

Bath & North East Somerset Fostering Services

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

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Inspector	Paul Clark
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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

Bath and North East Somerset Council provide a range of services for Looked After Children (LAC) through their Children and Young People and Family Support Service. This includes the Fostering Service which provides placements for 126 LAC and 35 respite care family placements for disabled children (known as the Family Link Service). At the time of the inspection 15 children were being fostered by Kinship Carers. The key responsibility for the recruitment, assessment, support, supervision and training of foster carers lies with the Family Placement Team. The range of services includes:

- Emergency and respite placements;
- Short breaks for disabled children and young people;
- Short term placements preparing children for a return to their family or for adoption;
- Long term placements;
- Remand and bail placements;
- Parent and baby placements;
- Placements for sibling groups;
- Therapeutic fostering placements.

A Team Manager supports 7.5 full time equivalent (fte) Supervising Social Workers, one Fostering Support Worker and one Social Worker for the Family Link Service. There is the availability of LAC Education Worker who is part of the council's LAC team.

Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

The service is staffed and managed by experienced and professionally qualified staff who support and train foster carers to a high level to ensure that young people are safe and well cared for. The educational, activity and leisure provision and the advocacy elements of the service are particularly outstanding.

Improvements since the last inspection

Foster carers who smoke are offered guidance and support during supervision (using their own GP services) to help them stop. The service has adopted the British Association of Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) guidance that children under five will not be placed with foster carers who smoke.

Personal Education Plans (PEPS) are in place for all school age children and young people.

A designated Educational Psychologist has a responsibility for all LAC needing a Special Educational Needs assessment or review.

Foster carers have been provided with a 'business card' with useful telephone numbers of persons and agencies offering additional support.

The service has implemented new supervision contracts and the use of the council's amended Performance Development Review.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

Foster carers who smoke are offered guidance and support during supervision (using their own GP services) to help them stop. The service has also provided foster carers with a training course in the last 12 months on 'Help with Giving Up Smoking'. The service has adopted the British Association of Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) guidance that children under five will not be placed with foster carers who smoke.

Foster carers follow guidance given in the Foster Care Handbook to ensure that young people placed are registered with a GP, Optician and Dentist within two weeks of placement and that routine checks are made by these services in line with LAC reviews. Initial medical assessments are carried out by a consultant paediatrician. A LAC nurse is available to foster carers for help and advice about the health of young people. Specialist psychology and psychiatric services for LAC can be 'Fast Track' accessed via the CAMHS team. The LOCATE team (a sub-group of CAMHS) offers the services of two Clinical Psychologists, a Play and Attachment Therapist and a Family Therapist to all LAC who may be referred to them. There is also a therapeutic foster care service made up of salaried fostering couples who are linked to the LOCATE service and who offer a specialised level of care to LAC with additional needs.

All case files on young people seen had a completed LAC Health record. The service does not provide young people with an individualised health record which would give them with a dated history of such information as inoculations, illnesses, accidents, allergies and which they could take with them between placements.

The core training programme for foster carers includes training on healthy eating and food hygiene. Young people spoken to were happy with the food they received. Foster carers also receive first aid training and there is a system in place to ensure that this training is regularly updated. The Family Link foster carers receive specialist training from the child's 'Lifetime Nurse' or GP on special aspects of their care, for example, invasive clinical medication, which also has a policy in the Family Link, Foster Carer's Handbook.

Upon placement the fostering service provides young people with an extensive array of information relating to their health and well-being. This is contained in a LACPAC and includes contact details and how they may access the LAC Nurse, drug and alcohol agencies and information on sexual health.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

The Council's Health and Safety officer conducts a comprehensive health and safety check of foster carer's households at the time of assessment and pre-approval to ensure that they do not present any physical risks to young people. This is repeated annually for the foster carer's review.

There are policies in place on child protection, bullying and complaints and these are contained in the Foster Carer's Handbook. There is training given to supervising social workers and foster carers in these areas. The service also has a policy on action to be taken in the event of a young person going missing. This policy is also contained in the Foster Carer's Handbook. An effective system is in place for the recording of complaints received and actions taken.

The service has a 'Managing Behaviour Safely' policy in place and a range of training is available for both supervising social workers and foster carers in this regard.

Supervising social workers and foster carers all have clearances on their Enhanced Criminal Records Bureau checks and these checks are updated every three years. Appropriate references are taken prior to appointment and verbally followed up. Medical clearances were seen to have been taken. Social Workers are registered with the General Social Care Council.

Accidents are recorded in a young person's file and foster carers record them in a weekly diary sheet which is shown to the Supervision Social Worker during supervision sessions.

There is a very responsive help service in place for foster carers. Staff maintain an 'Out of Hours' telephone help rota for fosters carers until 23:00 from when the Emergency Duty Service is available.

Foster panels are efficiently run and chaired by a person independent of the fostering service who is professionally qualified and who is an experienced child care manager. Clear and thoughtful challenges were seen to be made to social worker's approval assessments. Panels include members with expertise in child health and education. Two of the panel members had personal experience of having been fostered. The panel does not have a fair representation of members from minority ethnic groups. Although the Fostering Panel makes decisions about the approval of foster carers to the Family Link Service it does not have a member who has had experience of fostering a disabled child, or is the parent of a disabled child, or is themselves disabled.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Personal Education Plans (PEPS) are in place for all those school age children and young people who were case tracked. Placement Plans are in place for those young people of relevant age. These were written in a 'user friendly' style to aid the young person's understanding of the plan. The authority employs a full-time Education Coordinator who has a background in teaching and education welfare. The Coordinator is accessible to foster carers and provides help and support for them when a young person has additional educational needs (from a system known as 'Catch Up') or if the young person has been excluded from school. IT educational equipment can be supplied to those foster households which require it and this is agreed at the initial PEP meeting. The Education Coordinator has provided training for foster carers on safe internet use. However, there are no written policies on 'Safe Internet' or 'Safe Mobile Phone Use' currently in place or included in the Foster Care Handbook.

The service ensures that where relevant, those with parental responsibility are consulted and kept informed about their children's care. Parents are always invited to attend LAC reviews and are provided with a written copy of review outcomes.

The service has sufficient foster care households from minority ethnic backgrounds to reflect the needs of young people placed.

The authority has an excellent out of school activity programme (the R2K Project) which offers LAC a range of leisure and sporting pursuits. The authority also gives LAC 'sports cards' to enable them to attend all Bath and North East Somerset's sports and leisure facilities free of charge. This is done in a way which ensures that young people are not stigmatised.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

The authority has a service level agreement with the 'Shout Out', Advocacy Service which is part of the local 'Off the Record' agency. Young people may contact them directly to ask for support or advice or to discuss any aspect of their care. The service is also available to support young people at their LAC review meetings. However, the authority does not currently include in the LAC Review notification letters sent to young people that they may ask for an advocate to attend the review meeting to support them. There is a system of 'Independent Listeners' organised by the Reconstruct Service (who have a service level agreement with the authority) which allows young people to have friendship and support from a responsible adult when there is little or no family contact.

A designated Strategic Planning Officer has set up a 'Participation Strategy for LAC' which provides young people with a number of ways that allow them to be consulted

about the quality of the service or any intended changes to the service. This is an example of outstanding practice. The strategy has resulted in several changes being made to service provision. For example, LAC are involved in the staff recruitment process, they have contributed ideas to the content of the 'LAC Nurses Information pack', they have made LAC social workers more accessible by suggesting that social workers be provided with mobile phones. The 'Shout Out' service also produces 'The Small Issue' quarterly newsletter for LAC which informs and consults young people on issues effecting their care. The Family Link Service have constructed a Makaton card system ('Hear Me') to help communication and consultation with disabled young people. There is no support system in place for the birth children of foster carers.

The authority promote contact between young people and their birth families (except where in circumstances where this would be inappropriate). Several foster carers have received training in supervising contacts. The authority has numerous premises available where supervised contact can take place.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

Placement Plans are in place for all age appropriate young people. These include plans for their ongoing education, training or work development. The authority has introduced a Summer Work Experience Scheme for young people of an appropriate age who can earn a £10 per day wage and offer them ongoing work opportunities.

A training course is available for foster carers on 'Preparing a Young Person for Leaving Care'.

The levels of expected age related pocket monies and birthday and Christmas allowances and clothing allowances are advised in the Foster Carer's Handbook. However, these are not included in the Placement Plan. Young people are encouraged to open savings accounts.

Fostering fees are clearly made known to foster carers and payments are generally made on time. The authority give enhanced fees to carers whose recording is current and who undertake the training opportunities offered to them.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

The manager with overall responsibility for the service is the Assistant Director of Children's Services. The service is managed through a Group Manager and the Family Placement Team Manager. The management group share responsibility for developing policy and procedures, in line with national regulations and standards. These three posts are held by staff who hold qualifications in both Social Work and Management.

A clearly written Statement of Purpose is in place which contains the aims of the service and an outline of the various services provided. There is a Young Person's Guide to the service. There is a Foster Carer's Handbook and a Family Link Carers Handbook detailing all relevant policies and procedures.

Case records for young people are well organised and clearly sectioned. They are clearly written and up to date and are kept under secure conditions. The authority is currently in the process of introducing an electronic recording system.

The fostering service currently has an insufficiency in numbers of foster care households that could accommodate a sibling group of three or more young people.

The Fostering Service Supervising Social Workers are all professionally qualified and have appropriate experience in the provision of children's services. Supervising Social Workers receive 1:1 supervision at least once a month and there are weekly team meetings. There are clearly written job descriptions in place. Personal Development Plans are updated annually and these outline social worker's training and development needs. There is a comprehensive induction checklist in place for newly appointed Supervising Social Workers, the items of which must be signed and dated when they have been achieved.

Foster carers receive support and supervision from their Supervising Social Workers within appropriate frequencies. Kinship carers are well supported. The fostering service has an informal mentoring support scheme in place which goes some way to support newly approved carers. A formal system would ensure that they can always contact an experienced carer for help and advice. Carers are given free membership of the 'Fostering Network'.

There are separate support groups for foster carers and Family Link Workers which meet quarterly.

There are comprehensive induction and ongoing training programmes for foster carers. Foster carers are encouraged to undertake a NVQ Level 3 qualification in child care and 10 foster carers have achieved this qualification.

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 the Foster Panels have a fair representation of members from minority ethnic groups. (NMS15)
- consider providing young people with an individualised health record which would give them a dated history of such information as inoculations, illnesses,

- accidents, allergies. (NMS12)
- consider having a member of the Foster Panel who has had experience of fostering a disabled child, or is the parent of a disabled child, or is themselves disabled. (NMS 15)
 - construct written policies on 'Safe Internet' and 'Safe Mobile Phone Use' and include these in the Foster Carer's Handbook. (NMS 9)
 - include in the LAC Review notification letters sent to young people, that they may ask for an advocate to attend the review meeting to support them. (NMS 11)
 - ensure that there is a support system for the birth children of foster carers. (NMS 11)
 - formalise the foster carer's mentoring system to ensure that newly approved foster carers can always contact an experienced carer for help and advice. (NMS 21)
 - ensure that the details of the agreed pocket money to be given to young people is included in their Placement Plan. (NMS 29)
 - address the fact that the fostering service currently does not have sufficient numbers of foster care households that could accommodate a sibling group of three or more young people. (NMS 17)