

Plymouth City Council Fostering Agency

Inspection report for local authority 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

Plymouth City Council fostering service provides a recruitment, assessment, support and supervision service for foster carers, for a diverse range of children and young people from birth to 17 years. Fostering placements, include long-term, time-limited, emergency and family and friends care. The majority of young people are accommodated within the Plymouth area.

Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

Council members, foster carers and service staff demonstrate a real commitment to meeting the needs of looked after children in Plymouth. The needs of each young person are clearly identified by an effective assessment process and addressed holistically by a multi-disciplinary team that includes health and educational professionals. Service staff and foster carers maintain a clear child focus that ensures each young person is treated as an individual with their own specific, physical, social, emotional and cultural needs. The service has comprehensive safeguarding policies and procedures that have developed into effective working practices. Young people report that they feel safe. Individual risk strategies are developed by carers but are not always documented.

Young people live full and active lives and evidence indicates they make significant progress in areas such as education and social development. The overall health of young people in foster care continues to improve and innovative health education initiatives have resulted in a decrease in smoking and substance misuse. Support for young people is excellent and many are now deciding to stay in their placements until they are 18 and continue with their education or training.

The service is forward thinking and encourages the participation of young people and foster carers in its development. The views of young people are regularly sought about all aspects of their lives in foster care and any issues identified are dealt with appropriately. The management team empower young people, foster carers and staff to positively influence change. The service continually strives for further improvement and an open and self-critical culture encourages service staff and foster carers to engage in reflective practice. Service staff and foster carers regularly access training opportunities that keep them abreast of developments and innovations within the childcare field. The service is effectively monitored.

Improvements since the last inspection

Two recommendations were made during the last inspection. Both have been appropriately addressed. There is now a comprehensive system that ensures that all

those involved in the fostering service are appropriately vetted and safeguarding plans, that provide guidance for carers, are now drawn up in respect of all new placements.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

An excellent health assessment system ensures that the health and emotional needs of each young person are clearly identified on entering the service. Personal health plans, that are regularly reviewed, provide guidance for carers about how any outstanding needs, including immunisations, should be met. Excellent integrated working amongst social care and health professionals make sure any identified health needs are effectively addressed within limited time scales.

Young people are encouraged to adopt healthy lifestyles by eating wisely and taking regular exercise. Young people receive health education guidance from both their foster carers and the service's looked after children's nurse. Young people are encouraged to keep physically active and many regularly take part in a wide range of sporting and recreational activities such as swimming, cycling football and outdoor activities. Participation in such activities provide valuable opportunities for young people to make new friends and establish new social relationships. All young people are provided with passes that give them access to a range of leisure facilities within Plymouth.

A children in care youth club, the 'Mutley Crew', provides an informal forum for young people to meet and discuss health related topics such as smoking, drug use and sexual health. This informal approach to health education has proved to be extremely successful in raising young people's awareness about the importance of monitoring their own health. One young person confirmed that since entering care they had, 'given up smoking' and were now 'eating properly'. Another said they would, 'report any health worries or concerns to their carers.' Young people are supported in accessing health services by their foster carers and a record is kept of all medical appointments and interventions.

A dedicated child and adolescent mental health team is co-located within the children in care service and provides quick access to young people experiencing emotional and psychological difficulties. Members of the team provide individual therapy sessions for young people as well as advice and guidance for their foster carers. The support and guidance offered by the team is greatly valued by foster carers and staff and has made a significant contribution to placement stability and to improving the psychological health and well-being of young people.

Young people with disabilities and complex health difficulties are well served by a multidisciplinary approach to addressing their needs by bringing together education, health and social service staff. An effective matching process ensures young people with disabilities are appropriately placed with foster carers with the knowledge and skills to meet their needs. If required foster carers' homes are modified and specialist

equipment installed to improve access for young people with mobility difficulties. Foster carers undertake specific training on intrusive medical procedures to ensure young are kept safe.

The service monitors the overall health of young people in foster care. Recent trends indicate the health of young people is significantly improving. An effective health assessment process, early intervention and an innovative approach to health education has greatly improved the health outcomes of young people

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

Young people benefit from the strong safeguarding ethos that permeates every aspect of the service. Effective policies, procedures and working practices keep young people safe. Foster carers and social workers undertake joint training in child protection to ensure they are aware of each others respective roles in reporting any protection concerns. Although young people are helped to assess risk and develop self-caring practices relating to such things as stranger danger, road safety and use of the internet, individual strategies are not always documented. Young people said they have established good relationships with their carers. All felt that personal issues are dealt with sensitively and their privacy and confidentiality is respected. Young people indicated they would confide in their carers if they did not feel safe.

A major strength of the service is the support offered by the multi-disciplinary team to both young people and carers. Effective lines of communication have been established between foster carers, social workers, educationalists and therapists. The services child-centred approach ensures that staff remain focused on the specific needs of each young person. This holistic approach has the added benefit for carers and young people of providing a 'one stop shop' approach in which difficulties and problems can be addressed within the team rather than having to seek referrals to other agencies. Young people are encouraged to play an active role in developing the service and their views are regularly sought, both formally and informally. The inclusive nature of the service was encapsulated by one foster carer who stated, 'we are all in it together, to get the best for the children.' Carers feel well supported and can access support and guidance at any time. The out-of-hours service also provides peer support from experienced carers.

The vulnerabilities and risks associated with each young person's behaviour are clearly identified prior to any placement. From the information received safe care plans are developed to ensure each person is kept safe. Safe care plans provide clear guidance for carers on how appropriate behavioural boundaries should be maintained. There are well-established procedures to ensure that young people who go missing from care are reported; missing from care rates are low. Foster carers are successful in breaking patterns of behaviour that can put young people at risk. Young people reported that bullying was not a significant problem and that they would report any issues of concerns to their carers. Appropriate action is taken if it is known that a young person is being bullied.

Regular monitoring visits and health and safety checks ensure carers' homes offer safe and welcoming environments for young people. The assessment determines if a property provides good quality accommodation and conforms with accepted health and safety guidance. All outstanding safety issues have to be addressed prior to any placement being made. Young people spoke in positive terms about their placements and felt they were being treated well and being kept safe.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The service aims to ensure that all placements are planned and that young people are appropriately matched with carers who can meet their specific needs. Young people are provided with information about their carers before their placement and this contributes significantly to minimising anxiety levels. Young people are helped to develop socially acceptable behaviours. Positive behaviour is reinforced with praise and rewards from foster carers. Young people are encouraged to assume responsibility for their behaviour in a way that is appropriate to their age and understanding. Foster carers are provided with key information about the young people in their care so they can contextualise their behaviours and respond appropriately. Therapists provide foster carers with guidance on how to manage young people who present with challenging behaviour without having to resort to physical interventions. Young people are supported by their carers, even if their actions have led them into criminal activity. Carers work with young people and staff from youth offending teams to develop strategies to reduce their anti-social behaviour.

Young people said they were welcomed into carers' homes and encouraged to participate into all aspects of family life. All felt they were appropriately placed and had established good relationships with their foster carers and other family members. One young person reported that on a scale of one to ten his placement was, 'nine point nine.' Carers have high expectations of young people and aim to ensure that those in their care lead full and active lives and make significant progress in all aspects of their development. An extremely active foster carers' social group organises exciting trips and outings. These activities provide young people with the opportunity to meet other foster care families and other young people in care.

The personal development goals of individuals are reflected in their placement plans. Young people are able to pursue their own particular interests and hobbies and are currently engaged in a range of leisure and recreational activities that include kick boxing, dancing, drama, playing musical instruments, scouts, pantomime, street dancing, Prince's Trust activities, gardening projects and swimming. Participation in such activities raise individual's self-esteem, resilience and confidence. Carers accommodating young people with mobility difficulties are provided with specially adapted vehicles to ensure they can access activities outside of the home.

The importance of the educational achievement of young people in care is given a

high priority within the local authority. The educational needs of young people are identified through an effective personal education planning process. Personal education plans are in place and are regularly reviewed. Foster carers are pro-active in supporting young people with their education and regularly attend parents' evenings, school events and assist with homework. Young people who have experienced educational disruption are provided with access to numeracy and literacy schemes to help them catch up with their peers. The educational progress of each young person is closely monitored and additional tutorial support is provided if it is felt a young person is struggling.

The service has been successful in improving the educational outcomes of young people. Exam results have significantly improved, attendance levels are good and exclusions are rare. Statistics from the Virtual school indicate 77% of young people in care are making significant progress in their academic work and 87% of young people reported they were happy at school. The educational achievements of young people are recognised and celebrated through an annual awards ceremony. The service raises the educational horizons of many young people and an increasing number of young people are now continuing in education and training beyond school. Young people receive financial support and encouragement to maximise their potential. Members of the post-16 team help young people access appropriate college and university courses. One young person, who was in foster care, is in the process of completing a masters degree. A recent initiative with the university of Plymouth used exciting and fun activities to introduce young people to higher education. As a consequence of this initiative a number of young people are aspiring to higher education.

Each young person's religious and cultural needs are identified as part of the initial assessment process and every effort is made to ensure they can be met during their placements. Life-story work is often carried out with young people to provide them with an understanding of their personal history and cultural background. Carers are forceful advocates for the young people in their care and ensure they have access to appropriate resources and opportunities.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

The service is successful in involving young people in making decisions about their futures and there is high participation in the reviewing process. Independent reviewing officers are pro-active in consulting young people prior to their reviews. Foster carers, social workers and supervising social workers regularly discuss young people's futures with them. Young people said they felt, 'listened to'. There is an effective systems to obtain the views of young people with communication difficulties. Young people are provided with an independent advocate if they do not wish to attend their reviews. Advocates are also available for anyone wishing to make a complaint. The service ensures that young people receive a response to any concerns or complaints within ten days. Foster carers and service staff are sensitive when explaining to young people why their wishes can not always be met. Young

people are helped to understand their past and the circumstances that ended up in them entering care. There is particular specialist assistance available for life story work and guidance from therapists.

Young people play a significant role in the development of the service and a Listen and Care Council provides a forum through which young people can influence decision making within the local authority. In an effort to obtain the views of more young people Routeways, a local charity, is developing a consultation group for developing the fostering service further. The views and suggestions made by young people are taken seriously and responded to appropriately by senior officers and members. Young people participate in the appointment process of senior staff and a number contribute to the selection and training of new carers.

Young people are able to maintain appropriate contact with their parents, relatives and friends. Although every effort is made to place sibling groups together it is not always possible or in the best interests of each individual. However, the service acknowledges the need for siblings to maintain contact and carers liaise with each other to arrange regular meetings. The views of young people, their social workers and birth parents are taken into consideration in determining the frequency and duration of contact visits. Arrangements are clear, constructive and safeguard young people. Any restrictions regarding contact are made clear to all parties and plans are developed to ensure young people are not put at risk through meeting inappropriate adults. Contact visits are managed sensitively by foster carers and appropriate working relationships are established with birth parents. Outcomes and young people's experiences of contact visits are monitored, recorded and discussed with relevant parties.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is outstanding.

A well developed placement planning system ensures each young person receives the appropriate care and support necessary to prepare them for their transitions into semi-independent and independent living. Preparing for independence starts from approximately the age of 14 with the development of pathway plans. Career action plans provide an effective mechanism for helping each young person identify their specific educational and employment goals. The service has been extremely successful in helping young people move on to education, training and employment. Young people engaged in further and higher education are supported until the completion of their courses. On reaching 18 young people can, with their carers' agreement, continue to reside under a supported living scheme.

Young people acquire a range of independent living skills by completing an experientially based ASDAN independence training programme. Foster carers and members of the 16-plus team provide opportunities for young people to cook, budget and take responsibility for their own laundry. In an effort to experience firsthand what independent living is like, many young people access short breaks in the service's training flat. Young people undertake such visits safe in the knowledge that

they can return to their placements. An increasing number of young people are now staying with their carers until 18 and new 'staying put' arrangements have been introduced to ensure appropriate support is available.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

Young people receive a high quality individualised service from a local authority that has embraced all aspects of its corporate parenting role. The Statement of Purpose explicitly details the service's vision and values. On entering the service young people are provided with their own, age appropriate guide that outlines what they can expect from the service. Foster carers and service staff subscribe to an ethos that puts young people at the centre of all provision. Staff and foster carers demonstrate a genuine commitment to promoting positive outcomes for young people in care. Quality assurance is embedded in all aspects of the service and effective monitoring ensures continuous improvement.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. An inclusive culture, based on respect and empowerment, means all interested parties are involved in the development of the service. There is a comprehensive understanding of and a varied and holistic approach to meeting young people's needs. Policies, procedures and working practices explicitly promote diversity and equality. The service sensitively and proactively responds to issues of gender, religion, ethnic origin, language, culture, disability and sexuality. Foster carers and service staff challenge prejudice.

The service benefits from having a well qualified and experienced management team who provide excellent support and leadership. Managers ensure that the service's comprehensive policies and procedures are translated into effective working practices that address the needs of young people. Managers closely monitor all aspects of the service and those spoken with were knowledgeable about foster carers and the young people in their care. Although the service is facing financial restraints, savings have been identified that will not have an adverse effect on young people. Staff and foster carers feel the service is being efficiently managed and resources appropriately utilised. As one carer commented, 'over the last few years they have really got their act together!'

In an effort to minimise disruption to young people, the service strives to place young people within the Plymouth area. This strategy is very successful in minimising disruption and provides young people a degree of continuity in their lives by being able to access existing educational placements. It also allows young people to maintain existing social networks. The service has managed fluctuations in demand for foster placements well and does not make placements based on expediency. A high level of placement stability indicates appropriate matching. The service has established successful family and friend fostering arrangements. Family and friends receive substantial support, which enables them to effectively meet the needs of young people. Although the service has effective systems for allocating and managing placements, difficulties and challenges can be caused by external factors,

over which they have little control. For example, delays in court proceedings for young people identified for adoption. Such delays not only cause difficulties for short-term carers and young people but block other potential placements.

The service has been successful in recruiting carers from the city and surrounding areas. Carers are only approved following a thorough vetting process and the successful completion of a skills to foster training programme. The service ensures that inappropriate individuals, who may present a risk to young people, do not enter the service. The service sets high standards and there is an expectation that foster carers will be capable of providing high quality care to a diverse group of young people. Many of the young people experience social and emotional difficulties that inhibit their ability to establish and maintain relationships; foster carers help young people to begin to establish relationships. Social work staff clearly recognise the demands that can be made on foster carers and ensure that only those with the necessary attributes are invited to proceed to training and approval at panel. The service values diversity and seeks to recruit staff and carers from all sections of the local community regardless of race, creed or sexual orientation. Equality and diversity issues form part of the initial training programme for carers.

Once approved carers are allocated a social worker who provides regular support and oversees their development as effective carers. Foster carers feel valued and describe their support as outstanding. Support includes regular supervisory meetings, support groups, peer mentoring, respite care, social activities and extensive professional support. There is a strong management commitment to the continuous development of foster carers and they are expected to access the many regular training opportunities on offer, including the Children's Workforce Development Council's training programme. Foster carers feel that the service provides high quality training and contributes significantly to their understanding of the many issues associated with young people in care. There is a clear pathway for those wishing to develop their foster care careers. The service operates with an extremely motivated group of foster carers who display a real commitment to the young people of Plymouth.

The Council's robust recruitment procedures ensure that all staff are appropriately vetted and suitable to work with young people. All staff are provided with a detailed job description. The service operates within a culture of training and professional development that makes it, as one member of staff remarked, 'an interesting and stimulating place in which to work.' For example, all new staff embark on an Newly Qualified Social Worker Development Programme while existing staff work toward completing a post-qualifying training programme run in conjunction with Bournemouth University. Regular supervision and action learning sets provide opportunities for staff to engage in reflective practice. There is consistent use of self-evaluation. The extensive knowledge and skills within the multi-disciplinary team mean that decisions regarding individual young people reflect the 'joined up thinking' of more than one professional group.

The service operates with an effective fostering panel that is appropriately constituted and exercises its functions in accordance with statutory guidance. The

panel demonstrates robust quality assurance. There is a strong emphasis on safeguarding and ensuring excellent outcomes for children. They effectively challenge decisions which are not in the best interests of children. The panel advisor gives feedback to social workers and their managers after each panel in relation to their presentations and analysis. The fostering panel has complimented fostering team staff on the high quality of their assessments. The fostering panel seeks feedback from foster carers and their social workers about their experience at panel. A number of carers indicated that they had been apprehensive about their appearance at panel but had been put at their ease and treated with respect throughout the process.

There is a well-established and effective complaints system and all allegations are appropriately reported and investigated. An independent support and advocacy service is provided to carers who are the subject of an allegation. Any significant issues arising result in a review of existing practice within the service.

The premises and administrative arrangements meet the service's needs. The Carefirst computer based information system is proving to be an effective case management tool. It is being continuously improved to ensure key information is accessible to key personnel. Young people's records are accurate, up to date, concise and clear and contain all significant information required by regulations.

The service has an effective foster carers' payment system that deposits funds directly into foster carers accounts. Prompt payment and additional allowances contribute toward placement stability and better outcomes for young people.

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 foster carers encouraging young people to take risks as a normal part of growing up document how they have helped young people to understand how to keep themselves safe. (NMS 4.4)