

# Torbay Local Authority Fostering Agency

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

Torbay Council, a small unitary authority, provides a fostering service as part of its accommodation services for children and young people. The fostering service assesses, approves and supports a range of emergency, short term and long term placements. Furthermore, it also provides specialist placements, parent and child care, remand care, family and friends care and short term breaks for children and young people with disabilities.

The fostering service comprises of three distinct sections; the mainstream fostering team and the specialist placement teams, located in Torquay, and the 'Family 2 Family' short breaks scheme, based in Paignton. Separate service managers lead the mainstream and the specialist placement fostering teams. Private Fostering and 'Family and Friends' placements are fully incorporated within the mainstream foster care team. This service manager also supervises the assessments carried out by the fostering support worker for the 'Family 2 Family' short term breaks placements, based within the Children with Disabilities Service. The Operations Manager for Accommodation Services leads the fostering service.

As of March 2007, the fostering service was providing 54 approved fostering households, offering approximately 85 placements for children and young people. Additional foster care places were purchased by the authority from external providers. 16 new fostering households were approved in the 12 months to 31 March 2007. Of these households, four were provided by children and young people's family and friends; two households were approved to provide short breaks for children and young people with disabilities and five households were approved as supported lodgings.

## Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This announced inspection of the Torbay Local Authority Fostering Service was conducted under the Children Act 1989, the Care Standards Act 2000, Fostering Services Regulations 2002 and the National Minimum Standards for fostering services; all key standards were inspected. Within the group of children and young people and foster carers chosen 'at random' for this inspection, the sample included a significant number of children and young people with disabilities.

Overall, outcomes for children and young people looked after within the fostering service are good, despite the challenges that have impacted on the service in relation to recruitment, staffing, retention of carers and issues within the wider organisation. Recent service specific developments alongside the ongoing discussion and review of

protocols and procedures within the authority, provide promising prospects of improvement in these areas.

Children and young people's health needs are well met by the provision of effective multi-agency working arrangements that facilitate access to a good range of health and therapeutic interventions. Excellent opportunities are provided to children and young people to enjoy educational and recreational activities and to take part in consultation and decision-making processes. The fostering service pays good attention to keeping children and young people safe; their welfare is further promoted by the robust work of the Independent Reviewing Unit and the Fostering Panel. Sound matching processes within the service are weakened by the limited availability and choice of placements. The fostering service makes a good effort to respond to a largely demand led service, whilst addressing the spectrum of changing needs of children and young people living within the authority. The service continues to develop and maintain specialist provision in response to the identification of emerging patterns and trends for specific types of placements. Further consideration of the required capacity of the fostering service is needed, to ensure that the service has an adequate number of qualified staff and recruits a range of carers to meet the needs of children and young people for whom it aims to provide a service. Some information and training provision lack sufficient focus on the needs of children and young people with disabilities.

### **Improvements since the last inspection**

Two statutory requirements were made at the last inspection and have been satisfactorily addressed by the service. The Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) certificates issued for persons carrying on, managing or working for the fostering service are now available for inspection, providing evidence that appropriate checks have been completed to safeguard children and young people. A review of the approval of each foster carers is undertaken by the service, not more than a year after approval and thereafter, on an annual basis, to make sure that foster carers and their households remain suitable to look after children and young people.

In relation to the two good practice recommendations made, hand written case records have improved; records are legible and appropriately signed, providing adequate information. The system for recording, monitoring and the issuing of exemption certificates remains unsatisfactory as the suitability of placements made over and above foster carers' approved registration conditions, cannot be accurately evaluated from the current records kept.

A number of new initiatives and improvements have been made to benefit children and young people placed with foster carers. For example, the fostering service has further developed the Specialist Placement Service; the appointment of specialist health practitioners and the expansion of the independent reviewing unit both enhance and support the fostering service functions, promoting the welfare of children and young people looked after. The Adolescent Scheme outreach workers and the Education Transitions worker have had a positive impact in the reduction of placement breakdown and the capacity of the service to respond creatively in

meeting individual children and young people's needs. The development of a 'Corporate Parenting Strategy' and the 'Children in Care' improvement strategy both provide tangible methods of promoting the further improvement and development of the fostering service.

## **Helping children to be healthy**

The provision is good.

Children and young people's health needs are well met by the provision of effective multi-agency working arrangements that facilitate access to a good range of health and therapeutic interventions. Torbay Council backs the 'Healthy Care Standards' pilot study; statistics show that 86% of children in care complete an annual health check and two thirds of the children and young people in foster care report that they get good advice about how to be healthy. Foster carers register children and young people with local services and accompany them to medical appointments if appropriate, to ensure they receive the treatment that they need. The fostering service provides carers with full details of children and young people's health needs prior to placement, if such information is available to the service. Persons with parental responsibility provide signed medical consent for any first aid or emergency treatment that children and young people in foster care may need. Carers keep clear records in their households of any medication given to children and young people in their care; accidents and any injuries are recorded and reported to the fostering service, safeguarding children and young people's welfare. Foster carers complete courses in relevant areas, for example, health and safety, first aid, drugs and alcohol awareness and sexual health matters.

A good range of specialist health services provide additional support and advice on how best to address the specific health issues of particular children and young people in foster care. Children and young people with disabilities receive excellent support from the fostering service. The children with disabilities service and health services provide carers with information and guidance on how to best care for the complex health needs of the children and young people placed with them.

The authority has a designated Looked After Children Nurse, who leads on the provision of dental care for all children and young people in the service. The nurse provides general health advice and support to foster carers and children and young people to ensure health needs are met; a specialist Community Psychiatric Nurse is now employed to work with children in care. Moreover, the Specialist Assessment and Therapy Service provides a specific Child and Mental Health Services (CAMHS) grant-funded provision to children in care and their foster carers, to address individual's issues and support placements. Within this small authority, children and young people's health benefits from the good relationships that exist between the fostering service and local health teams. Fostering support workers are knowledgeable about local resources and services that are available to children and young people.

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

The provision is good.

No new members of staff have been recruited to the fostering service since the last inspection; social work staff and managers remain suitably experienced and qualified to provide safe and effective placements for children and young people. However, there are significant changes to staffing within the service; two fostering service workers and a service manager have left the service in the past year period. Identified performance issues and vacancies have been well managed; staff have worked hard to ensure that placements of children and young people have not been compromised by the recent difficulties encountered within the service.

Children and young people benefit from placements that provide comfortable and pleasant family homes. There are some excellent carers within the service; children's social workers indicate that foster carers generally make a good effort to meet and respond to each child's needs and preferences. For example, one carer changed the colour and pasted fairies on bedroom walls, to accommodate a little girl within a room usually occupied by boys. Children and young people say they are well looked after and are happy with their placements. The fostering service and the children with disabilities service work closely together to ensure that carer's homes are set up to meet all of children and young people with disabilities particular needs. The authority provides any necessary adaptation and/or specialist equipment to carer's homes to make sure that children and young people are kept safe and looked after in the best way to promote their welfare. For example, one home is fitted with 'grab' rails in the toilet; another household is provided with hoists, adapted bathroom and a lift. Fostering support workers carry out health and safety checks on each carer's household as part of the annual review and an initial check is made as part of the foster carers approval process. Foster carers undertake training in health and safety matters and evidence a good understanding of the relevant issues.

The fostering service demonstrates a good level of expertise in identifying appropriate placements and have processes set up to 'match' children to foster placements. 'Matching' and 'pre-placement' meetings provide forums to discuss specific requirements and identify how each placement will meet the needs of the individual child or young person placed. Where possible, children and young people have a period of introduction to the proposed carer so that they can give their view about the placement. Particular care is given to introductions and the involvement of parents within the short breaks scheme for children and young people with disabilities. However, over demand for the service and a limited choice of available placements, alongside emergency admissions and on occasion, the lack of the provision of information, have contributed to shortfalls in particular matching considerations. Moreover, recent referrals to the service, evidence variable practice between social work teams and the lack of clear threshold criteria in place. Insufficient detail has been provided, in some instances, to clearly identify the purpose and needs of the placement; for example, a recent parent and child placement. A significant number of placements are made on either a short-term or emergency basis. Regular 'cases of concern' meetings, a recent development within

the authority, provide a proactive approach to the management of placements, whilst monitoring and supporting the welfare of children and young people.

Good relationships exist between the fostering service and the Safeguarding Unit; child protection procedures and guidance are known to staff and carers and help to keep children and young people safe. Links between Safeguarding forums and the Fostering Management Group consider placement safety on a regular basis. Staff and foster carers complete a good range of child protection training; however, there is a shortfall in sufficiently addressing disability issues within the training provided. The service helps foster carers to formulate safe caring guidelines during their initial training; thereafter, the fostering service workers support foster carers in updating their plans to meet the needs of each child's placement. Any incident or concern is promptly addressed and fully investigated by the authority as appropriate. Outcomes are clearly recorded; any required action by the foster carer or the service is identified and relevant issues are brought to the attention of the fostering panel for review. Disciplinary action or referral to the Safeguarding Unit is undertaken as required, but independent support to foster carers during an investigation is not available. However, the fostering service provides support to foster carers at this time.

Children feel safe in their placements and say they are not bullied; a few children report some bullying whilst at school. The authority has clear policies and procedures in place to identify and respond to bullying issues; foster carers are clear that bullying and discrimination is not tolerated within their households.

Most children and young people in foster care know how to make a complaint and can identify someone to talk to if they have a problem. The fostering service deals with any complaints promptly in accordance with the authority's complaint system and timescales. Adequate monitoring and recording systems within the fostering service, provide the operations manager with a good overview of key concerns and emerging trends. The independent reviewing officers contribute a robust and vigilant overview of the safety and quality of foster care provided to children and young people. The reviewing systems ensure that both foster carers and children and young people have ample opportunity to express their opinions about the placement and identify any concerns that they may have. Children with communication difficulties needs are not fully met by current information and decision-making systems in place.

The authority operates a regular fostering panel that assesses and reviews the quality of the assessment process for foster carers and monitors the range and type of carers in comparison to the needs of children and young people. The panel chair is suitably qualified and demonstrates good leadership to a well qualified and suitably representative mix of panel members. The respective members each have expertise in relevant areas to contribute to decisions that will affect the well-being of children and young people in foster care. The panel runs in accordance with its terms and conditions which reflect the requirements of the regulations and standards; its functions are underpinned by excellent administrative support. All panel members are CRB checked; members benefit from training opportunities to help them deliver a good service that safeguards children and young people and provides the authority



with feedback on quality standards. The authority's scheme of delegation provides some confusion, with regard to the panel and its decision-maker and the decision-making processes within social work teams for the placement of children and young people.

The authority has satisfactory recruitment and selection procedures in place to ensure all appropriate checks are made for staff to safeguard children and young people. CRB checks are updated every three years to make sure that foster carers remain suitable persons to care for children and young people. All staff have a copy of their job description and carers have a contract with Torbay Council which sets out the expectations on each side.

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

The provision is outstanding.

The 'Family 2 Family' short breaks scheme offers regular, planned breaks, for children and young people with disabilities, within another family. The Children with Disabilities team provides good information to parents about the service and carefully matches children and young people with foster carers who are best suited to meeting the child or young person's individual needs. Each placement is supported by any necessary equipment or adaptation required to the foster carer's home, to make sure that the placement promotes and safeguards the welfare for that individual child or young person. Placement plans underpin flexible and diverse packages of care that take account of the foster carer's role in facilitating and meeting particular children and young people's needs. Parents remain central in decision-making about health, education and care issues. Clear contracts are drawn up between parents and foster carers to ensure that children and young people placed in the shorts break scheme receive a continuity of care that meet their needs. Survey responses from parents show a high level of satisfaction with this service; foster carers highlight the excellent level of support provided by the dedicated fostering service support worker and the fostering and children with disabilities services in general.

The fostering service makes a good effort to promote diversity and equality and raise awareness of these issues within the service. For example, the 'Foster Care Fortnight' event in 2006 focussed on diversity and equal opportunity issues. The service encourages diversity in applications from prospective carers and welcomes responses from a wide spectrum of the community; recruitment advertising is made within a range of publications. The prospective carers training and more recently, the core post-training requirement for all foster carers, addresses discrimination and equal opportunities issues.

Children and young people generally enjoy their education. Foster carers and the systems in place within the authority, provide good support and help maintain attendance; most children and young people have school places and regularly attend their educational provision. The fostering service works jointly with colleagues with responsibility for education to support children and young people in their educational achievements. For example, close links with the designated teacher for children in

care facilitates foster carers' understanding and contribution to children and young people's educational progress. Moreover, the Education Transitions worker supports children in care with significant education transition periods and with any education related difficulties; this supports both attainment and placement stability. In addition, specialist carers or 'outreach' staff accompany children and young people in the classroom if this support is required to sustain attendance. Foster carers show commitment to supporting children and young people's education. For example, foster carers contribute to placement review and the formulation and review of Personal Education Plans; they advocate in children and young people's best interests, by raising issues, such as the inflexibility of specialist provision time-tabling. The authority provides access to a computer for all children and young people in foster care to assist them with their studies.

The fostering service makes a commendable effort to facilitate the inclusion of children and young people in foster care within community and leisure pursuits. Foster carers receive a comprehensive information pack about local resources to assist them in identifying appropriate opportunities for children and young people to take part in. Children and young people benefit from engaging in a good range of recreational activities; concessionary rates are available within the authority and funding is made available to sustain children and young people's interests and hobbies. Foster carers undertake training that helps them to encourage and assist children and young people in the development of social skills and contribute to the enhancement of their self-esteem and the maintenance of social networks.

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

The provision is outstanding.

Foster carers are aware of the importance of children and young people maintaining appropriate contact with their friends and family; placement planning identifies contact arrangements and frequency is clarified within each child's placement agreement. The fostering service supports foster carers with difficult contact and organises appropriate venues, support and supervising workers as necessary, to keep everyone safe. The authority assesses any risks and foster carers maintain records of the outcomes of contact visits. Children and young people are consulted about contact within planning meetings; they report that contact arrangements work well and they are able to sustain friendships within the community. The fostering service, in conjunction with CAMHS, delivers attachment training to foster carers; this provides a good understanding of the relevant issues and assists carers to offer good support to children and young people with contact arrangements.

Children and young people take part in a wide range of established consultation processes about issues that affect them. Young people co-lead delivering the authority's 'Total Respect' training for councillors and multi-agency staff and they have the opportunity to mentor other children and young people looked after. Moreover, young people's collated views contribute to the implementation of the Healthy Care Standard's action plan and individual young people form part of interview panels for the appointment of key staff. The fostering service encourages

children and young people's participation in decision-making about their futures; for example, the service includes children and young people's views as part of the foster carers annual review process. The Foster Care Newsletter invites comments from children and young people to staff and carers; most children and young people believe that foster carers listen to them and take notice of their opinions. Placement planning welcomes children and young people's comments and views about the 'matching' process and the suitability of the placement to meet their needs; however, choices of placement are limited, particularly in relation to emergency admissions to fostering households.

Excellent practice within the Independent Reviewing system encourages and invites children, young people and their carers to express their views. Children and young people say that they feel involved and listened to. The authority's contracted services from The Children's Society's Participation Project support children and young people in foster care in both child protection and reviewing forums. However, advocacy services and the provision of information requires further development, to enable the effective participation and inclusion of children and young people with disabilities in consultation processes. The 'Foster Force' group, for the support of foster carer's own children, remains a commendable model of good practice; a DVD about the group is available for distribution and information to fostering households. The authority recognises foster carers contribution with the 'Foster Care Award'; this is given to a fostering household 'whose care has helped change somebody's future'.

### **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is good.

There are no key standards under this outcome area. However, the inspection chose to look at how the fostering service prepares young people for adulthood.

The development of the Specialist Placement service makes a significant contribution to the number of children and young people placed within the local area. This helps young people to maintain positive contacts within their own community. Excellent links between the 'Care to Community' team (CTC) and the fostering service, provides a good level of support to care leavers and ensures a smooth transition into independence. Young people take part in Pathway Planning and support workers will negotiate the continuation of placement in foster care to support young people as appropriate. CTC staff work with foster carers and the young people in placement to help young people develop independent living skills. Both services encourage young people to keep in touch with their foster carers once they have left their placements. Young people who have been placed in foster care, can choose to become 'training link partners'; these young people are offered the opportunity to take part in the training of prospective foster carers.

## Organisation

The organisation is good.

The fostering service updates its Statement of Purpose on an annual basis to ensure that it accurately reflects the current operation of the service. Children and young people receive an age appropriate guide to foster care, which has been created in consultation with children and young people using the service. The information provides details of how children and young people can access an advocate and how they can make a complaint. The format is not suitable for some children and young people with disabilities.

The overall management of the fostering service is good. Clear lines of delegation within the service, established management systems to prioritise workloads and robust leadership, ensures that arising difficulties are addressed to limit adverse effects upon the care given to children and young people placed with foster carers. Most foster carers commend current service managers and the team of fostering service support workers for the very good levels of support provided to them, to help them look after children and young people well. Support mechanisms include regular supervision, the provision of foster carers support group meetings and respite arrangements for the particularly demanding placements. In addition, the available services provided by health, education and adolescent support workers, provide further support functions to meet children and young people's challenging needs in placement. However, some foster carers express the view that children and young people entering the service have increasingly complex and severe needs and although they value the services available to them, many carers indicate that they would welcome increased respite support. Immediate support is also available to foster carers from the fostering service's 'duty' system and from the authority's 'out of hours' team.

All foster carers have access to and are encouraged to undertake the National Vocational Qualification Level 3 award in 'Caring for Children and Young People'; a good percentage of foster carers hold this award. Foster carers value the training opportunities offered to them; they report that they can access a wide range of good quality training, provided by either the authority's corporate training programme, or 'bespoke' training arranged by the fostering service. One foster carer is to be involved in undertaking assessments of prospective carers and contribute to pre-approval training programmes. However, foster carers report a shortfall in training opportunities that fully embrace the issues of working with children with disabilities. The service maintains records of training completed by foster carers and copies of their annual reviews. These documents inform consideration of future placements of children and young people, identify foster carer's skill bases and monitor the development and capacity of the service.

Although creative advertising has resulted in 16 new households being recruited in the past year, the fostering service has 12 fewer foster care households than reported at last year's inspection, Difficulties in attracting, recruiting and retaining foster carers reduces the overall capacity of the service and contributes to some

individual foster carers taking significantly more children and young people than they are approved to care for. The limited availability of placements in relation to the level of demand for them, results in some foster carers going outside of their agreed terms of approval, both in terms of number and age group. A number of 'exemptions' have been sought in some foster carer's registrations to place children and young people in households outside of their terms of approval. Systems are in place to record and monitor placements made outside of foster carer's registration terms; however, some records kept are not adequately or accurately completed by staff and thus children and young people's welfare could be compromised.

At the time of inspection, the fostering service struggles to meet the level of demand for the number and changing types of placements required for children and young people. However, the fostering service's specialist placement team takes a proactive approach in developing new types of placements; for example, parent and child care and adolescent placements, to provide children and young people with placements that meet their needs. 'Joined up' working arrangements with other services, provide foster carers and developmental work in progress with expertise and support the provision of a range of placements. The service undertakes friends and families care assessments and approval; fostering service staff demonstrate sensitivity and a good understanding of pre-existing relationships in assessing and approving families and friends as foster carers. Staff working within the service, receive supervision and ongoing training opportunities; some staff members have completed assessment training and adult attachment profiling to contribute to the development of their skills in assessing prospective carers.

The panel reports that most assessments of prospective foster carers are completed to a good standard. Children and young people's case files are well kept in accordance with the authority's guidelines; they provide an adequate history and progress for children and young people, should they wish to access this information. Foster carers files contain all relevant information. The fostering service has systems in place to monitor and review key issues, for example, allegations, complaints and accidents. Documentation is generally completed to a good standard and collated information informs the actions and the strategic direction of the service.

## What must be done to secure future improvement?

### Statutory Requirements

This section sets out the actions, which must be taken so that the registered person/s meets the Care Standards Act 2000, Fostering Services Regulations 2002 and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider(s) must comply with the given timescales.

Std.	Action	Due date
21	ensure that in relation to any child or young person placed or to be placed with them, a foster parent is given such information,	31/12/2007

	which is kept up to date, as to enable them to provide appropriate care for the child or young person [Regulation 17 (3)]	
21	maintain accurate records of all exemptions made by the local authority that include all of the requirements outlined within Schedule 7 Section 63[12] of the Children Act 1989; in particular, certificates must include the full names of children and young people placed	31/12/2007

## Recommendations

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

- provide suitable means, for any child or young person with communication difficulties, to make their wishes and feelings known regarding their care and treatment [NMS 11.4]
- provide the information contained within the Children's Guide, in different formats to meet the needs of different groups of children and young people, to ensure that it is suitable for all children and young people fostered [NMS 1.5]
- review the capacity of the fostering service and ensure that the service has an adequate number of qualified staff and recruits a range of carers to provide choice and meet the needs of children and young people for whom it aims to provide a service [NMS 17.1]
- review training arrangements to ensure that specific and relevant information is provided to foster carers regarding looking after children and young people with disabilities; in particular, in relation to child protection and communication training [NMS 21.2]
- ensure the provision of independent support to a foster carer(s) during an investigation [NMS 22.9]