

Cornwall Council

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

Cornwall County Council fostering and short breaks service recruits, approves, supports and trains foster carers and short break carers. The service also recognises and arranges friends and family care, and parent and child placements.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

Improvements since the last inspection

The registered provider was asked to provide training for foster carers in recognising the signs of abuse, managing behaviour and responding appropriately to disclosures and allegations, including bullying. The registered provider was also asked to continue discussions with the district children's care teams regarding the need for early involvement of the fostering and short breaks service where there may be a possible referral. Positive action has been taken in relation to both of these issues, including the provision of child and adult protection training and the restructuring of the short break provision. These measures help to ensure that young people are kept safe and have their needs met.

The registered provider was asked to review the provision of education out-of-school arrangements to fostered children and young people across the districts and to review the arrangements for contact in relation to the use of family aides and access to family centres as venues for supervised contact across the county. Positive action has also been taken in relation to these issues. There is a strong focus on education, and the service is in the process of improving the arrangements for contact. This helps to ensure that young people make good progress in education and benefit from maintaining contact with their families.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Young people have their health needs protected as the service has strong arrangements for health promotion. They lead healthy lifestyles and receive the health care they require. This is achieved through strong joint working between the service and partner agencies. Young people benefit from a dedicated health care team which includes looked after children's nurses, a paediatrician and clinical

psychologists. Support from these people helps to promote young people's physical, emotional and social development. All young people undergo regular health assessments and are registered with a doctor and dentist. They each have an up-to-date personal health record where information about their health needs, immunisations and medication taken is recorded. This record helps to ensure that people who need to know, have the information they need to promote young people's health. Carers are empowered to promote young people's health as there are good arrangements in place for training in a wide range of health care issues. Carers say they are trained in first aid and have access to training in areas such as epilepsy and medication. Specialist training is also provided which helps to provide carers with the skills required to care for young people with complex health needs. Physical adaptations and equipment are provided where appropriate and this helps to ensure that young people's independence is promoted.

Young people live in safe and pleasant environments. A thorough assessment is made of each foster carer's home prior to being approved to foster. This ensures that homes are suitable and that all avoidable hazards are removed as is consistent with a family home. Homes are inspected annually, without appointment, and this ensures that homes continue to be suitable. The service employs a staff member who has sole responsibility for health and safety issues. This helps to promote good fire safety and security and ensures good measures to reduce environmental risks.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

There are a low number of incidents of young people going missing, and strong arrangements in place to respond to young people who go missing. This promotes young people's safety. Carers are well supported to provide good support and care to young people and this minimises the risk that they will go missing. There is a clear policy in relation to young people who go missing and this is known to staff and carers. This helps to ensure that the correct action is taken to ensure young people's safe return. This includes appropriate liaison with the local police. Written records are kept in relation to all incidents of young people going missing which promotes their safe care.

There are sound systems in place for promoting young people's safety and welfare, and this means that they feel safe and are safe. Foster carers know how to keep young people safe and are supported to do so by the service. There is a shared responsibility for keeping young people safe, and clear arrangements for staff and carer training in child and adult protection. Foster carers have positive relationships with young people, which helps to generate a culture of openness and trust which in turn keeps young people safe. Young people are supported to take appropriate risks and this helps them to understand how to keep safe. Each household has a comprehensive safe care policy which ensures that there are clear arrangements for keeping young people safe that are understood by all relevant people. These policies cover issues such as privacy, touch, language and dress.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Carers are empowered to work with young people in a positive way through good support and training opportunities. This helps to ensure that they are confident in managing behaviour and promoting positive relationships. Carers say that the service is good at helping them to use different strategies to promote young people's positive behaviour as they involve other professionals to help with this. Young people are protected from bullying as foster carers are equipped with positive strategies for effectively addressing this issue. Training in positive care and control is provided and carers say that this helps them to de-escalate problems. A young person said: 'I get help from everyone. I feel loved and cared for.'

Leisure is valued and well promoted by the service, and this helps young people to enjoy their interests and develop confidence in their skills. Placement planning meetings always occur at the beginning of a placement and these consider young people's needs and wishes in relation to their leisure time. Young people's leisure interests can form part of the matching process. Carers say that they are encouraged to promote leisure activities. Many young people are currently involved in activities such as swimming, horse riding and cubs. Achievements are celebrated with praise and rewards. For example, book tokens and letters of praise are given to young people who have made progress in their lives. Foster carers say that they are encouraged to have special meals to celebrate success in exams. Carers are very happy with the levels of support and finance offered to support this.

Enjoying, learning and raising self-esteem through education are strong focuses of the service, and the service has high aspirations for young people. This ensures that young people make good progress in their educational achievements. Carers say that they are well supported to help young people do well in education. A foster carer said: 'Support offered regarding education is exceptional.' Another said: 'They are focused on best outcomes for young people. A young person said: 'Funding for maths tuition helped me succeed in my maths exam.' The service works closely with educational psychologists and the virtual school to ensure that strong packages of care are in place to support young people's education. When young people are not in mainstream school, alternative education is provided that is in line with their individual needs. Carers attend personal education plan meetings, which helps them to advocate positively for young people and to understand young people's educational needs.

Young people are supported, where appropriate, to maintain constructive contact with their parents and other family members. This helps them to understand their backgrounds. Practical support and guidance, including financial help, are provided to carers to help them support the contact in a positive way. Carers are clear about what is expected of them in relation to contact as decisions are recorded in care plans. This helps to ensure that young people benefit from well-organised contact. Some carers say that venues for contact are not suitable and limited in availability and that this means that the quality of contact is reduced. The service has listened to

this and is in the process of making local children's centres available for contact.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Young people know that their views, wishes and feelings are taken seriously and taken into account when decisions are being made about them. This helps them to feel respected and valued and ensures that care plans consider individual needs. Carers say: 'The children's voice is always heard and taken seriously', and, 'Young people are always consulted with'. Young people who are non verbal are asked to contribute to reviews through their parents or social workers. The service is in the process of developing consultation documents in a variety of formats with a view to promoting the independence of these young people. The service has made a pledge to young people who are looked after which was drawn up by young people who are looked after and care leavers. This underpins the approach of the fostering service. For example, young people have requested that they do not have multiple school moves, and the service has considered this as part of the matching process. There is a Children in Care Council and Voice4us project which is facilitated by an independent organisation. These arrangements help to ensure that young people feel listened to and that their views shape the service they are provided with. The service also values the views of the birth children of carers and facilitates a group for them. This ensures that these young people are supported and feel listened to.

Young people have a positive self-view, emotional resilience, and knowledge and understanding of their background. This is achieved as the service has a strong commitment to individualised care. There are clear plans of care which are understood by young people, foster carers and professionals working with them. Carers report strong arrangements for preparing young people for placements and to move on. These include tea visits, visits to school and being given full information about young people prior to placements commencing. This helps young people to feel part of the family and reduces the trauma of any moves.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

Young people are well prepared for and supported into adulthood and this helps them to reach their full potential. They have pathway plans that address their individual needs and this helps to promote their independence. These are developed in collaboration with young people, their social workers, foster carers and partner agencies. This helps to ensure that there is a clear and consistent approach to supporting young people to move on positively. Carers receive support and guidance to help young people establish positive relationships, prepare for work, develop positive self-esteem and financial capability. A young person said: 'We talk about my future.' Funding is available to allow young people to enter higher education if this is their wish. There is a shared lives scheme which allows some young people to stay living with their foster carers after they reach the age of 18. The service will pay for

driving lessons for young people should they want this. These measures all support young people to make healthy and successful transitions into adulthood.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

This is a service where carers feel exceptionally well supported. They speak extremely highly of the staff and management. One carer said: 'I get full support when needed, including out of hours.' Another said: 'We receive a high standard of support. Social workers have been amazing and go the extra mile.' The impact of such high levels of support is that young people make good progress in well supported and suitable placements.

The arrangements for the recruitment and assessment of carers are strong and help to ensure that foster carers are available to meet the needs of young people. Carers report that there is a thorough assessment process. This helps to ensure that young people only receive care from the most suitable people. There is a dedicated team for recruitment and assessment. Good joint working between departments means that focused planning is done in order to target groups of carers from all areas of the local community. The panel plays a strong quality assurance function. The fostering panel and decision maker make timely and appropriate decisions with the overriding objective of promoting the welfare of young people. Panel members have exceptionally high skills and experience and this helps to ensure that informed decisions are made regarding the best interests of young people. This helps to promote their welfare and safety. Young people are cared for in line with their placement plans and strong systems are in place for ensuring that these are kept under review.

Foster carers say they are well matched with the young people they care for and this helps to promote positive outcomes for young people and placement stability. Good matching is achieved with the use of a comprehensive matching tool which is used jointly by the placing team and the young people's social worker. Detailed young people's profiles created by the social worker inform this process. Clear support plans are presented to panel so there is a very clear understanding of young people's needs before a placement is made. There is ongoing training and development for panel members which supports them to be clear and competent in their roles.

There is a Statement of Purpose that is up to date and ensures that all stakeholders have a clear understanding of the aims and objectives of the service. The foster carers' handbook and young people's guide are both of a high quality and are user friendly. These documents ensure that carers and young people have the information they need about their rights and responsibilities. As a result they feel valued by the service.

There is high value placed on learning and development with a clear focus on positive outcomes for young people. There are excellent arrangements for the training and development of carers. This ensures that young people are cared for by

skilled and knowledgeable carers. Training opportunities are numerous and of a high quality. Training is geared towards the individual learning styles of carers and this ensures that learning is achieved. As a result, carers are skilled and confident. Carers are enthusiastic about the training and support they received from the service. A carer said: 'Training is fantastic and relevant to care needed by children.' Training is kept under review.

The leadership and management of the service are highly effective and praised by staff. This ensures that staff benefit from excellent systems of support and clear leadership and guidance, and as a result are highly motivated and take pride in their work. There are particularly high standards for the supervision and training of staff. This equips them with the skills needed to promote young people's welfare.

There are strong arrangements in place for monitoring the quality of service provision and this helps to ensure that the service is run in the best interests of young people. There is very careful selection of staff and fostering households with thorough recruitment checks being made prior to appointment. There are also generally good arrangements for the recruitment of panel members which help to protect young people's safety. However, in one instance two written references have not been obtained prior to the appointment of a panel member. It is acknowledged that other methods were employed to ensure the suitability of this panel member which protect young people, however, this practice is not fully in line with regulations and national minimum standards and does not fully promote the welfare of young people.

Allegations and suspicions of harm are handled in a way that provides effective protection to young people. The service provides training for carers in recognising the signs of abuse, managing behaviour and responding appropriately to disclosures and allegations, including bullying. Staff also received training in these areas. Risk assessments are undertaken for all young people and there has been a recent focus on e-safety in training for staff, carers and young people. Policies and procedures are in place for supporting safe placements. These measures all help to ensure that young people are kept safe.

The quality of case recording and file keeping is good. Supervising social workers monitor paperwork kept by carers and this helps to ensure its good quality. The premises are suitable for purpose, and administrative and information technology systems are good. Foster care by family and friends is given high priority. Policies and procedures reflect this specialist area of foster care, for example, training courses have been adapted to meet the needs of these carers. This helps to ensure that young people are well cared for and protected from harm. There are effective arrangements for the notification of significant events which ensures that there is a transparent approach to keeping young people safe. Carers receive payments fairly and in a timely way and this helps to ensure that they have the financial resources to ensure that young people's needs are met.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. Young people are treated as individuals and receive care that reflects their individual needs. Carers are well

trained and supported to promote equality and matched with young people who have needs that they can meet. The cultural needs of young people are recorded in care plans and staff consistently and positively promote difference.

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 full and satisfactory information is available on all members of the fostering panel in respect of each of the matters specified in schedule 1. (Breach of Regulation 20, Schedule 1)