

Blackpool Borough Council - Fostering Service; Childrens Services

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

This local authority fostering service provides care for children and young people who are looked after by the local authority. The fostering service offers a number of different fostering arrangements which include emergency, short and long term, permanence, respite, and care with family and friends.

Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

Health outcomes for young people are good. They are able to access routine healthcare and specialist provision as required. Young people feel safe and secure and have a strong sense of being part of foster carers' families. Educationally, young people of statutory school age have good school attendance and many are achieving well. However, too many school leavers are not involved in further education, employment or training. The local authority acknowledges that this is an area for improvement.

On an individual level young people feel that they are able to make their views count and are able to contribute to decision making concerning the future. A children in care council has been established for young people of secondary school age but younger children are not yet involved.

Organisationally, there are a number of issues that need to be resolved. The fostering service has already identified that inconsistencies in the quality of the assessment of prospective foster carers, the quality of panel minutes and an over-reliance on exemptions are all matters it needs to tackle as a matter of priority. Two further issues requiring attention concern the fact that decision making set out in matching documentation is not transparent and that the central list of foster panel members needs to be finalised.

Improvements since the last inspection

The local authority has recently reintroduced the permanency panel with the aim of securing the most appropriate permanent placement for young people. This panel is in its early stages and there is insufficient evidence to make a judgement as to how successful its work has been to date. The authority has updated the foster carers' handbook to ensure that foster carers can access up-to-date policies and protocols. The short breaks fostering service remains limited in its scope but demand is met predominantly through the authority's residential care provision. Young people are able to access appropriate short breaks provision.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Young people's healthcare needs are met effectively. Foster carers have a good understanding of the healthcare needs of young people and have made arrangements to register young people with family doctors, dentists and opticians. This means that young people have access to both routine and emergency treatment as the need arises. One young person said that their foster carers, 'always make sure that I am feeling ok and if I'm not, then they will arrange an appointment for me at the doctors'.

Specialist services such as the child and adolescent mental health team, the drug and alcohol service and the sexual exploitation team are made accessible as required. Foster carers are clearly aware of these services and value their input. Young people's healthcare needs are clearly set out in case records and are reviewed on a regular basis by the looked after children's nurse. This ensures that the physical and emotional well-being of young people is promoted.

The foster carers' forum meets on a quarterly basis and provides foster carers with an opportunity to discuss a range of issues including healthcare topics. Healthcare professionals have been invited as guest speakers. This enables carers to keep up to date with current good practice. Their training provides them with a good overview of how to promote and manage healthcare needs. Discussion of the specific healthcare needs of young people is always addressed through supervision. This contributes to the overall good health and well-being of young people.

Young people are encouraged to lead healthy lifestyles and have access to a range of sporting activities. They also understand the importance of eating well. For example, one young person said, 'we are fed very well and have a balanced diet.' The fostering service undertakes regular health and safety checks of fostering households to ensure that they remain suitable and to minimise the risk of hazards and accidents. These arrangements mean that young people live in a healthy environment.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

Young people said that they feel safe and secure in their placements. One young person made the following observation: 'I know and understand that as a carer your first role is to keep your children safe and my carers do this.' Another young person said: 'I am very happy with my placement and I always feel safe and secure.'

Foster carers have a good understanding of child protection and safeguarding and are confident about reporting any concerns in line with procedures. Child protection is a key element in training, both pre and post approval. This plays a significant role in helping to keep young people safe.

All foster families have a safer caring plan. The plans are comprehensive and clearly set out the house rules on how all family members should conduct themselves and keep themselves safe. Key issues such as privacy, no secrets and risk taking are addressed. The plans demonstrate that foster carers are actively promoting the welfare of young people.

The numbers of young people being absent without authority is low. As and when young people do go missing they return quickly. Foster carers are aware of the missing persons procedures and take appropriate action to report any incidents and to make young people feel welcomed when they return. The evidence indicates that young people understand the risks involved in leaving their foster home without permission.

Fostering social workers understand that they have a significant role in keeping young people safe and protecting them from harm. They work closely with foster carers, field social workers and independent reviewing officers to ensure that any concerns are addressed promptly. The number of allegations against foster carers is low and all are thoroughly investigated. This contributes to the overall safety and well-being of young people.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is satisfactory.

Young people enjoy positive and warm relationships with their carers and feel that they are listened to. One young person commented that, 'I do feel well cared for where I am living', and another said, 'we hold family meetings where everyone can say their opinion'. Young people benefit from living with foster families that are inclusive and promote positive behaviour.

The fostering service is good at promoting education of young people of statutory school age. It ensures that foster carers are aware of educational issues and any barriers to achievement that children might face when they come into care. Further training is offered on the effects of attachment and trauma issues on learning. The authority's virtual school provides training to designated teachers, nursery settings and other educational establishments on children looked after and the role of the foster carers. There is a dedicated educational psychologist who also supports young people. Attendance and attainment figures are improving. These arrangements provide young people with opportunities to do well in school.

The fostering service has identified two key areas for improvement in the education of young people. Currently only 80% of young people have personal education plans. This means education and learning are not monitored effectively or consistently for all young people. In addition, the service for young people of post statutory school age is less well established and the figures for young people engaged in further education and training are low. This issue is addressed in the strategic plan for fostering.

In general, carers received appropriate documentation prior to the placement of young people. This enables them to work effectively with young people in accordance with placement plans. Foster carers have the authorisation in place to make day-to-day decisions about the care of young people. However, there is evidence that some significant decisions, particularly concerning school trips abroad, have been delayed because they required input from social workers. This resulted in young people being unable to attend and left them feeling that they did not have the same equality of access as other young people.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is satisfactory.

Young people feel that they are consulted about their own personal circumstances. This is reflected particularly well in some of their comments about their foster carers. For example one said, 'my carers talk to me about my options in life', and another thought that the carers, 'listen to what I have to say'. As noted above, young people feel they are part of the foster carers' family and are clearly encouraged to express their views.

Young people are consulted prior to their review meetings and have opportunities to meet with their independent reviewing officer to discuss the decisions that are made. Young people are also encouraged and supported to present their views for foster carers' reviews. The open relationship that many young people have with their carers enables them to make a positive contribution to decision-making processes.

The rate of offending behaviour of young people in foster care has reduced over the last 12 months but the local authority has identified this as an area for further improvement. It aims to be more proactive in working with carers and children to prevent offending behaviour and has set up a working group to look at improving the coordination and access to services for young people at risk of offending. The fostering service will contribute to this group. This positive approach encourages young people to behave responsibly.

Young people's contact with family members and significant others is promoted well. Contact arrangements are clearly set out in placement plans and are carried out as directed. Many foster carers assist with transport and are supportive of young people when contact is cancelled at short notice or has been a distressing experience. Young people are enabled, as far as possible, to maintain appropriate and constructive relationships with their families.

The foundations are in place for general consultation of young people through participation activities. A children in care council has been set up for young people of secondary school age. The fostering service currently coordinates the work of this group rather than children's rights or advocacy services. At present there are no facilities for wider consultation of younger children through participation. This means

that not all young people are fully consulted about the development of the fostering service.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is satisfactory.

Some young people have high aspirations for themselves and express very positive views about the future. Foster carers encourage them to acquire the practical skills they will need to live independently. However, where young people wish to remain with their carers beyond the age of 18, they are enabled to do so through the staying put scheme. These arrangements assist young people to make the transition to adulthood at a pace that suits them.

As noted above, the local authority has identified that it needs to improve the service for young people who have finished statutory education. The recent restructuring of children's services means that all young people over the age of 12 will remain with the same social worker until they reach adulthood. This will help young people establish more positive relationships with their social workers and contribute to an improvement in the consistency of decision making.

At present half of young people in foster care aged over 16 are not in education, training or employment. The local authority has identified that this is not an acceptable position and has begun to take steps to address the issue. It is promoting a 'care to work' scheme and is establishing a number of apprenticeships within the authority. The current overall picture is that some young people approaching adulthood are not yet receiving the support they need to continue their development and improve their career prospects.

Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

The promotion of equality and diversity is satisfactory. Foster carers promote the individual needs of young people well. However, at an organisational level there are a number of factors which indicate that not all young people receive equality of service. In particular, this relates to the lack of a participation forum for pre-secondary school age children and an acknowledgment by the local authority that its services for young people making the transition to adulthood need to be improved. Set out below are concerns about matching and an overuse of exemptions. Both issues indicate that there is an insufficient breadth of foster carers to meet the individual needs of young people.

Foster carers feel well supported and express a strong commitment to working for this particular local authority. They have access to training events, the foster carers' forum and many have obtained appropriate qualifications. Young people benefit from living with carers whose practice is well informed and up to date.

A number of senior managers and the chair of the fostering panel feel that the assessment of foster carers is insufficiently robust and that there are inconsistencies in the evaluation of prospective foster carers' competencies. The evidence examined during the inspection supports this view. The local authority has identified this as an area for improvement to ensure that young people are only placed with carers where it has clearly been established that they are suitable.

The fostering panel meetings are quorate but as yet the central list has to be finalised. The panel chair believes that panel is rigorous in its discussions to approve new carers and fulfils its responsibilities to scrutinise all other matters that come before it. While this may be the case, it is not reflected in panel minutes and the reasons for its recommendations are not always clear. Panel minutes do not currently provide an accurate account of panel's deliberations.

Historically, the fostering service has relied heavily on the routine use of exemptions. While this number has come down significantly in recent months, it is still unacceptably high. Again, the local authority acknowledges this as an area for improvement and senior managers within the authority have issued instructions that no further exemptions are to be granted. It has an action plan in place to ensure that a sufficiently broad range of carers is available to meet current demand for placement and that the service is operating in line with its Statement of Purpose.

The reliance on exemptions highlights further the lack of transparency in panel's decision making. It also provides evidence that there are significant weaknesses in finding suitable matches for some young people in households operating at or below the usual fostering limit. Matching documentation produced by the fostering service is not sufficiently robust in explaining why a match has been made. This means that the local authority is unable to provide sufficient evidence that placements are well thought through.

The fostering service is managed and run by suitably qualified and experienced staff. The fostering social workers feel well supervised and supported in their work. However, the local authority acknowledges that the team is currently operating at or near to capacity and that this has implications for the recruitment of new foster carers, and social workers access to training. The matter is addressed in the authority's strategic plan for the fostering service.

There has been a significant rise in the numbers of family and friends carers. They are subject to the same assessment process as mainstream carers and provided with a similar level of support. This has enabled young people to remain within their own extended families.

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 young people have permission to take part in age-appropriate activities as would normally be granted by a reasonable parent (NMS 7.5)
- ensure that all young people, and particularly those of primary school age, have access to consultation through participation events about the development of the fostering service (NMS 1.7)
- ensure that written panel meeting minutes are accurate, clearly cover the key issues and record the reasons for its recommendations (NMS 14.7)
- provide evidence that the fostering service has sufficient information to facilitate an appropriate match between carers and young people (NMS 15)
- implement an effective strategy to ensure there are sufficient numbers of foster carers to meet with current and future demand. (NMS 13.1)