

Kingston upon Hull City Council Fostering Service

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

Unique reference number	SC055889
Inspection date	07/05/2009
Inspector	Sue Winson / Lynn O'Driscoll
Type of inspection	Key

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Date of last inspection	25/06/2007

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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

Hull City Council's fostering service provides care for children and young people who are looked after by the local authority and whose needs are best met in a family environment. Foster care is provided via a number of distinct fostering schemes including short break carers, respite carers and mainstream carers.

Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

The service is satisfactory with some good aspects. The people managing and working in the service are suitably qualified and have access to training to further their development. Foster carers are well supported and work in partnership to meet the needs of children placed. Deficiencies in clarity of policies and procedures, effective quality assurance and monitoring systems impacts upon the service's ability to develop and to increase the number of foster carers in order to improve placement choice and outcomes for children.

Improvements since the last inspection

No actions or recommendations were made at the last inspection.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is satisfactory.

The fostering service largely promotes the health and development of children. There is evidence of foster carers meeting health needs and promoting healthy lifestyles. They receive training on child development, attachment and specialised training is available for those foster carers who look after children with disabilities. Fostering social workers monitor children's health on supervisory visits and placing social workers comments for reviews are largely positive. Health assessments take place within the required timescales and children are registered with opticians, dentists and local doctors and have check ups as required. A smoking policy is in place which states that children under five years will not be placed in smoking households.

There is variability in outcomes for children who need specialised health services and improving how they meet emotional needs is part of the service's improvement agenda. There have been considerable delays in young people accessing psychological support. Accident forms are completed by foster carers which demonstrate that appropriate action has been taken.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is satisfactory.

The people managing the service are suitably qualified and experienced in safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children. Staff involved in assessment of foster carers are qualified, or in the case of students on placement, are supervised by qualified social workers. Arrangements are in place to renew Criminal Record Bureau (CRB) checks every three years.

Foster carers' homes, which were visited as part of the inspection, are child friendly and suitably decorated and furnished with age appropriate toys available. Health and safety checks are carried out prior to approval and areas of risk are identified, however, there is no record of remedial action being taken or of the assessments being carried out annually. Records of exemptions from the usual fostering limit do not specify whether the home can comfortably accommodate all who live there and there is not a robust system for monitoring these. Risk assessments on children sharing bedrooms are not in place.

Matching decisions are compromised by lack of placement choice. A significant number of foster carers have children placed outside of their approval range or over the usual fostering limit of three children. Planning meetings happen routinely and support to maintain placements is flexible and effective in that the service has had a low number of unplanned endings. Foster Placement Agreements are compiled which do not include specific reference to elements of matching. There has been occasion where the service has made placement with potential foster carers prior to their approval, and made inappropriate use of the emergency friends and family legislation. Where placements are made with agencies there are systems in place to monitor the quality of care children are receiving.

The fostering service protects children and young people and foster carers are trained in safeguarding and safe caring. Each foster carer has their individual safe caring guidelines and there is evidence that they carry out appropriate strategies in practice. Fostering social workers understand their role in safeguarding and carry out regular supervisory visits where foster carer recording and practice is monitored. Training for foster carers in positive behaviour management is clearly effective and they demonstrate awareness of the underlying factors which impact on young people. Not all foster carers have full information about children in their care, including up to date care plans.

The fostering service has two panels which both meet monthly and are well chaired and organised. One of the two panels does not have an elected member or a person with experience of having been in the care system. Medical and educational advisors are said to be useful assets to the panel. Reasons for decisions are clearly outlined in the minutes and there have been occasions where the panel has deferred cases with clear recommendations for actions to be taken prior to representation. There have been recommendations for approval 'in principle' prior to all checks being obtained.

The chairs and vice chairs have access to training on effective panels, however there are no arrangements in place for panel training and development and there are no written policies and procedures. The panel's quality assurance and monitoring functions are an area for development. Business meetings provide an operational link between the panels and the fostering service.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

There is an equality strategy in place and a commitment to providing services which value diversity and promote equality. Young people receive services to meet their individual needs which includes the provision of equipment and passes for leisure centres. Respite services are available to all foster carers. The city council's literacy and numeracy skills courses are available to assist foster carers in promoting education. Young people are encouraged and supported to take part in leisure pursuits in line with their interests and wishes.

The fostering service promotes education and school attendance. Training for foster carers equips them to support young people in education and help them with anxieties at times of transition. Children access appropriate educational placements and special educational needs statements and personal education plans are in place. Where necessary to meet individual need private tutoring is available for young people. Foster carers work with schools and educationalists to meet young people's needs and attend school meetings and events. In combination with library services enjoyment of reading is promoted.

A dedicated short break service is in place which aims to keep families together. This service is well established and is located within preventative services. It also provide respite to foster carers including friends and family carers. It is a flexible service providing short breaks at variable frequencies and for as long as necessary to meet needs. Good relationships exist with fostering teams where the recruitment of carers for short breaks takes place and short break carers have access to the same services as mainstream foster carers.

The fostering services works with a local specialist agency provides short breaks and long term placements for children with disabilities. A service level agreement clearly outlines their expectation of the agency and roles and responsibilities.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The fostering service promotes contact in line with legal directives and to meet needs of children. Foster carers respect children's rights to keep in touch with significant people and demonstrate understanding of the importance of contact to children. Sometimes carers provide contact in own home and maintain positive relationships

with family members, which has resulted in young people returning to live with their families. Placing social workers expressed concern about some foster carers' lack of availability or unwillingness to transport children to contact. Foster carers receive training on promoting contact and working in partnership with families and experienced foster carers are involved in training delivery.

Young people are encouraged and supported to attend their statutory reviews and contribute to the discussion. Foster carers are involved in service development and feel that their views are listened to. Support groups for the sons and daughters of foster carers are well established and a high number of children and young people are involved. A young people's parliament is well developed as is 'voice influence' across all services which involves them in service development. Complaints are properly addressed and outcomes fed back to carers.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

Young people are supported to develop life skills in preparation for independent living. Foster carers maintain an appropriate balance between young people's needs for independence and safety issues. Young people are able to stay with foster carers up to the age of twenty one in order to meet their needs and some young adults have remained in placement under supported lodgings arrangements. There is no evidence of formal pathway planning for young people in foster care.

A well organised system for payments to foster carers is in place which ensures that they are paid the agreed allowances in a timely manner. Foster carers can, and do, ring the finance officer if they have any queries.

Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

The promotion of equality and diversity is satisfactory. All training for foster carers and staff reflect equal opportunities policies.

The service has a statement of purpose which has recently been revised and which meets regulations. A children's guide is available in only one format and does not include contact details for Ofsted.

The service is managed by appropriate skilled, qualified and experienced managers who demonstrate a commitment to improving outcomes for children and young people. The team delivery plan has just been produced which clearly outlines areas for improvement and development. Regular full service and team meetings take place. Fostering social workers said that the quality of supervision and direction from line managers is variable. All staff are qualified and skilled in fostering and stated that the authority is a fair and reasonable employer. Staff know where to find the whistle blowing policy. Case management decisions are recorded.

The service cannot demonstrate that it is monitored and controlled as specified in National Minimum Standards and Regulations. There is a lack of information about some outcomes area for children and young people and some records lack detail or clarity. There are clear roles and responsibilities and lines of accountability however policies and procedures are sometimes unclear and do not provide effective guidance for staff. Reviews of carers take place within the fostering team after which information is updated and checks are renewed prior to the information going to panel, sometimes months later. The level of administrative support is insufficient and has been addressed by the service. Where the services uses agency placements there are quality assurance systems in place including financial monitoring.

A recruitment strategy is in place and targets for increasing the number of foster carers are being met. Assessments are comprehensive and contain clear and factual information. Clear processes outline expected timescales for enquiries and applications. The quality of information sent out to enquirers is high and the role of a foster carer is clearly and comprehensively explained.

Staff and foster carers were positive about the range and value of training available to them. Fostering social workers have personal development plans and opportunity to update and further their knowledge. The service has increased the take up of foster carer training through the use of a range of learning methods including e-learning. Well established training at the induction stage and throughout fostering careers covers a wide range of subjects including those designed specifically to meet foster carer's needs or requests.

Foster carers are well supported and supervised. They expressed satisfaction with the quality and range of support available to them. Support groups are held although some foster carers prefer not to attend them. Mentoring schemes are in place and there is the provision of out of hours and direct support from a residential centre. A foster carer handbook in place. Fostering social workers are clear about their support and supervisory roles and telephone foster carers each week, visit each month and carry out supervisory visit three monthly. Records demonstrate that this is largely happening in practice. Supervisory visit records vary in the level of detail they contain, some being very brief. Foster care agreements do not contain the detail required by Schedule 5 of Regulations.

The offices used by the fostering service are not sufficiently secure as it is possible to access them without any authorisation.

The local authority recognises the contribution made by family and friends as carers. A separate team focuses on the needs of this group and provides a flexible service. They have access to the same levels of support and training as mainstream foster carers. An active grandparents' group is supported by the service but organised by the people involved. Social workers give them information on legal routes available to them to enhance the security of placements.

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 each child has access to health services as required (Regulation 15)	07/05/2009
8	make specific reference to matching in any Foster Placement Agreement and ensure the agreement covers the matters specified in Schedule 6 (Regulation 34)	07/05/2009
30	ensure that the Panel comprises of people with the skills and experience as set out in Regulation 24	30/06/2009
30	ensure that the fostering service provider does not approve a person as a foster parent unless it has completed it's assessment of his suitability and it's fostering panel has considered the application (Regulation 28)	07/05/2009
1	ensure that the address and telephone number of Ofsted is included in the Children's Guide (Regulation 3)	07/05/2009
16	operate clear structures and systems to ensure that reviews of carers are managed and implemented effectively (Regulation 29)	07/05/2009
26	ensure that there are adequate security arrangements at the premises (Regulation 23).	07/05/2009

Recommendations

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

- ensure that the foster home can comfortably accommodate all who live there and is inspected annually to make sure it meets the needs of children (NMS 6)
- ensure that risk assessments are carried out where children share bedrooms (NMS 6)
- ensure that foster carers are provided with full information about children in their care (NMS 9)
- ensure that fostering panels have clear written policies and procedures which are carried out in practice (NMS 30)
- ensure that young people are consulted and involved in the implementation of their Pathway Plans (NMS 14)
- ensure the quality assurance function of the Panel is understood, implemented and maintained (NMS 30)

- ensure that all staff have access to policies and procedures (NMS 16)
- ensure that foster carer agreements are in line with Schedule 5 of Regulations and contain all the information they need to know (NMS 22)
- ensure that there are clear processes for monitoring and controlling the activities of the fostering service and ensuring quality performance (NMS 4).