

# Portsmouth City Council Fostering

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 fostering service provided by Portsmouth City Council is located within three separate teams, each providing different types of foster care. The largest of the teams is based at Chaucer House, in the centre of Portsmouth. This team recruits and supports Level 1 and Level 2 carers who provide placements for the majority of young people assessed as requiring foster care in the city. The Skye Close project based at Cosham provides approximately 25 carers at Level 3. These carers offer placements to young people with complex behavioural needs. The Family Link scheme based at Beechside in Drayton provides short term care for approximately 23 young people with disabilities and complex health needs.

The total number of approved households supported by the service is 178 providing approximately 290 placements.

The service is provided to meet the needs of young people from the city of Portsmouth requiring placement away from home. The fostering service works closely with the other children's services provided by Portsmouth City Council, including residential provisions for young people.

### Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This announced inspection assesses the key National Minimum Standards for fostering services.

The overall outcomes for young people fostered through this service are good, with the outcome area of health being judged as outstanding. The service provides young people with excellent opportunities to live healthy lifestyles and is supported by a range of specialist health and medical services.

The service provide young people with a range of placements to meet their individual needs. Carers are supported and supervised to promote the well being of the young people placed.

The service is well managed and staff are focused on young people's needs. Records and systems conform to the standards and regulations.

Young people have a range of opportunities to share their views with the service to ensure they are considered in the development of the service.

## **Improvements since the last inspection**

At the last inspection no actions were made. There were three recommendations; one relating to collecting information about young people's religious and cultural needs, one regarding the use of the views of young people in foster care training, and the other to agree new contracts with Level 3 carers. All of these have been successfully undertaken.

The service has made a number of additional improvements since the last inspection. These include: the agreement to appoint social workers to provide an out-of-hours service for foster carers to improve support to carers and young people; development of a magazine for young people looked after by the council; young people invited to the fostering panel when arrangements for their care is being discussed; extension of family link to provide long term care for a young person with complex health needs; provision of training to raise foster carer's awareness of their responsibilities for the education and health needs of young people placed with them. The service has made better use of media services in their attempts to recruit more carers. This has been particularly successful for the family link scheme.

The service is responsive to new legislation and initiatives and have good monitoring systems to assess how well they are meeting their stated objectives. This is evidenced by the very thorough self-evaluation sent prior to inspection.

## **Helping children to be healthy**

The provision is outstanding.

The service is excellent at promoting young people's health and development. Thorough assessments of health needs are undertaken and these are met in partnership with a range of health specialists. Initial annual health checks for fostered young people are undertaken by a consultant paediatrician and are updated annually. The service has access to a range of services specifically set up to meet the health needs of children looked after by the authority including sexual health, mental health and dentistry.

The family link service for young people with disabilities keep very clear records of young people's health needs, some very complex. They use the knowledge of parents and consult with community nurses to ensure the needs are met by the carers and that they have been trained to undertake any medical intervention. Arrangements have been made to extend the family link service to provide full time carers for a young person who has a range of challenging health needs. The response of the service to the needs of the young person has been outstanding and has enabled appropriate care to be given locally.

The service keep appropriate documents regarding consent from parents, administration of medication and involvement of medical professions. These clearly demonstrate an excellent understanding of the health needs of the young people cared for and the service's responsibility to meet these.

Carers are provided with training and support to meet the health needs of young people, including first aid, substance misuse and sexual health training. All fostered young people are registered with a general practitioner and can access medical services for themselves or with the support of carers. Imaginative ways of encouraging young people to make use of the services available, such as drop in centres, has increased the number of young people engaging with the medical services.

The service has a policy of not placing young people under the age of five years with carers who smoke and actively discourage young people from smoking.

Healthy eating initiatives have been set up in conjunction with the schools and foster carers are encouraged, during their monthly supervision, to consider healthy lifestyle issues such as exercise and healthy menu planning.

Young people's health needs are reviewed at six monthly intervals and at any time their needs change. The family link service have a very useful form used to update any changes in the care plan with regard to health needs. This enables easy access for carers to ensure they are delivering appropriate care.

### **Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe**

The provision is good.

There are three main sections of the fostering service - one providing short breaks for young people with disabilities, one providing carers for young people with complex needs and one providing foster care for the majority of the young people in the city that require the service. All have individual and appropriately qualified managers who are committed to their role. They have a very child centred approach to the work of their teams and monitor the service to ensure they meet the assessed needs of the young people.

Recruitment of carers is thorough to ensure the safety of the young people placed. The assessment of suitability include training courses, individual interviews, appropriate checks and presentation to the fostering panel. Health and safety checks on each household are undertaken. Following a recent incident in a foster home (still under investigation) these have been updated in each home. Foster carers have a good understanding of their responsibilities to keep young people in their care safe and undertake risk assessments when any potentially risky situations are planned. Foster carers suitability is reviewed annually, and following any allegation or concern regarding their care. There are effective processes to de-register inappropriate carers.

There are insufficient carers available to make careful matching possible for each young person. Recruitment of carers has been reviewed and there is now good use of the media team and improved recruitment packages. This has resulted in more applications for carers, particularly for family link and the Skye Close project. All of

the staff are aware of the principles of good matching and there is evidence of good planning and careful matching in many cases, but lack of resources limits this. Carers spoke of juggling placements to ensure a bed rather than finding an appropriate family for a young person. This has also led to sharing of bedrooms in a number of placements and staff feel uncomfortable about the risks involved in this practice. Where there is no prospect of an appropriate match the service use agency placements to meet the needs of the young people and try to ensure the placements are provided locally. Written placement agreements include considerations such as religion, sexuality and ethnic background.

Child protection training forms part of the induction for staff and carers and is regularly updated. All placements have a safe care plan drawn up that considers the vulnerabilities of everyone in the household. Carers have a good understanding of their responsibilities to keep the young people, and their own family, safe. Written guidelines ensure foster carers are aware of the permitted consequences of poor behaviour and each sign an agreement not to use physical chastisement. Unannounced visits to carers are made by supervising social workers to check on the provision of care. Allegations and concerns are well documented and dealt with appropriately to ensure the safety of any young people placed. Carers feel supported by the service and feel their own safety and that of their family members are well considered by the service.

The recruitment processes for the council are designed to keep young people safe and cover all the necessary checks and references. Staff induction packages are set up to give a clear understanding of the role and the expectations of being an employee. Staff suitability is monitored at supervision and annual appraisals.

The fostering panel is set up according to regulation and has a good mix of members. The minutes provide a clear record of the considerations and recommendations made. The decision making process is clear and carers are informed of all decisions. The panel will defer recommendations if they feel they do not have sufficient information to take a considered view. Young people and carers are invited to panel where appropriate and say they feel welcomed and respected. The medical advisor is appropriately used to clarify issues arising from carers medical reports. There are systems in place to ensure panel members can comment on the quality of assessments and query any action they do not feel is in the young people's best interests.

## **Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do**

The provision is good.

The majority of approved carers are white British. This reflects the background of most of the young people placed through the service. The service has made contacts with some ethnic minority groups and their promotional material is available in different languages but the interest shown has been minimal. There are a small

number of asylum seeking young people being cared for by foster carers and individual arrangements to help with language and identity issues have been set up, however one carer felt there are few opportunities in the community for these young people to engage in activities. Foster care training includes diversity and equality issues and there is evidence of carers working with parents to ensure cultural issues are considered. Young people with disabilities are catered for in terms of equal access to services. Individual interests and abilities are supported and promoted as shown in the young people's care plans.

The service has made good progress in the education of young people they care for. Foster carers are increasingly taking responsibility for the young people's education experience and are involved in choosing and supporting schools, attending parents evenings and providing transport so that a change of school is not required following placement. The education co-ordinator is involved in foster care training and this raises awareness of the foster carers vital role in young people's education.

The examination results this year have improved for young people looked after, although they are still below the average for the general population. Links with each school have been formed and a hard to place panel ensures that all fostered young people have an identified school placement. Rewards for attendance and achievement are given to young people as an incentive and an awards ceremony for young people provides recognition of their efforts. The ceremonies have been changed as a result of listening to young people to provide a more age appropriate venue for the older young people.

A range of information is made available to carers to support them in promoting education. This includes a resource box, access to a computer, a letter box service providing educational activities to young people and literacy help. Supervision of carers include discussion on how they are promoting the education of the young people placed with them. This helps the carers remain clear about their responsibilities.

Where respite care is provided the parents are recognised as the main carers and are involved in all arrangements. The family link scheme, set up to provide short-term breaks for young people with disabilities, is particularly good at using parents in their plans and information gathering. Carers on this scheme said they have very good links with parents and generally feel part of the extended family. Although the breaks are a real support to the parents the young people gain a great deal from the experience with some relationships continuing informally into adulthood. The parents and carers are able to make arrangements between themselves within the number of hours allocated and reviews of the placements are held regularly. Parents are very positive about the service and appreciate being seen as the main care giver. Very good reports and records are kept by the service evidencing the views of the parents and young people, and the cost effectiveness of the service.



## **Helping children make a positive contribution**

The provision is good.

Initial training for foster carers include the importance of family contact for the young people. Each placement has a contact plan and foster carers are often involved in providing transport and hospitality to enable contact to happen. Foster carers show appreciation of the effect of being separated from family and see supporting contact as a vital part of their role. Young people who are placed separately from their siblings are provided with opportunities to get together. Some of these arrangements are informally arranged between carers with the agreement of the social worker and parents. It enables relationships to continue even though the young people are unable to live together.

There are a range of systems set up to gain young people's views. These include the involvement of independent advocacy services and a group set up with young people and senior managers to discuss their experience of care. A computer programme has been set up to get feedback from young people prior to the review of their placement. Young people are consulted during appraisals of foster carers and when there are concerns raised about the quality of care provided. Exit interviews have been arranged in part of the service to hear young people's views about their experiences. There is evidence that the service has learnt from complaints made by young people and have altered the service as a result. There is now a magazine for young people looked after by the council. This is as a direct result of requests from young people. Whilst opportunities exist for most young people to have their say consultation arrangements for young people with disabilities have not been adequately developed.

## **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is not judged.

## **Organisation**

The organisation is good.

There is a clear statement of purpose for each of the three parts of the service. These set out the aims of the services and the gives information about the criteria to access the service. In addition there are information packs for young people outlining what they can expect from the service, how to make complaints and useful information about being fostered.

Staff are organised effectively and there is good use of individual skills and interests. This encourages job satisfaction. There are a number of specific responsibilities allocated to individual members of the team such as private fostering, kinship fostering and training. Managers are alert to the possibility of isolation and the

dangers of sole ownership of a service.

There are clear management structures and staff feel supported by their manager and team, personally and professionally. Supervision is rated highly and is a regular opportunity to reflect on practice within the service.

There are pressures caused by the lack of administrative support in parts of the service. This has led to some delay in completing paperwork and adhering to systems. Recruitment to vacant posts has been successful and induction processes have started. The positive impact of good administrative support is evident in the family link scheme where social workers have been freed up to work on development of the service.

The role of young people's social workers is clearly defined as different from the foster carers supervising social workers. Relationships between the two groups is good, and is helped by the crossover of staff who have worked in both teams. There is robust discussion if problems arise and information required by foster carers is chased by the fostering team. Staff have access to a large range of policies and procedures and feel supported to do their job. One exception is with regard to special guardianship arrangement. Staff and carers are unclear about the availability of financial support for legal fees, and payment of allowances. This is vital information when considering this route for carers and the young people placed with them.

There are sufficient staff in the fostering services to ensure that the tasks are completed. All social workers and managers are busy but have a good understanding of how their work is meeting the aims and objectives of the service. In the teams where the placements are planned there is time for reflection, discussion about matching needs and development of the service. In the team dealing with emergency and day to day requests for placements staff feel that their work is responsive to constant pressure, worsened by not having enough resources.

The service has very clear guidelines about the support of carers. The majority of carers feel support is good. The support in family link and Skye Close was felt to be particularly good as it includes 24hr availability of workers who know the service. Carers are particularly pleased that social workers are willing to visit their homes to discuss incidents and give practical solutions and advice. Skye Close have carers groups that are valued, as well as individual support and supervision. For mainstream and level two carers an out-of-hours service has been agreed and is due to commence in the next few weeks.

Carers in all services have formed informal networks of support with other carers. In many permanent placements the support requested from the service is minimal with carers preferring to get their support from family and friends. This appears to work well and enables the young person to really feel part of the family. Carers in these situations felt enabled by the service. All carers feel they are listened to by the service, although conflicts and complaints leave them feeling very vulnerable. In recognition of this the service has commissioned an independent service from a

private agency to provide support to foster carers who are going through investigations.

Monthly supervision of carers take place. Carers are free to raise issues of concern as well as give up-dates on placement issues. Signed notes of these sessions are kept on the carer's files. There is a carers group used to consult about fostering issues.

Training for foster carers has been reviewed following a change in personnel. Carers and staff are positive about the changes and the attendance records show that the take up figures have doubled. Training calendars are printed in the foster carer diary to encourage them to plan their time to make best use of the opportunities. Education and health representatives have been involved in carer training and young people have made a contribution. Practical support such as child care has been provided to encourage carers to attend sessions. There is now more emphasis on the experiences of male carers and this has had a positive effect on discussion about vulnerability issues. Buddy systems have been set up and arrangements are made to make use of the positive relationships that develop during the initial training offered to carers. There is encouragement for self-learning and an acknowledgement of the different styles of learning.

The records regarding the young people placed provide sufficient information to deliver appropriate care. Most information about young people is held in the social work teams but is available to other staff through the computer system. The council has a good recording strategy and undertake file audits to ensure this is adhered to. Carers keep daily records about the young people they care for and contribute to the reviewing process. Foster carers are aware of their responsibility to keep records safe and return them to the service at the end of the placement. The records kept in family link and Skye Close project are particularly clear, well organised and easy to follow. This enables the reader good understanding of the care being delivered to each young person.

In all of the services the correct administration records are in place. It has been a struggle for those services without administrative help to keep these up-to-date and staff time is being diverted from core tasks to ensure the systems are working. The records are generally clear, straight forward and easy to access. Records of complaints and allegations track the action taken and have clear outcomes. They evidence good, independent investigations.

There is a dedicated social worker for family and friends fostering. This has led to very good practice in this area. Social workers are encouraged to look at family and friends as possible carers for all young people coming into the system. There have been no disruptions in the family and friends fostering since the systems were set up. Initial assessment of carers takes place within six weeks and is presented to the fostering panel for interim approval. This is followed by a full assessment using the usual assessment process and is presented again to panel for consideration. Support to these carers is offered by the dedicated worker and other members of the team. The service pays family and friends the same allowances as other Level 1 carers.

## **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 a risk assessment is undertaken when young people share bedrooms in foster homes (Standard 6.5)
- develop further ways to consult with children and young people with disabilities to ensure their views are considered (Standard 11)
- ensure clear policy and procedures relating to special guardianship arrangements are provided to carers and staff (Standard 16.16)