

Plymouth City Council 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

Plymouth City Council fostering service provides and supports a range of fostering placements, which include long-term, time-limited, emergency and family and friends care. On 31 March 2007, the service had 181 approved fostering households with the potential to provide care for up to 340 children and young people. At that time, 250 children and young people were placed with the service. A further 81 children and young people were placed by the authority with other fostering service providers. Between 1 April 2006 and 31 March 2007, the service approved 19 new fostering households, of which 11 were family and friends households.

The fostering service has its own office base in the city. The service has a management team comprising of the service manager, two team managers, a panel advisor, a reviewing officer and a project officer who manages key projects associated with service development. The service manager is also responsible for the authority's adoption and private fostering arrangements services. One of the team managers also manages the authority's private fostering social workers. The service employs 13 full-time or part-time qualified social workers to recruit, assess and support foster carers, 6 full-time or part-time fostering support workers and administrative support staff.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This statutory inspection visit was undertaken as an announced key inspection. All key National Minimum Standards were inspected. The inspector found the service had made good progress in the nine months since the previous inspection visit and that it is now operating to a good standard overall.

Two recommendations regarding safeguarding procedures have been made at this inspection visit. It is recommended that the service ensures that checks on persons working in or for the service include a check of the Protection of Vulnerable Adults (POVA) list and that, where there are known risks associated with a child or young person's behaviour, the risk assessment and risk management strategies relating to these are recorded in writing.

Improvements since the last inspection

The service has taken effective action to address the statutory requirement and seven good practice recommendations that were made at the last inspection visit. The service now has a well-respected, stable and experienced management team in position, providing able leadership of the service and effective monitoring of the

quality of the service being provided to children and young people.

There is now better communication and more cohesive working between the fostering service and commissioning teams, leading to clearer and more effective placement planning. There is a strong focus on providing high quality care and good 'corporate parenting' to the children and young people in the care of the authority. Matching procedures have been revised and forms updated to ensure that foster carers are being provided with essential information about the needs of a child or young person's needs they are being asked to care for. The training programme for foster carers has been revised and improved. Foster carers are now able to access more training and guidance to assist them in helping to prepare young people for the transition into adulthood and independent living.

The service now has a stable staff team in place with most positions now filled by permanently appointed members of staff, instead of agency staff. Staff files checked showed that appropriate checking procedures are in place to ensure that people working for the fostering service are suitable to work with children and young people, suitably qualified for their role within the service and registered with the General Social Care Council if they are qualified social workers. 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.

The service is in process of appointing a reviewing officer who will be responsible for ensuring that annual reviews are undertaken of all approved foster carers to make sure that foster carers and their households remain suitable to look after children and young people and that foster carers are receiving the training and support they need to develop their competencies and skills in caring for children and young people.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

There are now good systems in place to ensure that the health needs of children and young people in the care of the authority are being met. Effective management monitoring systems are now being operated to ensure that children and young people's good health and well-being are being supported and promoted whilst they are being cared for by the service's foster carers. There are very good multi-agency links and working arrangements between the fostering service, commissioning teams and other services, for example, the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) and the designated Looked After Children (LAC) nurse, which support and facilitate children and young people's access to health and therapeutic services they require.

Placing social workers report that foster carers are good at ensuring that children and young people eat healthily and access primary health care services when they need to. Foster carers report that they are being provided with essential information

about a child's health in a timely manner, so that they can provide safe and suitable care for the children and young people they are caring for. Children and young people report that they are provided with advice and support about healthy living, encouraged to eat healthily and supported to go to the doctor and dentist for consultations and health checks.

Foster carers are provided with training in administering first aid to children and young people, promoting the health of looked after children and other specific health and medical needs, so that they have the skills and knowledge to provide suitable care and support to children and young people, which safeguards and promotes their good health. Supervising social workers ensure that foster carers are being provided with the information and training they need to look after the children and young people placed with them and that written health records are being maintained whilst the child is in placement.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The service now operates more robust systems to ensure that children and young people are protected from harm, their welfare promoted and care and accommodation being provided for children and young people is safe and suitable for their needs. Better liaison and joint working between the fostering service and commissioning services have now been established. This is ensuring that there is an effective exchange of information about a child's individual needs, and how these can be met, both before and after a child is placed by the service.

Commissioning teams, fostering service staff and foster carers all feel that the matching process has been improved since the new matching form was introduced. Most foster carers now feel that they are provided with 'satisfactory' or 'good' information about a child or young person's needs. Most foster carers view the service as 'good' at ensuring they can meet the needs of the children and young people placed with them. Children and young people reported that they are well looked after and feel safe and cared for in their foster homes.

Foster carers are provided with good advice and training on what to do if they have concerns about a child or young person's safety or welfare. Foster carers are aware that they can access support and guidance from the authority, by telephone, at any time. Foster carers said that, since the authority issued placing social workers with mobile phones, it has been much easier for them, and the child or young person, to get in touch with the child's social worker when they have needed to. Foster carers are provided with training and advice about safe caring skills, recognising signs of abuse and on ways of boosting and maintaining children and young people's self-esteem. Supervising social workers undertake annual health and safety checks of fostering households and unannounced visits to foster homes to ensure that foster homes are suitable and safe.

Placing social workers said that the welfare of children and young people in their

care is of paramount concern to foster carers they are working with. Placing social workers feel that foster carers are competent and knowledgeable about the service's policies and procedures for keeping children and young people safe. They report that foster carers are providing a safe, healthy and nurturing environment for the children and young people in their care and are well-focussed on ensuring that children and young people are safe.

Interviews with placing social workers, supervising social workers and foster carers indicated that where a child or young person's behaviour posed a particular risk to themselves, or others, this had been discussed and a risk management strategy put into place to ensure that the child or young person and others are kept safe. However, some instances where this process had not been confirmed in writing were found. It is recommended that procedures are reviewed to ensure that, where there are known risks associated with a child or young person's behaviour, these are recorded in writing and a written risk management plan produced, which provides the foster carer with appropriate strategies for keeping the child or young person and others safe.

There are suitable recruitment and vetting procedures in place to ensure that people who work in, or for, the fostering service are suitable to work with children and young people and that they are suitably qualified for their role. However, some of the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) certificates indicated that a check of the Protection of Vulnerable Adults list had not been requested. It is recommended that the service ensures that this is done. There are good processes in place for ensuring that thorough assessments of prospective foster carers are undertaken. The fostering panel operates very effectively to ensure that good quality decisions are made about the approval of foster carers so that children and young people placed with the service receive good quality care which meets their needs. The service has produced an excellent information booklet about the role and membership of the fostering panel for prospective foster carers.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The service provides specific mandatory training for foster carers on diversity and equality issues to raise awareness, promote good practice and increase foster carers' knowledge and skills in this area. Placing social workers confirmed that foster carers work cooperatively with them to enhance children and young people's confidence and feelings of self-worth and assist them to develop skills that will help them to deal with all forms of discrimination. Most foster carers feel that the service is 'good' at addressing issues of equality and diversity.

The service produces recruitment materials with multi-cultural images in a number of languages and has made links with minority ethnic and diverse cultural and religious communities in the locality to encourage and support applications from as wide a spectrum of the local community as possible. The service has an advertising stand at the annual Respect Festival, held in October, to stimulate interest and encourage

people from diverse backgrounds to apply to foster. This year, the service launched a new scheme, called the Alternative Care Experience (ACE), to provide short breaks for children and young people with disabilities. The scheme's target for its first year is to recruit sufficient foster carers to provide a short break service for 10 children and young people with specific requirements.

Children and young people think they are receiving the right help so that they can be successful in their education. Most foster carers feel that the service is good at helping them to support the education of the children and young people they care for. A specialist team, the Plymouth Looked After Children Education (PLACE) team, is responsible for raising attainment, improving attendance and reducing exclusions for children and young people in the care of the authority. The team also provides specialist support and guidance to foster carers on how they can support the educational achievement of children and young people in their care. Maintaining continuity in educational placements for children and young people when they come into foster care, or have to change placements, is one of the key targets for the authority. Performance in this area has improved over the past year. Children and young people said they were relieved to be told that they would be able to attend the same educational placement when they moved into their foster home.

The fostering service makes good efforts to facilitate the inclusion of children and young people in foster care in leisure pursuits within the community, for example, by negotiating discounts for foster carers at a wide variety of local and regional leisure facilities. The service also organises special events for foster carers and their families, such as the annual foster care funfair or a trip to the theatre. The service's quarterly foster carer newsletter has a 'Dates for your diary' section, which provides foster carers with information about forthcoming events throughout the city that would be of interest to children and young people. The weekly fostering allowance paid to foster carers includes a nominated amount to go towards sustaining children's hobbies and special interests. There is provision for additional costs to be met, if needed. Most foster carers felt the service was 'satisfactory' or 'good' at helping them support the children they care for in undertaking activities in the community. Placing social workers feel that foster carers are good at supporting children and young people to take part in hobbies and local clubs.

A new development is the fortnightly youth group for looked after young people led by the LAC nurse and a volunteer with support from children's services social workers. This is a very successful group, which provides an opportunity for teenagers in care to socialise with peers, develop their social skills in an inclusive environment and obtain information and guidance about health issues and other matters. Young people said that they welcomed the opportunity to get together with other young people in care and that they felt their needs were understood within the group. The group has successfully supported some young people to gain the confidence to participate in activities and youth groups in the wider community.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Children and young people are encouraged and supported to participate in the care plan review meetings and express their views about the way they are cared for and what they would like to happen in the future. Children and young people reported that their foster carers are very good at listening to what they have to say and taking their opinions into account. They also reported that they would speak to their foster carer or social worker if they were not happy, or if they had a personal problem. Children and young people reported that they knew how to make a complaint. Most said that would ask their social worker to help them if they needed to make a complaint. An example of how young people's views are listened to was given by one young person who said that they had recently complained about a proposed change in their social worker. This young person said that their wish to retain their current social worker was listened to and no change had been made.

Foster carers are very aware of the importance of their role in supporting children and young people in their care to maintain constructive contact with their family and friends in line with the care plan. Placing social workers said that foster carers they worked with were skilled in working with parents and supporting contact arrangements.

The service is improving its processes for consulting with children and young people placed with its foster carers and their parents. Questionnaires have been developed for children and young people, their parents and foster carers to complete at the end of a placement. Information from these will be used to inform service development, identify trends and patterns and assess the quality of service provided. Young people are now involved in the selection process for middle and senior management appointments within the service. Some recent examples of this were young people's involvement in the appointment of the panel advisor and the reviewing officer for the service.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

The service now provides specific training for foster carers approved to look after young people aged 14 years and above to assist them in helping young people prepare for adulthood and independence. The specialist Care Leavers team provides support and guidance to looked after young people who are aged 15 years and over. Children and young people reported that their foster carers and social workers help them to consider their future.

Foster carers are supported to care for children and young people placed with them through the payment of a specified allowance and agreed expenses. Payments are made at the agreed time and allowances are reviewed annually. The service is

reviewing the transport cost element in the allowance and is consulting with foster carers about this.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The service's Statement of Purpose clearly sets out what services are provided for children and young people who are placed with the fostering service. The Statement of Purpose is reviewed annually and was last updated in November 2006.

The service has produced two very good age-appropriate children's guides, which have been distributed to children and young people placed with the service to help them understand what they can expect from the service, how they can access advice and support, or get a complaint addressed. The guides can also be accessed on the authority's web-site. The guides have also been produced in alternative formats to meet specific needs. It is currently available on audio tape and in several languages based on the ethnic profile of children and young people currently looked after by the authority.

A well-respected, skilled and experienced permanent management team is now providing good and effective leadership of the service. The service has also replaced agency members of staff with permanently appointed members of staff, providing a stable staff team to support and develop the service. New systems and procedures, such as the new computer system and matching form and changes to the fostering service duty system, have greatly improved communication and joint working between the fostering service and commissioning children's services within the authority. This has led, in turn, to improved planning and reviewing of placements and better outcomes for children and young people. There is a strong focus across all levels of management that children and young people must be provided with the best possible 'corporate parenting' from the authority. Staff in the fostering service and children's services now feel that they are working more cohesively, and in partnership, to ensure that children and young people's needs are being well met. There is still a lack of choice in placements but placing social workers now feel that better matches are being achieved.

Staff hold suitable professional qualifications for their role and are supported to undertake continuous professional development requirements for these. Generally, both staff and foster carers now feel better supported than previously, through the updated policies and procedures, regular and supportive supervision sessions they receive and improved opportunities for training to update and expand their knowledge base and skills. Staff and foster carers feel that the new managers are more available and responsive to them and that their views and contribution to the service are now more valued. The Foster Care Forum, and the senior managers' continued participation in this, is a commendable development, which has helped to improve cohesion and morale across the whole service. Foster carers have particularly welcomed the opportunity that the Forum gives them to meet and discuss issues with senior managers and directors of the authority's children's

services. Generally, foster carers feel that the service was now better organised and more effective.

The training programme for foster carers has been revised and improved. Foster carers who had been on some of these courses were very positive about the training they had received, particularly the equality and diversity and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) courses. The service has now provided foster carers with clear guidance about training they are expected to attend. The fostering team managers were undertaking the statutory foster carer reviews but pressure of work meant that not all reviews were able to be completed within the statutory timescale. However, this is being addressed by the appointment of the reviewing officer who will be responsible for ensuring that all foster carer reviews are undertaken at intervals of not more than a year, as is required.

Case records for children and young people and foster carers are well maintained and stored securely. Children and young people are supported to access their case records, if they so wish.

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 a check of the Protection of Vulnerable Adults (POVA) list is included in the checks undertaken on persons working in or for the fostering service (National Minimum Standard 15).
- ensure that, where there are known risks associated with a child or young person's behaviour, these are recorded in writing and a written risk management plan produced, which provides the foster carer with appropriate strategies for keeping the child or young person and others safe (National Minimum Standard 9).