

Dorset County Council Fostering Team

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

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Inspector	David Coulter
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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

Dorset County Council Fostering Services recruits, trains and supports foster carers throughout Dorset. The service provides both short and long term placements. A Breakaway scheme also provides short breaks for children with disabilities.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

Outcomes for young people in foster care in Dorset have improved significantly in a number of key areas since the last inspection. Young people currently receive a high quality individualised service from a local authority that has embraced its responsibilities as a corporate parent. In recent times the age profile of young people entering foster care has changed significantly with an increase in both young children and those over 16 years. The service has responded positively to these changes and has managed to meet the needs of both groups from within its own pool of Dorset foster carers.

The health and wellbeing of young people is carefully monitored and any identified needs are appropriately addressed. Young people are provided access to a range of specialist services to address difficulties associated with mental health, drugs and alcohol, eating disorders and sexual health.

A strong safeguarding ethos permeates every aspect of the service and a comprehensive range of policies, procedures and working practices keep young people safe. Procedures relating to the recruitment of both foster carers and social work staff are thorough and minimise the risk of unsuitable individual's gaining entry into the service. Young people said they felt safe in their placements and were aware how and to whom they could convey any worries or concerns. The views of young people are regularly sought on all aspects of their lives. Foster carers are pro-active in advocating on behalf of the young people in their care and try to ensure they have access to services and appropriate resources to meet their needs. Foster carers are clearly aware of those at particular risk, such as babies and young people with complex health needs and supervise accordingly.

The service benefits from having a group of experienced and dedicated foster carers. Young people respond positively to the stability, security and support they receive in their placements and make significant progress in many aspects of their lives such as education and social development. Foster carers are well supported by an extremely motivated staff team who are committed to ensuring that the service responds effectively to changing demands. Many of the young people now entering the service present with complex care needs. The service has responded to this by developing a

number of multi-disciplinary initiatives. This has included the development of a parent and child programme, Horizon, that involves health and social work staff from within the children's services directorate. Future plans include a joint working initiative with the health visiting service. Such initiatives demonstrate the service's willingness to develop new and imaginative ways to meeting the needs of some of Dorset's most vulnerable young people.

Although there are two recommendations arising from this inspection they are aimed at further improving the quality of foster care provided by the service which was assessed as being good.

Improvements since the last inspection

The one requirement and two recommendations arising out of the last inspection have been appropriately addressed. Systems are in place that ensure all significant events are appropriately reported. All staff have to have two written references before their appointment is confirmed. All verbal references have to be followed up in writing. Each fostering panel now contains at least one member with expertise in education

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

The health and well-being of each young person is given a high priority on entering the service. An initial health assessment determines the health of each individual and identifies any outstanding needs including immunisations. Foster carers reported that, except in rare emergency situations, key medical information is always made available prior to any placement. The service's looked after children nurses have established good working relationships with a range of allied health professionals and make sure any identified health needs are effectively addressed within realistic time scales. There is an effective referral system that ensures that young people in foster care can gain access to child and adolescent mental health services. Young people are encouraged to monitor their own health and report any worries or concerns at an early stage. The health of each young person is always discussed during their reviews. Each young person is registered with a general practitioner and dentist. Foster carers receive regular training on health related topics and support young people by closely monitoring their health, providing advice and arranging and accompanying young people to appointments.

An effective matching process ensures young people with disabilities and complex health needs are placed with foster carers who have the knowledge, skills and appropriate facilities to meet their needs. A number of foster carers' homes have been modified and specialist equipment installed to improve access for young people with mobility difficulties. Foster carers are provided with specific training from health professionals on intrusive medical procedures to keep young people safe. All consents for medical interventions are appropriately obtained.

Young people are provided with health advice and guidance from, amongst others, looked after children's nursing staff. Information on specific issues such as smoking, sexual health, eating disorders and mental health issues are available via two open access websites. Young people are encouraged to lead healthy lifestyles and are made aware of the importance of eating sensibly and taking regular exercise. Free passes provide opportunities for young people to access a wide range of sporting and recreational facilities across the county. Young people indicated that their health needs were being appropriately met and were aware of how to keep themselves healthy. Evidence indicates many are keeping physically active by regularly participating in a wide of activities such as football, swimming, cycling, horse riding, martial arts and outdoor activities. Young people spoken with indicated that participation in such activities allowed them to keep fit and meet other young people.

Young people are accommodated in homes that meet appropriate standards in relation to facilities, comfort and safety. There is an expectation that each young person will be provided with a room that they can designate as 'their space'. Although each foster home should be subject to an annual household review records indicate a number of reviews remain outstanding. This has arisen as a consequence of recent staffing difficulties in one particular area and plans are already in place to ensure that all outstanding reviews will be completed in the near future. All the homes visited during the inspection were observed to be warm, homely and in good decorative order. Young people spoke in positive terms about their accommodation.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The service ensures that inappropriate individuals, who may present a risk to young people, do not enter the service. The service sets high standards and there is an expectation that those embarking on a fostering career will be capable of providing high quality care to a diverse group of vulnerable young people. Social work staff clearly recognise the demands that can be made on foster carers and ensure that only those with the necessary attributes are invited to proceed to training and approval at panel. The service currently benefits from having a group of extremely experienced foster carers who continuously strive to improve the quality of care for looked after young people in Dorset.

The service is successful in recruiting foster carers from all sections of the local community. All carers are recruited via a comprehensive assessment process that determines their suitability. Those being considered as family and friends foster carers are subject to the same assessment process and have to complete a skills to foster training programme and appear before panel. The vetting process extends to members of foster carers families. Foster carers undertake safe care training that helps them understand and recognise the different forms abuse can take. Foster carers met and spoken with were all aware of their individual responsibilities in reporting any safeguarding concerns. Safeguarding issues are always discussed during foster carers' supervision.

Service staff are recruited via a well established process that ensures they are suitable to work with young people. All prospective staff are subject to Criminal Record Bureau checks and have to supply suitable references, proof of qualifications and undertake an interview. Staff files examined indicated that they were appropriately vetted. All staff are provided with a detailed job description which details their specific role and responsibilities. The service has developed a culture of training and professional development that expects individuals to continuously increase their knowledge and skills. Regular supervision provides opportunities for staff to engage in reflective practice.

The service lays great emphasis on achieving appropriate matching and aims to ensure that young people are placed with foster carers with the necessary skills and experience to meet their specific care needs. Staff aim to minimise disruption and when possible placements are sought that will allow each individual maintain their existing school placements and access established social networks. The service is normally able to provide suitable placements from within its own pool of foster carers, however, if an appropriate placement can not be identified the young person will be matched with foster carers from an approved external agency. Such an approach avoids the risk of making an inappropriate match and the possible disruption of an already settled placement.

The vulnerabilities and risks associated with each young person's behaviour are clearly identified prior to any placement. Once a placement has been identified care plans are developed to ensure that both young people and carers can be kept safe. Care plans provide clear guidance for carers on how appropriate behavioural boundaries should be maintained. Effective monitoring of placements ensure that any difficulties can be identified at any early stage and support provided quickly. Evidence indicates good lines of communication have been established between foster carers, social workers, educationalists and therapists. Carers feel well supported and can access support and guidance via an effective out of out-of-hours service. The service has a well-established complaints process and foster carers and young people are made aware of how to register any concerns on. Any concerns about the conduct of foster carers are appropriately presented to the fostering panel for consideration.

In a recent survey over 80% of young people reported that they were helped to assess risk and develop behaviours that will keep them safe. Foster carers, teachers and social workers engage young people in informal discussions on safety issues such as road safety, stranger danger and the use of social network sites. Young people indicated they would convey any worries or concerns to their foster carers, social workers or teachers. Any disclosures are dealt with sensitively and the privacy and confidentiality of young people is respected.

There are well-established procedures to ensure that young people who go missing from care are reported.

Missing from care passports are developed in respect of each young person. Passports contain essential information for carers in the event of the young person

not returning as planned. Foster carers try to determine the movements of young people who put themselves at risk and develop strategies that ensure they do not mix with those that could exploit them. When required foster carers liaise with local police to keep the young people in their care safe.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Planned placements normally start with young people undertaking introductory visits to meet with their prospective carers. Although staff try to avoid emergency placements they still occur. Service staff are clearly aware of the apprehension many young people experience on entering care and in an effort to minimise anxiety levels carers now produce guides that contain information and photographs of their family, their home and their pets. Guides are supplied to each young person in advance of entering their placement. The service tries to ensure that foster carers are, at the point of admission, provided with key information relating to the specific health, cultural, and emotional needs of the young person being placed.

Young people said they were welcomed into their foster carers' homes and encouraged to participate into all aspects of family life. All felt they were appropriately placed and had established good relationships with their foster carers and other family members. One young person said that when she reported she was unhappy in a previous placement her concerns were acknowledged and another more suitable placement was found. Foster carers feel the quality of the information they now receive prior to a placement has greatly improved and that they are now in a better position to contextualise the behaviour of young people and respond appropriately. It is evident that every effort is made to make young people feel safe and secure. In spite of changing demands for placements staff have managed to provide suitable matches and placement stability remains high. Young people in long term care are provided with specialist help to better understand their personal history and cultural background. Such work has proved successful in helping young people develop a clearer sense of identity.

During their placements young people are helped to develop socially acceptable behaviours and are encouraged to assume responsibility for their behaviour in a way that is appropriate to their age and understanding. Foster carers help young people develop self-confidence by reinforcing positive behaviour with praise and rewards. Although foster carers have high expectations of young people and aim to ensure they make significant progress in all aspects of their development, they are also realistic and aware of the difficulties many looked after children experience. As part of their training foster carers are made aware of the impact of early childhood trauma and poor attachment and how such experiences can inhibit the ability of young people to both form and maintain social relationships. Specialist therapists are available to provide foster carers with guidance on how to manage young people who present with challenging behaviour. Young people are supported by their carers, even if their actions have led them into anti-social and criminal activity. Carers work with young people and staff from youth offending teams to develop strategies to

reduce such behaviours. In an effort to maintain stability in young peoples lives placements are kept open for those returning from short term custodial sentences.

The service recognises the positive impact educational achievement can have on the life chances of young people in foster care and as a consequence gives it a high priority. There is an expectation that all young people will have access to either school or college placements that will meet their needs. Each young person has an education plan that identifies any specific needs and sets achievable educational goals. All plans are subject to regular review. The progress of each young person is monitored by the head of the virtual school and his staff. Young people experiencing educational difficulties are supported by specialist teaching staff. Young children are provided with assistance with their literacy through a number of initiatives such as the 'letter box' reading scheme. Foster carers are pro-active in supporting young people with their education and regularly attend parents' evenings, school events and assist with homework. Carers are provided with training on how to support young people to achieve academically.

The significant progress young people are making in their education is reflected in improved attendance levels and exam results that exceed national averages. No young person has been permanently excluded from school in the last 3 years. Educational staff have successfully utilised imaginative experiential projects, including one based on archaeology, to help young people re-engage in education. The service has clearly raised the educational horizons of many young people and an ever increasing number now progress onto further and higher education. The achievements of young people are celebrated in an annual awards ceremony. Young people's questionnaires indicated they were satisfied with their educational progress and enjoyed school.

Young people are encouraged to pursue their own particular interests and hobbies and are currently engaged in a wide range of leisure and recreational activities. The council provides free passes that enable young people to access a range of its recreational and leisure facilities. A discretionary fund provides access for young people to undertake additional activities such as school residential trips. Such activities help raise individual's self-esteem, resilience and confidence. Foster carers accommodating young people with mobility difficulties are provided with specially adapted vehicles to ensure they can access activities outside of the home.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

The service successfully engages young people in making decisions about their futures and there is high participation in the reviewing process. The views of young people are always sought by reviewing officers prior to their reviews. Staff utilise a range of techniques to ensure the views of young people with communication difficulties are appropriately obtained. The reviewing process works well and the service is effectively meeting its statutory obligations. Young people indicated they were regularly involved in making decisions within their foster families and

contributed to decisions on leisure activities, choice of food and the destination of family holidays. The views of young people are obtained about their experiences in their placements prior to their foster carers annual household review.

Young people play a significant role in the development of the service and have been instrumental in the development of a pledge that details the corporate parenting responsibilities of the council. A number of young people contribute to the skills to foster training course for new carers and assist in the selection process of new staff. The views of young people are regularly sought via a Children in Care Council, that refers to itself as Dorset Kidz and a Corporate Parenting Panel. The views and suggestions made by young people are taken seriously and responded to by senior officers and members. The council has a service level agreement with Action for Children to provide a children's rights service. Regular meetings and fun activities provide opportunities for Action for Children staff to illicit the views of young people about all aspects of their care.

The service aims to ensure that young people have, when appropriate, regular contact with their parents, relatives and friends. Contact visits are managed sensitively by foster carers and appropriate working relationships are established with birth parents. Any restrictions regarding contact are made clear to all parties and plans are developed to ensure young people are not put at risk through meeting inappropriate adults. Although every effort is made to enable large sibling groups to meet together contact arrangements are developed on the basis of the best interest of each young person. The views of young people, their social workers and birth parents are taken into consideration when reviewing contact arrangements. Foster carers and service staff are sensitive when explaining to young people why their wishes can not always be met.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is outstanding.

Although the service has had a leaving in care team for many years, a recent reorganisation has created a 16 plus team that now provides support and guidance for young people, including those over 16, moving toward independence. Preparing for independence starts with the development of pathway plans. The development of such plans help each young person consider their training, employment and accommodation options. Discussions about the future are initiated in advance of each young person's sixteenth birthday. If it is thought appropriate, young people are provided with the option of moving on to independent or semi-independent living. However, an increasing number of young people wish to remain with their existing carers until 18 and beyond under supported living arrangements. Many foster carers move across to supported lodging arrangements in order to extend existing placements and provide continuity in care. Foster carers feel the introduction of such arrangements have been extremely positive and allow each young person to move when they feel ready. Members of the 16 plus team have established good

relations with a number of housing providers across Dorset and have been successful in accessing appropriate accommodation for care leavers wishing to live independently. Of the 32 young people to leave care during 2010/11 all but one was reported to be in suitable accommodation.

In preparation for independence, young people are provided opportunities to develop a range of social and life skills by their foster carers and staff from the 16 plus team. The service has, in recent times, been successful in helping young people move on to education, training and employment, however, adverse economic conditions is currently impacting on employment opportunities. Young people engaged in further and higher education are supported financially until the completion of their courses. The council has respond to this situation by initiating a Work Placement Scheme that offers a number of apprenticeships. All care leavers who apply for apprenticeships are guaranteed an interview.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

A Statement of Purpose sets out the service's aims and objectives in clear and concise terms. The Statement is subject to regular view and updated in response to new developments within the service. Young people in the Dorset Kidz group have helped design a number of age appropriate guides for new entrants to the service. The guides successfully convey the key features of foster care in an extremely 'child friendly way and aim to reduce the anxiety young people will inevitably experience in moving into foster care.

The service operates with an effective fostering panel that is appropriately constituted and exercises its functions in accordance with statutory guidance. Due to demand fostering panels are held fortnightly. The panel benefits from having both an experienced panel advisor and chairperson. In line with new standards there is now a central list of panel members. The panel has access to medical expertise, educational expertise and legal advice. The panel demonstrates robust quality assurance. There is a strong emphasis on safeguarding and ensuring positive outcomes for young people. The panel advisor and chairperson provide feedback to the service manager on the quality of assessments and presentations. Evidence indicates that assessments are of a consistently high standard. Foster carers indicated that they were well prepared for their appearance at panel.

Once approved foster carers are allocated a supervising worker who provides regular support and oversees their development as effective carers. Foster carers said they fell valued and indicated that support was always available when they requested it. Support includes both individual home visits and fostering support group meetings. In order to provide greater access support groups are held in different areas of the county. Foster carers confirmed that they also maintained contact with their supervising social workers via regular phone calls and e-mails. Supervising social workers make both announced and unannounced visits.

The service has a well established complaints process and all carers and young people are made aware of it on entering the service. Carers are supported if any allegations are made against them and they have access to external assistance. All complaints are recorded and investigated. Investigations are mostly dealt with by members of staff from other departments within the local authority. Investigations take place within agreed timescales. Any concerns regarding the conduct of foster carers are referred to the fostering panel.

The service supports foster carers financially and it is evident that prompt payments and the availability of additional funds to address additional needs contribute to the stability of placements. While no concerns were raised about the funding of long-term placements, a number of short-term foster carers felt the current system did not itemize payments and as a consequence made it difficult for them to identify which placement each payment related to.

There is a strong commitment within the service to the continuous development of foster carers and they are expected to access the many regular training opportunities on offer. The training needs of foster carers are regularly assessed and courses identified. The service has been successful in implementing the Children's Workforce Development Council's training programme and over 80% have now completed their training. Foster carers feel that the service provides high quality training and contributes significantly to their understanding of the many issues associated with young people in care. Training is now available in a number of different formats including e-courses, direct learning and blended learning. Training courses are developed in response to the changing needs of the service. For example, an increase in demand for parent and child placements has led to the introduction of paediatric first aid courses.

The service is managed by an appropriately qualified and experienced manager who is held in high regard by staff, foster carers and young people. The service manager and team managers are all qualified social workers who are skilled and experienced in management, fostering and child care social work. The management team have a good understanding of their statutory obligations and ensure that the service's comprehensive policies and procedures are translated into effective working practices. Managers closely monitor all aspects of the service and those spoken with were knowledgeable about all aspects of the service. The management team have provided consistent and effective leadership during a challenging period of changing demands. They have been extremely successful in developing a number of multi-agency initiatives with colleagues from health, youth justice and education that have resulted in improved outcomes for young people. Staff and foster carers feel the service is being efficiently managed and resources appropriately utilised. The service plays a significant role within the Children's Services Directorate and is held in high regard by council members.

The promotion of equality and diversity is extremely good. Policies, procedures and working practices explicitly promote diversity and equality. Staff and foster carers are recruited from all sections of the local community regardless of gender, religion, ethnic origin, disability or sexual orientation. Foster carers and service staff challenge

discriminatory behaviour when it is encountered. The service has established an inclusive culture that encourages all interested parties to get involved in the development of the service. Foster carers providing care for young people from other cultures are provided with specialist advice and guidance from family placement officers. Specialist equipment is provided for foster carers accommodating young people with disabilities to enable them access activities both within the home and local community.

The service has well established procedures for both the recording and storing of records that ensure confidentiality. Although the service has an effective computer based information system, it is being strengthened to increase access to management information relating to foster carer placements. It is evident that, by providing a central source, it has already contributed to a reduction in the unnecessary duplication of information. The service operates from premises that meet the service's needs. Young people's records were found to contain recent and relevant information.

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 homes of all foster carers are subject to an annual inspection (NMS10)
- introduce a system that clearly itemizes payments to short break foster carers (NMS28)