

Devon County Council 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

Devon County Council Fostering Service is the major childcare county resource for children and young people looked after by the local authority. This includes the following services: Long term or permanent care; Time limited or temporary care; Emergency care; Short break care; Family and friends or kinship care; Parent and child care; Family Care Worker Scheme (FCWS) or intensive fostering; Remand care; Private fostering; and Concurrency care pilot project.

The service operates three mainstream fostering office bases: one in Totnes (South and West team), one in Exeter (Exeter and East Devon team), and one in Barnstaple (North and Mid Devon team). There are three specialist fostering offices also. The two Family Care Worker Scheme teams are based in Totnes and Willand, and the remand fostering scheme is based in Exeter. The private fostering team is based at the Willand and Totnes offices. The Operations Manager Fostering is based in the Exeter office.

The service has links to specialist health, education, and psychology and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). There are five designated nurses for children and young people looked after in Devon.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

Since the last inspection, a new Operations Manager has been appointed. A new staff structure has been introduced, aimed at increasing the recruitment potential for new carers. A large amount of work has been undertaken, providing managers with the ability to monitor the quality of the service more efficiently. Several new projects have been introduced strengthening the strategic planning for the service, and developing inter-professional networks, leading to improved outcomes for children. Amongst these are the introduction of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) placement support officers, a recently appointed kinship care social worker and manager and the concurrency care pilot project. These are all positive developments and are commendable.

Staff and foster carers show commendable enthusiasm for, and dedication to, providing a high quality fostering service for children and young people in need in Devon.

Practice in the areas of the assessment, approval and support of foster carers is mostly of a high standard. Foster carers report being very well supported and value the holiday activity programme and support when children are excluded from school.

The foster panels are thorough in their considerations and well organised. Staff have opportunities for continuing professional development, and there is a clear management structure in place to support the work of the service.

The service also produces an informative and interesting fostering newsletter for foster carers three times a year.

At the time of the original inspection one branch of the service was subject to an internal review. It was, at the time, adjudged that until this review had reached its conclusions, and any actions arising implemented, the assessment for the outcome group 'Staying Safe' would be satisfactory which, in turn, would require the overall judgement to be satisfactory. The Local Authority requested that this position be reviewed by Ofsted. In response, Ofsted commissioned two additional inspectors to review the judgement for the outcome group 'Staying Safe'. This subsequent inspection, carried out in December 2008, concluded that safeguarding standards were good and the judgement for this outcome has been uplifted to 'Good'; consequently, the overall judgement becomes 'Good'. That section of the report and both of the recommendations in this report arise from this subsequent visit.

Improvements since the last inspection

At the last inspection in February 2007, no actions were made; five good practice recommendations were made. These recommendations have been acted upon. The recommendation from the previous inspection concerning the use of electronic recording systems, is now about to be implemented by the local authority rolling out the electronic recording system to include the fostering in the next phase.

Most parents and several care manager questionnaires record poor communication on child's progress with service. They do, however, say that communication with carers is good.

The service has introduced a staff re-structure aimed at improving recruitment of carers and also introduced targeted media and publicity campaigns.

The introduction of joint agency planning for child in care (CIC) education planning is a positive initiative; educational outcomes for children are improving since its introduction.

Risk management has improved since the introduction of risk management plans now undertaken and evidenced on seen foster carer/child's records.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Children's health needs are well identified and active measures are taken to promote good health outcomes for children and young people. The service is continuing to

develop very good links with health professionals. All young people are registered with doctors, dentists and opticians and are supported in accessing a range of health services including psychological support. The local authority is very pro-active in multi-agency working and the promotion of providing excellent health networks for children and young people. The service has good links with the child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) and with looked after children nurses. The service has appointed three CAMHS placement support officers, which is a positive development.

Most foster carers say that they had sufficient medical information to enable them to meet the needs of the child at the time the placement was made. Some carers reported that if not, this was made available shortly after placement. Any missing information is chased up in a timely manner by the supervising social workers. Not all foster carers have a written health record for children placed, and not all carers have signed consent for children to receive medical treatment. Carers do, however, record any medical appointments or treatment received by any child they were looking after.

Children and young people are encouraged by carers to develop healthy lifestyles and participate in activity programmes and healthy eating options are encouraged by the service.

The service also monitors health promotion for children in foster care and this shows an increase in the numbers of children with personal health plans since the last inspection.

Foster carers were well aware of their individual responsibilities in promoting the health needs of children. All children are registered with doctors and dentists.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

Children's safeguarding is promoted by the service and there is a commitment to monitoring and improving systems already in place.

The operations manager is a qualified social worker, registered with the General Social Care Council (GSCC) and is working to achieve an appropriate management qualification. All of the necessary employment checks have been completed and she has substantial experience in working and managing family placement services and a comprehensive and effective knowledge of the service and all its facets. The Head of Service is also suitably qualified and experienced and therefore suitable to be involved in the running of the fostering service. Both managers are committed to developing and enabling the scope of Fostering Service operations. There are clear lines of accountability and strategies are in place to take the service forward.

Potential foster carers are subject to a rigorous assessment process by qualified social workers before approval is considered through the fostering panel process.

There is a pre-approval training programme covering basic skills and likely issues arising from fostering; this provides practice guidance in safe care techniques and an introduction to safeguarding children. Foster carers complete annual safe care audits of their home and practice with their support worker; this is commendable reflective practice. Once approved as foster carers there is a comprehensive range of training opportunities available to enable foster carers to maintain or improve their skills. There has been a shift in the payments scheme for foster carers that now makes post-approval training a requirement rather than an expectation. In addition the service is looking at being equitable by providing 'at home' training to foster carers who live remotely or have difficulty travelling to training venues. A new policy and guidance document on managing allegations against carers has been drafted and this is aimed at making distinctions between allegations, serious concerns and standards of practice.

The service makes considerable efforts to match children with appropriately qualified and experienced carers. Recruitment campaigns are used to identify limited but suitable potential carers. The local authority has a protocol for chairing matching meetings and there are sound support systems in place to assist foster carers with any issues arising. Success is variable but the service has made progress towards more positive matching through the use of 'family finding' developments and child profiles with open risk management. However, records relating to matching information are not always present in Placement Agreements or foster carers' files, thereby making it difficult to track particular matching criteria.

All foster carers conduct regular health and safety checks on their homes as part of their review process and any identified risks are subject to risk management plans.

Children are protected by the Local Authority's safeguarding procedures. However, foster carers' files sampled failed to show a clear audit trail of action taken and procedures followed in the event of an allegation.

Personnel files varied in their content according to length of service. However, the most recent appointments showed records complied with National Minimum Standard's requirements indicating that recruitment procedures are sound. Staff vetting procedures are robust and meticulously processed; the policy is to renew staff and foster carers' Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) disclosures at least every three years.

The fostering panel observed during the original inspection visit was quorate, well organised, and ably chaired. Agenda material is sent out to panel members in advance; panel members are well prepared, and panel meetings focus on relevant issues.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The service promotes the valuing of diversity, as part of the assessment of carers and in the pre-approval training for carers. Carers demonstrate a commitment to meeting the individual needs of all children placed within the service.

Educational attainment for children is promoted by a number of initiatives, the service has introduced. These include the promotion of 'Aim Higher', the production of a training DVD for carers promoting educational attainment for children. There are good inter-professional links with Educational Welfare Officers, designated teachers for children in care and with the youth service.

Local Practitioner Groups are examples of excellent inter-agency working aimed at promoting educational attainment. The service continues to monitor both the educational attainment and attendance both of which continue to improve.

Where children are provided with short term breaks, the service recognises the importance of carers working with the parents as main carers.

Foster carers, generally, act as advocates for the children and young people placed with them and try to ensure that children and young people receive the care and support, and access to opportunities and services, they need. Important links have been made between the service and the education service to improve support for young people who have been excluded from school but more needs to be done at a strategic level to ensure that all children and young people looked after are receiving adequate educational provision suited to their needs.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Children and young people are supported in making positive contributions by the agency. Contact with children's families is supported in accordance with the care plan for the child or young person. Foster carers are encouraged to support and accommodate contact arrangements when appropriate.

Young people say that foster carers are good at communicating with them. Foster carers are good advocates for the children in their care and keen to ensure that the child's voice is heard. The service has introduced a number of initiatives aimed at consulting with young people and involving them in service development. These include young people's contribution to the performance management board and the celebration of young people's achievements.

The service is developing apprenticeship opportunities with the local authority and is developing further links with Devon Youth. Young people also contributed to the production of an anti-bullying DVD.

Despite these initiatives, feedback from some foster carers, some care managers and young people and parents indicates that children and young people do not feel well consulted about the service and how it could be improved.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

Young people are encouraged to participate in a number of leisure and social activities; there is a free access arrangement for young people to some leisure activities and to 'sports active', this initiative is currently being expanded across the county. Carers are provided with training in how to work with young people who will shortly be leaving care. Managers are working with other colleagues to integrate a range of services aimed at providing services to young people as they leave care. Most young people aged 15 years and older have pathway plans, but a number still do not.

Foster carers do not have formalised guidance and expectations in the preparation of young people for leaving care and living independently.

Most carers report the payments system works well and few report any difficulties, those who do experience a difficulty said that the issue is usually resolved satisfactorily in a timely manner. A small number of carers experience more regular difficulties with the payments system.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The service is well managed, and there is a high level of monitoring and improving quality assurance systems are in place. The recently appointed manager is introducing a number of changes to the service, aimed at improving the quality of the service provided. A significant degree of improvement is taking place.

The Statement of Purpose is reviewed regularly and currently requires updating to include the changes in service structure that are taking place. The statement is available on request to carers, placing care managers, parents and staff.

The manager is a qualified social worker, registered with the General Social Care Council (GSCC) and is working to achieve an appropriate management qualification. All of the necessary employment checks have been completed and she has substantial experience in working and managing family placement services.

There are effective measures in place to monitor the performance of the service; the manager produces quarterly reports by the Children and Young People's Services (CYPS) management board. Performance monitoring statistics are regularly produced. At present the service is still not yet able to access the local authority

electronic records system and this continues to create inefficiency.

There is a clear management structure for the service, with clear lines of responsibility and accountability. Carers and staff say they know who to contact and how to do so.

New staffing structures are in place and the service now has a county wide recruitment and assessment team and three foster care support teams. The re-structure is designed in part to increase the recruitment potential of the service. Some staff and carers are still adjusting to the new structure.

Some staff say there is insufficient administrative support for the service to operate efficiently.

All social work staff working for the service are appropriately qualified and registered with the General Social Care Council. The staff teams are very experienced and are highly skilled.

Training profiles are kept of all carers and staff. There is a well developed training programme in place and this is co-ordinated and monitored by one of the service practice managers. Most staff receive regular supervision and annual appraisal.

The service has a clear strategy for supervising foster carers. Foster carers' files show recent evidence of regular supervision of carers. Some foster carers' annual reviews are not taking place within statutory timescales, this information is now captured by the performance monitoring statistics, and action taken addresses these issues. The number of overdue foster carer reviews has reduced. Some annual reviews are not signed or dated.

The use of exemptions allowing foster carers to exceed the usual fostering limit has reduced. The use of exemptions is regularly monitored by the management information system.

Some information on children held by the service is incomplete; the child's case file is held by the locality team and at present the fostering service is not able to access those electronic records. Not all entries on records were clearly legible, or signed or dated by the author.

The service has recently appointed a social worker and practice manager with responsibility for developing the service for kinship carers. This project is only recently implemented but is subject to monitoring and is showing evidence of improving services for kinship carers.

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 matching criteria can be readily identified in records. (NMS 8.4)
- ensure carers' files contain clear audit trails relating to complaints and allegations including details of the investigation, conclusion reached and action taken. (NMS 9.5; 25.3)