments lack good quality analysis and details about specific matters, including interviews with previous partners and information about Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks. Not all staff have had access to training on undertaking assessments of foster carers.

There is no foster care training plan and training when provided is inconsistent and

patchy. There is a low take up of training across the county, although carers stated that when provided the training is of a good quality. The staff have limited opportunity to training and other developmental opportunities. Not all staff have had an annual appraisal where their training and developmental needs can be identified.

All of the carers commented positively on the support they receive from the staff and many identified staff by name as 'outstanding'. Carers clearly value the support that they receive. Carers receive regular visits, and staff are always available to take messages and give advice. However, the role of the supervising social worker is not defined and the standard of the quality of the visits varied. The process for annual reviews of carers other than the initial reviews are not robust and there is no systematic renewal of CRB checks and medical checks.

The young people's files contain a range of documents. However, there is a shortage of Looked After Children documents and, in particular, placement agreements. It is not always clear from the file why children have been accommodated or placed with particular carers.

Record keeping by carers is inconsistent and there are no procedures in place for the retention or disposal of records kept by carers. Carers record all the information about different children in the same diary irrespective of how many children they are caring for. Records are not always kept securely in carers' homes. Foster care agreements are not updated when a carer's approval changes and the agreements make reference to a previous regulatory body.

It is not clear if there is sufficient administrative support to carry out all the tasks required with respect to record keeping and general administrative tasks.

The friends and family carers do not receive the same level of support as other carers. Although friends and family carers are approved at panel and are caring for children, they are not always allocated a worker until they have undergone a full assessment and have been back to panel. Some friends and family do not undergo a full assessment if the care plan for the young people indicates a different outcome, for example, a special guardianship order or a residence order. There is a lack of clarity amongst staff regarding policies and procedures in relation to working with friends and family carers, who do not receive training, a handbook or visits from staff within the same timescales as other carers.

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
12	ensure that all carers have sufficient health care information about each child placed in order for them to be cared for appropriately (Regulation 17 (3) (a))	15/01/2009
12	ensure that carers have arrangements in place for the authorisation of the giving of consent for medical and dental treatment (Regulation 17 (3) (b))	15/01/2009
12	create a system for the storage and administration of medication by carers which is monitored by the service (Regulation 42 (1) Schedule 7)	15/01/2009
8	ensure that all placements are supported by a placement agreement which meets the Regulations are fully completed and given to the carers (Regulation 34 (3) Schedule 6)	15/01/2009
8	ensure that all exemptions to exceed the fostering limit comply with relevant legislation (Children Act Schedule 7)	15/01/2009
4	implement an effective monitoring system to ensure that matters outlined in the Regulations are monitored (Regulation 42 (1) Schedule 7)	15/01/2009
17	ensure that there are a sufficient number of suitably qualified and competent and experienced persons working for the purposes of the fostering service in order to carry out the full range of tasks required so that children are safeguarded and carers are appropriately supported (Regulation 19)	02/03/2009
19	create an effective training programme for carers (Regulation 17(1))	02/02/2009
20	undertake an appraisal with all staff who have not had one in the last 12 months (Regulation 21(4) a)	15/01/2009
19	create a programme to provide appropriate training and developmental opportunities for the staff (Regulation 21(4))	16/02/2009
21	ensure that the system for the annual review of carers is robust and complies with Regulations (Regulation 29 (1))	02/03/2009
21	ensure that Foster Care Agreements are updated and state accurately what the carers are approved for (Regulation 28 Schedule 5).	02/02/2009

Recommendations

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

- ensure that all carers have access to appropriate health care services including access to the LAC nurse (NMS 12.7)
- ensure that carers have access to appropriate health care training including first aid, health and hygiene and health promotion (NMS 12.5)
- ensure that all carers have up to date health and safety checklists which are updated as required (NMS 6.7)

- provide training for carers on health and safety responsibilities (NMS 6.7)
- provide consistent training for carers on safeguarding matters (NMS 9.2)
- ensure that all carers have a safe care agreement which complies with the authority's policy and is updated as required (NMS 9.3)
- provide information to young people so that they can complain to Ofsted should they wish to (NMS 11.5)
- ensure that respite carers receive their payments within appropriate timescales (NMS 29.1)
- ensure that all carers receive an unannounced visit (NMS 22.6)
- provide training for staff on undertaking assessment of carers (NMS 19.1)
- create a written policy on the recording by foster carers, the keeping and retention of files and security of records in foster carers' homes which is monitored (NMS 25.7)
- ensure that all friends and family carers receive the same level of support as other foster carers (NMS 32.3).