

Medway 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

Medway Council Fostering Team is responsible for the delivery of foster care services provided by Medway Local Authority. The team comprises a manager, senior practitioner, seven fostering social workers, two respite care social workers, one placement support worker, four full time support services assistants and one part time, support services assistant. A part-time post, dedicated to research and provided for training provision for both staff and foster carers has been implemented since the last inspection. With some 152 foster carers and placements of children and young people totalling 213, the service provides both short and long-term placements, which include emergencies and permanent. Within this, placements include babies, young children, teenagers/adolescents, mother and baby and pre-adoption; with a focus on specialising in children with a disability. The team also arranges and provides for respite care, short-term breaks and day care in order to support families in the local community as well as foster care placements. The service maintains necessary clear and established links with the Looked After Children's Team, Children's Disability Team, Adoption Team and 16+ Team. Regular meetings attended by managers and heads of these services ensure good communication and coordination.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This was an announced visit completed over four days by two inspectors. The evidence supports that a dedicated, qualified team works under excellent leadership, this provides foster carers with consistent, professional supervision and support. Children and young people benefit by being placed with foster carers who can meet their needs. Sound consultation processes mean that foster carers, children and young people, and family members are effectively listened and responded to. Clear lines of communication between departments ensure that potential difficulties with individual placements are quickly identified and planned for. Sound and robust monitoring mechanisms ensure that gaps are identified and remedied and the entire team welcomes the inspection process in an effort to further improve its practice.

Improvements since the last inspection

The fostering service has implemented the two actions and six recommendations made from the previous inspection. Changes to recruitment processes ensure the robust vetting of council staff. Clear and explicit guidance pertaining to the recruitment of foster carers wishing to transfer from the private sector has been written and implemented. This ensures such individuals are subject to a full and complete fresh assessment. Extensive work has been completed to compile detailed

and clear health booklets for all children and young people in placement. These have been distributed and are starting to be used. The administrative provision has increased, as have the weekly hours of the training coordinator post. The individual responsible within the council for foster carer payments has joined the fostering team and this has improved efficiency. The council teams within the current premises are due to relocate to new offices later this year and IT systems are being reviewed. In addition, the service itself has identified other areas it aims to improve upon. Preparatory work is being completed in anticipation of launching the payment for skills programme for foster carers later in the year. Documentation for children and young people to complete for foster carer annual reviews has been reviewed and updated and there is now a clearer format to measure carer competency in safe care.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Children and young people positively benefit by having their primary and tertiary health needs identified and met. They are all registered with local health care services and any outstanding annual health reviews are actively being chased. Referrals to specialist health services are made in accordance with presenting needs; this includes psychiatry, psychology and other forms of counselling.

There is good liaison between the fostering service and Looked After Children's (LAC) nurse. She has provided foster carer training on emotional health and well being and arranged a healthy eating conference which involved many different agencies. There is also LAC nurse attendance at the weekly RAG (resource allocation group) meeting, and on the foster carers panel.

The newly introduced health booklet is comprehensive and clear and specifically for Medway young people. This record is being distributed to all children and young people and contains more than just a record of health appointments. It has been designed with input by the fostering service and LAC nurses and contains information and advice, written in a style appropriate to younger children and teenagers.

Foster carers demonstrate a clear desire to promote the good health of those in their care. Households provide healthy and nutritious diets and ensure appropriate physical activity is undertaken. Written records of medicine administration are being maintained and appropriate training for additional health matters is provided for those foster carers who look after youngsters with specific health care needs. Improved documentation now records medical consent at the point of a child or young person entering the service to avoid any potential delay in accessing treatment, should the need for this arise.

The fostering service does not provide health training for young people, in preventative measures, such as healthy eating and advice on smoking, alcohol and illegal substances. This is included in the proposal put forward by the LAC nurse on future developments that are needed, along side more staffing and a lack of

resources to meet growing mental health needs, and difficulty with communication systems.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

The manager is suitably experienced and qualified, and all of the staff possess the skills, experience and qualifications commensurate with their roles. Those with a social work position are registered with the General Social Care Council. Checks on staff are completed by the personnel department, these include police checks and following up written references with a phone call; these are up to date and clear lines of responsibility and accountability are now understood.

The social workers in the team complete the Form F assessment, these are being completed to a good overall standard. Due to the staff pressures this year there has been less emphasis on recruitment drives, to enable staff to concentrate on supporting existing carers. The manager has produced a new procedure with clear explicit reference to how 'existing' carers transferring from other agencies will be assessed by Medway.

Six foster carer homes were visited and found to be clean, warm and comfortable. Annual health and safety checks are being conducted and if any issues are identified the health and safety team based in the local office accompanies the worker on a home visit to undertake specific risk assessments. Each individual foster carer's 'safe care' policy is subject to ongoing annual review and the safe care form is updated for each new child going into the home. The fostering service also ensures the British Adoption and Fostering Agency (BAAF) book on safe care is given to all carers. Annual checks are maintained regarding foster carers' own household and car insurances. Robust mechanisms ensure all accidents within fostering households are reported with appropriate remedial action taken.

The actual practice of matching exceeds the quality of the written records in place. Wherever possible, sound introductory visits are conducted; this includes respite placements as well as long term ones. Potential skill deficits are explored in order that appropriate training or additional support can be offered in an attempt to maximise the success of any new placement. Children and young people are living with foster carers who can effectively meet their needs and a high number of initial placements go on to become permanent. There is also a good number of such placements which have progressed beyond into supported lodging placements and special guardianship arrangements. This is particularly positive for the longer term security for youngsters.

Core subjects including child protection, bullying, promoting self esteem and receiving allegations from looked after children are comprehensively covered throughout initial foster carer training and beyond. This is further underpinned by clear policy and procedural guidance detailed within the foster carer handbook. Foster carers confirm they have been well prepared for the potential receipt of an

allegation. They know the processes this will invoke. The service manager for safeguarding has oversight of all child protection investigations. The fostering service holds clear and accurate records that support open and transparent working practices in respect of complaints and allegations, with the same levels of scrutiny for 'low level' concerns as the more serious cases.

There are clear written recruitment and selection procedures for appointing staff; all adverts now carry a safeguarding paragraph. The human resources team has undertaken training in safeguarding and have a good understanding of the principles. The application forms and subsequent social care checks are completed by the human resources department. Written references are subject to telephone verification and Criminal Records Bureau checks (CRBs) are conducted at enhanced level; these are renewed on a three yearly basis. Personnel files do not always contain the serial number of the CRB certificate. The interview process ensures candidates demonstrate an understanding of the fostering task and current legislation. Social work students can expect to be closely supervised by qualified and experienced social workers.

The panel consists of a wide range of child care professionals. All members have undergone the same close recruitment scrutiny as any other employee. Written minutes of panel meetings are clear and detailed. They show evidence of clear monitoring and quality assurance processes within the fostering service. Some of the other business related to council work such as supported lodgings placements and friends and relatives assessments, these are also subject to good monitoring processes. Particular scrutiny is placed upon monitoring all complaints, allegations and concerns; these are kept live until satisfactory resolution is agreed.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Fostering households and members of the fostering team are predominantly white English, however; this is reflected by over 95% of those in placement. The remaining youngsters from ethnic minority backgrounds are being cared for within households whereby either at least one of the carer's own ethnicity matches theirs, or appropriate rationale has been used to continue to make a placement where heritage is not ideally matched. A number of foster carers receive clear and appropriate support to maintain good quality placements for youngsters with particular disabilities and the fostering service ensures there is a good number of suitable foster carers available to provide respite breaks for these children. Fostering households are in the main composed of married or co-habiting, male and female couples. In addition, the service has a smaller number of single carers and gay couples. Recruitment literature is placed in all areas of the Medway towns, in an attempt to attract applicants from the wide and diverse community that is Medway. Such information is routinely translated into various other languages and training on valuing diversity and equal opportunities is provided at the foster carer assessment stage and beyond, with a particular focus within the training programme for this year.

All young people have an up to date 'Personal Education Plan' (PEP) in place and all care files hold a separate 'education' section. The monthly supervision reports, completed by fostering social workers, include details of educational attendance, attainment and needs. The fostering service maintains good educational links with educational psychology with a representative sitting on RAG, and based within the integrated team. There is now improved joined up working within education and a joint data base, which means services are more easily accessed and information recorded. The Local Council has many educational schemes which collectively have helped with the positive outcomes for enjoying and achieving, for example, a local inclusion team made up of multi-agency specialists to help reduce the risk of exclusion. A behaviour support service is in place to help empower foster carers and ensure all aspects of the PEP are covered. Joint training commenced a couple of years ago, raising expectations of attainment and training for foster carers in their role in supporting education. The Corporate parenting group is actively involved in education services and the Council also has in place a 'Virtual Headmaster' who is senior in the advisory service and has a role to encourage schools but also to challenge them appropriately.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

The fostering service ensures all foster carers are able to promote and provide a positive experience of contact with their birth families. This is achieved through the training and support of foster carers, complimented by clear policies and procedures. The fostering service provides, where necessary, practical means of support to enable those in their care to see their family members and friends. Meetings can be facilitated at suitable venues. The case files contain up to date contact arrangements, including any legal restrictions. The views of the young person are sought in determining future arrangements. Team meetings discuss placement updates and any forthcoming contact arrangements for young people and carers. Children and young people comment very positively about their own contact arrangements, with examples of their foster carers being an integral support mechanism.

Sound consultation mechanisms and processes are in place for all stakeholders, including the foster carer support group for carers and the 'Medway Challengers' for children and young people. Fostering social workers ensure the written documentation is fully explained verbally to newly placed youngsters and those spoken with, confirmed this happens in practice. Children and young people know how to complain and make representations both within and outside of their fostering households. They also confirm they are regularly seen privately by their foster carer's supervising social workers. A monthly newsletter is published and distributed by the Medway Foster Carer's association (MFCA). This group has organised trips and all fostering households are welcome to attend. Such excursions and meetings are also used as a forum to seek views and opinions and relay these back to the fostering service and senior management within the Council.

Children's and young peoples' feedback forms have been updated with the help of the 'Medway Challengers' and are now used at foster carer's annual review meetings. The "It's your meeting" guide is given to all children and young people in preparation for their own annual review meetings. The Corporate Parenting group is underway and is working as part of the pledge to Medway's young people on the acquisition of improved leisure activities, better education services and greater choice of accommodation and placements. Central to its role, the group has consulted with children and young people, and part of the pledge is 'Don't just say it, Do it' and 'listen to us and feedback'. Current planned developments include the initiation of a children's and young people's council, in line with the guidance of Every Child Matters legislation.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

Foster carers receive appropriate training and guidance, which in turn, enables them to effectively support those in their care for impending adulthood. The looked after children's team and 16+ team are due to merge later in the year. One underpinning reason for this is to enable youngsters to continue with their existing social worker as they pass through their 16th birthday, without having to change teams at such a key stage in their lives. Pathway plans and review meeting minutes show appropriate actions are being implemented. An excellent example was seen and described by a young person, detailing the relevant support and guidance being received from various sources in preparation for leaving school and making appropriate long term decisions. Whilst youngsters are supported to learn how to budget and given a substantial 'leaving care' grant, there is no clear, prescribed guidance with regards savings for young people. Neither is there a robust monitoring system to protect both the young person and the foster carer. The decision to move the person responsible for carer payments into the fostering team has further improved this aspect of service provision. Foster carers know what to expect in terms of their allowances and expenses and they receive them correctly and on time.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The Statement of Purpose clearly describes the aims and objectives of the fostering service. This is posted alongside the children's guide and key policies and procedures on the Council website. Such literature contains all the required information, is subject to regular updates and can be translated into several languages.

There is a clear management structure, with defined lines of accountability in place. Lines of communication and responsibility are clear. This is a suitably qualified, stable team led by supportive and experienced managers. Medway Council Children's Services is currently being restructured and the team is relocating in April. The changes have the potential to further improve the service by integrating all the key

LAC services. The current physical environment for staff of the service does not provide sufficient resources such as storage and computers. Whilst this has improved since the last inspection and there are plans for relocation, shortfalls remain. Staff have had the opportunity to attend consultation sessions to offer their views and gain an understanding of the rationale. One social work vacancy and several other vacancies caused by long term illnesses have impacted on the team this year, however this largely affected carer recruitment as the majority of the workload/caseload was effectively split amongst the team. Those in post are working hard to ensure all visits and supervisions remain up to date.

Staff continue to receive monthly supervision; this is more frequent for new staff throughout their induction period. All staff members are provided with good access to ongoing training opportunities to broaden their own knowledge base. Team and referral meetings occur weekly and team training days are organised to explore the vision and development of the service.

Foster carers and young people also continue to receive regular supervision visits. Questionnaires received from foster carers and young people give positive feedback including, "extremely accessible to us", "High levels of support and advice", "great relationship with the agency" and "very child focused and dedicated". Foster carers and fostering social workers understand the focus and aim of supervision visits. This is underpinned by clear written guidance which outlines the service's strategy for supporting and supervising foster carers. There is also good communication and positive working relationships between the fostering service and looked after children's team. The monthly foster carer support group meetings continue to be well attended.

The arrangements in place for the ongoing training and development of foster carers are good. The training coordinator is motivated, creative and forward thinking. Foster carers report very positively about the quality of training courses since the post holder started last year. Plans are already in place with regards "The Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) training, support and development standards for foster care", which are due to be implemented April 2008. These standards are already being used to inform new training policies and guidance, which includes the development of foster carers being paid in accordance with their skills and developing a specialist fostering scheme.

The case recording policy describes the information to be held on files. Those seen showed a high level of consistency in terms of content and organisation. There are examples of file audit sheets detailing where specific information is missing or incomplete, however, there is no record of how such shortfalls are being addressed. Other administrative records contain all the required information, however the current database does not lend itself to effective monitoring, for example training records and the status of foster carers. This information currently has to be gathered manually. The administrative team has been joined by an individual, with responsibility for foster carer payments and another colleague has a particular role to assist the training coordinator. The social work and administrative teams work in tandem and understand each other's roles. They make best use of the resources

available and are working extremely hard to manage the current workload. Recent long term staff absences and the extra work generated by the CWDC standards means the team is working to full capacity.

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 health training for young people, in preventative measures, such as healthy eating and advice on smoking, alcohol and illegal substances (NMS 12)
- ensure the matching form explicitly informs any strengths or weakness of the matching process(NMS 8)
- ensure staff personnel files contain a clear record of CRB certificate dates and serial numbers (NMS 15).
- develop clear guidance with regards savings for young people and develop robust monitoring systems for the safeguarding of accounts (NMS 14).
- ensure file audit sheets hold clear details regarding the actions to be taken to rectify the shortfalls identified (NMS 24).
- continue to review staffing levels in line with the changing and developing needs of the service (NMS 17).
- continue to review the potential need to increase the hours available to the training coordinator post, including the administrative needs of this service, in line with the additional work being created from the CWDC (NMS 17).
- consider the value of improving upon the electronic database to ease the retrieval of necessary information for monitoring purposes and ensure staff receive appropriate training for its use (NMS 25).
- ensure the previous report's recommendation pertaining to the inadequacy of the office space is considered within the context of the planned move to new premises (NMS 26).