

Devon County Council Fostering Service

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

Unique reference number	SC056693
Inspection date	26/03/2012
Inspector	Jim Palmer / Christina Maddison
Type of inspection	Social Care Inspection

Setting address	Devon County Council, Finance Services, County Hall, Topsham Road, Exeter, Devon, EX2 4QJ
Telephone number	01392 386052
Email	
Registered person	Devon County Council
Registered manager	Sally Fitton
Responsible individual	Karen Amanda Cleave
Date of last inspection	17/12/2008

© Crown copyright 2012

Website: www.ofsted.gov.uk

This document may be reproduced in whole or in part for non-commercial educational purposes, provided that the information quoted is reproduced without adaptation and the source and date of publication are stated.

You can obtain copies of The Children Act 2004, Every Child Matters and The National Minimum Standards for Children's Services from: The Stationery Office (TSO) PO Box 29, St Crispins, Duke Street, Norwich, NR3 1GN. Tel: 0870 600 5522. Online ordering: www.tso.co.uk/bookshop

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

Devon County Council Fostering Service is the major childcare county resource for children and young people looked after by the local authority. It comprises the following services: long term or permanent care; time limited or temporary care; emergency care; kinship care; parent and child care; intensive fostering; remand care; private fostering panel arrangements; family finding; and a supported lodgings scheme.

The service operates three mainstream fostering office bases: one in Totnes (South and West team), one in Exeter (Exeter and East Devon team), and one in Barnstaple (North and Mid Devon team). The Operations Manager Fostering is based in the Exeter office.

The service has links to specialist health, education, and psychology and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services. There are designated nurses for children and young people looked after in Devon.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This is a good service with some aspects of practice judged as outstanding. The service is provided with clear leadership and direction by an experienced team of managers who are aware of the strengths and weaknesses of the service. The service is outstanding at consulting with young people and seeking their views and opinions. Young people have a number of groups to which they can contribute their views and they are actively involved in advising the County Council and senior managers of young people's experience of foster care. Young people contribute to staff and carer training events and are involved in suggesting areas of development for the service. There is a strong commitment to receiving feedback on the service from young people.

Another area of outstanding practice is the provision on a very wide range of leisure and sports activities, aimed at raising young people's self-esteem and confidence. There are very strong strategic links to support young people's continuing education and life-skills development through the transition to adulthood.

Areas for further development are: ensuring that all foster carers receive full and detailed information prior to or very soon after placement in order to ensure that carers can meet the needs of children and identified risks can be safely managed; ensuring that all payments to carers are made in reasonable timescales; and all

temporary approval of carers are put before the approval panel within timescales set out in the regulations.

Improvements since the last inspection

At the previous inspection, two good practice recommendations were made. The service has made good progress in implementing the recommendations. The service was asked to ensure that the criteria for matching children to placements could be readily identified. New documentation has been produced by the service, and pre-placement matching considerations are now evidenced.

The service has received very few complaints since the last inspection, these are generally well recorded and, however in one case looked at the outcome was not held on the file. However young people and carers said that they were confident that complaints are thoroughly looked into and taken seriously.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Young people's needs are promoted by the service. There are good strategic links between health care professionals and the fostering service. Child in care nurses regularly attend fostering support groups and carers report that they are usually given specific advice and guidance about specific health matters as and when is necessary. Multi-agency meetings are held regularly which consider the health outcomes for individual young people; these include health and education professionals and representatives of the fostering service.

Children in Care nurses lead in health promotion training on the foster carer training programme. Information in varied formats is made available to young people, promoting the importance of good health outcomes and encouraging them to participate in their health assessments. Young people say that their health needs are well supported and that their views and wishes are taken into consideration. Some young people have been involved in developing training materials for foster carers which promote the importance of good health outcomes for children. All foster carers are provided with training in first aid, some carers have received specialist training in first aid for babies. Young people are able to keep their own doctor, if distance allows. All young people are registered with a doctor, dentist and optician and are offered initial health assessments and regular health reviews. Not all young people choose to take up these opportunities, particularly among the older population. However direct work is undertaken with young people in order to reduce any concerns they may have about health reviews.

Children with complex health needs have their health assessments undertaken by an appropriately experienced nurse. The service has good links with specialist services such as Child and Adolescent Mental Health services, joint agency child abuse teams and drugs and alcohol services which ensure that foster carers receive training advice and support when dealing with complex physical and emotional health issues.

Appropriate consents for medical treatment are gained and carers are aware of the level of delegated authority they have. Carers record all appointments, treatment and medication and these records and health matters are regularly monitored through foster carer supervision. Health outcomes are also monitored at carers annual reviews and at a strategic level by the local authority.

Children and young people are encouraged to develop a healthy lifestyle which includes participation in a wide variety of physical activities, for example, through the sport-active programme, the Duke of Edinburgh's award scheme, horse riding and a wide range of sports and leisure activities.

Children are looked after in homes which provide a suitably safe environment to meet their needs. All foster homes have regular health and safety checks undertaken by supervising social workers. The importance of health and safety is included in foster carer assessments and training and the foster care approval panel takes due consideration this. Specific risks assessments are carried out on individual items such as pets and various items of equipment or apparatus. Foster carers confirm that they have at least one unannounced visit each year.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The service has a well-developed policy for ensuring the safety of children. The fostering service safeguarding policy accords fully with the local authority safeguarding policies and procedures. The service benefits from having a significant number of highly experienced social workers, who are very familiar with child protection procedures. All carers receive appropriate training as part of the pre-approval assessment in safeguarding awareness. Once approved carers receive regular ongoing training and the safety of children is discussed regularly in supervision. Foster carers keep detailed records of daily events and are able to discuss any concerns they may have regarding the safety of children with their supervising social workers, fostering support workers and other experienced carers.

Foster carers provide safe home environments for children and develop positive relationships with children and young people in which concerns about children's safety can be openly discussed.

A strength of the service is the proportionate approach taken to risk management; young people are encouraged to develop social and life skills and engage in a range of activities that are sensitively risk managed. This allows young people to develop their own skills of keeping themselves safe.

All approved carers automatically join the fostering network and are aware of the process of support that is available to them.

The fostering service has excellent links with other agencies who are concerned with

child protection, this is supported by a cross-departmental management structure, that promotes good liaison and inter-departmental working, to promote the safety of children.

In 2010 some kinship placements were made without full assessments until substantially later than required. This matter impacted on a small number of households but has since been robustly addressed by the authority.

Carers seek to minimise the risk of children being absent from care, however when this happens, there are clear procedures for carers to follow and these are understood and followed. The service has a protocol with the local police and carers are very aware of their responsibilities and undertake direct work with children in order to help them understand the risks they face. Additional support is available to carers in order to maintain placement stability. However some carers reported that they are not always given sufficient information to keep children safe.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Foster carers have a thorough understanding of the importance of role modelling, and hold realistic yet achievable expectations of children. Foster carers are ably supported by supervising social workers and fostering support workers, this enables them to effectively care for children who may present complex and challenging behaviours. Behaviour management is regularly discussed in carer supervision sessions. Foster carers are also able to seek advice and support from other experienced carers and support groups. All foster carers receive training in acceptable forms of behaviour management and specialist advice and guidance is readily available to them.

Young people are actively encouraged to participate in a wide range of leisure activities that are planned and provided in order to promote self-esteem and confidence. Young people attending a riding school were very positive about the way this had developed their confidence and self-esteem by taking responsibility for the care of the horses and not simply going riding. For some young people there is the opportunity to gain related awards and attend local colleges to undertake equine studies. There is a vast range of leisure and sports activities available to young people and foster carers and fostering support workers actively promote activities that will enhance young people's range of skills and interests. There is a very active Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme with a large number of young people achieving at all levels including gold award.

The service places a high priority on promoting the education of young people; there are strong strategic links between the fostering service, education and the youth service. These have enabled the prioritisation of the education for looked after children. The local authority has introduced a virtual school team which has responsibility for promoting educational achievement for children in care. The virtual school headteacher is a member of the corporate parenting group and meets

regularly with heads of service. The fostering service has very close links with the virtual school headteacher and also has close links with other aspects the local authority service such as transport and independent reviewing officers, ensuring that children's education remains a priority and inter departmental barriers are reduced. There has been year-on-year improvement in educational attainment for children in care.

All young people coming into care are provided with membership of the library service and receive a book token. There is an expectation that foster carers will spend time reading with young people. Young people are provided with bookmarks and leaflets on numerous opportunities available to young people through the 'summer reading challenge'. This has shown an increase in the reading skills of children in care. Older young people are supported in gaining bursaries. The local authority encourages young people in care to participate in a wide range of consultation groups and regular meetings.

Young people's personal education plans are regularly monitored by the virtual school head; children, young people and their carers are encouraged to participate in this process. Child in Care co-ordinators follow up any concerns identified with key staff and managers as part of this monitoring to ensure there is no drift and appropriate actions are taken. As a result of the strategic prioritisation of this work, there has been a reduction in the numbers of school exclusions and currently no children in care are permanently excluded from school.

The local authority also holds a regular celebration of achievement award ceremony, for young people, parents, carers and staff, the numbers of young people nominated has significantly grown year on year.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The local authority is outstanding at seeking the views and wishes of children. Young people have the opportunity to attend have extensive opportunities to meet in both local and area consultation groups, this is a real strength of the service. Young people are able to confirm that consultation opportunities are excellent and they have had the opportunity to make positive suggestions about improving the service that have been acted upon, for example the development of a comprehensive programme of activities and improvements to educational resources for young people.

Young people have contributed to the design and content of children's information packs; have produced information in alternative formats such as DVD. Young people have produced an in-house magazine and they are establishing a website for children in care.

Young people have delivered presentations to the Local Authority Corporate Parenting Group, the full council, foster carer training events and training for key

staff such as Independent Reviewing Officers. Young people say that not only are these examples of how they are able to help shape the service they are able to bring young people's perspectives to elected members and senior managers. As a result of this active participation, young people say their self esteem and confidence has risen considerably and they are now significantly more able to represent their views and opinions with others. One young person said 'without the support of the fostering service I would not be the man I am today.'

Most young people have their needs identified accurately and foster carers are aware of how those needs should be met. All carers receive training in the promotion of equality and diversity. All placement plans are subject to review within statutory timescales and supervising social workers review the developments made within the placement at each supervision meeting with carers. Young people confirm that they are able to make choices about the food they eat, although they are encouraged and supported in developing healthy eating options. Older young people say they are given the opportunity to manage money, prepare meals and take appropriate decisions about their futures in a manner that will help them live more independently in the future. Children receive regular personal allowances.

The fostering service is very good at ensuring that carers are aware of the need to promote contact with children's families. Some foster carers are trained in supervising contact and all carers spoken with were aware of which decision making had been delegated to them. Contact arrangements are clarified at placement planning meetings.

The fostering service has good systems in place for gathering information on children's needs prior to offering placements; however a significant number of children are placed in unplanned placements. Some carers say that they do not all receive full information on children until after they are placed. There is a system in place to monitor whether placement planning takes place within five days of the start of a placement. Some carers say that even following such a meeting they do not always receive sufficient information to keep themselves or children fully safe. Risk assessments are not always completed when requested. Devon is significantly higher than the national average for numbers of young people who have three placements or more in twelve months.

Young people are given the opportunity to undertake visits to carers before the start of planned placements and say that they are given good information about the carer their home and the family expectations of the young person. Some carers say they do receive detailed information prior to a placement starting and at times inadequate risk management information.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

Young people are very well supported in having opportunities to develop practical life skills to enable them to make a successful transition to adulthood. Carers are aware

of the need to support young people through this transition and many young people remain in contact with their former foster carers for a long time. Foster carers and young people are actively engaged in the planning for young people's futures.

Young people are supported by the service in remaining in placement in order to complete programmes of education and training. Some young people have been supported to complete significant personal achievements. Practice in this area is very good and an area of strength for the service.

Foster carers all receive training in the importance of this transition for young people and, along with foster care support workers, undertake a practical skills programme for young people. The service has very good links with further and higher education services and, through strong strategic links, young people are supported in undertaking and completing educational opportunities.

A strength of the service is that it now has a range of services that fall within the remit of the fostering service, for example young people are able to progress from mainstream foster care placement, to supported lodgings scheme whilst remaining within the same service.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The service has seen a significant increase in the number of children and young people placed within the service. The fostering service is within a large children's services department, and its practice is impacted upon by assessment teams which are not directly line-managed by the fostering manager. Devon has a higher than average number of children having three or more placements in a year in comparison to national figures.

Good management information is available to service and strategic managers. The recruitment and assessment of carers is carried out by a separate dedicated team managed by a dedicated recruitment and assessment team manager. This team uses sessional workers in order to complete assessments in a timely manner. The time taken for the completion of assessments is reducing, however not all are completed within eight months. There are good systems for monitoring placement shortfall and there is an action to plan recruit sufficient carers to meet predicted need.

All prospective carers undergo a rigorous assessment and training programme to assess their competencies in being able to effectively meet the needs of children. Rigorous checks on the suitability of applicants are undertaken and all carers complete a recognised training programme covering the skills required by foster carers, before being presented to the panel for approval. All recommendations for approval are quality checked prior to submission to panel. Once carers are approved at panel a handover meeting is arranged between the recruitment and assessment workers to the supervising social workers, who then take responsibility for carers continuing professional development. All carers undergo an induction programme

linked to Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) competencies, some carer's progress to complete higher level training. Not all previously approved carers have completed the CWDC workbook though some hold other higher level qualifications; the service is currently working with carers to resolve the matters. Carers say they are well supported and are presented with very good training opportunities.

The service has two foster care approval panels that meet in separate locations across the county. Each panel is properly constituted and panel members have received training with regard to their role and the function of panel. A panel advisor and panel administrator support each panel. Panel members are given an induction and the opportunity to observe the functioning of a panel prior to sitting on panel. Appraisals for panel members have not yet started. Some panel members appeared ill prepared for one specific item presented to panel. The panels are regularly agreeing to recommend approval for a wide range of children and ages, however they are recording the carer's preferences with regard to approval their range of approval. Foster carers say that they find the assessment and pre-approval training rigorous but fully understand the reasons for this.

The service is managed by an experienced and appropriately qualified person. All staff undertaking the assessment of carers are suitably qualified and experienced social workers each currently registered with the General Social Care Council. The service manager provides very clear direction and leadership and receives support from an integrated senior management structure. Very positive feedback has been received from carers and staff about the manager's positive leadership and improvements that are taking place within the service.

The Statement of Purpose and children's guide have been recently reviewed and both accurately describe the service. Young people helped to design and agreed the content of the children's guide. It is available in different formats if required and there are two editions for differing age groups.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The service is seeking to recruit carers from a range of backgrounds. All staff members and foster carers receive training in the promotion of equality and diversity and young people are provided with a highly personalised service. Recognition of individual differences is a feature of this service. Carers show a very good knowledge of individual children's preferences. Foster carers support children and young people to make personal choices and to access community resources.

The service has recently appointed a practice manager with particular responsibility for family finding, and managing a team of family finding workers. A new policy has been introduced with the purpose of reducing delay in seeking permanent families for children. The intention is to raise the profile of permanency by provide specialist training, support and guidance for permanent carers. The team is introducing the concept of stability meetings with a view to increasing placement stability. This is a positive development for the service in the light of the higher than average number of disruptions currently occurring.

There is a process for carefully matching children with appropriate carers to meet their needs. However, some carers say that children have been placed in long-term, planned placements, where they were not given full information on the young person to fully meet their needs and this lead to placement breakdown within a very short period.

All staff and carers undergo rigorous checks to ensure that they are suitable to work with children. However in one instance there was no explanation for a short gap in employment history.

All carers receive regular supervision from a supervising social worker, and regular annual reviews. Supervision is structured; it follows a formal agenda looking at all aspects of the child's placement plus the developmental and training needs of carers. Carers place high value on the supervision they receive from their social workers and the support provided to them by fostering support workers.

All staff and carers receive regular training in the safeguarding of children and all are aware of the actions they should take if they have any concerns about the safety of a child. The fostering service follows the local authority safeguarding policies and procedures. There is a clear distinction between complaints and allegations. There are good links between the fostering service and the local authority designated officer. Appropriate liaison takes place between all relevant agencies and teams. Young people are confident any complaints or concerns that they have will be taken seriously.

Family and friends placements have a dedicated worker and practice manager which ensures that this work is properly completed by the service.

There are very good systems for monitoring the performance of the service, the manager and strategic management board have thorough knowledge of the strengths and weakness of the service. There is a clear service development plan in place for continuing to develop the service.

Regular payments to carers are generally clear and carers say that they are paid on time. However one-off payments for additional work or for damage caused to carer's property can be delayed for sometime. A number of carers reported difficulties with the payment system, and these concerns are not yet resolved.

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 foster carers have full information about the child (as set out in standard 3.9 (NMS11.2))

- ensure that prior to the placement for each child, the foster carer is provided with all of the information they need to carry out their role effectively (NMS 15.2)
- ensure that payments of all allowances are made promptly at the agreed time (NMS 28.2)
- ensure that where a family and friends foster carer is temporarily approved a full assessment is completed as soon as possible and where the intention is that the child stays with the carer always within the timescales set out in the regulations. (NMS30.14)