

# North Yorkshire County Council Fostering Service

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

North Yorkshire County Council provides a fostering service through the Children's Services Department, delivered by three separate teams covering a wide geographical area. The service recruits, approves, supports and monitors foster carers who provide respite, permanent, specialist and treatment foster care. This includes family and friends carers.

### Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

The service has made some progress since the last inspection, addressing all outstanding recommendations, implementing a range of initiatives and thereby improving outcomes for children and young people. Children and young people rate the fostering service highly. They feel that they are safe, listened to and supported with their health and education. Children know who to turn to if they wish to make a complaint, and they do not have any concerns about bullying. Young people describe being helped to think about the future and supported to prepare for independence.

The consensus among foster carers and a range of stakeholders from field work teams, health, education, youth justice and independent reviewing officers, is that the service provides a good standard of care for children and young people. Some birth parents feel that the care their children receive is excellent. Children and young people are suitably matched with foster carers who undergo thorough assessment. Staff are appropriately qualified and supported in their work.

Some aspects of the operation of the service are not robust enough to ensure that all children and young people are safe and achieve optimum outcomes. A number of recommendations are therefore raised to address the shortfalls identified and so further drive up standards for children and young people.

### Improvements since the last inspection

The majority of recommendations set at the last inspection have been addressed. These related to obtaining medical consents, providing children with information and activities and ensuring their views are better taken into account in foster carer annual reviews. The service was also asked to improve practice with regard to access to records, family and friends training, monitoring of unannounced visits to foster carers, providing information for children, training for carers, and reinforcing the role of the supervising social worker. The action taken contributes to improved outcomes for children. However, the recommendation for improving monitoring of the service has not been fully met and is raised again at this inspection.

## Helping children to be healthy

The provision is satisfactory.

Children and young people are cared for by foster carers with a good understanding of how to meet their physical, emotional and psychological health needs. One young person noted, 'I go to the doctor's to help me with my weight' and another young person commented that their foster carers, 'help you with anything you have got on your mind'.

Foster carers confirm they are encouraged to reinforce healthy lifestyles and promote the emotional well being of the children and young people they look after. They are supported in this task because the service works closely with a range of health providers, including general practitioners, health visitors and the child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS). One stakeholder noted, 'foster carers are given a priority as service users by health visitor' and a foster carer commented, 'we are asked in supervision visits how we help our children to be healthy'.

However, some children and young people do not receive health assessments and dental checks within recommended timescales and not all have up-to-date immunisations. One stakeholder noted that the service, 'works closely with the Specialist Nurse and Nurse Advisor for looked after children. Forms from children's social care are slow to come in however and this puts significant pressure on health to meet the targets for initial health assessments. Change of placement forms are often received very late'. This inconsistency in practice means that children and young people's health needs are not identified in a timely fashion and impacts on them being able to achieve optimum health outcomes.

## Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is satisfactory.

Children and young people indicate they feel safe and rarely feel the need to go missing from their foster homes. They know who to speak to if they are not happy and report that they are free from intimidation and bullying. One young person commented they that knew how to make a complaint but that they have, 'no need to ever make a complaint - I'm treated excellently'. Another young person agreed that they feel well cared for, 'because they keep me safe and love me'.

Children and young people benefit from a range of measures which improves their safety and well being. There is a procedure for storage and use of medicines' procedure and foster carer homes are checked to ensure they are free from hazards. There is thorough assessment of prospective carers and they routinely receive unannounced visits. When child protection concerns emerge, these are dealt with promptly and according to procedure.

Processes for assessing and agreeing the suitability of family and friend assessments are less robust and means that children and young people in these placements do

not enjoy the same level of protection. For example, some applicants and household members over the age of 18 do not have Criminal Records Bureau checks in place.

## **Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do**

The provision is good.

Secure, stable foster placements provide children and young people with the foundations they need to develop positive attachments, make the most of their learning opportunities and function appropriately with others. This is because foster carers are equipped with the skills they need to deal with challenging behaviour and help children and young people deal with adverse experiences. One young person noted, 'my carers are really nice but firm when necessary'.

A stakeholder commented, 'my child has made amazing progress; able to catch up with some of her educational targets, improved her self esteem and has gained much from the stability afforded to her'. Another professional noted that, 'child A has been able to control his emotions, reducing aggressive outbursts, confiding in his carer and accepting the need for rules and boundaries'. Younger children's development is enhanced by attendance at nursery and in pre-school education. Foster carers play an important part and contribute by providing appropriate play and learning opportunities. The service is ambitious for children and young people in its care and has a range of initiatives to engage children in learning such as reading clubs, access to outdoor education, and a Key Stage 4 're-engagement' programme.

Children and young people also benefit from the interventions of the education for looked after children (ELAC) virtual school team and foster carers who provide effective individualised educational support. One young person noted, 'my foster carers help me to revise, motivate me, look at my work and give me constructive criticism as well as praise'. A stakeholder reflected that, 'the foster families play a significant role in working alongside the school to ensure progress'. Young people are fully supported to gain employment and some go on to study at college and university. Teaching staff comment positively on the support provided to children and young people. One head teacher noted, 'we receive support from the ELAC virtual school team which is invaluable. They provide excellent support to vulnerable children'.

Children and young people enjoy a range of activities which promotes their development and bolsters their sense of achievement and self-esteem. A stakeholder praised one particular foster carer saying that, 'the carer has offered opportunities to the young person which others might take for granted – music lessons and going travelling, developing domestic skills together at home to great acclaim to build self-esteem'. Subsidised leisure cards enable children and young people to experience a range of leisure and sporting activities which, as well as helping them to remain healthy and active, helps to promote social inclusion through contact with their local community and the development of friendship networks.

## Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Children and young people are fully supported to develop a positive self-view and emotional resilience. This happens because foster carers understand the importance of family, heritage and the therapeutic needs of children and young people and are skilled at meeting these needs. CAHMS and expert staff also provide advice and guidance.

One young person reflected that their foster carers were, 'excellent and I owe them a great deal for making me the person I am today - a hard working, well motivated, funny and well-liked lad'. The same young person also commented that they had, 'many discussions about university. My foster parents made me believe I was good enough to study law - my dream career - when I doubted myself'. Children and young people confirm that their foster carers listen to them and take notice of what they say. One young person noted, 'they listen to me and understand what I'm saying'; another that, 'they listen to my opinions and give me a choice'. Foster carers exercise skill and patience in working with children and young people with complex needs, ensuring their views are sought, considered and acted upon.

At a corporate level, well-established mechanisms for consultation allow children and young people to make their views known. For example, young people have been involved in key staff appointments, such as interviews for fostering management and quality assurance posts, and the ELAC Virtual School has included looked after children or care leavers in every appointment made since 2008.

Children and young people say they are welcomed into their foster homes and are made to feel like one of the family. One young person commented, 'I feel safe and happy and well cared for where I'm living now.' Another noted, 'I feel like part of the family, loved and cared for - excellent! I get on with everybody, I enjoy life a lot and am treated extremely well'.

Contact with family and friends is managed well, with children and young people's needs being central to arrangements. One birth parent noted that, 'the new family support worker makes the contact with my daughter more relaxed', and another birth parent commented positively about, 'a communication book is used between the foster carer and us'. Birth parents are reassured that their children are well cared for. One birth parent noted, 'I have two children in foster care. I am very happy with the foster service. My children have the best of everything. Their education has been exceptional, their health and wellbeing is very good. I cannot thank them enough'. Another commented that their children were, 'well-presented and well cared for'.

## Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

Young people are provided with effective support to help them achieve successful transition to independence and their views in this respect have been acted upon. They told the service that being able to stay in their foster placement beyond the age of 18 years was very important to them. As a result and where this is the right plan, young people stay with their foster carers into young adulthood.

For some young people this has meant they can continue their education without having to worry about moving into independence. In addition, the service extends its corporate parent role by offering work placements and apprenticeship programmes within the local authority to its care leavers. Young people say their foster carers help them out a lot at this important stage of their lives. One young person commented, 'my foster parents are encouraging me to find a job', another noted that, 'my carers talk to me about it (the future) all the time'.

Young people have good access to external support services with one young person saying, 'my leaving care worker is helping me think about what I want to do in the future'. A stakeholder reported that one young person is, 'learning a lot of independence skills, knows how to budget, deals with banks, is really maturing. Carers are very positive and give a lot of encouragement and support'.

## Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

Children and young people benefit from a well-considered process of matching where their individual needs are clearly identified. One stakeholder commented, 'the fostering service works hard to match children successfully and provides excellent support for carers'. This results in very stable placements where they can experience positive and enduring attachments.

Fostering service staff give foster carers good support so they successfully care for children. Foster carers feel that the advice and training they receive is good and that, 'there is always someone there at the other end of the phone'. One stakeholder described, 'excellent communication and good follow-up of actions'. Staff confirm they receive effective management support. They are equipped with the skills, competence and training they need to help children and young people achieve improved outcomes.

Family and friends carers undergo appropriate initial assessments. These placements are managed well with the same support, payment and access to training as any other carer. Some attend specific family and friends' support groups and training relevant to their particular situations.

Managers make regular reports to the executive about the functioning of the service.



The safety and quality of foster carers' care is monitored through regular supervision, unannounced visits and annual review. The independent reviewing officer service gives an additional layer of quality assurance.

However, children and young people's need for safety is compromised in some instances, particularly in relation to family and friends placements. Management and monitoring of the service here is less effective and less robust. This means that any patterns or trends, such as those identified in this report, are not promptly identified or addressed and this does not therefore serve children and young people's best interests. The nominal Registered Manager, responsible individual and agency decision-maker is conflated in one officer of the local authority; this creates a conflict of interest and does not lend itself to rigor and independence in monitoring or decision making.

Fostering panels across the three geographical areas function adequately in some respects. Central lists are well-balanced with a number of independent members, all of whom receive an annual appraisal. Assessments of prospective carers are generally sound and have good analysis of applicant's strengths and needs and these reports are effectively scrutinised by each of the three panels. However, panel recommendations for the approval for family and friends carers are sometimes made 'in principle' and without panel having the information that is required by regulation. Agency decision-makers do not always make a decision within the seven day timescale. Nominated officers for family and friends have not been appointed as required by the regulations.

Exemptions from the usual fostering limit are few, but foster carers are not always given notice in writing and it is not always clear how these exemptions are reviewed. There are instances where the children for whom the exemption applies are not correctly named in the letter to the foster carers, and where the duration of the exemption is contradicted by what it is in children's placement plans. This may give children and young people in these situations a misunderstanding on what their overall plan is.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good.

## **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):

- obtain the information specified in Schedule 3 relating to X and other members of X's household and family (breach of regulation 26 (2)(a))
- ensure that health assessments take place once every six months in the case of children aged under five and at least every 12 months in the case of children aged five and over (The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 2:

Care Planning Placement and Case Review (2010) paragraph 2.6)

- ensure that the fostering panel and agency decision maker make timely, quality and appropriate recommendations/decisions in line with the overriding objective to promote the welfare of children in foster care (NMS 14)
- inform the foster carer by notice in writing that s/he is exempted from the usual fostering limit and consider how it will review any exemption to the usual fostering limit (Volume 4, statutory guidance, paragraphs 5.49 - 5.50)
- improve procedures for monitoring the activities of the service and ensure the manager regularly monitors all records kept by the service to ensure compliance with the service's policies, to identify any concerns about specific incidents and to identify patterns and trends. Take immediate action to address any issues raised by this monitoring (NMS 25.2)
- appoint a nominated officer or officers with authority to grant temporary approval of foster carers by a process which complies with Regulation (2) of the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations. (Family and Friends Care: Statutory Guidance for Local Authorities, paragraph 5.12)