

Leeds City 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 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.

A range of foster placements are provided. These are based on a number of schemes that are temporary, permanent, fee paid, remand, task centred, fee paid permanency, assessment and family resource carers.

The service is responsible for the recruitment, assessment, training, support and development of all its foster carers.

Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

This was an announced inspection of all of the key outcome areas under the Every Child Matters agenda.

Since the last key inspection in July 2008 and monitoring visit in February 2009, the service has continued to make good progress and improvements to the service delivery. This has resulted in better outcomes for children and young people. Strengths are in areas, such as the support from health and education, the manner in which children are consulted and enabled to participate in issues affecting them, transition of young people into independence and good support and training opportunities for carers, including carers who provide short breaks to children with disabilities. The fostering panel provides a well organised and representative arena that provides a good level of scrutiny.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good.

There has been significant progress made to improving the service delivery and the capacity within the senior management team to bring about change within the fostering service is having an impact. There is continued scrutiny by elected members and senior managers with a clear focus on safeguarding children. The service has developed an action plan for the reduction of numbers in larger households and this plan is monitored and regularly reviewed.

There remains shortfalls in the numbers of carers available to provide more placement choice, to prevent overcrowding and to ensure appropriate matching of children with carers. Aspects of the recruitment process, management of complaints, safe caring practices and risk management safeguards are not robust and are areas for improvement to ensure the safety and welfare of children.

Improvements since the last inspection

The service has made good progress and continues to review the action plan to ensure compliance and improvement.

Improved controls exerted by the fostering service to ensure that children are not placed with carers over the normal fostering limit of three has been adhered to with appropriate systems in place to secure exemptions over the fostering limit. Exemptions are going to panel and the basis on which the exemption is agreed and timescales are made clear. The service also plans to ensure that where foster carer agreements do not reflect the approval status of foster carers that these are also taken to the fostering panel. These arrangements promote welfare and safeguard children and young people.

Children's social workers and fostering social workers have a better appreciation of the legal implications under the Children Act 1989 with respect to placing children in larger households. They said that they are spending more time talking and listening to young people and ensuring that risk assessments are in place when placements are made.

Improvements have been made to carer's assessments on their suitability to become a foster carer. Carers are provided with training, advice, information and support to help them to look after children.

Measures are in place to ensure that shortfalls in staffing are met by qualified agency staff or by existing staff extending their hours of work. This ensures that unallocated households are appropriately prioritised and managed. Good practice recommendations relating to matching, the promotion of equality and diversity, support to kinship carers, monitoring of the service have been addressed. Outstanding issues relate to risk assessments for children sharing a room and ensuring that accurate safe caring policies are implemented.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

The service promotes the health and well-being of children. Carers are very well supported to access health services to meet the physical and emotional needs of children, including specialist health services. Carers ensure that children placed with them are registered with key health professionals or maintain their existing arrangements. Children and young people confirm that they always get support and advice about being healthy. Comments from young people include 'I am being very well cared for and looked after'.

Most carers confirm that they are supported to help children stay healthy and promote a healthy lifestyle. Carers are well informed about the health needs of children, which are reviewed and monitored through the statutory review process.

Consent for children to receive medical treatment is available to carers.

The service continues to have good links with the health team for looked after children and they provide a range of support to the service. An increased number of health needs assessments and immunisations have been completed. The service is developing services to improve mental health assessments and services to children from black and ethnic minority communities, unaccompanied asylum seekers and those who are suffering from post traumatic stress disorder. These initiatives identify and promote the good health of children.

There is a range of training and good practice information available to carers on health issues, such as sexual health, health promotion, including first aid and healthy lifestyles.

The support given to family placement carers is also good. The needs of children are thoroughly assessed and integrated needs assessments are properly implemented. Carers are provided with information regarding children's health needs and know what to do in an emergency. Parents maintain full responsibility for their children's health needs. Family placement and short breaks carers confirm that they have good relationships with parents and information is appropriately shared for consistency. This promotes the health and well-being of children.

Carers are provided with a copy of the service medication policies. This includes the procedures about handling medication. However, the document could be improved and enhance carers' knowledge. For example, information about controlled medication, Sickle Cell and Thalassaemia is missing. No mention is made of medication in relation to diabetes and use of insulin. The policy also lacks information with regard to care of babies and what carers should and should not do.

The short breaks medication policy details the action to be taken by carers, however not all carers are aware that they need to make a record of medication administered to children.

The short break nursing agreement is signed by carers and medical personnel after training is completed where carers have to perform invasive procedures. This is completed for all children on short break services. It includes gastronomy feeding and care, nasal gastric feeding and care, stoma care. This is good practice.

All children's personal care needs are provided for and require high levels of supervision, for example, children with reflux who need supervision when eating, to prevent any risk of choking. A risk assessment is in place. However, this is not sufficiently specific in identifying the risk, triggers or action necessary to minimise risk and the action foster carers should take. This practice is in conflict with the medication policy, which makes clear the need to have individual risk assessments for each procedure. The provider is addressing this.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is satisfactory.

The recruitment policy and procedures sets out the progress and systems to ensure robust vetting of prospective staff. However, it does not require references to be confirmed via telephone. There is no reference to the need for the recruitment panel to record discussions relating to positive Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks or gaps in employment. Not all of the checks are made to ensure that the arrangements for the recruitment of staff are completed. Not all of the applications contain a full employment history, the reasons for suitability are not recorded and the service needs to follow up checks of previous employers, not just the most recent, to fully comply with the regulations.

There are sound systems for checking that carers are safe to care for children. All necessary checks are carried out on carer households, including CRB checks. There is also a renewal process and clearance for young people over 16 years old who live in carer households.

Carers provide children with a safe, healthy and nurturing environment and the rooms are suitable for fostering. Health and safety checks are in place, including dog risk assessments where appropriate. Carer's preparation and training covers health and safety issues. Vehicle checks are also completed.

Significant progress has been made to address the issue of carers looking after children over numbers. A review of the fostering services duty system has meant that children are no longer placed with foster carers over numbers without the necessary exemption. Most fostering social workers and children's social workers understand the legislative consequences of larger households and are putting the needs of children first and their best interests are considered more to ensure they live in a safe environment. The social workers of children living in larger households take more time to speak to children on their own and listen to their views. They acknowledge the changes that are being made to reduce the numbers and reasons for this. Social workers are more aware of ensuring good risk assessments are in place and that these are subject to review, irrespective of the size of households. These measures safeguard children's welfare.

Exemptions are clear and detailed, setting the basis on which the exemption is agreed. This includes promoting the welfare and safeguarding children and young people, as it takes account of the issue of large households.

Some carers express concerns about the service's response to addressing holiday care arrangements and action taken to prevent over numbers. However, some carers accept and understand that these arrangements had to be formalised, to prevent over numbers in households to ensure good outcomes for children and young people. Some holiday carers have now been formally approved.

The practice of children sharing bedrooms with a none sibling is due to cease.

However, children who are currently sharing with unrelated children who pose risky behaviour have not been subject to a written risk assessment. This does not sufficiently protect children from harm.

Matching of carers with children continues to pose a challenge for the service and this is acknowledged. There is a range of services offered. However, there are limitations to what is available due to a shortage of carers. The service has increased the use of external placements with independent fostering agencies. Children's social workers comment that such placements can present a problem with location, which can impact on parents who may have to travel distances to see their children. Some carers are very proactive and know their child and even if the match is not exact, they will work hard to make sure they find all the support and resources necessary to help them because they see their child as the main focus.

Matching in short breaks continues to be a strong feature of the service. Social workers and fostering social workers meet, so they are able to look closely at the match in the first instance. This ensures that the arrangements can meet the child's needs and carer's skills.

The authority seeks to safeguard and protect children from abuse and neglect through its Local Safeguarding Children's Board (LSCB) with responsibility for coordinating safeguarding and protection across the city and the safeguarding policies and procedures. Strategy meetings are appropriately managed and action is taken to safeguard children.

There is recognition that that children receiving intimate care may be more vulnerable to abuse. The guidance about this issue is well thought out and covers issues such as nursing interventions. The document also sets out the carer's responsibility and the expectations in ensuring safe practice.

All carers have had child protection training. They are provided with information to ensure they are aware of the action to take to safeguard children. This includes children and young people missing from home and risk management measures in place to address these issues. There are clear policies about bullying, including the authority's anti-bullying strategies for children, disciplinary measures, complaints and whistle blowing procedures. There is also information about the support carers would receive, should an allegation be made about them.

Carers have safe care policies for their households. However, not all of them are completed appropriately or with enough clarity to fully safeguard children in households.

The service has good links with the fostering surgery, who helps carers access support to address crisis situations and to minimise the risk of placement breakdowns. Some carers confirm that they benefit from this service and are provided with additional advice and guidance to help stabilise placements.

The fostering panel is organised efficiently and in a manner that ensures that

decisions made about the approval of carers follows careful deliberations of the information presented. The panel provides a good level of scrutiny and the needs of children remain the focus of the decision making process. The views of carers are considered. Panel is clear about their responsibilities with regards to carer's assessments. There are good quality assurance processes and written records of proceedings, including the reasons for its recommendations.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The service promotes equality and diversity for all children. Carers and children have access to a range of guidance and initiatives to ensure that children have equal opportunities to develop their interests and talents. Carers have access to equality and diversity training and some are proactive in seeking advice about how they can imbed equality issues in carer support groups.

There is valuing diversity guidance for social workers. This includes information, such as the assessment for children of mixed parentage, assessment and planning process and working collaboratively with other agencies to ensure appropriate support to meet needs.

The fostering manager takes the lead to make sure that staff promote good race equality in their conduct, attitude and in practice. They also ensure that race is integrated in practice, where people feel safe to challenge and raise concerns. This also extends to the carers. The service ensures that children have full information about where they can go if they are unhappy and are concerned, for example, contact with the Children Rights Officer.

Family placement carers are provided with support and equipment to help maximise children's potential to lead as full a life as possible. Staff value children's difference with positive description and profile of the children is detailed in the records.

Most carers confirm that the service addresses issues of equality and diversity in good and satisfactory ways. Some young people placed in trans-racial placements felt that their basic skin and hair care needs were not met and commented about the negative impact that this had on their self esteem.

The service provided by the education team continues to work effectively and provides good support. The involvement of the virtual head continues is seen to make a significant impact on service delivery. Positive comments have been made about the value of the service by fostering social workers, foster carers and children confirm they get the educational support they need to be successful in their education. Typical comments from children include, 'after having my SATS results and got level 4 in everything', 'yes, I am helped with my school work'. There is support for young people leaving care who are continuing with their education in college and university. Laptops are issued to children to assist them with their education and leisure needs.

The authority is proactive in ensuring that children receive better education and the support they need to help them reach their potential. The education team acknowledges that attainment for looked after children in Leeds is not yet good enough, although good progress has been made. Events to celebrate the educational achievements have been held. Foster placements provide a stable environment that enables children to reach their potential. Children have personal education plans and children with disabilities have integrated needs assessments carried out. Statements of educational needs are in place and these are regularly reviewed.

The foster carer's hand book contains details of the expectation of the authority that foster carers support children through education and this is backed up by the foster carer agreement. Carers attend education meetings as appropriate.

Carers are provided with an education newsletter and children have access to mentoring services that offer support with homework and confidence building, as well as activities that offer an opportunity for carers and children to meet.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Contact is promoted and carers are clear about their responsibilities to ensure children keep in touch with their family and significant others. Some carers record the outcomes of contact visits and the presentation of children when they return from contact. Supervised contact is recorded. This is good practice.

The overall strategy for consultation and participation maximises young people's, carer's and parent's involvement in their care. There are a number of key events and activities that the service promotes and a range of social events, all of which are well promoted by the service and specific training for carers and staff, which is led, run and delivered by young people. This has been positively received by all who have attended.

The lead elected member takes an active interest in hearing what children have to say and there is good corporate parent support. Carers are trained by the service to listen to children and also have access to the complaints and advocacy officer. Views are ascertained from carer's birth children.

Children and young people and parents are consulted about foster carer reviews and social workers are making a positive contribution. Parents who have children with disabilities have opportunities to be consulted about their children's care.

Children and young people say they feel consulted and know who to talk to if they have a problem. Children said, 'I talk to my family and teacher and social worker', 'everything is great', 'they listen to me and always give me advice'. However, some young people said that although they are aware of the complaints procedure, they have no confidence in it or in social workers and therefore they have not made a

complaint about their care and treatment. This is an area that the service is addressing.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

The service supports young people who are preparing towards independence. Young people consulted confirm that they are helped to think about the future. Young people said 'yes, I am talked to about my future' and 'I'm not moving for a lot of years'.

There has not been any significant change to the limited resources available in the leaving care team. However, young people continue to be supported by social workers in field work teams rather than transferring to the pathway planning team and training has been delivered to staff. Young people have pathway plans and carers are fully involved in their development and review. Carers support young people to develop independence skills. Foster carers may also register on the National Association of Adult Placement Scheme.

The authority has developed a post 18 fostering policy, which has been shared with foster carers with the aim of promoting foster care for young people beyond 18 years old where it is considered appropriate. Carers attended the presentation on the policy. There is a clear system in place to decide on the thresholds.

There are systems in place to pay carers the agreed amounts and support is provided to carers to provide for children. Some comments from carers who provide short breaks services indicate that they do not always receive their payments on time, or are overpaid and need to pay the money back. However, this is eventually resolved and no major concerns have been raised that have not been addressed by carers and the service.

Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The service has policies and procedures that supports equality and inclusion for all children who are looked after by carers. Carers receive training in equality and diversity and children are provided with opportunities to have a say in their care and participation in events, to live a healthy lifestyle and in a safe environment, to have educational opportunities, to maintain contact with family and significant others and to feel properly prepared to live independently and to develop a positive sense of identity. The short breaks service provides a good service to children and their families.

The statement of purpose has been revised. It has been formally approved and meets the fostering regulations. There are children's guides for older and younger people. These are written in a child friendly manner and contain details about how

children can complain and how they can contact Ofsted.

There is a separate statement of purpose for the family placement service for disabled children. This sets out the aims of the service valuing people's difference, accessible services to all and that young people should be encouraged to reach their full potential.

There are improved practices for monitoring and controlling the quality of performance in the fostering service. There is a clear management structure and lines of accountability between managers, staff and carers. The fostering service has made significant progress to improve the standard of service provision and has worked effectively towards meeting the action plan and there is capacity for the service to improve further, particularly when the service can clearly demonstrate their level of sustainability.

Future service developments have been identified in the service as part of the overall children's service improvement plan to ensure integrated service delivery. This is in respect to leadership, development of relationships with social work teams, placements and matching, kinship care, performance management, recruitment of carers, panel, resources and diversity. A number of these areas are not yet embedded, so the impact is not yet known.

There is a clear management structure and staff know who they are accountable to. There is a newly appointed chief officer, who has a clear vision and leadership of the service. The appointment of the fostering manager provides stability and consistency. Fostering social workers and social workers are clear about their roles and there is an appreciation of each others responsibilities. They can see the improvements that management changes have created. Social workers commented that 'we are working harder and more is to be done but we don't feel it is a hassle because we can see the improvements that have been made over the past few months so it is worthwhile'.

Fostering social workers are appropriately qualified, experienced, knowledgeable and committed to their work. They are regularly supervised, supported and the authority has developed a new appraisal system, which includes personal development plans which are currently being implemented. The quality of assessments has improved and staff are trained to complete them. Fostering staff have a range of training opportunities to enhance their knowledge and skills. Managers have received relevant training to assist them with their work and to support staff and carers.

Some vacancies still exist in the teams and the service is addressing this. Unallocated cases are appropriately managed and additional staff appointments are planned. There is an ongoing recruitment strategy with dedicated staff. A range of creative methods to recruit new carers to the service are used. There is a recruitment strategy activity plan which targets specific recruitment of carers to reflect the make up of the city.

The management is aware that they need to continue to improve the systems in

place for the recruitment and vetting of staff and to make sure that past employment in childcare is followed up where possible, in line with the regulations.

Carers have a copy of the foster carer's handbook that they use as a reference of policies and procedures to help them care for children. Most carers speak highly of the support they get from the service. Comments include, 'I have fostered for this service for 30 years. There is an element of loyalty but the main reason is to give love and support to a child in my care and give them a secure home until decisions are made about their future', 'I think the fostering service do an excellent job, it is the foster carers that are needed'. Carers confirm that they are visited, including unannounced visits. Most carers attend support groups and the Foster Carers Association continues to offer support to carers and representatives meet with the foster care liaison group.

Training opportunities are available to all carers at flexible times and a number of carers have attended a range of courses, including the implementation of the Children's Workforce Development Council training. Carers' annual reviews have been improved and the appointment of an independent reviewing officer ensures better monitoring and less conflict of interest for carers and fostering social workers who supervise and support them. This is good practice.

The service uses the electronic system to record information about children. These records have improved. Most social workers are now recording information about children on the electronic system. The information seen is legible and provides a clear impression of children's development and progress. These contain the appropriate records, such as looked after children's documents. Most carers said that they get enough information to inform the placements and information sharing has improved over the years.

There are separate records for staff, children, carer's complaints and allegations. Carers are informed about the complaints procedure. However, complaints are not managed and addressed in a timely manner and not all complaints include clear outcomes or an audit trail. One complainant commented that the complaints procedure was 'slow' and 'shambolic'. This is an area that the service is aware that it needs to improve on.

There is a dedicated kinship carer's team that has further developed since the last inspection. Improvements have been made to ensure a good service is provided to this group of carers and to ensure they have access to the same training opportunities and support as other carers. The service is yet to be fully embedded, it is encouraging to see the developments that have been made so far and there is willingness for staff to make it a successful part of the service.

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
15	ensure that personnel files comply with the Fostering Service Regulations 2002 (Fostering Service Regulations 2002, Schedule 1)	30/09/2009

Recommendations

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

- make sure the complaints are promptly dealt with and their outcomes evaluated to inform the service (NMS 22.8)
- make sure that children who display risky behaviour do not share a room until a written risk assessment and outcome of the assessment is in place (NMS 6.5)
- make sure each foster carer household has in place an up to date written safe caring policy (NMS 9.3)
- continue to develop strategies to ensure sufficient carers to meet the needs of all children (NMS 17.5)
- identify the support that children need to meet their skin and hair care needs (NMS 7)
- update the medication policy to promote the health of all children and make carers aware about their responsibility to record medication administered to children in their care (NMS 12.1)