

Liverpool City Council Fostering Service

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

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About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to assure children and young people, parents, the public, local authorities and government of the quality and standard of the service provided. The inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000.

This report details the main strengths and any areas for improvement identified during the inspection. The judgements included in the report are made in relation to the outcomes for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and the relevant National Minimum Standards for the service.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding: this aspect of the provision is of exceptionally high quality
Good: this aspect of the provision is strong
Satisfactory: this aspect of the provision is sound
Inadequate: this aspect of the provision is not good enough

Service information

Brief description of the service

Liverpool City Council's fostering service provides a fostering service for Liverpool City Council. The service recruits, approves and supports a range of carers. These include family and friends carers, recruited carers, respite carers for children with complex needs and specialist foster carers. It is responsible for safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children and young people who are fostered.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This fostering service provides a good standard of care and support to children and young people. This includes the promotion of health care, welfare and safety of children and young people.

Foster carer recruitment has increased and a designated independent company has a service level agreement for the ongoing recruitment and assessment of foster carers. The service has continued to work in increasing carer's attendance at training. However, some carers have difficulty in accessing the training at the times that it is held. Foster carers receive regular support and supervision from their supervising social workers. Individual safe care policies are current and specific to individual children and young people. All carers receive unannounced visits and health and safety checks are updated on an annual basis. This ensures that carers provide safe environments for the children and young people to live in.

Consultation with children and young people is good with strong support provided through the Children in Care Council (CICC); young people in foster care are included in this forum. The CICC meet on a regular basis with senior managers and councillors to keep the profile of children and young people in foster care high on the looked after children agenda. The fostering service has undergone a recent service review. This has enabled the service to evaluate and plan the ongoing development of the service. Foster carer payment levels have been reviewed with the planned introduction of payment for skills being introduced in April 2012. The service has consulted with carers through the foster carer development group and foster carer forum regarding this.

The quality of information provided to foster carers is variable and this impacts on carers' understanding about their role in making day-to-day decisions or giving appropriate consents for children and young people to undertake activities. The fostering panel is robust and makes clear recommendations to the agency decision maker. However, there has been a delay in informing a small number of prospective foster carers about their approval.

The service has robust systems to monitor children who are missing from home and there are appropriate safeguarding systems to address this. Monitoring of complaints is now being managed appropriately and notifications forwarded as required by The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011.

Improvements since the last inspection

At the previous inspection in July 2008 a number of requirements and recommendations were made to improve the quality of the service. These were made under previous legislation. The fostering service has demonstrated a commitment to addressing these to improve outcomes for children and young people. Foster Care agreements are in place and contain relevant information, all agreements are being updated to reflect the change in Regulations. Staff and panel members' files contain all required information. Contact arrangements are identified within placement plans and children placed with foster carers have a children's guide as well as their foster carers having a copy. Written health care plans are in place that include the details of parental consent to medication and foster carers are aware of their responsibility to notify the fostering service of any accident or illness of a child placed with them. Foster carers' views are gathered in relation to the ongoing educational needs of young people and the leaving care team have worked closely with the fostering service to support carers to prepare young people for independence.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Children in foster care live in environments where their physical, emotional and psychological health is promoted and where the care provided meets their individual needs. Young people's health care needs are clearly identified through individual medical assessments which are undertaken in a timely manner. The looked after children's (LAC) nurse coordinates the school nurses and health care visitors to undertake annual health care assessments. This ensures that the health care needs of young people are clearly identified. All young people are registered with appropriate primary health care professionals. Foster carers are proactive in ensuring young people are supported to access these services when required. Carers maintain clear health care records and this enables an overview of the individual health of young people to be monitored appropriately. Young people who responded to questionnaires said that they feel that they feel well cared for and that their carers support them to have a healthy lifestyle. A drop-in service providing advice, guidance and support is in place at the leaving care service which is accessible for all children and young people.

The fostering service has a training and development programme for foster carers that includes training in first aid, health promotion and managing medication. Foster carers also have access to training through the dedicated Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services Looked After Children team. This team provides therapeutic

support to children and young people.

Children and young people live in foster homes which provide adequate space. Health and safety checks are undertaken as part of the initial assessment process and are updated on an annual basis, or sooner if required. Annual unannounced inspections of foster homes are undertaken by the fostering supervising social workers to make sure that they continue to meet the needs of children placed.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

Children and young people say that they feel safe living with their foster family and that they are well cared for and feel part of the family. They say that they are aware of how to make a complaint and details of how to complain are in the children's guide. All foster carers have a safe care policy that clearly identifies how the safety and well-being of the young people in placement is promoted; young people's safety is also promoted through the implementation of individual risk assessments. Foster carers receive training on safe caring practice and safeguarding. Foster carers know the procedure for reporting a significant event to protect and promote the safety of the young people in placement; this includes reporting any accidents or injuries. The fostering service has a robust monitoring system to record, respond to and investigate information about allegations, disclosures of abuse or complaints from children and young people.

Children are protected by the policies and practices in regard to absence without authority. A very small number of children have been missing from foster homes in the last year. When this has occurred meetings are held to ensure that risk assessments are developed and appropriate action is taken; this ensures the safety of the young people is promoted. There are clear procedures regarding behaviour management and foster carers are aware of the sanctions they can implement to support young people and to enable them to develop a clear understanding about appropriate behaviours and boundaries.

Comprehensive recruitment checks for carers include undertaking an enhanced Criminal Record Bureau (CRB) checks on them and on any adult family members living within the same household. Checks are also carried out on those that have regular unsupervised contact with children and young people. The panel does not approve any prospective carers who do not have satisfactory CRB disclosures.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Children and young people enjoy positive relationships with their carers and, in discussion, spoke very warmly about their foster carers and living as part of a family. They also benefit from placements that provide them with stability therefore ensuring continuity of their care and support.

Foster carers enable and support children and young people to participate in a range of activities. These include sporting and leisure activities and include football, swimming, rugby and the use of local leisure facilities. These opportunities enable young people to develop interests and meet other young people; it is through these they are enabled to develop their social skills. The fostering service has made available information regarding delegated authority which enables foster carers to make timely day-to-day decisions, such as agreement for young people to attend school trips and functions. However, this is not in place for all children and young people and some foster carers are unsure of what they can or cannot make decisions about. The service is aware of this and is addressing it through the review process for each young person.

Education promoted well and children are supported to attend school and achieve. The looked after children education service team work closely with staff and carers to ensure children and young people receive support when required. Strong links have been made with designated looked after children (LAC) teachers within schools across the city to provide continuity of support. The personal education plan documentation is currently being reviewed and developed for older young people. This is to ensure that there are clear details recorded about the transition arrangements and foster carers can contribute effectively to the arrangements.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The views and wishes of children and young people are gained with regards day-to-day decisions and in planning for their future. There is an active children in care council (CICC) and the membership of the council includes children who are fostered. They ensure that any issues identified are fed back to the local authority for appropriate action to be undertaken. A representative of this group also attends the corporate parenting keep in touch meetings. Children and young people's views are gathered and are fed into foster carers' reviews so that they have the chance to comment on the quality of the care and support they receive. They are also encouraged and supported to attend their own reviews and the independent reviewing officers speak with children and young people to establish their views about the quality of the care and support that they receive.

Consultation with foster carers has developed through the foster carers' forums and support groups which foster carers are invited to attend. The foster carers' newsletter format has been updated to provide a range of information for carers regarding the services available.

Children are encouraged to develop a positive self-view, emotional resilience and understanding of their background. Foster carers receive training on life story work and keep memory boxes and mementos for when children move on. Young people's contact with their birth family is promoted in line with decisions made by the courts. Carers are encouraged to develop positive relationships with birth families and are

supported if any challenges arise. Although some contact arrangements require a significant input from carers they are clear about their responsibility to ensure that contact takes place. Kinship carers are supported to manage contact in ways which benefit children; especially when contact arrangements are complex.

Planning for children and young people moving into their foster placements is managed effectively. Prior to placement, matching is undertaken by the fostering team. The team receives all applications for placements from children's social workers. Children's social workers are responsible for ensuring that foster carers receive appropriate documentation about children. However, some carers report that there is a delay in receiving this information and this could impact on the initial care and support that they provide to a young person. When documentation has not been received supervising social workers from the fostering team follow this up. Wherever possible children are supported to meet foster carers prior to moving in. When this is not possible the service has commenced, in conjunction with carers, profiles of foster carers and their home. This means that young people gain an overview of the placement prior to moving in. This is currently in place for newly approved carers and is being undertaken with all foster carers.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

Young people are supported to make the transition into adulthood appropriately. Most young people have a pathway plan in place. This document identifies the individual needs of a young person and enables effective support and access to further education or employment and to appropriate accommodation. The local authority has a strong commitment to the principles of the 'Staying Put' scheme and this information has been effectively communicated to the foster carer development group. The authority are currently awaiting further financial guidance from the Department for Education to ensure that all foster carers are clear about the financial arrangements. Foster carers receive training and guidance to support young people to prepare for adulthood and to move into independent living.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The service has a clear recruitment strategy in place. The ethnicity of foster carers reflects the needs of young people requiring foster placements. The agency continues to develop further recruitment strategies to encourage and support applications from foster carers who are able to provide respite services for children with complex needs and placements for teenagers. The recruitment of foster carers has been outsourced to a recruitment consultancy with a clear remit to work to. This will enable the fostering service to focus on the training and support of foster carers. The service also uses independent fostering agencies providing placements within the city to increase and support

placement choice.

The fostering panels make appropriate recommendations and have a role in the quality assurance processes. The panels' members have a range of relevant experience and members are child-focussed and challenging. Assessments are presented to panel in a timely manner. The decision maker's decisions are appropriate. However, there has been some delay in a small number of foster carers receiving written notification of the agency decision maker's decision. This has been addressed to ensure that approval decisions are notified in a timely manner.

Full pre-approval training is provided to carers by the fostering service. Information regarding safeguarding, child protection, education and health is provided along with details about the roles and responsibilities of foster carers. Further post approval training is provided through the Children's Workforce Development Council induction standards. The service has provided all foster carers with details of the national minimum standards, and about the changing role of the fostering task. The training and development programme for foster carers has been reviewed. Some foster carers say that training is not always accessible to them due to their own home and work commitments. The service is further addressing this to ensure that all carers have an opportunity to attend training with some carers accessing on-line training. The service is introducing a new payment for skills structure to foster carers with effect from April 2012. This is so as to ensure that each carer's payment is based on the carer's skills, training and experience. Consultation for this has been ongoing through the foster carer development group and information has been forwarded to foster carers in newsletters and during meetings and support groups. Support groups are ongoing and further support groups are being planned, including a men's group.

Foster carers receive support and supervisory visits as well as unannounced visits. This enables the fostering service to continually assess the outcomes for young people in placement. Foster carers are required to maintain records of the support provided to young people and these are seen by the supervising social workers during their visits. The service has identified that some foster carers' records are more detailed than others and this is being addressed through ongoing training and development.

The Statement of Purpose has been reviewed in January 2012. The fostering service is undergoing a full review as part of the City Council's service level review and the interim Statement of Purpose clearly reflects this. The fostering service is managed effectively and has a strong management team. Robust recruitment procedures ensure the safety of young people. Staff say that they are effectively supported, consulted and kept informed about the ongoing development of the service. They feel that, although the restructuring of the service has been challenging, the outcome has been positive. This is because it has resulted in the development of a skilled, cohesive and dedicated team that drives improvements in the service to achieve positive outcomes for young people. The senior management team meet with staff on a regular basis and provide ongoing support. Staff receive regular supervision and have the opportunity to develop their skills through a range of training opportunities.

The strategic planning ensures that the range of services available meet the needs of children in foster care. There are robust monitoring systems that ensure that the service operates effectively. These include the monitoring of complaints and their and ensuring that notifications are made and issues are acted upon appropriately.

Children and foster carers' files are electronically stored and there are appropriate safeguards to ensure the contents remain confidential. However, there are two different computer software programmes used and communication between the two systems is not always effective. Staff are aware that both computer programmes need to be checked for appropriate information. Senior managers are aware that this is time consuming and this is being addressed. The offices are secure and appropriate for the fostering service.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further the registered person should take account of the following recommendation(s):

- ensure that each foster carer is aware of all the necessary information available to the fostering service about a child's circumstances, including any significant recent events, to help the foster carer understand and predict the child's needs and behaviours and support the child within their household (NMS 3.9)
- ensure that foster carers know what authority they have to make decisions about everyday matters involving the child (Chapter 3 (3.13) The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 4 Fostering Services)
- ensure that the foster carer or prospective foster carer is informed orally of the decision maker's decision within two working days and written confirmation is sent within five working days (NMS 14.10)
- ensure that all training fits within a framework of equal opportunities and anti-discriminatory practice and is organised to encourage and facilitate attendance by foster carers (NMS 20.10)
- ensure that information about the child is recorded clearly and in a way which will be helpful to the child when they access their files now or in the future. (NMS 26.6)