

Coventry City Council Fostering & Family Placement 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

Coventry Fostering Service provides a large proportion of looked after children's placements in the city, in recent years numbering usually between 230 and 280. These placements are provided by a wide and diverse range of carers. Most carers offer one or two placements, others are able to look after three or (exceptionally) more children. Some carers offer emergency care for the critical period when a child enters care; others offer short-term care for up to 24 months. Some are matched to long-term placements of children and provide good permanent families. In recent years there has been a growth in the number of friends and family carers approved, most looking after a relative's children. The development of Residence Order and Special Guardianship policies, with associated financial support, has assisted the fostering service to offer an alternative to children being placed in long-term care with friends and family carers; this reduces the length of time such carers continue to be registered as foster carers.

Currently, there are 173 mainstream foster carers, 39 approved friends and family carers and the fostering service is supporting 51 Special Guardianship support plans.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

Children, young people, foster carers and parents of children and young people in placement were mostly positive about the service. Where individuals were unhappy about the quality of the service, these issues have been addressed through the fostering service's complaints procedures.

The fostering agency achieves good outcomes for children and young people in foster care. Children and young people's individual needs related to their health, social and emotional development and education are met within the fostering households. Foster carers have good access to a range of professionals, including health and education; this access supports the child's placement in foster care effectively.

Children and young people's welfare is effectively safeguarded. This is because foster carers are well trained and the fostering service has developed effective partnerships that promote best practice. One young person commented, 'I feel safe, secure, happy and well looked after.'

Children and young people have outstanding access to top quality educational resources and support. They are making strong progress with their education.

Children and young people's views are being successfully canvassed by foster carers

and the fostering service with positive impacts.

Foster carers are providing an environment for young people to develop their independence skills and make a successful transition to adulthood.

The leadership and management of the fostering service are good. A good range of policies, procedures and internal monitoring helps foster carers to be effective professionals. There is a clear vision to provide good quality placements and experiences for all children and young people within fostering.

Areas for improvement include increasing the access to specialist health services for children and young people in all cases. Similarly, to enhance the quality of the matching documentation so that the correct levels of support, training and resources are available in all cases. To improve the foster carers' reviews so that they are taking place in a timely manner. Finally, to ensure that payments to foster carers are prompt and taking place with no delays. None of these areas adversely affect the continued good outcomes that children and young people are achieving through their foster placements.

Improvements since the last inspection

At the last inspection three recommendations were made. All have been addressed. These were in respect of: further foster care training for children and young people with unusual allergies and food intolerance; enhancing communication between the fostering service and the child's social worker; arrangements for supervisions to be on a planned basis.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

The health care needs of the children and young people are effectively identified, supported and met. Their health is promoted in accordance with their care plans. Children and young people have good access to health care resources although they do not always have prompt access to specialist health care services which has the potential to compromise their needs.

Foster carers receive training on health, first aid and in the management and administration of medication. They receive comprehensive guidance to enable them to care for children with complex health needs.

The fostering service promotes children and young people's physical, emotional and psychological health and makes good arrangements to ensure they deliver the health services children need. Multi-agency working is a real strength of the organisation. Staff from the fostering service work well in partnership with other health professionals focusing on the harder to reach young people to encourage them to access medicals and health assessments. This improves outcomes for young people by ensuring that they receive appropriate health interventions which address their

health needs.

The authority has re-commissioned a new looked after children and child and adolescent mental health service which provides emotional and mental health support for children and young people. This has reduced the time young people have to wait to access support as the service works directly with children and young people, foster carers and professionals. This service provides a range of therapeutic services and drop in clinics. The service also provides training and guidance about behaviour, attachment and mental health and well-being.

Foster carers are proactive in encouraging children and young people to live healthy lifestyles. Children and young people have the opportunity to participate in a wide range of physical activities in line with their interests.

Children and young people live in foster homes that provide a healthy environment and have the space they need. Foster carers are given the equipment and physical adaptations needed to enable them to provide a high level of care to children with disabilities and complex health needs. Foster carers' homes are regularly monitored to ensure that the environment is consistently safe, clean, secure and well maintained. Children over the age of three usually have their own bedroom. If they do wish to share, there is proper consideration given to the wishes of all the children concerned, their individual needs and any potential for bullying and abusive behaviour.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

Children and young people are kept safe and their welfare is promoted. The fostering service works effectively in partnership with other agencies to develop clear and comprehensive systems to ensure their protection and safety. Any allegation made by a child or young person is taken seriously and investigated in line with the authority's safeguarding procedures. The fostering service has a designated senior manager for managing allegations and for liaising with the local authority designated officer. The service also conducts cause of concern meetings when there are concerns around the quality of care within a foster placement. As a result, children and young people's safety and welfare are being promoted at all times.

Foster carers receive safeguarding training as part of their core training and access safe-caring and health and safety training within the first two years of approval. This ensures they are aware of their roles and responsibilities in supporting and safeguarding children and young people.

Children and young people live with foster carers who help them to understand how to protect themselves and live safely. Fostering households have safe-care policies that are specific to their families. These are reviewed on the placement of children and young people to reflect the individual needs and requirements of those placed with them. This ensures all those living in the fostering household are fully aware of

any particular risks relating to children and young people's behaviour.

Children and young people who go missing from foster carers are safeguarded and supported to change their high risk behaviours through robust multi-agency protocols. Foster carers are aware of these protocols and the procedures and follow these fully in practice. Children and young people are protected as far as possible and responded to positively on their return. A multi-agency screening panel tracks all children and young people missing from care and monitors any repeat episodes. This helps to raise awareness and identify the services needed to address the reasons why young people go missing.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Children and young people feel comfortable in their placements. They become confident and develop a strong sense of belonging in their placement. One young person commented, 'Because I am part of the family now I will do anything that I'm asked.' Foster carers place strong emphasis on the importance of promoting positive behaviour. This is underpinned by comprehensive good quality training that addresses attachment issues so that foster carers can take a full account of any difficulties arising from the child's past experiences. Each foster carer's safe caring policy is individualised so that any possible behavioural issues are addressed and dealt with on a practical basis. This promotes consistency of care, support and guidance leading to improved outcomes for children and young people.

Children and young people are able to enjoy their interests and develop confidence in their skills. This is helping children and young people to explore a rich variety of sporting, recreational and cultural activities. Children have equal access to activities and leisure pursuits. For example, swimming, football, drama, horse riding, scouts, cadets and playing musical instruments.

The education and achievement of children and young people is actively promoted and supported. One educationalist commented, 'They out perform the national average for looked after children.' Children and young people have an outstanding range of educational resources to support their learning. One young person commented, 'I have had home tuition and this has really helped me to progress with my Maths and English.' Children and young people have access to additional teaching assistant support in schools because the local authority continues to prioritise extra funding. This supports the comprehensive approach to educational achievement.

The local authority has invested heavily to help improve outcomes for young people so that they become economically active in the future. For example, investment in providing targeted work to personalise the curriculum for 14-16 year olds, is working well to improve education outcomes by the age of 16. Good outcomes are now leading to improved progression to post 16 learning overall and in particular to progression to courses above foundation level in the different school environments. One educational co-ordinator commented, 'These improved outcomes are also

reflected in more young people choosing to enter school sixth forms than in previous years.' This promotes equality of access for all young people in their education.

Young people have access to extensive alternative programmes and courses. They benefit because there is an initiative, the work related learning service, which provides a bespoke provision when this is needed. One senior manager in education commented, 'We deliver a highly-regarded training unit for foster carers which supports them to help maintain high attendance, know who to liaise with in school, understand some of the problems looked after children are likely to experience and provides a suitable learning environment.' One young person commented, 'I am a fully qualified Chef and I am now doing a course in retail. I am aiming to open a restaurant.' As a result, young people progress successfully in their education and maximise their opportunities.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The fostering service adopts a very successful strategy gaining children and young people's views in line with their age, understanding, first language and communication method. There are endless examples of children and young people having directly contributed to policy and practice through meetings with elected members of the council and with staff and senior managers. One young person commented, 'We have got involved in shaping consultations, sit on recruitment and selection panels and commissioning boards.' Another young person commented, 'Medical staff see us at a venue and time of our choice for our health assessments, because we have indicated we do not want to attend a hospital venue for our statutory health assessments.' This inclusive practice promotes the voice of children and young people.

Children and young people are developing a positive self-view and are beginning to understand their background. Foster carers are proactive in asking for help if there is regression with behaviours. Children and young people are growing up in an environment where foster carers consciously engage and help foster the child's emotional health. This helps improve outcomes for children and young people so that they are benefiting from a stable placement.

Children and young people have, where appropriate, constructive contact with their parents, wider family, friends and other people who play a significant role in their lives. Where there are pre-existing and meaningful relationships contact is actively supported. Children and young people are supported to develop an understanding of their past. Foster carers are very diligent with making travel arrangements and meeting at different venues across the city; their commitment is unyielding. One social worker commented, 'The carers promoted contact with the child's siblings and the children benefited from this consistency.' The outcomes for children and young people mean that they are not isolated from their wider family and community; this provides reassurance to the children and young people.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

As young people progress through their placement and mature, foster carers provide creative opportunities to learn independent skills. This includes taking an active part in the fostering household to learn basic skills related to cooking, budgeting and travelling independently. All this is appropriately paced and is appropriate to their age and development.

Young people's pathway plans are implemented effectively with contributions from foster carers to support the next stage in their lives. The leaving care team has been strengthened to work with young people from 15 years onwards. One senior manager commented, 'This includes a social worker who is trained as a social pedagogue who has the skills to engage young people who are difficult to reach as well as running weekend groups.'

Organisation

The organisation is good.

Leadership and management are good. The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The fostering service meets its aims set out in the fostering service's Statement of Purpose. Good systems are in place to monitor and review the performance of the service. The management team has a very accurate view of the strengths and areas for improvement within the service. The fostering service is managed and lead by a committed group of senior staff. This is leading to continued improved outcomes for children and young people.

Since the last inspection, there have been several changes including the restructuring of the management team and a number of staff leaving. There are further impending changes including an office move and for staff to work more closely within a multi-disciplinary arena. This journey of change has been challenging for staff at times. However, staff are emerging with a more up beat approach and see the benefits of working collaboratively with the aim to improve outcomes for children and young people in foster care.

Foster carers are generally satisfied with the level of support and supervision that they receive. One foster carer commented, 'There have been difficulties with staff shortages and a period of unsettlement within the fostering service. There were many changes with senior managers. This now seems to have settled.' As a result of all the changes, not all foster home reviews are taking place in a timely manner. This partially compromises the fostering service's overview of the foster carers' performance and reviewing the continued quality of the foster placement.

The fostering service achieves well-matched placements in practice. This is because the recruitment and duty team know the profile of foster carers very well. Once a match is being considered appropriate the potential foster carer is engaged in the

process from an early point so that dialogue and preparation can begin. However, this very good practice is not backed up by a robust documentation. This has the potential to not clearly set out what additional training, resource or support might be necessary and may compromise the good practice of getting well matched placements in all cases.

Payments to carers are clearly set out in the foster carer's handbook. However, some foster carers are frustrated by a lack of consistency with making timely payment for items that they have purchased on behalf of the child, such as passports or a pair of glasses. Equally, there have been some changes to the new electronic payment systems which caused a number of errors. As a result, foster carers are not, in all cases, entirely satisfied. The fostering service is currently addressing this area.

The fostering service is proactive in how they recruit potential foster carers. A specific placements team manages and co-ordinates all referrals for placement, including in-house fostering placement provision. This ensures that all appropriate options can be considered in terms of placement finding and matching. One staff member from this team commented, 'We want local people for Coventry children because this leads to better outcomes. For example, each Friday there is a road show in the city to actively recruit foster carers.' All potential foster carers are assessed using a formal assessment which staff have been fully trained to complete. Most assessments are completed in a timely manner and this is an area that the fostering service is looking to continue to improve.

There is a designated team, named the connected person's team, that supports friends and family fostering which is highly successful. In turn, this is promoting legal permanence as an option through connected person's assessments; there are a significant number of Special Guardianship Orders being granted by the court. The outcome for children and young people is that they remain within their own family network. One friends and family foster carer commented, 'The fostering team were very kind, they listened and they wanted it to work for my grandchild.'

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 panel is properly constituted with relevant professionals and foster carers represented from other external services. The skills, knowledge, expertise and match of suitably diverse groups among members are good. Since the last inspection, panel has improved its processes through a thorough quality assurance programme. The outcome for children and young people is that good quality foster carers are being approved. This helps to promote and protect children and young people's welfare during their fostering placement.

The fostering service is satisfied that the staff and foster carers recruited are suitable to work with vulnerable children and young people. An effective recruitment and selection process is in place. Representatives of the Coventry Care Council actively participate in new staff interviews and contribute to the decision making process. This good practice promotes equality and inclusive practice in the service.

Foster carers have good access to a varied programme of training which is improving year on year. This is because of the increasing participation of multi-agency partners from safeguarding, to health and education. Training considers carefully equality and diversity perspectives. The online training available to foster carers is commendable and highly prized. The outcome for children and young people improves because foster carers are well trained and supported with the fostering task.

Staff supervision and appraisals are taking place. Staff training is highly invested with clear pathways for career progression. This includes opportunities to become a highly qualified practitioner. One social worker commented, 'This increases job satisfaction and is likely to lead to good staff retention.' The outcome for children and young people is that they experience good continuity of supervising social workers and their support is not be interrupted by staff leaving.

The fostering service maintains records to a good standard. Children and young people's care placement plans are being effectively supported and implemented. Children and young people are actively encouraged to contribute to their review. There is the added protection of access to an advocate to represent their views where there is disagreement. Since the last inspection, a new electronic system is being developed and introduced with the aim of achieving more effective and efficient record keeping. Foster carers are diligent with making written records about the child's progress and development. The outcome for children and young people is that records are helping them now and in the future to understand their fostering experience.

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 children have prompt access to specialist health services when they need them (NMS 6.4)
- ensure that the matching criteria sets out any additional training, resource or support required NMS 15.1
- ensure that any agreed expenses for care of the child are reimburse promptly and at the agreed time (NMS 28.1)
- ensure that all foster carers are reviewed at least annually. (The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 4: Fostering Services 5.60)