

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 all the key National Minimum Standards were inspected. Since the last inspection the service has undertaken a significant amount of work to make improvements and meet the actions and recommendations made at the last inspection. This is against the backdrop of the challenges with the uncertainty about the General Manager's post and the 'acting up' management arrangements. Ofsted recognises that a lot of the developmental work has yet to be fully implemented and embedded into practice to make a real impact. Staff are very clear about the changes which have been undertaken and are committed to change. The service continues to have many strengths in particular the support to carers, the support to young people regarding their education, the commitment to develop practice, placement stability and outcomes for children and the challenges posed by accommodating unaccompanied asylum seekers. Further work remains in order to fully complete the implementation of the development plan, these include strengthening the monitoring the service, developing further the role of the supervising social worker and reviewing the level of support to friends and family carers. The promotion of equality and diversity is good.

Improvements since the last inspection

A considerable number of actions and recommendations were made at the last inspection. The service has undertaken a significant amount of work since then and plans are in hand for most of this work to be fully implemented in September. In particular new policies have been created to ensure that carers have sufficient health care information, and medical consent for the young people placed with them. The local Primary Health Trust has appointed additional Looked After Children Nurses so that carers and staff have good access to health care advice and information. A new policy and procedure has been created for the storage and administration of medication so that this is monitored more closely.

The service has started using the Placement Information Record and a new policy has been created to ensure that this is completed accurately so that carers have appropriate information.

The system has been strengthened for the agreeing of all exemptions and a new letter has been devised, which complies with legislation. A new system for monitoring all activities within the service has been developed and this is beginning to have impact in many areas. There has been overall improvement in staffing levels and the authority has created new deputy service managers to increase the overall management capacity. A new training programme has been created and the service is hopeful in appointing a training manager who will work specifically with foster carers.

All staff have now had an appraisal which has identified their developmental needs. The service has started a review of all the foster care agreements to ensure that they match the current carer's approval and these are being processed through the carers' annual reviews. A new system for the creation of health and safety checklist including special attention to carers who live on farms and staff are about to start training on assessing health and safety matters.

Changes have been made to the safe guarding training and the safe caring policies to increase the level of safeguarding within fostering households. New arrangements are in place to ensure that carers are paid more promptly when they have provided respite care.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is satisfactory.

Carers are promoting the health and well being of the young people placed. New policies and procedures have been developed regarding the storage and administration of medication and recording and are due to be implemented and distributed to carers in September. The policies provide good and helpful advice. A new training programme has been developed and includes training for carers on first aid, sexual health and mental health and carers have started to undertake this. However the training on first aid may not be the most appropriate for carers and they do not have access to training on health, hygiene and promoting healthy lifestyles.

Carers ensure that young people are registered with local doctors, dentist and opticians and these matters are considered at the statutory reviews. Young people say that carers look after them when they are ill and provide them with a healthy diet. A number of young people are taking part in sports and other active hobbies. However a number of carers do not understand the implications and use of medical consent and this is not signed on all Placement Information Records, which should be given to carers when a child is placed.

A number of new initiatives are in hand to develop the emotional well being of young people, including Story Sacks and a new model for life story work called Work Life model and this is being developed with carers and staff through training and support groups.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The arrangements for the recruitment and selection of staff are good. The staff personnel files contain all appropriate documentation and there is evidence that this is scrutinised by managers prior to any candidate starting work.

The service provides suitable carers. Carers have health and safety checklists in place and the format for these has been revised and now includes additional measures to ensure that children placed on farms are safeguarded. Carers' homes provide appropriate accommodation and the sharing of bedrooms is managed through a risk assessment process.

The arrangements for matching are good. Placement stability is very good with very few unplanned endings. All siblings are placed together where this is the plan and a steady supply of new carers ensures that placement choice is good. A new system for making exemptions is in place, few are made and these and permission for variations are agreed at service manager level. Very few children are placed with Independent Fostering Agencies and good systems are in place to safeguard these placements. Placement outcomes for children are generally good and most young people are satisfied with their care arrangements. One wrote in a survey- 'I love living here because they are great loving carers.'

Young people said that they felt safe in placements, that they were not being bullied and know how to access help if they need it. Carers are offered safeguarding training and this is gradually being taken up by them and there is a new format for safe caring policies, which are detailed and good. There is a new policy in place to deal with allegations against carers and this policy emphasises the need to safeguard children. There have been very few allegations made against carers in the last 12 months and an appropriate response was made in each case. Carers understand that physical punishment is not permitted. A new training programme is being developed and implemented to provide additional support and advice to carers on managing behaviour and parenting strategies.

The panels are organised, effectively and efficiently. The minutes and observation from last year confirms that the panels are aware of their responsibilities, undertake detail questioning of matters brought before them and make clear recommendations. This contributes to the overall safeguarding of children placed to increase their life chances.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The service values diversity and this is promoted well. The staff have begun to develop the service for unaccompanied asylum seeking children as the number they are accommodating is also growing. Carers are provided with specific training to meet individual needs as these arise, relating to culture, religion or disability. Issues relating to equality and diversity are considered during the assessment phase for carers and discussed during the pre-approval training.

The service promotes well the education of looked after children. The county has a specific team who provide a range of resources and support to carers and individual children. Carers value this service and one wrote, 'the service we have received has been outstanding, they have provided transport and a mentor'. Almost all young people have a personal education plan, all children are attending school or education provision and fixed term exclusions are low. Good practice was observed in respect of individual children to ensure that they attend appropriate schools to meet their needs and have additional support as required. Another carer wrote, 'Our young person has lots of skills and is predicted to get an A in maths at GCSE, he has lots of hobbies and interests, he can sing, swim, plays team games and is well thought of in the village'

The service provide a range of activities for the children placed, which carers value and one carer wrote, 'Numerous activities are organised by North Yorkshire County Council for looked after children, most of which we take part in as a family. Our looked after child has been on about five different activities so far this year and with still more to come. We are very happy'.

However some children are denied the opportunities to attend school trips or activities organised by external organisations as it can be difficult for carers to gain the permission as this is granted by service managers. Carers find this frustrating particularly when the timescales are short. The service has in place a 'sleep over' policy which is overly bureaucratic and does not encourage this activity and does not comply with the spirit of the guidance given by the Department of Children and Families. (DCSF)

The short break service for children and their families with disabilities is provided by an external organisation and is inspected separately. North Yorkshire council have respite carers who provide respite care and good breaks for their main foster carers to allow them a break or to take a holiday.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The service promotes contact well. Carers and young people are aware of the contact arrangements and these are recorded on file. Carers are involved with

contact, some providing transport and others accommodation for visits. Contact arrangements are reviewed at the statutory reviews. All young people said that they were satisfied with present contact arrangements.

The council has developed systems for participation and consultation, through local participation groups, consultation days and events and an established Young People's Council. The young people involved with this work clearly value their involvement and the impact on other looked after children and their own opportunities for personal development.

Young people are consulted prior to their statutory reviews and many take an active part in them, which they value. Young people also stated that carers listen to them, are willing to talk to them if they are worried and take into account their views and feelings. One young person wrote, ' They have always listened they have never not listened to me'.

The arrangements for the making and investigation of complaints is appropriate. All young people know how to make a complaint and the Council also employs the National Youth Advocacy Service (NYAS) to provide a range of additional services. However the views of young people are not routinely and systematically collected and recorded during the annual review of carers.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

There are good arrangements in place for the development of independent living skills for young people and in particular the range of accommodation options. The authority is taking part in the 'Staying Put' pilot which is developing opportunities for young people to remain in foster care beyond their 18th birthday. This has been well received by carers, staff and young people and a significant number of young people have been able to take up this opportunity to provide some stability as they progress into young adult hood. The service has purchased a training course for carers to help them in developing their own knowledge a skills in this area.

The majority of carers reported that they are paid on time and receive appropriate payments and allowances. However friends and family carers are less satisfied as they are aware that they receive the basic payment without the additional allowance. However some friends and family carers have received additional funding for a range of other items and arrangements.

Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Appropriate policies are in place and managers, staff and carers are aware of relevant issues and also of the ongoing work required. Carers are provided with specific training and support as issues arise and staff have undertaken a specific training on equality and diversity. Equality and

diversity issues are taken into account during matching, however more subtle matters are not always recorded in the Placement Information Record and in carer's supervision records, for example about identity.

The Statement of Purpose has been revised and contains appropriate information for carers, professionals and staff. Young people are provided with a range of documents including a Children's Guide and information about making complaints. These documents are being revised and work is in hand, however none of the current documents contain information on how young people can contact Ofsted or the National Children's Rights Director should they wish to.

The service has developed new systems for monitoring their activities. There is clear evidence that a file audit has taken place and a new policy has been created to ensure that carers, staff and young people have the appropriate documentation. New policies have been developed for unannounced visits, supervision of carers and recording. However these have not as yet been fully implemented and the impact is that some carers have not had unannounced visits, essential paper work is either missing or not in good order or carers are not fully aware of the relevance of each document.

Since the last inspection the service has appointed deputy service managers, a policy officer and has created 'acting up' arrangements for the General Manager's post. The service has also undertaken a considerable amount of development work to improve the service and meet the actions and recommendations from the last inspection. A significant amount of resources has been allocated to the service and there is commitment across all levels to continue the improvement. However the majority of this work is due to be implemented in September and the new deputy service managers have not as yet taken up their posts, therefore the real impact of this change has not as yet been realised.

The service has now through a series of secondments and use of agency workers an adequate number of sufficiently qualified and experienced staff in the East and West of the county to meet the needs of carers and young people placed. However the team in the Central area is not as well placed. Carers commented negatively about the impact on them of both fostering and social work temporary staff and how this affects their relationships. The authority continues through an efficient and effective programme to recruit carers and there is a steady number always waiting to be assessed.

Staff are well supported through regular supervision, appraisal, team meetings and training and developmental opportunities. Staff commented in particular that they are encouraged to suggest new ideas and lead project work.

Carers value highly the support they receive from the fostering social workers and family support workers and the majority speak positively of the service and in particular the staff. One carer wrote, 'We are well supported, treated with respect and recognised for the work we have done'. Carers are provided with regular visits, phone calls, equipment and support groups. There are plans in hand, through the

creation of new posts to develop the system for the annual review of foster carers to ensure that they are independently scrutinised and robust. The service recognises that the current system is not as effective and in particular the views of young people placed is not consistently and independently obtained and recorded as such. The service has done much over the last year to develop the role of the supervising social worker and to emphasise in particular the safeguarding role, particularly through the development of the new supervision record. However not all carers are getting the same level of service and some do not have for example a carer's handbook, unannounced visits with real purpose and their paper work routinely scrutinised.

There is a new good training programme in place for all staff and carers and the service is hopeful that they can appoint a service specific training officer to develop and monitor all training for carers. There are established systems in place for carers to work through the new Children's Workforce Development Council standards.

A new policy and system has been established for the recording by carers, which is gradually being accepted by carers and scrutinised by staff. Carers are generally keeping their records secure and beginning to record important matters. There are arrangements in place so that young people can access their records, however these systems are not robust enough to ensure that all young people have access to their records in a timely way.

The service keeps separate records for children, carers and administrative matters and these are generally in good order, although some routine matters like dates and signatures are not always obvious. However the service is challenged with the introduction of the Integrated Children's System for records.

The service has a number of friends and family carers. The arrangements for children placed in an emergency are good and once they have been approved at panel the case is transferred to the fostering service for the full assessment. However friends and family carers are not paid the same as other carers and until recently were not offered the same level of training and they are not required to undertake pre-approval training as other carers would. It is some time since this policy was reviewed and this leads to dissatisfaction amongst carers, who are not always clear at the start of the placement what is expected of them.

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 carers have medical consent and understand the implications of this (Regulation 17.3.b)	30/09/2009
1	ensure that young people are provided with information on how they can contact Ofsted should they wish to (Regulation 3.3 c)	30/09/2009
21	ensure that the views of children are taken into account during the carer's annual reviews (Regulation 29.3.b.iii).	31/10/2009

Recommendations

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

- provide training for carers on health, hygiene and promoting a healthy lifestyles (NMS 12.5)
- ensure that young people are not denied the opportunities to take part in normal activities as experienced by children who live in families (NMS 7.7)
- ensure that the monitoring systems in place are fully implemented (NMS 4.1)
- review the role of supervising social worker to ensure that the carer operates within and understands all standards, policies and guidance agreed by the fostering service (NMS 22.3)
- ensure all carers, on approval, are given a handbook which covers policies, procedures, guidance, legal information and insurance details (NMS 22.4)
- ensure that there are occasional unannounced visits, at least one a year (NMS 22.6)
- ensure that young people understand that they can access their own records and see them within an appropriate timescale (NMS 24.1)
- ensure that friends and family carers receive the same level of support and training needs as any other carers (NMS 32.3).