

Dorset County Council Fostering Services

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

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Inspector	Stephanie Omoosewerha / Gavin Thomas
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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

Dorset County Council Fostering Services are a part of a family placement service which plays a key role to children who are looked after, children who are in need of adoption and children and families in need of support. The key tasks of the fostering services are to recruit, support, develop and equip a diverse group of local families who can provide secure family care to children and young people who are being looked after.

There are three main components to the fostering services, which are mainstream fostering, permanence and the Turnaround scheme. Mainstream fostering also includes specialist services such as shared care providing respite breaks for families, project fostering providing a service for older children with complex and challenging behaviours and assessment fostering. The Turnaround Scheme provides short term placements for young people who require an intensive and very structural placement.

The nominated manager of the fostering services is the service manager for resources. Two team managers have responsibility for the Fostering team and the Adoption and Permanence team respectively. The teams operate from two sites reflecting the wide geographical span of the Local Authority area. The team managers support assistant team managers, social workers and social work assistants with effective use being made of specialist roles such as assessment and pre-approval training, specialist fostering and reviewing to ensure workloads are managed efficiently and expertise is used appropriately.

At the time of this inspection Dorset County Council Fostering Services supported 210 approved fostering households and 279 placements. These include a range of placements such as long, medium and short term placements, shared care, kinship care, specialist fostering and treatment care.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This statutory visit was undertaken as an announced key inspection. All key National Minimum Standards for fostering services were inspected.

Dorset County Council Fostering Team delivers a good standard of care to children and young people who are fostered. Good systems are in place for self monitoring and the service has been able to effectively identify areas of weakness and target them for improvement. As a result, the service has significantly strengthened over the last 12 months and increased its capacity to improve the achievement and wellbeing of children and young people. In particular the outcome for enjoying and

achievement was judged as outstanding with looked after children being well supported in attending and attaining at school, achieving results above the national average. A further new development includes working with the children's rights service to recruit a group of young people to work specifically with the fostering service giving them the opportunity to fully contribute to the design and running of the service.

Feedback from children and young people who are fostered was very positive. They were particularly complimentary about their foster carers who made them feel valued, listened to and well cared for. Additional comments made demonstrated they felt being fostered had significantly benefited them. Foster carers spoke highly of the support they received from the service. Other professionals felt a change in culture in the last 12 months had brought about better communication and transparency that had strengthened working partnerships providing a more cohesive service.

One requirement and one recommendation were made as a result of this inspection, concerning tightening up of processes for reporting of incidents and evidencing verbal feedback for written references.

Improvements since the last inspection

The last inspection report included four requirements and eight recommendations for good practice. The service has taken effective action to fully address the requirements and seven of the recommendations. The outstanding recommendation refers to appointing someone with educational expertise to the panel. There have been no panel vacancies since the previous inspection so this has not been achieved. This recommendation is, therefore, carried forward in this report.

Improvements have been made to the arrangements for kinship care. Whilst assessments are still undertaken by social workers in field work teams, information has been provided and a pack put together to give comprehensive guidance and encourage consistency of practice when carrying out assessments. An audit of procedures was completed in June 2007 and cases are now coming to panel for interim approval within the six week time scale. A part time post has been identified to take a lead in further developments to research specific needs of kinship care.

The placement agreement agenda has been modified and updated to ensure planning is more effective and all necessary issues are covered, including medical consent. This has also improved the matching process as any potential gaps are identified at this stage and strategies put in place to support them.

A new duty system was launched in April 2007. This has led to better access to the fostering service when requesting new placements. It has also improved the consistency of information coming into the service as risk assessments are always requested at point of referral. The geography of the region can present some challenges to keep children and young people in their local community and targeted recruitment drives have tried to address any imbalances. Placing social workers report better access to more local placements.

Reviews of foster carers are generally on target. A family placement officer has particular responsibility for this role, overseen by an assistant team manager who takes on more complex reviews if necessary. This gives a level of independence to reviews. Forms are sent out prior to reviews to obtain contributions from foster carers, children and young people and other professionals. Work has been done to improve placing social workers' contribution to reviews and forms are now being filled in more regularly. The children's rights service will provide help making forms more child friendly as part of their remit to facilitate further consultation with children and young people.

The health and safety questionnaire has been amended to indicate what action is taken to any risk identified. These are being reviewed on an annual basis.

An audit has been carried out where children and young people are living with carers on a long term basis, to ensure change of approval status is presented to panel as necessary. A further review of planning for permanence is underway to review the process of changing the status from short to long term placement.

Children and young people are not matched with a foster carer without a risk assessment and these are now requested at point of referral. Safe care policies are in place and these are up-dated as appropriate.

LAC (Looked After Children) nurses report increased communication with the fostering team. This has enabled them to feel better able to contribute and work with the service. They are now regularly involved in training and attend support groups to further advise foster carers on health issues. Their expertise is also used to provide information to foster carers, for example they are currently putting together a fact sheet for foster carers giving up smoking.

Guidance is available on allowances including discretionary payments. This is sometimes difficult to address as it can depend on individual circumstances. Activities are discussed at foster carers annual reviews and other initiatives such as the 'positive activities for young people' have helped to provide funding for extra curricular activities. The service recognises that the provision of leisure activities and pursuits needs to be more coherent.

A new team structure has been put into place including additional staffing and management time. This has reduced workloads making them more equitable and ensuring statutory visits are undertaken. The increase in management time and the effective use of specialist roles in the team has enabled workers to carry out their duties more efficiently.

The new duty system has had an impact on the quality of information coming into the team. The majority of carers felt they had been provided with sufficient information, with a very small minority still feeling this was inadequate. The fostering service is clear that all available information is given to carers and will continue to monitor this area of practice, via feedback from foster carers.

The team manager from Adoption and Permanence and the assistant team manager of the Turnaround scheme are now providing quarterly reports to the fostering panel. The panel chair felt these regular up-dates were very useful in providing the panel with an overview of the service.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Children and young people's health and development needs are well met, with continued improvements to practice being made to further promote better outcomes for children and young people. Placement agreement meetings focus on health needs and medical consent issues, ensuring foster carers have the information they need and the required documentation is available and signed. The service keeps appropriate records of young people's health needs and these are monitored, including annual health checks. Foster carers are encouraged to keep an up-to-date diary of any health appointments and the outcome of these.

There is good communication and liaison with other agencies and working arrangements between the fostering service, commissioning teams and other services, for example, the designated LAC nurses who support and facilitate children and young people's access to health and therapeutic services. LAC nurses are now involved in training of prospective foster carers and have increased involvement in supporting and advising carers such as attending support groups to update carers about health issues or providing written protocols and procedures for specific issues e.g. supporting babies from drug addicted mothers through the withdrawal process. More specific training needs can be individually addressed by appropriate professionals, particularly those of carers who work with the shared care scheme that provides a respite service for children and young people with more complex health needs that can include both physical care and behaviour support plans.

All children and young people who are fostered are registered with a general practitioner and can access other specialist services as necessary such as mental health, dentistry and opticians. Specialist services can be fast tracked where necessary for children and young people in foster care.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

There are two well qualified and experienced managers, one who oversees the Adoption and Permanence Team and the other who oversees the Fostering and Turnaround Scheme. The nominated manager of the fostering service is the Service Manager for Resources who has overall responsibility. All managers and social workers have the necessary skills and experience to manage and deliver a service that promotes and safeguards the welfare of children and young people.

Children and young people's welfare is protected by thorough procedures to recruit foster carers. The assessment of suitability includes training courses, individual interviews, appropriate checks and presentation to the fostering panel. Foster placements vary in terms of the style, size and material provision of the properties but all are suitable for their scope of approval. Health and safety checks on each household are undertaken, which include any actions taken and are updated on an annual basis. Foster carers have a good understanding of their responsibilities to keep young people in their care safe and undertake safe care plans at the start of any new placements to address any potential risks. Foster carers suitability is reviewed annually by a worker that undertakes this specific role to provide a more independent assessment.

Changes to the way requests for placements are referred to the fostering team and the structure of placement agreement meetings has had a positive impact on the matching process. A new duty system has been established which enables a named worker in the fostering team to be contacted. This provides increased accessibility to the fostering team and ensures consistent information is requested at point of referral. There is a transparency about the availability of placements and an emphasis about keeping young people in their local area. The placement agreement identifies any gaps in the matching process and how this can be addressed such as specific training for the foster carer.

Children and young people are protected by robust child protection procedures. Training for foster carers includes recognising signs of abuse, safe caring skills and managing behaviour. Safe caring guidelines are provided and safe care plans are drawn up at the start of each placement to consider the vulnerabilities of everyone in the household. Foster carers have a good understanding of acceptable forms of discipline and this is set out clearly in written guidance.

The service operates a sound recruitment process for workers employed in the fostering team. Personnel files generally comply with regulatory requirements, although evidence that verbal checks are being carried out on written references is not always available.

The fostering panel is set up according to regulation and has a good mix of members, although there is an outstanding recommendation to include someone with expertise in education. Panel minutes provide a clear record of the considerations and recommendations made. The decision process is clear and foster carers are informed of all decisions. The panel will defer recommendations if they feel they do not have sufficient information to take a considered view. The medical advisor is appropriately used to clarify issues arising from foster carers' medical reports. There are systems in place to ensure panel members can comment on the quality of assessments and query any action they do not feel is in the children's or young people's best interests.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The fostering service recognises and values children's and young people's diversity. The majority of approved carers are white British, however, this reflects the background of most children and young people placed through the service. The recruitment strategy highlights needs to target ethnic minority groups and the literature has been re-designed to emphasise the multicultural nature of fostering. Working with diversity training is mandatory for all new foster carers and refresher courses are offered for more experienced carers. Additional support is given to placements where gaps have been noted in the matching process relating to cultural and religious issues, including training, reading materials and ideas for activities. Children and young people with disabilities are catered for in terms of equal access to services. Foster carers have been given training that simulates experiences to heighten their awareness of disabilities and encourage them to involve children and young people in community activities.

The service places a high priority on meeting young people's educational needs and encouraging them to reach their full potential. The service liaises closely with the LAC Education team and meet regularly to identify any young people who are struggling in their mainstream school placement. This proactive approach ensures extra input can be accessed prior to placement breakdown with a view to integrating the young person back into mainstream school at the earliest opportunity. The importance in linking attendance with attainment is fully recognised and the LAC Education team work closely with schools and foster carers to reinforce this message. Termly meetings are held for designated teachers and this has now been opened out to foster carers to emphasis and increase their participation in the children's and young people's education.

Levels of educational attainment are good with results for Key Stage 2 and GCSE performing above the national average. Additional schemes are used creatively to support young people's learning and out of school activities. For example funding is available for 'positive activities for young people' which offers opportunities for young people to experience activities chosen by themselves to support and help them, such as horse riding and art clubs. A letterbox club is also being launched that provides a monthly pack of library books to children encouraging them to read supported by their foster carers. There is funding available for young people who are looked after and this can be used to pay for items to support their learning, such as computer equipment or school trips. An annual awards ceremony is held to recognise and celebrate young peoples achievements.

The service offers a family based shared care scheme that enables children and young people to receive a local service that promotes sharing the care between parents and carer. Carers are recruited and approved in the same way as other foster carers but receive specialist training where necessary to meet the physical and behavioural needs of the children they care for. Parents are involved in any plans and information gathering and a document "All about Me" is used effectively to

encourage child and parent participation. Good systems are in place for introducing children and young people to potential carers. There are close links with other agencies such as health, education and occupational therapy to ensure children's and young people's needs are met including specialist health needs and environmental adaptations.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The fostering services recognises the importance of maintaining and developing family contacts and friendships. Individual contact arrangements are specified in the initial placement agreement and safe care plans address any issues around safety with contact with birth parents. Arrangements are flexible and amended as appropriate, which can happen as a placement becomes more established and initial contentions have settled down. More emphasis is being put on finding local placements facilitating children and young people staying in the in local communities and enabling easier access for contact arrangements. Foster carers are given training and support to ensure they have the right information to promote contact.

Consultation with children and young people placed with foster carers is good, with new innovative developments to improve their participation being implemented. A service level agreement is in place with National Children's Homes to provide a children's rights service. Young people have been recruited as Total Respect trainers and a further group has recently been set up to focus on fostering including recruiting and training foster carers and designing literature. An advocacy service is also available to support children and young people with specific short term issues and more recently independent visitors have been recruited to provide a longer term befriending and monitoring role. Young people are also represented on the Corporate Parenting Panel giving them the opportunity to comment on reports and raise issues. A care leaver has been appointed to the Fostering Assessment Panel.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

The service works positively to prepare young people for adulthood and independent living. There is a specialist Leaving Care team and all young people are allocated a leaving care worker just prior to their 16th birthday. The service provides specific training for foster carers to assist them in helping young people prepare for adulthood. Written guidance is available, although the service has identified the necessity to provide more specific information for the foster carer handbook. There are processes in place for approving foster carers as supported lodging to facilitate continuity of care after the age of 18 and this has been used very successfully to support young care leavers. Recent restructuring has brought together the Leaving Care team, the LAC Education Team and the Specialist Prevention team to provide a more cohesive service with greater accessibility. The majority of young people in foster care post 16 are currently accessing educational and employment

opportunities and a Connexions Personal Advisor has been allocated to the Leaving Care team to track 16 and 17 year olds to increase support to this age group.

Foster carers are supported to care for children and young people placed with them through the payment of a specified allowance and agreed expenses in line with Fostering Network Guidance. Additional incentives are available such as a loyalty scheme recognising approximately two years contribution to the service. Payments are made at the agreed time and allowances are reviewed annually.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

There is a clear Statement of Purpose that sets out the aims and objectives of the service. This is reviewed annually and was last updated in February 2008. In addition, the service has produced two age-appropriate children's guides which are distributed to children and young people at the start of a placement to help them understand what they can expect from the service, how to make complaints and useful information about being fostered.

The service is organised effectively with clear lines of accountability throughout the management structure. Individual managers' responsibilities are clearly defined and they are suitably qualified and experienced for their positions. The structure of the fostering team provides additional management time which has had a positive impact particularly with tightening up systems and processes, increased communication with other parties, new developments which had led to the service being "re-energised" over the past 12 months.

The fostering service provides experienced and well qualified social work staff. Good use is made of the individual skills and interests of staff in the fostering service. There are a number of specific responsibilities allocated to individual workers, which works well and encourages job satisfaction. The role of children's social workers is clearly defined as different from the foster carers supervising social workers and increased communication and liaison between the two groups has led to better working relationships. Staff receive regular supervision and training needs are promoted and progressed. Staff have access to a large range of policies and procedures to provide guidance to all aspects of their work.

The fostering service is successful in recruiting and retaining foster carers and recent numbers of foster carers going through training and assessment has increased. The service is committed to investing in good quality in-house services and there is flexible use of resources, such as project fostering to provide care for a small number of challenging children and young people. The service has worked hard to provide a good range of placements. The matching process is transparent, placements for sibling groups have improved and there is more emphasis on being able to place children and young people locally. In the main, assessments are undertaken by two specialist workers who are thorough and comprehensive in assessing and preparing prospective foster carers.

All foster carers have an identified supervising social worker and spoke highly of the support they receive. Additional support is also available through membership of Fostering Network, access to an independent support group and a "buddying" scheme. Foster carers have regular training opportunities and their individual learning needs are discussed at reviews and supervision. A wider range of training opportunities has been offered recently including involvement from education and health representatives and young people.

There are accurate and up-to-date individual records for children which contain all significant information required by regulations. Information kept in foster homes is clearly defined and foster carers are given clear guidance about their responsibilities for recording and keeping records safe.

Administrative records contain all significant information relevant to the running of the foster care service and as required by regulations. Confidential records are stored securely and there is a clear policy on access. There is a system for keeping records about allegations and complaints, which include details of any investigation, conclusions reached and any action taken. Whilst appropriate action had been taken following any allegation, there was one incident which had not been reported to Ofsted as indicated in Schedule 8 of the Fostering Services Regulations 2002.

The fostering service is sensitive to pre-existing relationships in assessing and approving family and friends as foster carers. Assessments for family and friends are undertaken by placing social workers and a Fostering Assessment Information Pack has been devised to assist them with undertaking these assessments helping to improve consistency of practice. There has been a tightening up of the assessment process and initial assessments are now being undertaken within the six weeks timescale and present to the fostering panel for interim approval, followed by a full assessment which is presented again to panel for consideration. Family and friend carers have access to the same support and training as any other carers.

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
25	ensure notifiable events are reported to the relevant authorities as indicated in Schedule 8 of the Fostering Services Regulations 2002 (Regulation 43).	30/04/2008

Recommendations

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

- include evidence that telephone enquiries are made to follow up written references on personnel files (NMS 3).
- consider the appointment of a panel member with expertise in education (NMS 30).