

Torbay Council Fostering Agency

Inspection report for local authority 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 fostering service is part of the Children's Social Care Directorate of Torbay Council. It assesses, approves and supports foster carers to look after the majority of Torbay's looked after children population. It works closely with partner agencies to meet the diverse needs of the young people in its care. The service provides a wide range of placements including emergency short-term placements, task-centred placements, family and friends' placements, parent and child placements and long-term permanent placements. A Contract Care Worker Scheme provides placements for young people whose assessed needs cannot be met by traditional foster care or residential placement, and a specialist 'Family 2 Family' short-break scheme, managed by the children with disabilities service, provides support for young people with disabilities.

Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

In spite of recent unprecedented demands being made on the service, it has managed to provide satisfactory outcomes for the young people in its care. The service has many strengths, there is a good level of placement stability and young people express a high degree of satisfaction with the quality of care they are receiving. Outcomes relating to enjoying and achieving, positive contribution and economic well-being are all good and indicate young people are being appropriately supported in their personal development.

However, there is clear evidence that the development of the service has been curtailed by an inconsistency in approach due to a heavy reliance on agency staff on short-term contracts and an inability to recruit enough carers to meet the increased demand for placements. An inconsistent approach to placement planning, a heavy reliance on exemptions and a cumbersome and inefficient recording system have all detracted from the quality of the provision. Senior managers are clearly aware of these shortcomings and have devised a development plan and new staffing structure to address them. More effective joint working with other services, such as health and education, indicate a willingness to develop more responsive approaches to changing demands.

Improvements since the last inspection

During the last inspection, in November 2007, the service was given five recommendations. The recommendations have been appropriately addressed and a number of changes made to policies, procedures and working practices. There is now an effective system that ensures that the views of young people with communication difficulties are regularly sought and represented at their reviews. A number of

guides, in age-appropriate formats, now provide information for young people entering the service. The service has implemented a number of radical measures to ensure that it operates with an appropriate number of qualified staff and carers. A recent recruitment initiative has resulted in a significant number of prospective carers entering the system and it is hoped all will be approved within newly established time lines. Although regular training opportunities are offered to carers on child protection and communication, as recommended, those caring for disabled young people with extremely complex needs are not being supplied with specialist information at the point of placement. Carers who have allegations made against them now have access to an independent support and advocacy service.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is satisfactory.

Young people's health and emotional well-being are given a high priority on entry to the fostering service. An effective health assessment system ensures that the health and emotional needs of each young person are clearly identified. Personal health action plans, that are regularly reviewed, provide guidance for carers when and how any outstanding needs, including immunisations, should be met. The service is successful in maintaining high rates of immunisation. Signed consent for medical intervention is appropriately sought from parents and guardians.

Young people are expected to undertake an annual health check, however, there is a reluctance on the part of some, in the older age group, to participate. The introduction of initiatives, such as gym assessments and health questionnaires have proved effective alternative methods of determining the general state of a young person's health. Young people are encouraged by carers to monitor their own health and report any worries or concerns. Young people are supported in accessing health services by their carers and a record is kept of all medical appointments and interventions.

Young people experiencing emotional and psychological difficulties are provided with quick access to specialist services under a joint initiative with the local child and adolescent mental health service. Young people with disabilities are well served by a multidisciplinary team of education, health and social service staff who deploy a coordinated child-centred approach to meeting their needs. Specialist equipment, such as hoists, is provided for carers accommodating young people with mobility difficulties. Carers are provided with training on health-related issues and an expectation that the young people in their care will be encouraged to develop healthy lifestyles by eating wisely and undertaking regular exercise. Young people are provided with information on drugs, alcohol and sexual health and are helped to think through the possible consequences of their actions on their health and well-being. The council monitors the overall health of its looked after population. Recent trends indicate the health of young people is generally improving.

Although the current health provision for young people has many strengths, a

number of carers indicated they had not been provided with key health information on young people at the point of placement. It is also clear that at present there is no system that ensures that carers providing care to young people with extremely complex health needs are provided with appropriate specialist advice.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is satisfactory.

The service has developed a number of effective policies, procedures and working practices to keep young people safe. Carers receive training in child protection and are clearly aware of their responsibilities in regard to reporting any protection concerns. Young people establish trusting relationships with their carers and feel confident in confiding in them. Personal issues are dealt with sensitively and their privacy and confidentiality are respected. Young people indicated they would confide in their carers if they did not feel safe.

The homes of carers are appropriately assessed to ensure they offer a safe and welcoming environment. The assessment determines if a property provides good quality accommodation and conforms with accepted health and safety guidance. All outstanding safety issues have to be addressed prior to any placement being made. Young people are normally provided with their own bedrooms that are designated as their own 'personal space'. Carers' pets are subject to an assessment to ensure they do not pose a potential risk. In some instances carers' homes are modified to provide better access for young people with mobility difficulties. Young people spoke in positive terms about their placements and can exercise choice over many aspects of their care.

There are well-established procedures to ensure that young people who go missing from care are reported appropriately. Missing from care rates are low and carers are successful in improving this type of behaviour. Young people reported that bullying was not a significant problem and that they would report any issues of concerns to their carers.

Young people's social workers' monitor their progress in their placements and develop strategies with carers if it is felt a young person's behaviour is putting them at risk. Young people indicated they are safe and appropriately placed in their placements. Although the majority of young people have their own designated social workers, the amount of support they receive can vary significantly. A number of young people reported that their designated social workers change regularly and as a consequence, they do not always get the opportunity to establish meaningful relationships with them. In response to this difficulty, members of the foster care team have increased the support they offer during their routine visits to carers. Foster care staff offer opportunities for young people to meet with them to discuss their experiences of care. Any concerns are conveyed to the young person's social worker. Though this is not an ideal situation, it is a positive response to a difficult problem. It is envisaged that the current situation will be significantly improved with the introduction of the new proposed team structure.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Each young person's religious and cultural needs are identified as part of the initial assessment process and every effort is made to ensure they can be met during their placements. Life-story work is often carried out with young people to provide them with an understanding of their personal history and cultural background. Carers are forceful advocates for the young people in their care and ensure they have access to appropriate resources and opportunities.

Young people are helped to develop socially acceptable behaviours. Positive behaviour is reinforced with praise and rewards from carers. Young people are encouraged to assume responsibility for their behaviour in a way that is appropriate to their age and understanding. They are supported by their carers even if their actions have led them into criminal activity. Carers work with young people and staff from youth offending teams to develop strategies to reduce their anti-social behaviour. Placements are often kept open, to provide continuity in care, for young people to return to following periods in secure settings.

Carers have high expectations of young people and aim to ensure that those in their care lead full and active lives and make significant progress in all aspects of their development during their placements. The personal development goals of individuals are reflected in their placement plans. An extremely active adolescent support team provides opportunities for young people to participate in regular leisure and recreational activities. Young people are able to pursue their own particular interests and hobbies. Carers accommodating young people with mobility difficulties are provided with specially adapted vehicles to ensure they can access activities outside of the home.

The importance of educational success to increasing life opportunities is clearly recognised by the council. The council has made a commitment to improve the educational attainment of the young people in their care. Although the service has been successful in raising school attendance and reducing exclusions, the often considerable progress many young people have made has not been reflected in improved exam results. While the majority of young people surveyed said they were receiving a good education, not all felt they were personally doing well. A 'virtual headteacher' has recently taken up post and is in the process of identifying ways, including the use of computer-based resources, to improve the exam results of young people in foster care. She has already made significant progress and is ensuring that each young person is in receipt of a detailed personal education plan which identifies achievable goals. The service now supports young people until they complete their education and a number are currently completing further and higher education courses. An annual award ceremony provides a forum for recognising

young people's educational achievements and carers indicated it has been extremely successful in raising the self-esteem and confidence of many young people.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The service is successful in involving young people in making decisions about their futures and there is high participation in the reviewing process. Young people indicate that reviews are conducted appropriately by independent reviewing officers and that their views and wishes are always sought. The views of young people with communication problems or language difficulties are obtained by specialist staff who undertake visits prior to their reviews. Young people receive independent support if they wish to raise a complaint.

Young people play a significant role in the development of the service and a children in care council provides a forum through which young people can influence decision making within the local authority. The views and suggestions made by young people are taken seriously and responded to appropriately by senior officers and members. Young people are encouraged to express their views about the service and are regularly consulted by independent reviewing officers and children's rights staff. Young people's guides make clear how they can register a complaint. Young people participate in the appointment process of senior staff and a number contribute to the training of new carers.

The service produces clear guidance for carers on the type and frequency of the contact each young person can have with their parents, relatives and friends. Although every effort is made to place sibling groups together it is not always possible or in the best interests of each child. However, the service acknowledges the need for siblings to maintain contact and carers liaise with each other to provide regular meetings. Any restrictions regarding contact are made clear to all parties and plans developed to ensure young people are not put at risk through meeting inappropriate adults. The local authority has a facility in which supervised contact can take place. Carers report any concerns about contact directly to the young person's social worker. The views of young people are taken into consideration in determining the frequency and duration of contact visits. Carers confirmed that contact arrangements are always discussed at review meetings.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

As a corporate parent, the council aims to ensure that young people in foster care receive appropriate care and support until they are ready to move to semi-independent and independent living. For those wishing to stay in their existing placements support will be offered until they are 18 years old. Young people engaged in further and higher education are supported until the completion of their courses. Young people wishing to stay with their carers can, with their carers'

agreement, continue to reside under a supported living scheme. An effective pathway planning system assists young people identify areas that need to be addressed if they are to make effective transitions to independent or semi-independent settings.

The service has a dedicated care to community social work team that helps young people in foster care prepare for their futures beyond care by providing options and independent living skills training. Young people can develop their independent living skills by accessing the care to community training facilities that include a domestic kitchen. The care to community team has established good links with other agencies so that young people can access housing and training opportunities. Recent initiatives have included the introduction of a simplified application process for young people wishing to access courses at South Devon College and the development of placements at Waypoint Supported Lodgings to provide accommodation and independence training for individuals moving on from care. A training guide has been produced to help carers assist young people acquire a range of independent living skills before they move on.

Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

In an effort to minimise disruption to young people, the service strives to place young people within the Torbay area. This strategy is very successful in minimising disruption and provides young people a degree of continuity in their lives by being able to access existing educational placements. It also allows young people to maintain regular contact with family and friends. However, the last year has seen an unprecedented demand for fostering placements as the number of looked after children in Torbay has increased significantly. The demand for foster places has been made more difficult to meet as the pool of available carers has not significantly increased with only a small number of fostering households being approved in the last year.

The service responded to the surge in demand for fostering places by seeking placements from independent providers, family and friends and asking carers from within the existing pool to consider accommodating young people who would not normally fall into their existing approval categories. While it is clear that all placements have been carefully considered, exemption records do not, in all cases, contain detailed information. It is also evident that some placements have, in the recent past, proceeded without the development of agreed placement plans. This has left both carers and young people in a vulnerable position. In spite of the difficulties, the service has managed to achieve a high level of placement stability. The service is fortunate in having a well-qualified and experienced manager who has provided effective leadership to staff during this period of unprecedented demand.

In light of these events, a review of the service's recruitment policy was initiated and this has resulted in the establishment of a dedicated team to recruit new carers and prepare them for approval within a much shorter timescale. A new Statement of

Purpose, written in clear unambiguous language, makes clear the aims and objectives of the service and provides information for prospective carers on the management structure, the specific role played by contract carers, the principles and standards of care and the process of recruitment.

The service aims too ensure that inappropriate individual's do not enter the service and present a risk to young people. Carers are only approved following a thorough vetting process and the successful completion of a skills to foster training programme. There is an expectation that foster carers will be capable of providing care and accommodation to a range of young people including those that experience social and emotional difficulties. Such young people often have attachment difficulties that inhibit their ability to form and retain relationships. Foster care staff clearly recognise the demands that can be made on carers and ensure that only those with the necessary attributes are invited to proceed to training and approval at panel. The service values diversity and seeks to recruit staff and carers from all sections of the local community, including ethnic minorities. Equality and diversity issues form part of the training programme for carers. Carers reported that the approval process was demanding but acknowledged it had to be thorough. Although the new team have been successful in recruiting a new cohort of prospective carers, many are still engaged in the vetting and training programme and have yet to be presented to panel for approval.

Once approved carers are allocated a social worker who provides regular support and oversees their development as effective carers. While it is evident that carers access regular training opportunities not all have completed their Children's Workforce Development Council's training programme. The introduction of a computer based learning programme has been introduced to aid completion. Carers feel that the training contributes significantly to their understanding of the many issues associated with young people in care and provides them with a range of skills that they deploy to address specific problems such as challenging behaviour.

The service has, in recent times, experienced difficulties in both recruiting and retaining qualified social work staff and there has been a heavy reliance on agency staff on short term contracts. Although the fostering service has managed to meet its obligations and find placements for an increasing number of young people in need, its effectiveness has been compromised by a lack of continuity. Staffing difficulties have also impacted on the service's ability to develop and respond to changing needs. This has been clearly recognised by the new management team and a number of permanent posts have now been successfully filled. Carers are clearly aware of the situation and feel that staff have generally managed well in extremely difficult circumstances. Staff expressed confidence in the new management team and feel that proposed changes to the organisational structure should help address some of the current difficulties.

The council's robust recruitment procedures ensure that all staff are appropriately vetted and suitable to work with young people. All staff are provided with a detailed job description. Recently appointed staff reported that the comprehensive induction programme prepared them well for their specific roles and responsibilities. Staff are

provided with regular training opportunities to update their knowledge and skills. The staff engage in reflective practice and have identified areas to improve the experiences of young people being admitted into foster care. For example, a new team structure is being introduced to ensure that young people entering the service are provided with a more consistent approach with identified personnel. Staff feel they are well supported by their team managers and appreciate the advice and guidance that is always available from the Service Manager.

The service operates with an effective fostering panel that is appropriately constituted and exercises its functions in accordance with statutory guidance. The panel's well-considered recommendations reflect a healthy decision-making process that contributes to the safeguarding of children and young people. A number of carers indicated that they had been apprehensive about their appearance at panel but had been put at their ease and treated with respect throughout the process.

Although the service is moving to a computer-based recording system it is currently in a period of transition in which both computer and paper records are being made. The current system does not provide easy access to information and there is clearly a frustration on the part of staff that, in some instances, it is leading to unnecessary duplication. Access to confidential information relating to young people is limited.

There is a well-established and effective complaints system and all allegations are appropriately reported and investigated. An independent support and advocacy service is provided to carers subject who are the subject of an allegation. All allegations and complaints are registered and analysed by a designated council officer. Any significant issues arising result in a review of existing practice within the service. For example, an increase in incidents relating to challenging behaviour has initiated the introduction of pre-placement meetings, involving all relevant professionals and the prospective carers to discuss strategies to manage potential difficulties that may arise. Such initiatives have proved extremely successful and have contributed to the significant decrease in the need to instigate section 47 child protection enquiries.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Recommendations

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

- ensure that all carers are provided, prior to placement, with information and training on how to meet any specific medical needs (NMS 6.8)
- ensure that all carers complete the Children's Workforce Development Council's Training programme (NMS 20.2)
- ensure carers are provided with a comprehensive placement plan prior to the placement of any young person (NMS 15.2)

- implement an effective strategy to ensure there are sufficient foster carers to meet current and predicted demands and introduce a system that ensures that all exemptions have a clear rationale and are time limited (NMS 13.1)
- ensure there are efficient and robust administrative systems and that information is recorded and stored within a system that avoids unnecessary duplication and provides ready access. (NMS 27.1)