

Local Authority 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

Gloucestershire County Council Fostering Service currently supports 185 registered foster carers, covering a range of fostering functions. These include long term, short term, specialist fostering, respite placements and 64 kinship/family and friends carers. Additionally, Family Link provide carers for a short break respite fostering scheme for children with disabilities. The fostering service comprises: the Fostering Recruitment Team(FRT);the Permanence and Kinship Fostering Team (PKFT);The Short Term Emergency Placement Scheme(STEPS) which includes the Placement Referral service(PRS); and the Family Link Team. The intervention team provides placement support.

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 took place over a two week period. The inspection was carried out by two Ofsted inspectors. The judgements in this report have been made using Ofsted's new benchmarking guidance that was implemented on 1 April 2008. Information about this guidance can be found on the Ofsted website. The new basis for making judgements is not directly comparable with that used previously.

Gloucestershire County Council provides an overall satisfactory fostering service that in some areas is a good and very good service. The service has strengths in consulting with children and young people in care, in supporting young people in education and promoting healthy living. There is a clear strategy for working with and supporting carers and positive work is undertaken with kinship carers. Support is available to carers' children, and young people generally report feeling well cared for. The service supports contact arrangements, and matching for long term placements is good. The current management structure whilst temporary is clear, and monitoring systems are in place.

Areas identified for improvements are the two requirements reported which cover: matching for short term placements: reviewing existing exemptions and variations and the Crash placement scheme; ensuring carers are appropriately approved for these placements; and panel examining more robustly exemptions and variations. Nine recommendations are made which include: carers receiving signed consent for all young people to receive medical treatment; carers receiving up to date information on young people; reviewing the systems on allegations and complaints; increasing placement choice for all children; checking all recruitment information is held on files and internal recruitment policies are followed; PEPs(Personal education plans) should be reviewed; improve the system to distribute children's guides and ensure all young people know how to complain; ensure carers store information securely; and ensure all carers have handbooks once the final consultation is over.

Improvements since the last inspection

The last inspection was carried out in July 2006 by the Commission for Social Care Inspection. That inspection made five requirements and seven good practice recommendations which have been fully or partly addressed. Foster Care Panel has been established in line with Regulation 24. Schedule 1 information is obtained with some minor omissions. The service continues to recruit carers and has commissioned five placements from an independent fostering agency. Additionally, the whole service is at stage three of the commissioning strategy review for children and young people. However, placement choice for young people remains limited. Placement matching takes place but further matching work is needed. Recruitment for staffing positions has recently taken place and health information is often available on young people.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

The systems in place to promote the health of young people are good. A lead nurse for children and young people in care in Gloucestershire has been appointed, whose role includes health assessments for those who are harder to reach. A scheme to enable better access to a dentist has been piloted in one area. It is reported that 90% of health and dental checks for young people in care are completed. Health care professionals are accessed appropriately. A primary mental health worker can be accessed via the education welfare service, and education psychologists are accessed via the adoption and fostering officers. Subsidised leisure centre membership for children in care and their foster families is under negotiation in one area. The intervention team, which includes clinical and educational psychologists and clinical nurse specialists, provide a planned response to increase placement stability. Not all carers have signed written consent for children to receive medical treatment. Carers record any medical appointments or treatment received. One new (Capita One) placement information record was seen which contained individual consent for a range of detailed medical treatments.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is satisfactory.

The acting head of looked after children's resources and acting fostering service manager have been employed by the service for some time and are fit and appropriate to carry out these roles.

Foster carers provide comfortable accommodation. Health and safety checks form part of the foster carers' assessment and part of their annual review. Unannounced visits are undertaken. Young people's responses to the inspection questionnaires were predominantly positive, including comments "I am always supported in what I do" and "I feel well cared for all of the time."

Long term placements evidence good matching. However, matching for short term and emergency placements is at times hampered by insufficient placement choice and up to date information on young people. Referral forms and matching forms are used in both PRS and for long term matching. Matching meetings were evidenced for some young people who wait for long term placements, which is seen as positive practice. Disruption meetings are sometimes held and disruption training is given to team managers. The appointment of an independent reviewing officer to chair these meetings is expected imminently.

There are several cases of children in placement with carers outside the "normal" fostering limit. For the majority, but not all, exemptions were made, which are signed off by the fostering service manager and a list of exemptions and variations return to panel. However, the exemption form does not specify whether the welfare of all young people living in the foster home will be safeguarded and carers are not informed of the exemption in writing. Carers and some workers are not aware of the "usual fostering limit" and some confusion about sibling groups exists. Variations, instead of exemptions, have also been applied inappropriately. Specific written placement agreements are in use, however dates and signatures are often missing from them. Additional support is not always formalised on these plans. There was evidence that help with transport for contact and education is provided, and placements sometimes turned down if appropriate help is not available. Young people confirmed differing practice when being introduced to foster homes. Some had the opportunity to visit carers prior to placement and others moved straight in. Some young people spoken with were not aware of any alternative choice of placement. Long term matching evidenced careful introductions. One example of a book about the foster family was seen and is an excellent example of information that can be given or shared with young people about the foster family. New direction carers are matched with young people and a clear service is identified to support these young people and carers. This was described as "making a real difference, with respite identified on a monthly basis, a circle of support and good team work." 'Crash' has been in operation for eleven months providing overnight emergency accommodation with three identified carers. 'Crash' placements have been identified where carers can take an additional young person at short notice, and is accessed by the ORS (Out of hours Referral Service). The decision for carers to take a crash placement in addition to other young people has not been through a formal approval process. This scheme is not operating to its own guidelines and some young people have remained at their crash placement for days/weeks. The scheme has not been formally reviewed as planned after three months. The families identified often have several children in placement. Concerns regarding the use of 'crash' are noted on files.

The service has commissioned five placements from a local independent fostering agency to provide more placement options. These have been used, but only when the in house local provision is not available. Good use has been made of these placements. The use of this facility and an expansion of this type of provision will be incorporated into phase three of the children and young people's commissioning strategy.

Carers and other professionals express the view that carers are asked to take placements outside their approval range, and these are often older teenagers, those

with more complex needs and large sibling groups who are difficult to place. A change in practice to alter approval ranges into three predetermined age groups has not been discussed with foster care panel.

Child protection awareness is good and concerns are followed up. Complaints are investigated well and if appropriate taken to panel. Child protection training is provided both pre and post approval. Safe care guidelines are produced by carers as a family policy. Whilst no evidence was seen that these policies are personalised and cleared with children's social workers, carers showed good awareness of the issues and made changes as circumstances changed. Young people confirm they had seen the "Rules" of their current carers. Systems are in place to record information relating to allegations, although these records were not comprehensive in all cases.

Carers show awareness and understanding about bullying, and young people in care in Gloucestershire, have been involved in making a DVD raising awareness of bullying issues. Information about young people provided to carers prior to placement, is variable, with some carers given all the information available while others wait some time for basic information. Carers reported this was frequently due to the field/placing officers and their workloads and interest. Without this accurate and updated information there is evidence that young people and children have had disrupted placements.

Minor breaches in recruitment practice were found and remedied whilst the inspection was underway. The service is not yet fully adhering to its own internal guidelines on recruitment practice.

Foster care panel have clear policies and procedures. Panel membership is in accordance with the regulations and there are plans to replace members coming to the end of their second term of office. Panel is well managed and minutes are clear. Applicants are invited to panel when their assessment is presented. Panel is not robust in examining exemptions and variations which are presented to Panel in a list format.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The fostering provision is committed to promoting equality and valuing difference. The recruitment team have targeted BME (Black Minority Ethnic) carers and have been successful in recruiting their target of four carers last year. The service have same gender carers in both mainstream and family link. Carers' training covers respect for all aspects of children's backgrounds. Carers also encourage young people to access interests and hobbies.

Children in placement are in education, but their personal education plans are not always reviewed or on file. The education of children in care has been targeted and the educational provision for them has improved. The virtual school and associated work has brought a positive impact, but it is a little early to measure sustained

progress. A pilot group of budget lead professionals has been developed and is positive in assisting young people to access relevant learning. Carers and young people report good home-school liaison and communication. Educational achievement and attendance is monitored and celebrated. Holidays in term time are only agreed with the approval of the virtual head teacher and are strongly discouraged. Transport to school is reported to consume a large budget and senior managers are committed to ensure young people remain, wherever possible, at the school which provides consistency in their lives. The policy regarding trips and allowances for children in care is clear. L4L(Learning for Life) has been appreciated by carers and young people and activity packs are positively received.

The family link short breaks scheme provides respite for children with disabilities. Links with the mainstream service have been strengthened with the secondment of the manager from family link to STEPS. There are clear policies and procedures in place to meet the particular needs of the children on short breaks but these have not been examined in any depth at this inspection. This service recognises the ongoing key role of parents as the main carers for the child. The review of the service plans to bring this scheme under the management of the fostering service.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Children and young people are supported and encouraged to maintain contact with families, according to their care plan. Clear plans are in place to facilitate this contact and carers have good understanding of the importance of maintaining these links. The views of older children are sought, with access to independent workers as necessary. Carers are skilled at assisting young people to voice their views about contact and at discussing difficult issues as they arise. Carers are appreciative of placing social workers who know children well and provide clear and supportive guidance to them.

The service have a clear commitment to obtaining, valuing and using the views of children and young people. This is done on an individual basis at their own reviews and young people are invited to contribute to carers' reviews. There is also a well established forum for young people in care, L2CCG (Listening to children consultation group), where senior managers meet regularly to consult with young people and answer questions from the "u said we did" agenda. Young people from this group have been included on the interview panel for the virtual school head teacher, and at interviews for field and development operational managers, where they have been described as "very perceptive". It is clear the views of young people are highly valued. However, case tracking showed that not all foster children felt able to share their views with their carers.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

There are no key standards for this outcome area. Payment to carers are at the recommended rates.

Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

The service has an up to date statement of purpose reviewed in May 2008 and approved by the elected members. It excludes the number of complaints and their outcomes. The guides for children and young people are attractive and well thought out, but need updating with Ofsted's details. Young people indicated that whilst most had seen a guide, not all still retained it: either it had been left in a previous placement, they had not been old enough when they entered care to receive one, or it had been lost. Several young people responding to questionnaires indicated they are unclear about how to make a complaint. However, those interviewed were able to identify adults they trusted that they could confide in.

The fostering service has a clear management structure and clear systems in place. The service for children and young people is on the brink of phase three of the children and young people change programme. Currently only two of the three team managers posts are filled, due to the temporary promotion of the third team manager to fostering service manager position. The service's STEPS team has experienced several changes of manager and changes of staff. The situation had stabilised at the time of this inspection. Carers commented that these changes have been unsettling, with several carers commenting they have experienced three or four changes of worker in two years. Staff and carers commented on the burden of administrative work and question whether more support in this area would free up more time to be "out on the job". The staff compliment comprises well experienced family placement practitioners together with more recently appointed staff. A new family worker appointment was made to the STEPS team.

The fostering service report a clear strategy for working with and supporting carers. Carers commented on "Regular contact and good support, the staff are committed and hardworking", often naming individual fostering officers who are described as "excellent, supportive, have kept us in the service and are well trusted". These make up the majority of comments from carers, with a small minority experiencing difficult working relationships and lack of support: "they listen to any concerns you may have, take on board any issues you raise and then do nothing at all about them". Regular support and supervision visits, telephone contact and support groups are scheduled. The majority of support are co led by carers. Out of hours advice is provided by a placement support team. Membership of Fostering Network is provided to all carers. Training is provided for carers both pre and post approval, centrally and in support groups. The quality of training is reported by carers to be variable. There

is ongoing work in preparation for the Children's and Workforce Development Council standards. Support to carers' children in "K4K"(Kids for Kids) is appreciated by both carers and children.

There is a written policy on case recording by carers and the training offered. Records are kept daily by the carers on children placed: the quality seen varied from well documented to minimal. Security of information at carers homes sometimes clashes with the desire to encourage openness and involvement by the young people with their records. At the time of the inspection, case records for children were being transferred to a new electronic system, this was just bedding down and navigation of both paper and electronic systems were still in operation.

Records in the service generally contain information required, audits are undertaken by managers although action taken could be more timely. Concerns, complaints and allegations are recorded and monitored by the fostering service manager. These records are not held in a consistent or complete format, making it difficult to track concerns about individual young people.

Records on carers are well organised. Assessments of carers are thorough. Annual reviews take account of views given by children in placement, and placing social workers are asked their views.

The work undertaken in the area of family and friends carers in the last two years is significant, with responsibility to support kinship carers undertaken by the fostering service. The support offered by the fostering officers attached to these carers is greatly appreciated: "The fostering officer is a godsend and offers good advice". This service has also developed a support group and invites carers to appropriate training.

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
8	ensure specific reference to matching is in every Foster Placement Agreement. Ensure each carer's terms of approval are consistent with the placement or proposed placement. Specifically review carer's who require exemptions or variations. Exemptions must take account of all children who are, or will be, living in the accommodation. Carers must enter into a foster carer agreement. (Regulation 34)	30/09/2008
30	ensure the quality assurance function of the Panel is	30/09/2008

	<p>understood, implemented and maintained. Specifically, ensure carers designated for 'crash' are assessed and approved and this is included in carers' terms of approval. Additionally, exemptions and variations must be robustly examined and carers given written notice of their revised terms of approval.(Regulation 29)</p>	
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Recommendations

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

- ensure all foster carers have signed consent for medical treatment for the children they look after.(NMS 12)
- provide all foster carers with up to date information on young people placed with them.(NMS 9)
- review systems to ensure records of information on allegations and complaints are consistent and comprehensive.(NMS 9)
- review placements made to ensure children are carefully matched and continue to increase placement choice for all children and young people.(NMS 8)
- check that all the information required in Schedule 1 is held on every staff file and adhere to the fostering service internal policy on recruitment.(NMS 15)
- check young people's personal education plans are reviewed and are on files.(NMS 13)
- continue to review and improve the system that distributes children's and young people's guides, to ensure young people know how to access an independent advocate and how to complain. Update the guides with the Ofsted contact details.(NMS 1)
- ensure carers store information in a secure manner.(NMS 24)
- distribute foster care handbooks to all carers once the final consultation on them is completed.(NMS 21)