

Derbyshire County Council Fostering Services

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 is part of Derbyshire County Council Children and Younger Adults Service. There are five local fostering teams based in Ilkeston, Chesterfield, Clay Cross, Swadlincote and Buxton providing support and supervision to foster carers. A disability fostering team supports foster carers to provide short-term breaks and longer-term placements for children with disabilities. The social workers for this team are co-located within the support teams across the county.

In addition, a contract care team supports foster carers with additional skills to care for teenagers with specific needs who would otherwise be placed in residential or specialist care. A central recruitment team is responsible for the recruitment of new foster carers. The social workers are co-located within the support teams across the county.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

Children and young people benefit from a good quality fostering service. The service demonstrates it is able to continue to improve and has taken appropriate action to address previous recommendations. The service aims to increase the educational opportunities and life chances of children and young people. A number of initiatives are well underway, for example to support educational and training opportunities and support young people to stay with foster carers beyond 18 years.

The fostering service works effectively within the wider local authority services to act as a responsible corporate parent for the benefit of children and young people. Safeguarding arrangements are robust and there is good monitoring to promote children and young people's welfare. Foster carers are very positive about the support they receive and the relationships they have with the fostering service. Children and young people report they feel safe and cared for. One young person comments 'its really good here, I want to stay' and another young person says '....if it was not for my foster carers I'm with at the moment then I would not have a good life. I have known them 10 years and they are amazing'.

As a result of this inspection there are four areas to improve relating to the attendees at foster panel, the quality of panel minutes and appraisals for panel members.

Improvements since the last inspection

The previous inspection in March 2008 identified two recommendations: to ensure all staff receive appraisals and the suitability of placements considers the contact needs

of children and young people. Good progress has been made with undertaking yearly appraisals for staff. In addition children are now being placed within their locality to promote contact arrangements and reduce travel across the county.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Children and young people receive good support with their health needs. Robust partnerships with dedicated nurses ensure each individual child's health needs are assessed upon becoming looked after. The vast majority of children and young people access initial and annual health assessments and routine checks to promote and maintain good health. Good oversight and communication between nurses and the foster service ensures foster carers have ready access to health support and advice for individual children. Carers find this is very valuable. Some carers report very close links with their local surgery and health visitor, supporting partnership approaches to monitoring health, for example concerning developmental delay. As such, younger children progress during placements and start to achieve outcomes in line with expected chronological targets. If required, older young people have access to advice on sexual health and services targeted at preventing pregnancy and reducing substance use. This is positively reducing the numbers of young people affected by such issues.

Foster carers are well trained and can access diverse training on health matters, for example first aid, promoting health including emotional health, babies experiencing substance withdrawal, attachment and the impact of neglect. Foster carers are enthusiastic about such opportunities and in particular report the training on attachments enhances their skills for supporting and understanding children and young people's emotional well-being. Specialist services to support young people's mental health are available and new arrangements from January 2012 increase the availability of such services across the local authority for all young people. Further strategic commissioning developments are well underway to standardise healthcare provision across the county.

Children and young people report they feel their health needs are supported and they are helped by carers to understand the importance of good health. They say 'she makes me a fruit smoothie every day' and 'I eat healthy'. Children and young people enjoy and engage in a wide range of interests, clubs and hobbies which promote social relationships, physical health and the development of new skills, leading to increasing confidence.

Children and young people live in homes which can accommodate their needs and are subject to health and safety checks. Young people with disabilities are supported to explore and develop in their homes proportionately to any risks. The service maintains appropriate standards through supervisory checks, including unannounced checks, to monitor children and young people's welfare. Any bedroom sharing is subject to risk assessment and scrutiny to maintain safe care for all.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

Children and young people report feeling safe and well cared for: 'They make me feel safe, secure, happy, settled and well fed.' Foster carers are well informed of their safeguarding responsibilities and take appropriate action in line with procedures to keep children and young people safe. Individual safe-care policies identify potential risks and how to minimise such risks to safeguard young people. Foster carers are clear safe care is part of their ongoing care and subject to review in light of changing needs. Foster carers report that training prepares them well; a comprehensive training programme includes child protection, safe-care practice, reflective practice, building positive relationships, managing challenging behaviours and training specifically tailored to the needs of children with disabilities.

Foster carers are clear on reporting procedures and accessing out-of-hours support should young people go missing. The local authority monitors all young people to identify any patterns and trends and takes appropriate action to minimise risks. Numbers of young people going missing are not significant and they do not go missing for lengthy periods.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Overall children and young people report positively on their experiences of being part of a foster family. Young people comment 'love it with my foster carers' and 'they always listen to what I say and help me out'. Foster carers speak warmly and affectionately about children in their care. The fostering service provides good training opportunities to support and strengthen relationships between foster carers and young people to promote placement stability. Contract foster carers report positively on activities specifically designed to promote relationships and feel they benefit from reflecting on the effectiveness of strategies in practice groups. Such methods support young people to begin to contain and appropriately modify socially unacceptable behaviour. Social workers report examples of children no longer requiring medication as a result of good quality care and improvements in children's behaviour. Another social worker comments on the progress of a young person who no longer displays violent behaviours or self harms.

The local authority is committed to improving attainment and takes a strategic approach to monitor all children and young people's educational progress. Meaningful personal education plans outline individual targets and support. The local authority actively supports further education, for example university places and a growing apprenticeship scheme maximises opportunities for young people. Foster carers act as good parents by advocating for support, liaising with schools on any bullying, supporting homework and attending parents' evenings. A young person comments: 'I was happy at school, I am happy at college.' Another comments that their foster carers 'are helping me get back into school'. An enhanced library service

enables foster families to access 20 books per visit which promotes excellent access, choice and variety to encourage reading.

Children and young people have ample opportunities to develop, socialise and engage in enjoyable activities and purposeful leisure pursuits both with foster carers and friends and with those activities provided by the fostering service. A very well-attended and popular day, known as the 'big book bash', combines positively recognising children and young people's achievements and the commitment of foster carers with a literacy event with a well-known children's author. Such events positively engage children and young people and generate interest in reading and learning, to maximise opportunities.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Children and young people report they know who to speak to if they are unhappy and wish to complain. The fostering service takes young people's concerns seriously and provides timely responses to resolve issues and seek positive outcomes. The local authority effectively promotes advocacy services and children's rights which broadens choice for young people when seeking support. Children and young people confidently access such services. Children's views, wishes and feelings are actively sought through review processes. Overall, children and young people feel confident to contribute directly or through their independent reviewing officer.

For the majority of children and young people, their experiences are of successful matches, planning and preparation for their placements. The local authority seeks to minimise disruptions and placement moves and is largely successful. Foster carers say they usually have sufficient information when emergency placements occur; foster carers feel they receive what is currently available and further information is provided promptly. Children and young people receive profiles on foster carers, in addition to visits, stays and information on what they can expect from the fostering service. This helps to reduce anxieties and prepare for positive moves.

Creative attempts to place children as close to local areas as possible, minimises travel to contact arrangements. This has improved since the previous inspection. Children and young people benefit from maintaining relationships with significant people where this is part of their plan. Foster carers support children and young people both practically with contact arrangements where possible, and emotionally to manage stresses and disappointments. Foster carers take responsibility for meeting needs as agreed in placement plans and often drive plans forward for children. Children know their plans in an age-appropriate way for them, for example 'a judge is helping find a new mummy and daddy'. Children with disabilities are fully supported to engage positively in family life, make choices and develop social and practical skills, for example helping with domestic chores, managing money and enjoying the use of an adapted cycle for family cycle rides.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

Young people are supported to exercise informed choices for their future: 'Foster carers help me think how I would like my future to be, and they do their best to make that happen for me.' Positive arrangements known as 'staying put' enable young people to remain with their foster family into adulthood and support foster carers financially to continue. This significantly benefits young people to continue in education or work at this crucial stage in their development. As a result the number of young people accessing education, work and training continues to grow and currently applies to the majority of young people over 16 years. Young people's achievements are celebrated and recognised with a dinner event each year tailored particularly to the older age group.

Foster carers receive appropriate training to prepare young people through transitions and prepare them for independence in line with care plans. Foster carers demonstrate they understand that preparation for independence starts at all ages and take responsibility for developing social skills and self-care skills for children and young people.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

This is a well-managed service and overall provides a good quality service to children and young people in line with its clear Statement of Purpose. Lines of delegation and decision making are well understood and this is a service which strives to improve. Continuous monitoring and review ensures operations and outcomes are scrutinised. As such, there is a thorough, ongoing assessment of the service's strengths and the areas to improve. The pressures on the service are well understood, with the focus on plans for action and measures to minimise any impact on children and young people through careful and resourceful matching.

An effective recruitment strategy ensures the number of fostering households continues to increase. Assessments include appropriate safeguarding checks, analysis of findings and scrutiny of applicants' ability to provide safe care. Prospective foster carers are recruited robustly and fairly. Where applicants have individual needs, for example for an interpreter, this is provided to minimise any potential barriers. Equally, staff and managers are recruited robustly and are suitably qualified to work and manage this service.

Overall, the foster panel is suitably constituted, although the role of managers involved in presenting cases to panel is not clearly defined. The foster panel makes timely recommendations, although not all examples of the minutes appropriately evidence the discussion of panel. In addition, not all panel minutes evidence that the discussions with prospective foster carers do not inadvertently lead into pre-empting the approval decision. In addition the panel chair is not undertaking the appraisals of

panel members. Although these areas do not significantly impact upon children, this results in some panel practices and records which are not fully accountable.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good and at the heart of the service. All children and young people are considered individual and capable of maximising their potential. Robust monitoring of health and education ensures children and young people's needs are equally identified in their plans. The local authority has improved the quality of personal education plans to ensure they reflect the individual children and young people. Foster carers see their role as strong advocates for children and young people. Young people benefit from adaptations, for example, adapted cycles to enjoy family cycle rides. All newly approved foster carers benefit from well-established mentoring support to ensure they have a good start to their fostering career.

Safeguarding arrangements are robust and are well understood by foster carers and staff. Any concerns or safeguarding matters are effectively responded to and reported in line with procedures and protocols. All events are scrutinised for any emerging patterns or trends. Foster carers clearly understand their responsibilities and duty of safe care; as a result, children and young people are appropriately safeguarded.

Foster carers report high levels of satisfaction with their support, training and prompt payments: 'I would not foster for anyone else.' Foster carers receive good levels of training in core and specialist areas to meet the needs of children, for example in diversity, safe care and building relationships with children. Increasing levels of foster carers are completing the recognised induction standards and this is demonstrated in foster carers' knowledge of their roles, standards of care and insight into behaviours. Importantly foster carers are clear on the role of supervision and unannounced visits as part of overall safe care for children and young people.

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 foster carer or prospective foster carer is informed orally of the decision maker's decision within two working days. In particular, the discussion at panel with prospective foster carers does not pre-empt the decision-making process (NMS 14.10)
- ensure written minutes of panel meetings are accurate and clearly cover the key issues and views expressed by panel members and record the reasons for its recommendations (NMS 14.7)
- ensure the panel fulfils its quality assurance functions free of undue influence by the fostering service itself (Volume 2: 5.10)

- ensure the panel chair conducts the performance reviews for panel members.
(Vol 2: 5.15)