

# City of York Council Fostering Service

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

The City of York Council operates its fostering services through two teams. The family placement team recruits families to work with children who are looked after by the local authority. The sharing care team recruits families who offer short-term breaks for children with disabilities. All the carers are approved to act as foster carers, including connected person carers.

### Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

Children and young people benefit from an overall good service with outstanding features in a number of outcome areas. These are in the delivery of health, education, behaviour management, leisure activities, participation, consultation, and preparation for independence. These areas are met to an excellent standard and serve to improve children and young people's life chances. Young people say they feel safe and protected from harm. Foster carers understand their role to keep young people safe and provide suitable and stable home environments.

A key strength of the fostering service is the level of support available to disabled children and young people and those who are making the transition into independence. The service works effectively and seamlessly with partner services and parents to ensure high levels of support, continuity, and positive attachments and experiences.

Foster carers are well supported, which has a positive impact on placement stability and outcomes for children and young people. Children and young people know who they can talk to with a problem and are aware about the complaints procedure. Parents for children and young people receiving short break services are provided with good information and opportunities to express their views with respect to placements. A robust fostering panel ensures that all matters presented are thoroughly scrutinised. This practice safeguards children and young people from unsuitable foster carers.

Children and young people benefit from a highly committed, competent and experienced management team. This is championed by corporate parents and well regarded by partner services. Supervising social workers are qualified, experienced, well motivated and child centred. They understand and effectively carry out their role to a standard that supports foster carers very well. The fostering service promotes effective communication throughout the service and with partners. This ensures a well organised and informed fostering service that delivers successful outcomes for children and young people.

Three recommendations are made as a result of this inspection. The first relates to the fostering service ensuring that gaps in matching children with carers are promptly met. The second relates to ensuring support for all connected person carers to meet the needs of children and young people placed with them. The third is repeated from the previous inspection and relates to procedures for monitoring the service. These shortfalls do not significantly impact on the quality of outcomes for children and young people and their development.

### **Improvements since the last inspection**

Most of the recommendations made at the last inspection have been met. Matching of children and young people with foster carers now identifies areas where foster carers need additional support to compensate for any gaps in the match between the child and carer. However, these gaps are not met in a timely enough manner. All fostering panel business is conducted by a quorate fostering panel and reasons for recommendations are recorded. Children and young people are placed with foster carers whose approval is consistent with the proposed placement. Systems are in place to ensure that any gaps in employment are explained. These improvements contribute to the promotion of children and young people's care and welfare. However, the fostering service has yet to implement procedures for monitoring and controlling the activities of the service. This recommendation is reiterated.

### **Helping children to be healthy**

The provision is outstanding.

Children and young people benefit from strong support that promotes their physical, emotional and psychological well-being. They benefit from excellent, well coordinated arrangements from health services, including the support from the looked after children health team and primary health care professionals who ensure children and young people's health needs are identified and are well met in conjunction with their health needs assessments and health plans. An outcome for children and young people is improved health from their starting points. Children and young people are consulted about health issues, in particular how their health assessments can be improved so they attend. They confirm that they get advice about being healthy. One young person said: 'Keeping healthy is a must!' The gap in relation to the 16-plus review has been met with the appointment of the looked after children nurse who will be in post in January 2012.

Children and young people's psychological and emotional health needs continue to be well met by the child and adolescent mental health team. They provide an invaluable service of consultation and support to the fostering service, children and young people and their foster carers.

For children and young people receiving short break care with foster carers, their parents are responsible for their health care. The fostering team and sharing care team work seamlessly with multidisciplinary specialist health professionals, including the sharing care nurse who provides an excellent integral role in ensuring safe health

care for children, young people, carers and their families. A major strength of the short breaks service is the high level of support and advice to carers who are supporting children and young people with a disability, additional needs and significant life-threatening conditions. One sharing care carer said: 'We have fostered for York for 18 years and on the whole feel we are valued and have strong links with the fostering team.' Parents are positive about the services their children receive.

Children and young people are cared for by competent carers who are well trained in health matters relevant to the care they provide. This includes children and young people with complex health needs who need specific medical care and treatment. Foster carers have access to excellent training, information and direct and indirect support in relation to drugs, alcohol and sexual health issues.

Children and young people are actively encouraged to get involved in activities they enjoy in their local community. This is further enhanced by the provision of 'max' cards, offering free leisure access in the area where children and young people live. A specialist project, known as 'All Together Active' has been developed for children and young people who may find partaking in activities with non looked after children and young people challenging. Children under five years old are taken to baby groups and children's centres and get involved in stimulating activities. These interventions encourage social integration and promote children and young people's social development, good health and social interactions.

Children and young people live in foster care homes that provide homely and nurturing environments. Carers' homes are monitored by the service through health and safety checks, and regular announced and unannounced visits. These practices ensure safe standards are maintained and the promotion of children and young people's welfare.

### **Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe**

The provision is good.

Children and young people receive good care and support that protect them from significant harm. This is evident in the close partnership work that the fostering and sharing care service have with safeguarding services such as schools, health, social care, education and safeguarding teams. Children and young people are safe and report that they are well cared for and feel safe. They say they can identify people to speak to if they have a concern. Foster carers are acutely aware about their responsibilities to keep children and young people safe and they take their role very seriously. They are trained in safeguarding issues and understand the allegations against foster carers' procedures. Foster carers understand the reasons for safe care practices and implement the policy so that everyone in the household is kept safe.

Foster carers are clearly aware about their roles and responsibilities to ensure that the welfare and safety of children and young people are paramount. Foster carers said: 'They come first', and, 'safeguarding is our sacred duty.' Children and young people who go missing from foster care are protected by the effective runaway and

missing from home protocol. Close interagency working with safeguarding partners and agencies ensures that children and young people who go missing return quickly, are positively responded to on their return, and are monitored.

### **Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do**

The provision is outstanding.

Children and young people benefit from excellent, trusting relationships with foster carers who represent positive role models. This is a particular strength in the services delivered to children and young people by the sharing care team. Children and young people say they feel loved and like one of the family. One young person consulted said about their foster carers, 'they love me endlessly.'

Children and young people who present at the beginning of their placements with a range of challenging behaviours have successfully minimised them. Clear routines and boundaries maintained by foster carers ensure that children and young people are aware about expectations. Excellent support from the child and adolescent mental health service reinforces the foster carers' approach to managing complex and challenging behaviours, sustaining placements for some children and young people. Children and young people develop confident and sociably acceptable behaviour as a result of these interventions.

Children and young people's educational needs are given high priority and ensure the inclusion of all children and young people irrespective of their learning needs or the type of educational provision they attend. Disabled children and young people are well supported to ensure they enjoy and achieve with the support of the virtual headteacher, educational psychologist, designated teacher, and other services who offer foster carers advice and support. Foster carers are fully involved in children and young people's education planning and attend meetings. This ensures that they can support children and young people's personal education plans. Excellent joint partnerships and close communication with health and educational professionals promote and support children and young people's educational development and specific needs in a way that encourages their aspirations and supports positive attainment.

The sharing care team has a strong relationship with education services, and foster carers are encouraged to observe children and young people in school with parental consent. A number of children and young people are exceeding expectations, with good examination grades and attendance at college and university. This is commendable. Children and young people at risk of disruption to their education benefit from the involvement of the virtual headteacher who provides a strong overview and continues to drive forward educational improvement. Children and young people may have laptops and bikes to assist them in getting to and from their destinations, promoting their education and independence.

Children and young people do not report experiences of bullying. They recognise that it does happen and would know who to talk to about it. The service is very good at

following up instances when concerns are raised about children and young people who would choose not to speak to anyone if they were being bullied.

Children and young people are actively encouraged to develop friendships, and they enjoy activities, social events and holidays with their carers, visiting a diverse range of places and new experiences. Children and young people are developing their social skills and confidence.

### **Helping children make a positive contribution**

The provision is outstanding.

Children and young people's individual needs are very well met and a number are making excellent progress. Foster carers ensure that children and young people are welcomed into their homes and feel like part of the family. They support children and young people to recognise their strengths and develop their resilience, confidence and independence. Once young person said about their carers: 'I really like everyone who I live with and they helped me settle in.'

Children and young people are supported to have a positive self-view, emotional resilience, and knowledge and understanding of their background. Children and young people live with foster carers who provide a stable, homely environment and actively promote their safety and welfare and help them to understand their histories. For example, life story work and individual work with children and young people promotes their culture and identity. This helps children and young people to be informed about the reasons they are being looked after.

Children and young people who live with foster carers or receive sharing care support are actively encouraged and empowered to make a positive contribution, such as taking part in a range of activities, which promotes their social inclusion in their respective communities.

Children and young people's participation and views are central to service delivery and improving outcomes. Participation groups, such as 'show me that I matter', 'I matter too', and other groups enable young people's views to be progressed and acted upon. Children and young people and care-experienced young people have produced a very good DVD and handbook which promotes the local authority's Pledge for looked after young people. The Pledge demonstrates the support that children and young people say they want during and after being looked after.

Children and young people are regularly consulted and their views are respected, seriously considered and have a real impact at cabinet level of the local authority. This is well facilitated by the children's rights officer who provides information, support, guidance, advocacy and consultation. The commitment to the Pledge is taken at the highest leadership and management level and independent reviewing officers consult directly with children and young people about how accurate the Pledge is for them. Children and young people have a voice. They say they feel listened to, especially by their foster carers. One young person said: 'They value

everything I say.' Improvements have been made to include more of the views of children and young people with additional needs so they can contribute to the existing participation groups. Parents act as advocates for children and young people receiving sharing care support. These measure ensure that any issues raised about placements can be promptly addressed to promote continuity of care.

Children and young people benefit from clear and agreed contact arrangements with significant people in their lives. This is well facilitated by competent and well-supported carers. Contact is actively promoted and serves to promote children and young people's identity and relationships outside of the foster care home.

### **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is outstanding.

Young people benefit from excellent support and guidance to help them make the successful transition into adulthood. This is irrespective of their age and ability. Excellent partnership work with the pathway planning team ensures that young people are promptly referred and pathway plans integrate a range of services, such as social care, education, training, participation and accommodation services. This provides an excellent example of through care and is a major strength. Pathway plans are produced in consultation with young people and their foster carers to an excellent standard. Foster carers are appropriately trained in transitions to ensure they can support the young people they care for. Young people say that they are helped to think about their future. Typical comments include: 'I have information about further education and soon will be getting information about flats/staying put', and, 'I get support from school and my foster carer'. Sharing care foster carers actively contribute to care planning for young people making the transition into adulthood as far as practicable.

Young people and their foster carers are well informed and advised about leaving care matters. They are provided with a USB memory stick, along with their welcome pack, that tells them all they need to know about the scheme.

The fostering service, with the support of corporate parents, has championed a number of pilot schemes to provide opportunities for young people who are reaching care leaving age. For example, the staying put scheme is in full operation and offers young people the opportunity to continue their placement with foster carers post-18 years old. This is an excellent family model that promotes young people's opportunities to stay with carers while planning to move on at their own pace. It involved close consultation with foster carers and care leavers who were on the steering group and had a real say in the development of the project. In addition, excellent resources, such as taster and trainer flats, and supported lodgings, are available to young people. The second chance scheme provides young people with the opportunity to return to foster carers if independent living is not successful. All care leavers in York get an offer from the local council for accommodation. This level of support and inclusion enables young people to make a positive transition into adulthood in a similar way to their peers who are not in the care system.

A large number of care leavers in education, employment and training, including those young people in apprenticeships, continue to be very well supported. For example, an excellent initiative provides supported work placements with local employers. The outcome has been that several care leavers have found longer term employment as a direct result of this experience. Care leavers in higher education are supported financially, and those who wish to learn how to drive are assisted. Vulnerable care leavers who are leaving prison are supported so they do not fall through the net. This level of support is consistent with a good parent and enhances young people's life chances.

## **Organisation**

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Children and young people's diverse care needs, support and guidance are individualised and actively promoted in all areas of their development.

The Statement of Purpose, incorporating fostering and sharing care services, has been reviewed and is up to date. It clearly sets out the service's aims and objectives and facilities it provides. Children and young people have access to guides consistent with their age and abilities. The Pledge is included with the guides. It informs young people about expectations that the local authority has promised to deliver when they become looked after.

Children and young people benefit from a child-centred service that has strong leadership. Managers are experienced, highly competent and motivated at all levels of the service. They communicate remarkably well with each other within their immediate remit and with partner services in a highly effective manner. This ensures a service that is proactive, self-auditing and very well informed. Strategic management is accessible and approachable. Corporate parenting is actively championed and the outcomes have a direct impact on the service that children and young people receive. Despite austerity measures and pressures nationally, the service continues to place the needs of the child first.

Managers are acutely aware about the strengths of the service and areas for development. However, some of the plans are yet to be implemented and measured for impact and sustainability. There is still no procedure for monitoring and controlling the activities of the fostering service. Although there is no known impact on children and young people, this would ensure the basis for clear and robust monitoring systems.

Fostering social workers are child centred and are committed to positive outcomes for children and young people. They feel well managed and supported and have good opportunities to develop their knowledge through a range of relevant training opportunities. One fostering social worker said: 'I have found the fostering team to be a pleasure to work in. Everyone is very supportive and committed to their role to

ensure the best support and therefore outcomes for children.' Outcomes for children and young people are positive when the fostering workforce is competent, well supported and shares a positive morale and sound work ethic.

Good arrangements are in place to ensure that all personnel employed by the fostering service are subject to efficient and transparent vetting processes. This means that only suitably qualified and experienced people can work with children and young people. Prospective carers' assessments contain appropriate safeguarding checks and are of good quality. This ensures that prospective carers have the competence and capacity to provide safe and nurturing care to children and young people. The service recognises that they need to recruit more foster carers to meet the current demand. They have a clear strategy that demonstrates how they intend to achieve this.

Children and young people benefit from a well-managed fostering panel that is independently chaired and functions within the legal parameters. The fostering panel ensures close scrutiny of information, makes timely, robust recommendations and provides good qualitative feedback. The agency decision maker makes well-informed decisions based on clear recommendations.

Clear, focused communication, information sharing and excellent working together practices promote stable placements and better outcomes for children and young people. Children and young people are well matched with foster carers and their complex and diverse needs are well met. However, not all gaps in meeting needs, although recognised, are promptly addressed.

Allegations against foster carers are properly dealt with and carers understand the process, which is enhanced by the training they receive.

A large number of foster carers are very positive about the support they receive from the fostering service. This includes regular visits and contacts from fostering social workers. They say that staff will go the extra mile for them. Typical comments include: 'There is always someone available if I need help or advice on anything'; 'We have regular supportive visits from our link worker'; and 'I am very happy to be doing a job I love with the support I need to do it to the best of my ability.' Foster carers are impressed by the support they receive from partner agencies, and in a number of cases do not feel their placements would have survived without them. However, not all connected person carers have felt as supported. This is an issue that the service has acknowledged and has already made plans to resolve.

Foster carers say that they get good out-of-hours support. All foster carers have the option to become members of support organisations, such as the long established City of York Foster Care Association. Senior managers are in regular communication with the association and are in the process of responding to some pressing issues raised by them.

Improved training programmes and initiatives ensure that all foster carers continue to learn and develop their knowledge and experience. Managers are well aware

about some of the tensions with respect to some foster carers completing the mandatory childcare qualification, training in general and attending support groups. This is particularly related to connected person carers and is an area that the service is addressing.

Good administrative systems and records, including sound computer systems, are very well organised and provide a very good record of children and young people's progress, care planning arrangements and review of their care.

## **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):

- implement clear and effective procedures for monitoring and controlling the activities of the service (NMS 25.1)
- ensure that where gaps in matches are identified, the fostering service works with the responsible authority to ensure the placement plan promptly addresses any additional training, resources or support required (NMS 15)
- ensure that all connected person carers receive the support they require to meet the needs of children placed with them. (NMS 30)