

Nottinghamshire 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

The fostering service is overseen by a service director with responsibilities delegated to a group manager and subsequently to a service manager with day-to-day management responsibility. The service manager is the manager of the fostering service.

The service consists of eight fostering teams located across four offices. Five of the fostering teams provide services to mainstream carers with the remaining three dedicated to recruitment and publicity, fostering futures/emergency and short breaks. The local authority commissions, through a regional framework of procurement, independent fostering providers to provide foster placements for unaccompanied asylum seeking young people and for black and minority ethnic children and young people.

The service provides a number of different types of foster care: long and short-term mainstream foster placements; support care placements, which support the child's main placement; short-term breaks for disabled and non-disabled children; emergency foster placements for children needing a placement for 6 to 8 weeks; fostering futures placements where the carer is self-employed and receives a salary; remand foster care for young people remanded to the care of the local authority and child-specific or family and friends foster care placements. The fostering service also supports persons wishing to apply for a non-agency adoption order and adopted adults who are seeking to trace their families via adoption counselling. The service additionally provides a daily home-finding duty service to children entering the care system or needing to move within the care system and also a permanent home finding service to children in need of such a service.

The fostering service has two fostering panels each held monthly. One takes place on a Friday and one takes place on a Tuesday.

The fostering service has 340 approved foster households (as at 30th September 2011) and has 360/365 children living in foster care, as their main placement, at any one time. This represents, at any one time, 50% of the total number of children looked after by the local authority.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This fostering service helps achieve good outcomes for children and young people in foster care. There are a range of individuals with whom children and young people living in foster care have contact with and are responsible for identifying concerns

about their safety and well-being. Children and young people's health and safety is promoted. A key strength of the fostering service is the level of support and resources available to disabled children and young people. The authority works effectively with partnership agencies, and where appropriate, commissioned services to meet each individual's identified needs. Another key strength of this authority is the money that has been invested in short-break care provided by contract carers for physically disabled children and young people. Accommodation has been especially adapted to meet their complex needs. A small number of vehicles have also been purchased to ensure the safe transport and access to services for physically disabled children who use wheel chairs.

Children and young people are enjoying sound, strong relationships with their fostering household. Foster carers are caring, committed and professional in their role. They help build the foundations for children and young people to develop secure and safe attachments.

Leisure opportunities help children and young people build their confidence and self-esteem. They are provided with many and varied opportunities. These are based on the level of ability of the child. Children and young people are receiving good support to help them achieve their potential in their educational setting.

Children and young people's views are being sought and acted on positively. Foster carers' practice is well embedded to engage the views of the child and act as an advocate.

Foster carers provide an environment for young people that promote their independence. The fostering service collaborates effectively with the after-care team.

The organisation and management of the foster service are effective and efficient. The management team are proactive and creative in assessing current and future needs of children and young people. The dedicated team of recruitment and project officers contribute positively to recruiting good quality foster carers. All of the social workers are suitably qualified and professionally experienced. All foster carers are allocated a supervising social worker.

As a result of this inspection visit there are two recommendations being made. The first relates to the fostering service ensuring that all children over the age of three have their own bedroom and do not share with another. The second relates to increasing the accessibility of the training programme for foster carers. Neither of these areas negatively impact on the continued good outcomes that children and young people are achieving.

Improvements since the last inspection

All the recommendations made at the last inspection have been met. The consent form for medical treatment has been revised and the completion of health assessments has improved. The recruitment processes have improved because the new electronic database is in place. The fostering service has developed a centralised

system of placement procurement. This centralised system facilitates the process of 'matching' a child's profile with the available foster carer capacity. This is underpinned with good placement planning, risk assessments and a safe caring policy. The contact visits are supported by trained staff with appropriately safe transport for contact. Where it is safe and practical to do so, the child's foster carer provides transport for the child's contact arrangements. A transport policy is available in the foster carers' handbook which is adhered to in practice. There is a positive working partnership between the payments team and the fostering community. The payments team encourage direct contact from foster carers and there is a problem avoidance, rather than a problem solving, culture. The foster carers' electronic records now evidence that foster carer agreements are in place for all foster carers.

All these actions demonstrate the fostering service's commitment to the promotion of children and young people's welfare at all times.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Foster carers are effectively promoting children and young people's physical, emotional and social development within the foster home with the support of a range of health professionals and services. For example, all children and young people are supported by a dedicated Children in Care Health Team who can be contacted by children and young people, foster carers, social workers, health visitors, school nurses, parents, doctors and paediatricians. They help if there are any health concerns, undertake statutory looked after children health assessments and produce each child's or young person's health care plan. Children and young people, who have poor health when they first become looked after, receive appropriate health interventions which result in their health needs being addressed. Foster carers provide healthy environments and ensure children and young people are registered with a doctor, see a dentist regularly, attend any other relevant health appointments and meet specific responsibilities set out in their health care plan. The outcomes for children and young people are that no health matters are going unchecked.

Where children and young people have specific health issues or conditions, foster carers manage these sensitively. All foster carers receive training on health issues in their core training programme, which covers administering basic first aid and minor illness treatment and the storage and administration of medication. Where a child requires specific medical treatment foster carers are individually trained to meet those needs and are regularly assessed to ensure they remain competent. As a result, children and young people's holistic health needs are being successfully promoted.

Foster carers provide children and young people with good advice, support and guidance on leading healthy lifestyles and making informed decisions. The authority provides foster carers, children and young people with a range of information on services that can give training and confidential advice on alcohol and illegal substance abuse, smoking, sex and relationships, sexual health and meeting cultural

health needs. These services are also promoted by the local authority's youth groups who will often invite them to take part in activity days. Children and young people benefit because this innovative practice promotes greater accessibility.

For children and young people receiving short-break care with foster carers, responsibility for health care remains with the parents. Effective partnership working ensures any ongoing treatment or emergency treatment is consistent throughout a stay. This service is further enhanced by an occupational therapist and specialist nurse being part of the supporting staff team. A key strength of this short-breaks team is the work being undertaken to support children and young people with life-limiting conditions. In consultation with the child or young person and their family some incidents of short-break care have moved from the foster carer's home into the child's home. Specific work has also been undertaken to produce personal resuscitation plans and individual emergency plans involving the child or young person, parents, foster carers and consultants. One contract carer commented, 'Dealing with ever changing medical conditions and medication keeps me on my toes.' This inclusive practice promotes good outcomes for disabled children and young people.

Children and young people live in foster homes that provide comfortable homely accommodation. The standard of this accommodation is regularly monitored by supervising social workers on visits and unannounced inspections. Assessments of risk are undertaken on a regular basis and ensure that any concerns identified are addressed and minimised. Foster carers receive appropriate training and guidance that ensure they are able to promote and maintain safe environments. Policies and procedures as well as foster carers' practice promote privacy and dignity for all members of a foster carer's household. This is achieved primarily through the way in which foster carers model respect for the children and young people they care for. It is, however, also supported by the physical environment of the home and the way in which children and young people are given their own space and bedroom. There are currently occasions when children and young people share a bedroom. The fostering service is in the process of adjusting its practice so that all children and young people over the age of three years have their own bedroom and do not share. Where this is not possible, children and young people's views are sought and assessments of risk are undertaken.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

All supervising social workers and foster carers ensure the safety and well-being of children and young people is paramount in their daily practice. There are clear safeguarding policies, procedures and guidance that underpin an established programme of induction and on going training. This ensures proactive partnership work that focuses on meeting the specific needs of each child and young person. Prior to, and throughout a placement, a child or young person's safety and well-being is regularly reviewed and monitored. Using a range of methods, including risk assessments and individual safe caring policies, these systems ensure their changing

needs are identified and strategies are put in place to address them. Foster carers make sure children and young people feel safe and help to educate them to protect themselves and make sensible decisions. The outcome for children and young people is that their welfare is being promoted at all times.

Any allegation made by a child or young person is taken seriously and investigated in line with the authority's safeguarding procedures. The result of a serious case review is due to be published. Work is already being undertaken by the authority to learn from the case and the outcomes of the review.

Foster carers are well equipped to address any instances of bullying, e-safety and cyber-bullying in consultation with the young people's social workers. They have a good awareness of the particular vulnerability of looked after children and their susceptibility to bullying and always seek the views of the child or young person involved prior to taking any action. This inclusive practice means that for children and young people positive action is always taken.

The local authority is effectively supporting foster carers, individual children and young people to cope if they are subject to discrimination, marginalisation or ridicule from their community or peers by virtue of their gender, religion, ethnic origin, cultural background, linguistic background, nationality, disability, sexual orientation or looked after status. Foster carers are well informed, trained and confident about dealing with issues and are able to involve external professional advice and support as necessary. For example, access to surgeries and practice seminars run by an independent social work consultant leading on Black and minority ethnic best practice.

Children and young people who go missing from foster carers are safeguarded and supported to change their high risk behaviours by good multi-agency protocols. Nottingham County Council continues to improve its response to children and young people who are missing from home, care and education. For example, the joint protocol between Nottingham City Council and Nottinghamshire Police is regularly reviewed and revised. Foster carers and supervising social workers practice has been further enhanced by a recent joint seminar between Nottingham County Council Independent Review and Quality Assurance Group and Nottinghamshire Police and Mansfield/Ashfield Runaways Project. The collation of data is being refined to provide a clearer overview of the incidents of missing children and young people from foster placements and the occurrence of return interviews and multi-agency meetings. The outcome for young people is that over the last quarter of this year there has been a reduction in the number of incidents where young people go missing.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Children and young people benefit from having a choice about the diversity of the fostering placement on offer. This enables children and young people to be matched to an environment that matches and promotes their individual needs. Children and

young people feel comfortable in their placements. This results in children and young people developing a sense of self and belonging in their placements. Children and young people experience a high level of placement stability within the fostering service.

Children and young people enjoy sound relationships with their foster family, interact positively with others and behave appropriately. Foster carers set appropriate boundaries and help children and young people. Foster carers are effective with seeking advice and support if they face problems with a child's behaviour. The fostering service can provide direct support to foster carers as key partners, including direct access to a counsellor, psychologist, and a psychiatrist. One foster carer commented, 'As foster carers we have received tremendous support and this has made a real difference for the child in terms of his emotional and psychological development. He is now thriving here and is doing well at school.' Children and young people are further protected because all foster carers attend specific training around behaviour management, attachment difficulties and safeguarding procedures. The outcomes for children and young people are that they enjoy a safe, stable and secure environment because foster carers are suitably trained.

Children and young people are able to enjoy their interests, develop confidence in their skills and are supported and encouraged to engage in leisure and cultural activities. Children and young people have equal access to leisure pursuits and cultural activities. Foster carers are proactive and consistent with encouraging children and young people to participate in sports, arts and recreational hobbies. This helps to increase children and young people's self-confidence and sense of self-accomplishment.

The education and achievement of children and young people is actively promoted as valuable in itself and as part of their preparation for adulthood. Children and young people are supported to achieve their educational potential. Educational achievement is above the national average for children of primary school age. Young people are making satisfactory progress when they attend secondary school. One educationalist commented, 'As a department we are chasing 'Narrowing the Gap' in outcomes for vulnerable children and young people against a context of improving outcomes for all.' The local authority is taking positive action through the 'No less than Success' strategy that champions an awareness of the issues involved and increased educational expectations. Foster carers have direct access to the virtual head teacher and educational psychologist. Foster carers play a positive role in a child's formal and informal education. This is demonstrated through the evidence sought from schools and after school activities, which corroborate the assessments undertaken by the supervising social worker during their visits. Outcomes for children and young people are improving because foster carers show commitment to and care about the child's education.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The fostering service adopts different methods of gaining children and young people's views in line with their age, understanding, first language and communication method. There are many opportunities available for children and young people to express their views. The children in care council is well embedded and represents the views of children and young people within the fostering service. The children in the care council have been highly effective in influencing decisions taken about services. For example, the Pledge emphasises what children and young people want to support them while in care and when they leave. Another example demonstrates how children and young people asked for the Pledge to be produced in booklet format and this now also includes signs and symbols. All of these inclusive practices demonstrate that the fostering service is receptive and responsive to the needs of children and young people. The outcome for children and young people is that they have clear opportunities to have a voice about their life.

Children and young people know that their views, wishes and feelings are taken into account in all aspects of their care. They are helped to understand why it may not be possible to act upon their wishes in all cases and know how to obtain support and make a complaint. This is because children and young people are provided with a wide range of accessible information about the services and supports that are available. Concerns raised by children and young people are dealt with promptly and in a child focused manner. Children and young people's rights are additionally safeguarded because they have direct access to an independent visitor service.

Children and young people have a positive self-view, emotional resilience, and knowledge and understanding of their background. Children and young people benefit because the foster carers provide a safe and nurturing environment so that they learn and develop to become more confident individuals. As children and young people progress within the fostering household, they develop a good sense of security and begin to trust adults around them. Communicating with children and young people is a core area of competence for foster carers and staff and this is reflected in their respective training programmes.

Children and young people feel part of the family and feel included and participate in their foster home. They are welcomed into the foster home and leave the foster home in a planned and sensitive manner which makes them feel cherished and valued. They are not treated differently to the foster carer's own children living in the household. The child's needs are met and they benefit from a stable placement. Foster carers provide a good standard of care and help children and young people to understand their life history by keeping keepsakes, mementos and photographs. This helps to promote and value children and young people's culture and identity.

Children and young people know what plans have been made and they are kept informed in a sensitive way. Foster carers take an active part in carrying out the care plan which includes specific tasks. Fosters carers are making a real difference to

children and young people that they care for. They achieve this because they work in partnership with social workers and within the multi-agency framework so that the principle objective, to improve the lives of children and young people, is met.

Children and young people have, where appropriate, constructive contact with their family, friends and other people who play a significant role in their lives. Children and young people benefit from good, regular and consistent contact. Foster carers provide very practical support. For example by providing transport and meeting at different venues. Children and young people are being effectively supported before, during and after contact visits. This means that children and young people keep in touch with their family and community and are not isolated.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

Foster carers and young people are involved in the pathway planning process and a dedicated after care team provides ongoing social work support to each young person. Pathway plans are clear about how needs are addressed and what help is available to support and prepare young people towards a successful adulthood. The after care team ensures that young people receive benefits advice through personal advisers and through the authority's welfare rights benefit line and website. This helps to develop young people's knowledge base about the financial support options that are available for continued education and employment. The proportion of young people in education, employment and training at the age of 19 years continues to increase year on year. The outcomes for young people are that there is an increased awareness and support for young people leaving care in continuing into further education and training.

Foster carers provide all young people with creative opportunities to learn independent skills. These are appropriate to their age and development. Young people's holistic needs are being fully addressed. Foster carers have access to advisers to help them to prepare and support a young person in the transition to adult living. In conjunction with the after care service, foster carers work with young people to develop the necessary independent living skills. From an early starting point young people are encouraged to develop the practical skills related to cleaning, cooking, budgeting and taking personal responsibility. Foster carers follow the guidance issued regarding the level of personal allowance that is provided to a young person in placement. Young people understand the importance of managing money as a key requirement of preparation for independent living.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

Leadership and management are good. The premises and administrative systems are suitable to enable the fostering service to run smoothly. The fostering service is managed ethically, effectively and efficiently and delivers a service that meets the

needs of its users. The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Staff are supported and guided to fulfil their role and provide a good quality service to children and young people. Staff have access to appropriate supervision and support which is viewed as an integral part of their social work practice. Children and young people benefit because staff give valuable time to reviewing decisions and working to affect positive change in complex individual and fostering household situations. Children and young people's outcomes are improving because the fostering workforce is stable, competent and morale is good.

There are good processes for the selection of staff and fostering households, which are sound and robust. The fostering service recruits, assesses and supports a range of foster carers to meet the needs of children and young people. Good consideration is given to equality and diversity issues within the recruitment and assessment processes. The fostering service is able to sufficiently meet the need for short breaks for disabled children and young people. Family and friends foster carers receive the support they require to meet the needs of children and young people placed with them. This good practice promotes placement choice and provides children and young people with added safeguards through well matched placements.

The fostering panel and decision-maker make timely, quality and appropriate recommendations and decisions in line with the overriding objective to promote the welfare of children and young people in foster care. The fostering panel has a diverse membership, is properly constituted from different disciplines and members understand equality and diversity issues. Good quality assurance systems are in place to monitor the effectiveness of the panel in order to provide quality foster care placements. The panel operates fairly by ensuring applicants can attend panels and by monitoring that all assessments are thorough, rigorous and fair. One foster carer commented, 'The panel process on the day was fair, thorough and well run.' The outcome for children and young people is that the panel is playing an important role in the provision and monitoring of foster carers for children and young people.

Children and young people are being appropriately matched to foster carers who are able to meet their needs. From the outset, there is a formal process to ensure that appropriate matching is taking place. This process successfully identifies any gaps and provides additional support, resources and training that are needed to support the child's placement. As a consequence, there is stability and children and young people make good progress. One foster carer commented, 'Placements are well matched and this is because great care is taken about only offering a place that is likely to succeed. This provides great satisfaction for carers because you watch the child develop and grow.' These actions support and maximise the likelihood of a stable placement. The outcomes for children and young people are more positive as a result of the appropriate focus given to the matching process, which leads to more successful outcomes.

Children, foster carers, staff and the authority are clear about the aims and objectives of the fostering service and what services and facilities it provides. Information is provided that is user friendly and easy to understand and conveys succinctly what is provided. The Statement of Purpose is clear on how the service

promotes equality. The fostering service meets the aims and objectives in the Statement of Purpose. The principle focus of the fostering service is to protect and support the most vulnerable children and young people. This promotes the welfare of children and young people at all times throughout their fostering experience.

The fostering service is provided and managed by those who are suitable to work with children and have the appropriate skills, experience and professional qualifications to deliver an efficient and effective service. One foster carer commented, 'I can't praise my supervising social worker enough. They are always there. If I ask for help or guidance it is dealt with promptly.' Another foster carer commented, 'The fostering service is really well organised and all of the staff are approachable and know you by name.'

The fostering service is financially sound. Extra funding has been provided by the local authority and this helps increase the recruitment of foster carers, additional independent reviewing officers and supervising social workers. This level of investment is helping the local authority to meet its obligations. In turn, children and young people benefit from improved outcomes as the investment in the workforce ensures there is enough workforce capacity to meet needs; this helps to improve the quality of the placements.

Foster carers receive the training and development they need to carry out their role effectively. All training considers equality and diversity perspectives. One foster carer commented, 'Foster carers are encouraged to take part in the training of other foster carers and in such a way, learning and experience are shared across the fostering community.' This enables all foster carers to provide a safe care environment that helps children and young people to be safe in their attachments. At the point of assessment, foster carers attend a comprehensive programme of training. All foster carers are required to complete an annual learning and development plan which clearly identifies training and development needs. Some foster carers observed that the training programme events are so popular that it is not always possible to secure a placement despite submitting their training requests. The fostering service recognises this is a gap within the fostering provision and is taking action to address this area. Well trained foster carers help lead to improving individual outcomes for children and young people.

Foster carers receive the support and supervision they need in order to care properly for children and young people placed with them. There is a highly effective telephone support service available out of hours to foster carers. It is common practice that foster carers are encouraged to join a support group local to their home address and also to participate in the quarterly countywide meetings that take place between foster carers and an officer of the county council. Additionally, there are two groups for 'children who foster' and the sons and daughters of foster carers within the authority. The outcome for foster carers is that they are being well supported. In turn, they provide good quality care, support and guidance to children and young people in placement.

Foster carers are well trained and know what steps to take if they receive an

allegation. All significant events relating to the health and protection of children and young people fostered by the service are notified by the to the appropriate authorities. The outcome for children and young people is that their safety and welfare is promoted at all times.

Children are cared for in line with their placement plan or short-break care plan. The fostering service takes positive action to chase up outstanding visits by the child's social worker. This is because foster carers diligently report to the supervising social workers when these visits are not taking place. Similarly, the independent reviewing officers highlight practice that is weak around statutory visits. Foster carers contribute positively to reviews and assist the child to contribute their reviews in a meaningful manner. Records are clear, up to date, stored securely and contribute to an understanding of the child's life. Records contain sensitive and respectful recordings and reflect issues related to equality and diversity. The practice related to data protection and confidentiality is commendable.

Payments to foster carers are fair and paid in a timely way and this is because the administration and organisation processes at the fostering service are good. Foster carers are clear about the fostering service's payment structures and the payments due to them. This is because the fostering service provides very clear information about financial information which is highly accessible in the foster carer's handbook. Foster carers are also provided with additional allowances which are also clearly explained. All these areas recognise the importance of paying foster carers for their skills.

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 each child over the age of three has their own bedroom (NMS 10.6)
- ensure training is made available to foster carers that meets their personal development plan. (NMS 20.8)