

Somerset County Council

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 fostering service of Somerset County Council is part of its Children and Young Person's Directorate which embraces both its social services and education provision. The directorate is divided into four geographic regions of Somerset with an Area Manager in each. The Area Manager for the Taunton region has overall responsibility for the fostering service and line manages the Registered Manager of the service who is also based in Taunton. The Registered Manager has direct management responsibility for the county wide, Home Based Care Team who place more challenging young people with specialist foster carers; the Recruitment and Assessment Team who recruit and assess foster care applicants; and the Private Fostering Service (which is the subject of a separate inspection). Each of the four geographic regions has a Resource Team who have members who support mainstream fostering placements. The Resource Teams also have members who support the Short Term Fostering Service for Disabled Young People.

The fostering service has access to Team 8 which has a team of Adolescent Intervention Workers who can be called upon to provide 'hands on' support for Looked After Children (LAC) including those in fostering placements in danger of breaking down.

The authority has a Service Level Agreement (SLA) with the Promise Advocacy Service which recruits, trains and supervises mentors who do one to one work with young people. Some of these members are additionally trained to act as Independent Visitors to LAC who have no parental contact.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

The inspection was announced. The service is well managed and staffed by experienced and professionally qualified practitioners. Foster carers are properly recruited, trained and supported. Whilst the short term care scheme for disabled young people is greatly appreciated by parents more could be done to make it a more integrated part of the fostering service. In the main, young people receive a good standard of care.

Improvements since the last inspection

A Statement of Purpose of the service now includes the details of the short break service for disabled young people.

All young people using the mainstream service receive a Young Person's Guide and

an information DVD.

A training scheme for foster carers is now in place following the directions of the Children's Workforce Development Council.

The template for the Foster Carer's Agreement has been revised and is now in place.

The household health and safety checks have been revised to include gas servicing records and these checks are now carried out by appropriately trained staff.

An intimate care policy is now in place for young disabled children using the short term break scheme.

Details of the membership of the fostering panel are now made known to foster carers.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

A LAC Nurse is available to foster carers for help and advice about the health of young people. Specialist psychology and psychiatric services can be accessed via the nurse who links with the local Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) teams. Social Work Therapists provide specialist counselling help for young people with more complex needs. The Home Based Care team has specially trained foster carers to support young people whose behaviour is particularly challenging. The service has access to Team 8, a specialist team of direct workers who will go into foster care homes to support placements in danger of breaking down because of behaviour management problems.

Initial medicals following a young person's placement are carried out by a paediatrician. The LAC Nurse writes to the young person's GPs to obtain their medical history. The LAC Nurse conducts annual medical checks on every LAC. Children under five years of age are seen by a health visitor every six months.

Foster carers follow guidance given in the Foster Carer's Handbook to ensure that fostered young people are registered with a GP, optician and dentist and that routine checks are made by these services in line with LAC reviews. There is a clear policy in place on the intimate care needs of young disabled people using the short term care service.

All case files on young people seen had a completed LAC health record. The service has yet to develop the provision of a individualised health record for young people to keep, which would provide them with a dated history of such information as inoculations, illnesses, accidents and allergies.

The fostering service provides newly placed young people with leafleted information relating to their health and wellbeing. This includes the contact details of local drug and alcohol agencies (On the Level) and information on sexual health. The council

provides a more professional introductory package for the young people using its residential care services.

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 at least every three years.

Foster carers who smoke cannot do so in front of young people or care for children aged under three. Latest British Association of Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) guidance recommends that this should be raised to five years of age. The fostering service offers free nicotine patches to foster carers and young people who smoke.

The fostering service has an information website which young people can access and which gives them advice about promoting good health.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

Health and safety checks are carried out on foster carers households by a designated officer at the time of assessment to ensure that there are no physical risks to young people in the home. This is repeated annually for the foster carer's review. There are clear policies in place on the safety of children and household dogs.

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 Foster Carers' Handbook and in brief in the Young Person's Guide.

Young people are made aware of their right to make a complaint about any aspect of the service and they receive information on how to complain. An effective system is in place for the recording of complaints received and actions taken.

Enhanced Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks are made on Supervising Social Workers (SSW) and foster carers and these checks are intended to be updated every three years. However, there were some shortcomings identified in the taking and follow up of CRB checks. One long serving SSW had only had a police check several years ago and had never had a CRB check.

Appropriate references are taken prior to appointment and verbally followed up. Medical clearances are taken. Social workers are registered with the General Social Care Council. All SSWs and managers of the service have a professional social work qualification.

Foster panels are efficiently run by an experienced chairperson. The panel takes rigorous steps to ensure that only fit applicants are approved. The approval includes

the stipulation of the conditions of approval and whether placements are short term, intermediate or long term. Although the panel can seek the advice of a paediatrician for medical advice there is no member with expertise in child health and neither is there member representation from a minority ethnic group.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Educational support for LAC is well structured and organised. There are two advisory teachers who keep an overview of individual LAC's educational needs and who oversee the deployment of eight teaching assistants all of whom are trained to NVQ Level 4. If young people are excluded from school they are supplied with a laptop and instructed in the use of a 'Virtual Classroom' teaching package. The fostering service has an education officer who also monitors the education of LAC and who can access educational psychologist assessment if necessary. The service has recently appointed four attendance support workers (one for each region) who will check on a LAC absent from school. Young people can access an online teacher two evenings each week for assistance with their homework. All of these various support items demonstrate a commitment to LAC's education and are an example of good practice.

All of the young people who were case tracked during this inspection had Personal Education Plans (PEP) or Pathway Plans in place.

To support LAC education, all foster care households who do not possess a PC or internet access are provided with a PC and a printer and are given a payment of £120 to set up on the internet. All foster carers are given a written policy on safe internet use ('Keep Your Child Safe'). These are all further examples of good practice.

A young person's weekly pocket money payment is agreed at the time of the Placement Planning Meeting. If necessary foster carers can refer to the children in the authority's residential care pocket money scale.

Parents using the Short Break Service for Disabled Young People were very appreciative of the service. However, foster carers felt that there were few network systems of support and contact with other foster carers in the scheme was minimal. They also felt that their training needs were marginalised in favour of mainstream foster carers.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Communication systems for advising young people about the fostering service include an information DVD and information about the fostering service on its own website. Young people about to leave care have a newsletter. However, there is no

general newsletter for LAC many of who may not be computer literate.

There is a Young Person's Guide for the fostering service but there is no guide for young disabled people written in a user friendly format. Neither is there a section on the website specifically for disabled young people using the Short Term Break Scheme.

The authority has a Service Level Agreement (SLA) with the Promise Advocacy Service who recruit, train and supervise mentors 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 by mentorship attendance at their LAC review meetings. Young people are not reminded of the availability of mentors in the notification letter that informs them of their forthcoming review. Some of the mentors receive further training to offer themselves as Independent Visitors for young people who have had no contact with their families.

The authority has a participation officer who takes steps to consult and inform young people about the service. The fostering service has trained some LAC to be involved in the staff selection process. The authority also arranges an annual award ceremony to celebrate the achievements of young people. These are examples of good practice.

The authority promotes 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.

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

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

Care leavers groups designed to prepare young people for leaving care are organised by the participation officer in collaboration with social workers from the authority's Leaving Care Team. There is also a Leaving Care Pack which young people are provided with.

Pathway Plans were seen to be in place for age appropriate young people. These included plans for their ongoing education, training or work development.

The levels of birthday and Christmas allowances and clothing allowances are advised in the Foster Carer's Handbook. As previously stated, pocket money levels are agreed at placement planning meetings and at annual reviews. Young people are encouraged to open savings accounts.

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

made on time. However, some foster carers complained that there were sometimes difficulties obtaining repayment for the time spent and the travelling costs of attending a young person's school meeting or for making necessary health and safety adaptations to their homes. These items were fully discussed with the Responsible Individual.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

Foster carers are recruited and assessed by a social worker who is a designated member of a Recruitment and Assessment Team. Following successful completion of the Skills to Foster course, which forms part of the assessment process, an application for approval is made to a Fostering Panel who decide upon initial approval and the conditions of approval before their recommendation is made to the Agency Decision Maker. The panel reviews these approvals annually.

Foster carers receive support and supervision from their Supervising Social Workers within appropriate frequencies. There is an out of hours support system provided by the authority's Emergency Duty Team who can refer to the Team 8 for emergency out of hours help.

An ongoing comprehensive training programme designed by the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) is in place to provide core skills for foster carers. This must be completed within the first year of approval. Additional training is also available for foster carers to enable them to enhance their skills and they are paid a £10 fee for attending each training session.

After their initial approval foster carers can choose to be paired with an experienced carer who they can contact for help and advice. The service is proposing to make this a more formalised mentoring support for newly approved foster carers.

Foster carers may take two weeks paid holiday each year without the young person placed to provide respite from caring.

Carers may choose to join but are not given free membership of the Fostering Network.

A clearly written Statement of Purpose is in place in the form of a Fostering Policy and General Practice Guidance document which contains the aims of the service and an outline of the various services provided. The fostering service provides foster carers with a Foster Carer's Handbook which contains all necessary policies, procedures and guidance.

Case records for young people are maintained by their social workers and 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. Although local authority fostering provision is not bound by the regulatory requirements of the private sector, the managers acting as Responsible Individual and Registered Manager of the service are still required to formally notify Ofsted in writing of the names of the persons acting in these positions, which they have not done.

Supervising Social Workers receive one to one supervision at least once a month and there are weekly team meetings. There are clearly written job descriptions.

There are comprehensive induction and ongoing training programmes for Supervising Social Workers.

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):

- develop the provision of an individualised health record for young people in a user friendly format, which would provide them with a dated history of such information as inoculations, illnesses, accidents, allergies and so on. (NMS 12).
- ensure that all staff and foster carers working with vulnerable young people have Enhanced CRB checks and that these checks are updated at appropriate intervals. (NMS 15.4)
- ensure the Foster Panel has a member in attendance with expertise in child health (NMS 30.8) and a member from a minority ethnic group (NMS 7).
- provide a guide for young disabled people using the Short Term Break scheme written in a user friendly format. Also ensure there is also a section on the website specifically for disabled young people using the Short Term Break Scheme. (NMS 1.5)
- formally notify Ofsted in writing of the names of the persons acting in the positions of Responsible Individual and Registered Manager. (NMS 2)