

Derby City 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 fostering service forms a part of the city council's Children and Young People's Services. It provides a full range of fostering placements, including family care, and also supports carers who provide short breaks to families. The three fostering teams are led by service managers and a head of service. These teams are responsible for all aspects of the fostering task including the recruitment, training and support of carers.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This full, announced inspection considers all parts of the service and finds that the overall quality rating is good. There is a continuation of the good standards identified at the last inspection. Effective leadership has been applied during a period of challenging budget constraints and increasing demand for foster placements.

There is good continuity of staffing and carers receive good support. Improvements have been made by the authority to corporate parenting. This means that children and young people are more involved in decision-making. Children and young people benefit from particularly effective contact arrangements.

This inspection makes five recommendations. These relate to: the training of the manager; ensure children and young people know about the Children's Rights Director; make sure that any gaps arising from the matching process are recorded and addressed; allow foster carers to attend all panel meetings at which their approval is being discussed and; to assess the ongoing competency of all carers not just the main carers.

Improvements since the last inspection

The last inspection made three recommendations. These have all been addressed. Foster carers now have health records that can transfer readily between placements, whether for short breaks or other reasons. This is an improvement that carers welcome as it makes the management of health care easier and more timely. Safe care plans are redrafted for each placement. This ensures that the individual characteristics of each placement are considered for every children and young person. Carers receive regular supervision and matters arising from training are discussed. This report makes a recommendation for improvement in this area.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Children and young people benefit from good access to health services; they feel their carers help them become and remain healthy. One young person reported that he had been helped to lose weight since being in foster care and felt better for it. Children and young people receive a priority service from health agencies that ensures their physical and emotional needs are assessed promptly. Carers receive suitable support and training so that strategies, such as those regarding teenage pregnancy and drug misuse, are effective. Carers also ensure that specific health needs arising from ethnicity are appropriately addressed.

Carers ably advocate for children and young people to ensure they receive specialist health services. Other professionals note that foster carers thoroughly understand the individual needs of the children and young people in their care, including those who have learning and other disabilities. There is good integration and communication between agencies and opportunities are used to improve these wherever possible. Shortfalls were identified in the information that carers have and in the access of children and young people placed out of city to health services. Both have been improved to the benefit of children and young people and carers.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

Children and young people benefit from strong systems of protection. They feel safe and make good progress as a result. One social worker said, 'Once children are placed in foster care we see a real improvement in their attitude, abilities and overall well-being'. Staff and carers address any suspicions of significant harm promptly and have effective working relationships with professional partners. Those carers working with children or young people with disabilities are specifically aware of the issues affecting them.

Children and young people are thoroughly protected from bullying arising, for example, from their backgrounds or sexuality. All children and young people who responded said that they are not being bullied in their foster homes. Carers and supervising social workers ensure that any such issues arising elsewhere, such as in school, are rigorously checked.

Carers establish and maintain positive relationships with the children and young people in their care; safety is a high priority. As a consequence, there is a high rate of placement stability. This is an important contribution to children and young people's success. Any potential hazards are considered carefully and children and young people are protected well from threats such as those posed if they go missing.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Children and young people in foster care are successfully helped to behave positively. Suitable placements and effective role modelling by foster carers mean children and young people learn appropriate ways to address difficulties. Foster carers are taught techniques that prevent tensions rising and understand the emotional and psychological damage that has often occurred. As a result, children and young people feel they are treated like all the other children in the family. They think that any punishments that occur are fair.

Positive relationships impact positively on the education of children and young people. Children and young people benefit from purposeful work being undertaken to network agencies together and track the progress of individuals. This means that children and young people in foster care receive the help they need. The benefits of networking is also helping children and young people with their confidence in education; whether it is from home tutors, personal advisors or through designated teachers in schools. Attendance figures are particularly high and represent the commitment of carers to ensuring their children and young people are not disadvantaged. An overwhelming majority of the children and young people who responded feel their education is either good or outstanding. One young person said, 'I've gone up a level at school since being in foster care'. Children and young people are clearly encouraged to be aspirational and support is provided beyond 18 in colleges, universities and work-places.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Most children and young people feel they are listened to well. There is a good variety of ways in which they are consulted and this is under review to improve it further. Recent improvements include the establishment of a corporate parenting sub-committee to provide coordination in this area. Groups of children and young people are consulted by the council about a wide range of matters. Also, it is planned that a child who is in care will carry the Olympic torch through the city. These measures help to inspire children and young people and give them confidence.

The needs of a wide range of children and young people are also met well by documents being in a variety of formats to suit different ages or reading abilities; they are also translated into other languages if required for example by children or young people seeking asylum. Independent advocacy is available as are independent listeners so that the opinions of all foster children are supported. Most children and young people understand how to make a formal complaint but few know how to contact the Children's Rights Director. This shortfall is unlikely to affect many children or young people but is a significant part of their rights.

Supervising social workers, reviewing officers and foster parents ensure that the

views of individual children and young people are routinely taken into account with regard to placement planning. Carers are fully aware of the needs of children and young people and ensure these are met. For example, carers ensure that teenagers become more independent and learn domestic and financial skills. Culturally appropriate food and personal care products are routinely provided so that children and young people maintain an understanding of their identities. Carers have copies of written placement plans and contribute well, with children and young people, to their reviews.

Children and young people feel secure in their placements and understand what their long-term plans are. This is a substantial contribution to their emotional resilience. In tandem with this, there is particularly effective attention paid to maintaining family contact. No concerns were raised about contact by carers or children or young people. This is an important contribution to the emotional welfare of children and young people, especially considering the complexity of court-directed arrangements and the substantial impact these can have on carer households.

Children and young people benefit from a range of free activities in city amenities. Although these are of less benefit to the significant proportion that live out-of-city, carers ensure that all children and young people establish supportive social and recreational networks. Most children and young people feel well-integrated into their households and neighbourhoods.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

Almost all young people feel they are helped well to plan for their futures, in particular by their foster parents. Formal planning for leaving care is sometimes later than desirable but still provides substantial help in ensuring their skills are suitably developed. Skills include the development of sufficient self-esteem so that young people of all abilities represent themselves effectively; for others it includes the provision of driving lessons. The organisation is also successful in placing a large majority of care leavers in education, employment or training.

Accommodation is provided to care leavers as it helps to obtain appropriate benefits, if they are eligible. Support is maintained with young adults after they leave the service too, which increases their confidence and sense of security. Young people with learning disabilities are able to stay in their foster placements longer if it is in their best long-term interests. For example, if they are likely to transfer to an adult placement. The service recognises areas that can be improved and makes appropriate links with other services, such as the housing department.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

Children and young people and carers benefit from an up-to-date Statement of Purpose and children's guide. These provide essential information about the service and are available in a range of formats. Children with learning difficulties, for example, reported that having the information on a disc was particularly helpful. These documents confirm the authority's commitment to equal opportunities, which is evidenced in practice.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Needs arising from disability, ethnicity and age for example, are addressed well. Corporately, improvements are ongoing in the consultation with the whole range of children so that their needs are reflected throughout policies. Individual cultural and other needs are addressed well, for example through placement matching and planning. One young person said, 'For the first time I had a carer who could understand and help me with the right things for my hair and skin'.

Leadership is effective and there has been a constructive reaction to recent budgetary constraints. There is substantial fostering experience in the management team and extensive monitoring. This contributes to effective development planning, which ensures good outcomes for children and young people. However, the new manager is not undertaking training to fully ensure he has the knowledge necessary for managing the service. However, the current impact of this shortfall is low, and all staff are supported and guided well. All staff have regular supervision meetings and sufficient opportunities to train and, in the case of supervising social workers, maintain their professional accreditations.

Given the wide racial diversity in the city, appropriate steps continue to ensure the service recruits a more representative range of carers. For children and young people, the impact of this gap is relatively low because suitable carers are located from independent fostering agencies, if necessary. Effective monitoring means that shortfalls are readily identified and steps are taken to address them. This includes the recent substantial increase in demand for foster placements. Despite the pressures on the new recruitment team, good matching takes place and is represented by a low level of disruptions and good continuity of placements. This is a critical benefit to children and young people's emotional well-being and future success. Documents are in place to guide and record how matches are made. However, these are not always completed and do not always show how any gaps are addressed. This means that attention to individual issues is less thorough in this area and the process of decision making is less transparent. The recruitment of staff generally is thorough and is increasingly taking into account the views of children and young people.

The fostering panel is well organised and thorough and has a good range of independent members. It plays an effective role in ensuring high standards are maintained in households and in the service. Instances of households going over the

normal fostering limit, for example, are kept under review to ensure that children and young people's individual needs continue to be met. The service managers are aware that recommended timescales are not always met, for example in decision making and provision of papers to panel members. However, steps are underway to resolve this and the impact of the delays on children and young people is minimal. Foster carer approvals are reviewed regularly although carers are not always invited to attend and be heard. This shortfall means that carers' views are heard less often than necessary.

Foster carers, staff and prospective foster carers receive thorough training, which is particularly well received by carers. This is supplemented by excellent support and advice from their supervising social workers, and prompts payment of fees and allowances. Such training is adapted to meet the needs of short-break carers and friends and families carers, too, so they can effectively meet the particular needs of their foster children. However, there is a lack of clarity about how individual developmental needs are recorded, addressed and reviewed for every foster carer. This means there is a potential shortfall in the competence of those carers who attend less training; in practice these are predominantly men.

Satisfactory arrangements are in place to assess and support family and friends foster carers. The particular needs of this group of carers are recognised by staff and trainers. They have equal access to support and training and there have been recent improvements to their access to financial support.

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 the manager undertakes such training as is appropriate to ensure that they have the experience and skills necessary for managing the fostering service (Regulations 8(3) and 10 (2))
- ensure children know how to contact the Children's Rights Director (NMS 1.5)
- ensure, where gaps in matching are identified, the fostering service ensure the placement plan sets out any additional training, resource or support required (NMS 15.1)
- ensure foster carers are given the opportunity to attend and be heard at all panel meetings at which their approval is being discussed (NMS 14.5)
- ensure the reviews of each carer include an appraisal of performance against clear and consistent standards, and the effectiveness of training and development is evaluated with regard to every carer. (NMS 20.6)