

Leicester City Council Fostering Service

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

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Setting address	Leicester City Council, Social Services, 1 Grey Friars, LEICESTER, LE1 5PH
Telephone number	0116 299 5882
Email	mark.tingley@leicester.gov.uk
Registered person	Leicester City Council
Registered manager	Mark Tingley
Responsible individual	Mark Tingley
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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

This city council provides a full range of family fostering placements for children and young people up to the age of 18 years.

A service manager is responsible for the day-to-day management of the service. He oversees the four fostering teams, each led by a team manager. The teams are organised into the assessment and recruitment team, the short term team, the kinship care team, and the permanence team. Within each team a senior practitioner undertakes development work in addition to holding a caseload. An administrative team supports the fostering service.

Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

This full inspection finds continuing outstanding practice. The service provides a particularly high level of personalised care to children and young people that addresses issues of equality and diversity exceptionally well. Highlights include: a vibrant Children in Care Council and close working with other agencies and departments. Research, legislation and the results of self-evaluation are reflected and embedded in practice. Outcomes for children and young people are excellent and they make strong progress.

This inspection makes two recommendations so that all reports to panel are clear in their recommendations and that panel members receive appraisals.

Improvements since the last inspection

No actions or recommendations were at the last inspection in 2008.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

The service promotes the health of children and young people in foster care exceptionally well. Foster carers, and their own children too where appropriate, are enabled and trained to provide relevant support. In particular, there is close professional attention to the emotional and psychiatric health of children and young people in foster care. The service responds clearly and thoroughly to any requirements arising from a child's race, culture or sexuality, for example, are clearly and very thoroughly addressed. Foster carers recognise that support in this area leads to significant benefits, such as the stability of placements and success in

education.

Children and young people are helped to understand how to care and protect themselves through prompt, direct input from named nurses. Delays are thereby minimised and positive working relationships are quickly established with health professionals. This means that carers and children and young people have less hesitation in seeking help. It has led, in particular, to an improvement in the protection of babies through higher rates of immunization. Additional support is also available, if needed, to address individual needs. This is adapted to meet any communication or difficulties with understanding that a child or young person may have. Young women who are pregnant receive additional support, which is supplemented for some, by group meetings covering relationships.

Foster carers encourage healthy diets and regular activity for the children and young people in their care. Relatively low levels of disruptions mean that children and young people form good attachments and receive consistent information that helps them to learn effectively. Children and young people receive specialist advice and support about self-harm and drug misuse, for example, that contributes to them becoming emotionally resilient.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

The fostering service works particularly closely with other parts of the local authority and with partner-agencies to provide a high standard of protection for children and young people in foster care. This leads to the large majority of children and young people being effectively protected from being missing and from undertaking criminal behaviour. Foster carers receive substantial training relevant to the protection of children and young people and understand these responsibilities. They also all receive up-to-date training on current issues, such as electronic communication and the use of social networking sites. The handbook provides links to additional support on appropriate websites, such as those for road safety. Additional training is provided by independent organisations, for example regarding the protection of young people from sexual exploitation. Because of such efforts, all the foster children who responded to the Ofsted survey feel safe in their placements; one young person said, 'My foster placement is really good and my carer helps me stay out of trouble'.

Children and young people are protected by thorough recruitment practices and clear ways of dealing with any allegations. Risks to individual children and young people are carefully assessed, both on a routine basis and in the event of significant issues or changes. Carers understand the extent to which they have authority to make decisions and allow appropriate risks. This helps to ensure that children and young people lead as normal lives as possible. If young people go missing frequently, clear thresholds trigger additional steps. Regular monthly meetings occur with police to review these cases and keep young people as safe as possible. All staff are very clear about these procedures. If allegations occur, there is close multi-agency consideration of the factors and the movement of children and young people is

avoided if at all possible. Careful monitoring of any patterns in the records, for instance regarding the use of physical interventions, means that lessons are learnt and improvements made. This shows effective and consistently high standards of practice.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Foster families have high expectations of children and young people that translate into positive behaviours. In addition to their basic training, carers learn relevant, individualised strategies from professionals to address specific behavioural issues. This is an important contribution to the longevity of placements, to children and young people's feelings of security, and to their own skills in dealing with difficulties. Most carers receive satisfactory information about children and young people before a placement occurs and any shortfall is addressed as soon as possible. Constructive relationships are established and the vast majority of children and young people feel positive about their carers.

All households arrange a variety of activities that stimulate children and young people to maintain good physical health and improve their social skills. Good use is made of the multi-cultural activities on offer in the city. Individual interests are facilitated, such as dance classes and attendance at particular clubs, even when additional support is necessary to establish sufficient confidence. In addition, the authority provides a number of high profile and exciting annual events for carers, their families and foster children. As a good corporate parent, the local authority provides free access to certain sports facilities too, which families appreciate. The high standard of provision and aspirations are also reflected in the leisure fund for additional activities and a designated looked-after children's youth worker. These features contribute to developing children and young people's self-esteem through provision of the additional support they require.

Children and young people receive excellent attention to their formal education too, overseen by a 'virtual' head teacher. As in other areas, there is strong attention to their individual needs, whether by individual tutoring or additional support in finding the most appropriate school. Effective interagency work with designated teachers in school means that exclusions are minimised. Importantly, carers feel they are fully supported because of the links they have with professionals. One said, 'I have someone I can ring about schools and pre-school placements'. Academic attainments are improving and attendance is good.

Children and young people in foster care benefit substantially from a variety of local and national initiatives. There is efficient contracting with independent agencies that provide specialist services. This includes the ambitious use of singing and performing to increase children and young people's self-esteem and improve their interpersonal skills. Recently this led to a top award at a national music event, which is testimony to the success of the project. There is also improved corporate monitoring by senior managers throughout the authority to raise the attainment of those children and

young people who do not receive at least 25 hours of education a week. Imaginative up-to-date, research-driven initiatives also educate and stimulate staff and carers. In all such cases, and at celebratory events, the fostering services ensures that all groups are represented, including older young people, children and young people with disabilities and those who live with friends and families.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

The vast majority of children and young people feel that the way they are involved in day-to-day decisions about their lives is outstanding. There is a well-resourced Children in Care Council that represents them extremely well. The authority has also made a written pledge to effectively ensure that the views of children and young people in foster care contribute directly to the development and improvement of the service. As a result of input from looked after children and young people, improvements ensure that carers allow reasonable risk-taking, that new ideas are brought back from high profile national events, and that children and young people understand their rights. Under the guidance of a Children's Rights Officer, it obtains the views of a wide cross-section of foster children, including those from overseas and those who live outside the city. The importance the authority places on the views of children and young people is demonstrated by the imminent assessment of the service by children and young people from elsewhere.

On an individual level too, children and young people receive excellent support. One young person said, 'They always listen to things I say; I know who to talk to about any problems, and my carer sorts things out for me'. Because of monitoring and also national initiatives, the service is continually improving in both this and other areas. There are good relationships with local religious groups and there are exceptional examples of children and young people's needs being addressed through these channels. Carers often contribute to mutual understanding of particular heritages. The role of the independent reviewing officers, too, has been improved recently so they are more specialised and can address individual needs more thoroughly, including those of children and young people who have special communication needs. All reviews occur promptly, which is a significant benefit to foster children and their carers, and work is being undertaken to improve further the effectiveness of care planning. Recruitment practices and carer training ensure that the needs of children and young people who are not hetero-sexual are met and discrimination is not tolerated. Children and young people feel that there is no bullying in their homes.

A specific manager oversees family contact arrangements, which is particularly beneficial. There is an in-depth understanding about how contact works effectively, taking into account the needs of all the parties, in an efficient, child-centred way. Consequently, children and young people feel the service supports them well with their contact. This is an important contribution to placement stability and the general success of fostered children and young people.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

All care leavers benefit from a thorough, embedded policy of stability, continuity and aspiration. The foster service works in close partnership with independent agencies and effectively prepares young people for successful adulthood; this includes those young people who are transferring to adult services. In line with the corporate parenting pledge, opportunities to work are identified within the authority and championed by senior personnel. Government initiatives to permit foster households to care for young people beyond 18 are implemented thoroughly, along with clear programmes to educate young people in the necessary independence skills. Accredited training is available to teach care leavers to manage their own homes. The views of young people over 16 are sought and feedback is positive. Additional effort is focused on those individuals who are not in education, employment or training after 18 years of age and to those who need additional help with interview skills who are at greatest risk.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. As befits such a multi-cultural city, the fostering service is particularly thorough in its efforts to promote social diversity. Its workforce is representative of the community and there are stringent processes to ensure that all children and young people have equal opportunities. Documentation and practice clearly reflect this, including the up-to-date Statement of Purpose. One household represented many when it reported, 'The service is very accepting of our culture and gives us good help'.

There are excellent managerial systems in place to ensure the ongoing effectiveness of the service. Clear delegation of tasks means that there is full attention to each area of the service and excellent cooperation between managers, both inside the service and with colleagues in the wider authority. Similarly there is effective work with the independent sector to ensure efficient and up-to-date implementation of a range of contracts. This leads to innovative and stimulating practice, despite financial pressures, and an increase in demand for the service. In particular, senior managers ensure there is effective monitoring, including regular and varied checks of service user's views and benchmarking against similar services. Shortfalls are identified and action taken to address them. Regular monitoring of records also takes place, which identifies any patterns and shortfalls. As a result, work is underway to ensure certain records cannot be altered retrospectively.

The service pursues a very effective carer recruitment programme. Along with its private contractor, the service uses a highly professional and visible campaign that is adapted to target particular under-represented groups, including those who are lesbian, gay, bi-sexual or trans-gender. This successfully engages a cross-section of the community and work is underway to increase the provision of short-break carers.

Staff undertaking placement duty follow clear and effective procedures. Consequently, most children and young people and carers feel very well matched in their foster households. The service avoids placing undue pressures on households and this is an important contribution to placement stability. Careful use of independent fostering services also occurs if a suitable match is not possible in-house.

Particular success is also evident in the recruitment and support of Friends and Families carers, who are fully integrated into the service. Their assessments are completed in a timely way and they have an equal level of support regardless of their location and for as long as they need it. Interpretation and translation services help to ensure the most appropriate, long term family placements for children and young people who need them. Disruption levels are particularly low amongst this group. Children and young people have input into agreeing individual targets in their placement plans, and they make good progress.

Assessments of new carers are all undertaken in-house and to a high standard. There is thorough monitoring of reports that go to panel and there is a particularly high rate of approval. However, in a very small minority of cases the evidence presented to panel is ambiguous. Potentially, this could lead to inappropriate panel decisions. In practice, panel works effectively in ensuring approvals are suitable.

Support to carers and staff is excellent. Carers report a consistently high standard of support. They are also further integrated into the service by training other carers, which is particularly effective practice. Children of foster carers also contribute imaginatively to this training. Carer's progress is kept under review and they have access to a wide range of training, much of which is shared with supervising social workers. Carers also use on-line courses to ensure as much training as possible is completed. Most staff, including supervising social workers, receive regular supervision and appraisals. However, not all panel members receive annual appraisals to identify their developmental needs. On the other hand, like their colleagues, panel members receive substantial and varied training that fully equips them for their task. There is particularly good use made of external courses, to keep up to date with changes in legislation and other new initiatives.

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 written report on the person's suitability to be approved as a foster carer sets out clearly all the information that the fostering panel and the decision maker needs in order to make an objective approval decision (NMS 13.7)
- review each panel member's performance annually against agreed performance objectives. (Volume 4, statutory guidance, paragraph 5.15)

