

Isle of Wight 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

The Isle of Wight Local Authority Fostering Service is based at Ryde Social Services Centre in Lind Street, Ryde, Isle of Wight. The service has approximately 124 approved fostering households offering a variety of placements including long and short-term foster placements, Family Link for young people with disabilities, respite care and kinship care. At the time of the inspection there were 211 young people in the care of the Isle of Wight Council of which 31 were being accommodated by independent fostering agencies. The service recruits, trains, assesses and supports foster carers across the Isle of Wight. There is a dedicated fostering panel.

Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

This inspection was undertaken by two inspectors over the course of three days. Information from the manager was received prior to the inspection and questionnaires were received from a number of foster carers. During the inspection interviews were held with both foster carers and service staff. A small number of young people were also spoken with during the visits undertaken to foster carers' homes. A range of records and documents were also examined.

The service was last inspected on the 15th November 2006 when a number of recommendations were made. An action plan was developed in response to the recommendations and the majority of recommendations have been implemented. While the service has made significant developments in a number of key areas, the overall development of the service has been seriously curtailed by both a chronic staff shortage and an increasing demand for foster care placements.

The foster service manager and his team of support staff and carers have worked hard to maintain an effective service in the face of exacting pressures. Without either the appointment of more staff or a sudden decrease in the demand for foster placements, it is unlikely the existing level of service can be maintained. A failure to address this difficulty compromises the service's ability to meet its stated aims and objectives and maintain a positive impact on the island's looked after children.

Improvements since the last inspection

The fostering service has increased the participation of young people in foster care in its operations. For example, a number of young people are now assisting on preparation courses for foster carers. A young

persons steering group has also been established to provide access for those in foster care to relay their views to the managers of the service.

The fostering service now requires all individuals who provide support for looked after children to be referred to the fostering panel for approval. Such a change should ensure that all children being looked after are being cared for by individuals who have undertaken all the necessary checks and demonstrated their fitness to care.

The service has, in recent times, utilised the skills of two carers to run a successful recruitment campaign that has resulted in a significant number of new carers being recruited, assessed, trained and approved. The service has been particularly successful in recruiting new carers from amongst family and friends. Recruitment from this group is well above the national average. Placements with family and friends have proved very successful as the carers are known and familiar to the young person. A mentoring group has been established that links newly approved carers with those who have more experience. New carers can access their mentors via visits, telephone calls and e-mails. Advice and guidance is also available via a recently introduced website and e-learning resource.

Other developments since the last inspection include the introduction of boarding out budgets and the initiation of coaching courses for young people in a number of activities including tennis and beach football.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

The health and well-being of young people is given a high priority within the fostering service and health issues are addressed as part of carers training by the Looked After Children's nurse. All foster carers undertake first aid training.

On entering the service all young people are subject to a comprehensive health assessment that identifies any physical or mental health problems. Records demonstrate that during the last twelve months 78% of young people have received an annual health check. All young people have a health plan and are registered with General Practitioners. There is a recognition that encouraging older teenagers to undertake health checks can be problematic. Information is provided on services available to help young people with concerns relating to alcohol/drug misuse and sexual health.

The service, through its matching process, aims to ensure that young people are placed with carers who will meet their specific, physical, social and emotional needs. Young people with disabilities, who receive respite care through the Family Link service, are matched with carers who have the requisite knowledge, skills and appropriate facilities in their homes to meet their often complex needs. The health

and well-being of young people is monitored on an on-going basis and discussed as part of the reviewing process and specialist services accessed as required.

There is an expectation within the service that carers will promote the concept of 'healthy living' and for example, recent policy changes aim to discourage carers from smoking. Young people and carers can access information on the importance of diet and regular exercise from, amongst other sources, a new fostering web site. While the service, through its fun days and beach football initiatives, promotes healthy activities, access to council operated leisure centres and swimming pools can be prohibitively expensive for young people.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is satisfactory.

The service's manager has the appropriate qualifications and experience to manage the service. He is aware of his role and responsibilities in regard to the management of the fostering service and has a clear idea about how it should continue to develop. The manager is held in high regard by both his own staff and foster carers for his professionalism and child-centred approach.

The service has developed and implemented a foster carer recruitment strategy aimed at raising the awareness of the fostering service throughout the island. This pro-active approach that includes road-shows, stands at local festivals and a publicity campaign, during Fostering Fortnight in May, has been implemented successfully by a team of foster carers and service staff. Twenty-two new carers have been recruited and received panel approval since the last inspection and a further 32 selected for assessment and training. Some concern was raised by foster carers about the ability of the service, with its staffing difficulties, to assess and train this new cohort. While the pool of carers within the service has increased since the last inspection, a number of long standing carers have also resigned. During this same period the demand for foster placements has increased.

The service has a well developed system of selecting and training foster carers. All prospective carers are subject to a thorough assessment process that includes checks on both themselves and family members. Health and safety assessments are also carried out in respect of their properties and pets. Only those that are likely to be approved are presented to the fostering panel. Foster carers reported that though the assessment and training process is demanding, it made them fully aware of the responsibilities they were taking on and the possible social and emotional demands that could be made upon them. The fostering service recruits carers from a wide section of the community and records indicate that the present group bring with them a range of skills and experience. The service monitors the performance of carers via annual reviews and will, if necessary, refer them to panel if they are not meeting the necessary standards.

During the inspection a number of carers were visited, including those offering respite stays as part of the Family Link service. All the properties visited were warm

and welcoming and in generally good decorative order. While foster carers confirm they receive support a number indicated that, due to staff shortages, the interval between supervision sessions has increased. A number also confirmed their annual household checks were now overdue. Risk assessments are undertaken in respect of environments and activities.

The manager of the service indicated that the matching process has, in recent times, been more successful and as a consequence, the number of placement breakdowns has decreased. The specific care needs of young people are clearly identified prior to placement. Placement agreements, developed with foster carers, aim to ensure that the identified care needs of each individual are appropriately addressed. The matching process takes into consideration, amongst other things, each individual's physical, social, emotional, cultural, educational and religious needs. Each placement is considered on an individual basis and carers have the right to refuse if they do not feel a placement is suitable. The service has been particularly successful in recruiting family and friends as carers.

All carers receive training in child protection and are made aware of their personal responsibilities in regard to the reporting of any child protection concerns. Staff undertake unannounced visits to carers. While there are expectations that the views of young people will be regularly sought by support workers and social workers, staff shortages have curtailed the frequencies of such consultation. Young people have access to an independent advocacy service and are provided with information on how to make a complaint. Out of hours support is available to all carers. There are well established policies and procedures in the event of a child or young person going missing.

The service has not, in recent times had much success in either recruiting or retaining professionally qualified staff. The service is presently under-staffed and this is undermining its ability to provide an effective quality service. Staff shortages have resulted in a number of unqualified staff assuming the roles and responsibility of qualified workers. The manager confirmed systems are in place to ensure they are supervised by qualified staff.

Foster care staff are recruited to the service via a well established process that requires them to complete a detailed application form, undertake a Criminal Record Bureau Check and provide the names of referees who can comment on their knowledge and skills. All new staff have to undertake a full induction before assuming their full responsibilities. Once in post staff can access a range of training courses.

The service has its own fostering panel that meets at regular intervals. Panel members bring with them a range of skills and experience. There are clear written policies and procedures for its operation. The scope of the panel has recently increased to encompass all looked after children. The panel is able to maintain independent scrutiny of the fostering service and challenge the service where appropriate. Training is provided specifically for panel members. A number of new carers reported that appearing in front of panel had been a positive, if somewhat

daunting experience. All appreciated the efforts of panel members to put them at their ease.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The fostering service values diversity and promotes equality. Carers are drawn from a cross-section of the island community and reflect differences in age, gender and social background. In some instances carers are recruited to meet the needs of a specific child or young person. The selection and training of carers addresses diversity issues around gender, religion, ethnic origin, culture, disability and sexuality.

The importance of education in the care of children and young people is clearly recognised within the foster service and there is an expectation that all will have access to an appropriate educational placement. All children and young people are expected to have a personal education plan developed within twenty days of entering care. Exam results have improved over the last year and the number of school exclusions amongst looked after children has decreased. If a child or young person on entering fostering is already settled in a school or college, every effort is made to support their continued attendance. While the Looked after Children Educational Service has been successful in supporting those young people undertaking exams, the foster service also looks after a large number of young people who have special educational needs. At present there is no specific training offered to foster carers on issues related to special education.

The educational progress of each child and young person is closely monitored and discussed during their reviews. Educational support for carers is provided through training and resource material. New guidance has been developed around assisting children and young people with their homework. Additional tutorial support is made available for those young people undertaking national exams and every effort is made to ensure they have computer access. The service celebrates the achievements of all the children and young people in its care and holds a presentation evening to do this publicly.

Children and young people undertaking Family Break respite stays remain the responsibility of their parents. Family Break carers confirm that they liaise directly with children and young people's families and make arrangements for their stays. Many of those involved in the Family Break service have been providing respite care for the same young people for many years and have established strong links with both the children and young people and their families.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is satisfactory.

Young people are encouraged to maintain contact with their family and friends. Contact arrangements are made explicit in placement plans and the role of carers established. If there are any restrictions regarding contact, they are made clear to all parties concerned. Carers are provided with training on the management of contact. A number of carers have been identified to assist with contact visits and will, if required, provide transport. The local authority has a contact centre where supervised contact can take place. Contact visit arrangements are regularly monitored and any difficulties arising discussed. The views of young people are taken into consideration in determining the frequency and duration of contact visits. Staff and carers indicate that many young people maintain regular contact with their family and friends via their mobile phones and in some cases computers.

The foster service encourage carers to be pro-active in seeking out the views of children and young people about their care. By so doing, issues or concerns can be addressed before they develop into major difficulties. All young people are, when entering care, made aware of how to raise issues of concern and register a complaint. The foster service also tries to ascertain the views of looked after children on both an individual and group basis. All children and young people have formal review meetings every six months during which they can express their views on their particular circumstances. There are a number of groups including the corporate parenting panel where young people can speak with senior managers and a Care Advocacy Support Team has been established to provide young people with an opportunity to comment on the operation of the service. Young people can ask the advocacy service to support them at reviews, in disruption meetings and making complaints. A former young person in care serves on the Fostering Panel and a number of others are involved in the training programme for new foster carers.

While it is evident that the foster service seeks out the views of young people, young people are not receiving adequate support or contact with their designated social workers. The manager reported that the looked after children team were also suffering from staff shortages and that this was, in many instances, impacting on their ability to support young people on a consistent basis.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is satisfactory.

Every young person is assisted in preparing for life after their sixteenth birthday by a dedicated after care team. The local authority has a range of options available to young people over sixteen that include possible extensions to their existing placements, supported lodgings and hostel accommodation. Training is made available for foster carers who have young people who are due to leave. Foster care staff liaise directly with members of the after care team. The after care team was not

visited but foster care staff and carers reported it was operating effectively and provided a good service.

Individual placement agreements between the service and carers make clear the allowances to be paid in respect of each placement. Carers confirmed that their allowances are generally paid on time. However, the service still does not produce an itemised payment system. This remains a frustration for many carers, especially those who provide multiple placements. While only a few concerns were raised by carers about existing allowance levels, there was a general consensus that increasing demands on their time could deter prospective foster carers from applying to the service. A new finance module has been introduced into the preparation to foster training.

Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

The service has introduced a new council approved Statement of Purpose to reflect recent changes and developments. The statement provides a good overview of the fostering service including its aims and objectives, its management structure, number and qualification of staff and recruitment processes for staff and carers. A number of information leaflets have also been developed on specific elements of the service such as Family Link.

At the time of the inspection, there was a lot of movement and uncertainty within the local authority senior management team and as a consequence a number of staff are now acting-up in senior positions. While this has not directly affected the day-to-day operation of the service, which remains the responsibility of the foster care manager, there is now a new interim senior management team. Staff and carers expressed the opinion that the service is being managed as best it can, given the trying circumstances brought about by a shortage of staff, an increasing demand for foster care places and uncertainty around managers occupying decision making posts on an interim basis. While there are clear lines of accountability within the existing management structure and liaison within teams, the fostering service manager has no direct responsibility over the delivery of certain elements of the service such as the amount and frequency of support offered to young people by their social workers.

Being a local authority service, it is subject to internal scrutiny via the committee system and external audit. Children's Services, of which the fostering service is one, are striving to meet a number of key government performance indicators. There is a foster team business plan that addresses the five key areas identified in the government publication Every Child Matters and identifies which staff are responsible and the timescale for completion.

The service has difficulty recruiting and retaining qualified staff. Though a number of new appointments have been made in recent times, the fostering team is still operating with inadequate staffing levels and is struggling to ensure the service

operates effectively. Caseloads remain high and unqualified staff are undertaking tasks previously carried out by qualified staff. All staff are provided with job descriptions and undertake a full induction on appointment. Staff receive regular supervision and appreciate the manager's 'open door' policy that provides instant consultation. Staff have access to regular training opportunities and are encouraged to develop their professional knowledge and skills. The foster care team is supported by a number of administrative staff. While staff reported having access to appropriate equipment a number felt that the computer system was not particularly user friendly and did not provide easy access to information. Staff have regular team meetings and minutes are produced.

The service has been successful in recruiting new carers. All prospective carers are subject to a comprehensive assessment and training programme before being taken to panel for approval. Carers are well supported during the assessment and approval process. Once approved, carers are expected to further develop their knowledge and skills, to meet the often complex needs of the young people they are caring for. Carers are encouraged to undertake National Vocational Qualifications in Child Care at level 3. An annual foster carer training calendar is produced that lists all available courses for the year. A brief overview of each course highlights the course aim and learning outcomes. There is a high level of satisfaction amongst carers about the quality of training courses offered.

While all carers receive regular supervision from support workers, the time intervals between supervision sessions is increasing due to staff shortages. The service has recently established a mentoring system in which experienced carers offer support to new carers. Specialist assistance is being sought from a national organisation to undertake some group supervision with a number of foster carers and their support workers. There is a system of practical support for carers that includes: out of hours support, prompt payment, insurance cover and access to social work support. All carers are provided with placement plans. Some support workers are not qualified, however, they are supervised by qualified staff. All carers have a handbook that contains the policies and procedures of the service. The service takes complaints seriously and will, if necessary, take foster carers back to panel if they feel they are not providing an appropriate service. All carers are subject to an annual review that, amongst other things, reviews the success of placements and checks domestic arrangements.

Apart from emergency situations, foster carers receive key information on the physical, social and emotional needs of each young person prior to placement. Foster carers keep records relating to each young person during their placements. All are made aware of their responsibilities in regard to confidentiality. The service is developing introductory information on each foster placement so that young people are made aware of the home they are going to. In a number of cases this information has been produced on DVD.

During the course of the inspection a range of documents and records were examined. Much of the information relating to young people is now stored electronically and was not accessed during the inspection. All the records requested

were readily available and the records examined contained recent and relevant information that is presented in clear, accessible language. As the computer systems within different departments in Children's Services are not compatible, information cannot be easily accessed on a shared basis.

The service operates within a local authority facility in the centre of Ryde and is accessible for the public. Accommodation is largely open planned and does not provide much privacy for workers to undertake confidential calls. There are a number of rooms that can be used for meetings.

The manager confirmed that the service, like many within the council, is under financial pressure and as a consequence a number of posts have been lost in recent times. Financial constraints, staff shortages and an increase in demand have all contributed to the pressures on the service.

Figures indicate that the service has been extremely successful in recruiting family and friends as carers, well above the national average. This has proved successful in keeping young people on the island and minimising disruption.

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):

- develop some new ways of getting teenaged young people to undertake health checks (NMS 12)
- ensure that the household reviews and health and safety checks are carried out within established timescales (NMS 6)
- ensure that the service has an effective policy on the recruitment and retention of qualified staff (NMS15)
- introduce training for foster carers on the issues around meeting the needs of young people with special educational needs (NMS 13)
- ensure that each young person's views on all matters affecting them are sought on a regular basis by a designated individual who can establish a meaningful relationship and offer continuity (NMS 11)
- introduce a system whereby payments are itemised so that carers are fully aware what each payment relates to (NMS 29)