

North Somerset Fostering & Family Link

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

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About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to assure children and young people, parents, the public, local authorities and government of the quality and standard of the service provided. The inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000.

This report details the main strengths and any areas for improvement identified during the inspection. The judgements included in the report are made in relation to the outcomes for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and the relevant National Minimum Standards for the service.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding:	this aspect of the provision is of exceptionally high quality
Good:	this aspect of the provision is strong
Satisfactory:	this aspect of the provision is sound
Inadequate:	this aspect of the provision is not good enough

Service information

Brief description of the service

The Family Placement and Family Link teams are both part of the Children and Young Person's Directorate of North Somerset Council. The Family Placement Team is divided into three sections: Recruitment, Support and Adoption which are based in the Town Hall.

A full time team manager manages the Recruitment and Support Sections and a part time team manager the Adoption Section. There are two recruitment social workers and 5.4 full time equivalent (fte) supervising social workers in the Support Team. At the time of the inspection the service supported 90 approved foster care households looking after around 150 young people. Some of the young people are placed with Independent Fostering Agencies.

The Family Link Service is based in a separate building a few miles from the Town Hall. It provides short break and a flexible shared care scheme for disabled children. It is separately managed and has two supervising social workers supporting 14 approved foster care households providing care for 19 young people. There is currently a waiting list of seven young people.

The service operates a 'payment for skills' scheme for foster carers as part of a mechanism of recognising the different levels of foster care provided and as a means to encourage training and skill development. There are three skill levels for foster carers, Level 1 for newly approved carers and those gathering skills, Level 2 for more experienced carers who have undertaken further training and Level 3 where carers must have achieved NVQ Level 3 in Child Care. There are also specialist Youth Justice Carers and Single Placement carers for young people with specific areas of need.

The service operates a monthly Fostering Panel which is independently chaired and which makes decisions regarding the approval of foster carers, their annual reviews and matters concerning changes in their approval conditions.

Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

The managers and staff of the fostering service provide a high standard of care for looked after young people. The health and wellbeing of young people is paramount and a commitment has been made to their educational and social development and to their preparation for independent living. An inspection of the Adoption service was not part of this inspection.

Improvements since the last inspection

The level of administrative support for the Family Link Service has been increased.

Young people using the service must now be registered with a GP, Dentist and Optician within 28 days of placement.

The service is developing a 'user friendly' health record for young people to keep themselves.

The service is more proactive in helping foster carers who smoke to give up.

A mentoring service for newly approved foster carers is now in place.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

Supervising social workers conduct a Health and Safety audit of a foster carer's household at the time of assessment for approval and thereafter at the time of each annual review. The service should consider using a designated Health and Safety Officer to carry out these checks. The Family Link Service ensures that their foster carers households receive an occupational therapy assessment to meet the needs of young people placed.

A Planning Agreement meeting is held at the start of each placement wherein the health needs of the young person placed are identified and recorded. It was noted that Supervising Social Workers do not always attend these meetings. Attendance at these meeting would improve their understanding of the placement.

Foster carers now follow guidance given in the Foster Care Handbook to ensure that young people placed are registered with a GP, Optician and Dentist within 28 days of placement and that routine checks are made by these services in line with LAC reviews. Initial medicals following placement are carried out by a medical practitioner. A LAC nurse is available to foster carers for help and advice about the health of young people. The nurse has formulated a 'Health Pack' which is given out to all LAC, this contains a comprehensive amount of information and advice about health generally, sexual health, drug and alcohol misuse and some more general advice about keeping themselves safe. The nurse also provides foster carers with training in first aid and general health during the 'Skills to Foster' course which is part of their initial training. In addition to this training foster carers also receive first aid training as part of their core training and there is a system in place to ensure that this training is regularly updated. A seminar for foster carers on 'Healthy Lifestyle' was also held within the past year.

Specialist psychology and psychiatric services can be accessed via the CAMHS team. The CONSULT team comprises of a psychologist, an educational psychologist and a specialist social worker and is available to give specific advice to foster carers and

also will provide 1:1 therapeutic sessions for young people who require it.

All case files on young people seen had a completed LAC Health record. Following a recommendation of the previous inspection the service is developing a individualised health record for young people which would provide them with a dated history of such information as their inoculations, illnesses, accidents, allergies.

Foster carers are not allowed to smoke in their homes or in the presence of young people. Children aged under three years are not placed with foster carers who smoke. The service should consider raising this to five years in line with the British Association of Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) guidance. The service produces a Newsletter for foster carers, within this there is specific advice for foster carers about where they can go to get help to give up smoking.

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. Supervising social Workers check on a young person's diet at the fortnightly supervision sessions.

The National Children's Bureau (NCB) carried out a study of the Council's health provision for LAC for the Government White Paper 'Care Matters' and found it to be an example of good practice.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

There are policies in place on Child Protection, Bullying and Complaints and 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. All of these policies are contained in the Statement of Purpose, the Foster Carer's Handbook and in brief in the Young Person's Guide. The Guide ('A Guide for ME') is in two forms for older and younger children. Unfortunately, the guides have not been updated to include the contact details of Ofsted. This should be done at the earliest opportunity. There are separate Handbooks and Guides for the Family Link Service. An effective system is in place for the recording of complaints received and actions taken.

A medication policy is in place for the administration of invasive medication. Training for foster carers is provided by a specialist community nurse commissioned by the Family Link Scheme.

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 have been taken. Social workers are registered with the General Social Care Council.

The Foster Panel is efficiently run. Panels include members with expertise in child health and education. The panel should attempt to appoint a member from a minority ethnic background and a person with experience of disability.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

All young people case tracked had up to date Personal Education Plans (PEP) in place and Pathway Plans where appropriate. The service ensures that personal advisors from the Connexions service attend LAC PEP review meetings.

The fostering service has access to the LAC Education Team which is part of the Children and Young Person's Directorate. The team provides teaching support, education welfare, educational psychologists and has recently appointed two 'Virtual Head Teachers' who take strategic leadership for improving the educational achievement of LAC. This demonstrates that the authority have made a positive investment in the educational needs of LAC.

The authority will also give foster households grants of up to £500 to enable them to purchase computers for the educational needs of LAC. There is guidance on safe internet use contained in the Foster Carer's Handbook and the authority has recently run a training course for foster carers on safe internet use.

The authority have given LAC, foster carers and their children access to free leisure services at the six local leisure centres.

The service produces a quality newsletter for foster households which keeps them informed of any changes to the service, policies, procedures and entitlements.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

The authority has a service level agreement with the 'Barnardos Advocacy Service' who young people may contact 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. The service should include in their review notification letter to LAC the fact that they may ask for a Barnardos advocate to be present at their review meeting if they so wish.

The fostering service has set up a mentoring or 'buddying' system for LAC placed whereby young people can go to a peer for help and advice. A group of LAC and care leavers have produced a DVD outlining their thoughts and experiences of foster care which is contained in the information pack for young people recently fostered. Questionnaire surveys take place annually asking LAC to comment on the quality of their care. The authority train and support LAC to become involved in the selection

and recruitment of Social Services staff. This is an example of good practice.

A group of foster carers from the Family Link Service holds a forum twice annually where they can express their views about the service and be consulted about any intended changes to the service.

The authority promote contact between young people and their birth families (except 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. The authority have recently reviewed its policy on contact and supervised contact to better inform practice.

Foster carers and young people receive a quarterly newsletter which keeps them informed of any developments and events occurring within the service.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is outstanding.

Pathway Plans were seen to be in place for age appropriate young people. These included plans for their ongoing education, training or work development. There are good links with the Connexions service. The authority has a 'Past 18' policy which supports young people to remain with their foster carers past their 18th birthday if they so wish.

Foster carers have been provided with training in helping young people to move on and live independently.

The 'Next Step' project has a centre available where with staff help LAC can access a lounge, cooking facilities and computers and they have two flats available where young people can stay for weekends and prepare for independent living.

The levels of expected age related pocket monies and Birthday and Christmas allowances and clothing allowances are advised in the Foster Carer's Handbook. Young people are encouraged to open savings accounts.

The authority have a free caravan in Devon which is available for foster carers and young people for short breaks.

Fostering fees are clearly made known to foster carers and payments are generally made on time.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

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 separate

Statement of Purpose for the Family Link Service and a comprehensive information pack is given to parents using the service. A clearly written Foster Carer's Handbook informs foster carers of all 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 fostering service managers and staff 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. The service could be improved by the provision of resource workers who could offer more 'hands on' support to foster carers and young people.

Foster carers receive support and supervision from their supervising social workers within appropriate frequencies. There is an 'out of hours' support system provided by a rota of the management team and carers may also contact the authority's emergency duty team. The fostering service has a mentoring support scheme in place where newly approved carers can contact an experienced carer for help and advice. Carers are given free membership of the 'Fostering Network'. A quarterly newsletter goes out to all foster carers and young people which consults and informs them. The authority must do more to consult and inform foster carer's birth children through forums and group activities.

There are comprehensive induction and ongoing training programmes for both supervising social workers and foster carers and a training officer oversees all foster carer's training. Foster carers are encouraged to undertake a NVQ Level 3 qualification in child care; 19 foster carers have NVQ Level 3 in Child Care and there is a NVQ Assessor in place.

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 supervising social workers attend Placement Planning Meetings where possible. (NMS 12)
- consider using a designated Health and Safety Officer to carry out checks of foster carer households. (NMS12)
- consider raising the minimum age at which foster carers who smoke can have placements to five years in line with the British Association of Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) guidance. (NMS 12)
- update the Young Person's Guides to include the contact details of Ofsted. (NMS 9)

- appoint a Foster Panel member from a minority ethnic background and a member with experience of disability. (NMS 30)
- include in Care Plan review notification letters to LAC the fact that they may ask for a Barnardos advocate to be present at their review meeting if they so wish.(NMS 11)
- provide resource workers to offer more 'hands on' support to foster carers and young people. (NMS 16)
- do more to consult and inform foster carer's birth children through forums and group activities. (NMS 21)