

Cambridgeshire County Council Fostering

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

The fostering service is local authority managed. The range of fostering services includes time-limited, respite, day care, long-term, permanent, kinship and family link fostering. The service assesses, approves and provides on-going support to foster carers.

At the time of the inspection the service was supporting 167 foster carer households and was providing placements for 264 children and young people.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding: a service of exceptional quality that significantly exceeds minimum requirements

Good: a service of high quality that exceeds minimum requirements

Adequate: a service that only meets minimum requirements

Inadequate: a service that does not meet minimum requirements

Overall effectiveness

The overall effectiveness is judged to be **good**.

The service is effective in ensuring that the right type of fostering placement is found as quickly as possible for children in need of foster care. This includes the service for children and young people under the kinship care arrangements and 'link' scheme for children with learning and physical disabilities. As a result, the outcomes for children and young people are good across all aspects of their safety, welfare and development. Placement stability is a significant contributor to these good outcomes: rates of disruption are low, and have continued to fall since the last inspection. This is by comparison with other local authorities and includes many looked after children for whom a permanent placement with foster carers has been identified as the best choice of placement for them.

Children and young people do well overall in their placements. They are safe because good emphasis is placed on safe care practice and underpinning knowledge of child protection and complaint procedures. A particular strength of the service are the well - designed support arrangements which enable young people to 'stay put' with their carers past school leaving age and into employment or further education. This provides them with stability and security during a crucial period of their lives. A further strength is the significantly improved emotional and physical health that children and young people enjoy. This results from the direct support, advice and training provided to carers and children by a team of designated nurses and

psychologists whose role is to work solely with looked after children and young people.

The service is led and managed well overall. Effective arrangements are used to recruit and retain good quality carers who can meet a diverse range of children and young people's needs. Panel functions and manager monitoring both work robustly to promote and support high quality placements and safe care. As a result, the large majority of children and young people have positive views about the quality of their care and their relationship with carers.

There are some minor shortfalls identified in areas such as panel staff recruitment, delivery of training during 2012, and the best use of some documentation. These weaknesses are minor and have not had any measureable adverse impact on the quality of care that children and young people receive. The service continues to provide regular, good quality support to all carers. Children and young people are included and supported well overall to give their views, wishes and feelings about their care.

Areas for 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 in relation to each of the matters specified in Schedule 1 before persons work on the fostering service panel. This refers specifically to the taking up of written references (Regulation 20, Schedule 1.3)
- ensure that the written guide to the service for children and young people ('Children's Guide') is made available at the point of placement in a way that is accessible and includes correct details of how a child can contact their Independent Reviewing Officer, the Children's Rights Director and Ofsted (NMS 16)
- ensure that all training is organised to encourage and facilitate attendance by foster carers (NMS 20.10)
- ensure that there is monitoring of any child missing from a foster parent's home without permission. (Regulation 35 (1), Schedule, 6.7)

Outcomes for children and young people

Outcomes for children and young people are **good**.

Children benefit from stable and appropriate placements and are placed with their siblings when this is in their best interests. Many have chosen their placement and it is the best option for them. They experience minimal placement disruptions and

enjoy very good relationships with their foster family. One young teenager said his carer is, 'the best carer in the world - she helped me with my confidence.' Most children who returned surveys said that the care given to them by carers is excellent and the vast majority answered that they strongly agree they are treated like one of the family. As a result, children feel safe and are safe. They know that their carer household lives by safe care practices which are designed to make everyone feel safe and facilitate trust and confidence between carer and child. Children and young people very rarely make any complaints, but they feel well protected through the team around them, including their social workers, independent reviewing officers or assigned advocates.

Children and young people's wishes and feelings influence their care. For example, children's wishes to remain permanently with their present carers or to move to assessed kinship carer arrangements have been effectively facilitated by the service. This meets children's assessed permanency needs, provides consistency and promotes their sense of worth. It results in children and young people feeling good about themselves and having a good understanding of their background. Children and young people's wishes and feelings also influence the fostering service. For example, children have contributed lists of the attributes they seek in a carer to be included in advertising materials for prospective carers. Similarly, they have influenced the style of recently piloted 'carer profiles'. They asked that the profiles include plenty of photos and simple facts about who is who in the carer family. They also asked that these are ready to be given straight away to children and young people before they arrive at new placements.

Young people are making very good progress with their emotional and physical health. They are growing physically and in maturity as they develop positive attachments and receive consistent care and attention from families who prioritise their basic and more complex health needs. Children pursue active, healthy lifestyles with their carer families and pursue sports and leisure activities according to their talents and interests. This includes being helped to celebrate the festivals and participate in the lifestyle choices which fit with their cultures and religions where appropriate. It also includes being helped to maintain contact with relatives and understand what has happened to them. Young people are well informed about healthy lifestyles and most choose to eat healthily and not to smoke, misuse drugs or alcohol. They are also well informed about issues such as emerging sexuality because carers are alert and equipped with tools to help them discuss such issues. Children with learning and physical disabilities are also making significant progress with eating, drinking and toileting as they gain confidence in a caring, consistent environment where carers have high expectations of the progress they can make.

Children and young people are making good educational progress overall. This is because the majority of carers have high expectations of what children can achieve and work effectively alongside schools to promote each one's learning. The service is aware of the need to continually raise their and carers' aspirations for children and the virtual school head is engaged in work to achieve this. Children's school attendance is good and they receive consistent support to continue with their work through related activities and homework outside school. Some young people are

accessing appropriate vocational training, while others have embarked on university degree courses. Children have overcome difficulties with bullying and have gained the confidence to participate in after school activities. Children with severe learning disabilities are making significant progress through the effective use of visual timetables, cue cards and rewards of their favourite things. Consistent use of method and tools for communication both in school and in the family and link care homes has been key to this progress. Computers are presently available to all children and young people but the universal safeguards imposed by the central server posed undue restrictions to their valid use for home study. As a result, carers and children contributed to a recent service decision that computer services will shortly be funded by the service, but purchased by families, so that they can be tailored to children's individual needs.

Children and young people are able to actively participate in day to day and more complex decisions about their lives. For example, many young people are choosing to continue for longer with their long term carers. They continue to feel supported as one of the foster family and do not feel pushed to become independent too soon. At the same time, they are making real progress in learning the practical, emotional and budgeting skills required for living independently. As a result, many young people are enjoying an ongoing 'base' with their carers long after they have started to live independently. They also make a contribution to the local authority service as they contribute to foster carer training courses, and participate in meetings with senior managers of the service. A care leaver is also undergoing checks to sit on the fostering panel. These social and participation opportunities are benefitting young people's qualifications and social confidence as well as strengthening their future job prospects.

Quality of service

The quality of the service is **good**.

The service successfully recruits, assesses, prepares, trains and supervises skilled foster carers. They have a positive impact on the outcomes of children and young people. This is achieved by consistent work from committed and effective social work and support staff who put children and young people at the centre of what they do. Recruitment of carers is robust and the fostering panel functions effectively to scrutinise and improve the quality of reporting, assessment and matching. This includes ongoing advice and recommendations that all workers prioritise the inclusion of children and young people's views on carers as part of carer reviews. As a result, there are renewed efforts to ensure that children's own views, wishes and feelings about placements and carers are obtained and recorded and that they are helped to represent themselves in person more often. This relates to both carer's own children and to fostered children.

There are suitable numbers of kinship and link carers. However, there are limited available general foster placements at times, such as amongst some minority ethnic communities. There is still significant use of independent fostering agency placements in cases when a suitable placement and match cannot be made in-house.

This helps to ensure placements can meet young people's needs. The appointment of a marketing manager and a well - informed recruitment plan identifying specifically what carers are needed aims to alleviate this difficulty. Despite this, most children's needs are met well by all the matches made. Most matching reports, placement plans and review reports detail children's assessed needs comprehensively, including how any gaps in matching are to be addressed. There is a system and expectation that social workers for children already in placement are consulted to ascertain the implications for their care. This works in most cases, but not always. On exceptionally rare occasions written information to carers about children is late in being provided but verbal information is given. Some children also still indicate that they know little about their carers before placement and do not receive information, such as a children's guide or carer profiles to help them overcome initial anxieties. The service is actively addressing this. Consultation work with children and young people has been undertaken for a revised children's guide and the carer profiles in place so far are child friendly and informative. Carers, social workers and advocates ensure that children are provided with reassurance and information at the beginning of placements which reduces the impact of the absence of some of these documents.

Carers achieve a very good record of placement stability. This is attributable to the very high quality support and supervision of foster carers. Carers are unequivocal about the support they receive. They remark on the constant availability of supervising social workers and their promptness in organising individual health or behaviour advice. Many remark on their efficiency in finding information or resolving delegated authority issues. One carer said, 'if there is ever a dispute over contact arrangements or transportation, the supervising social workers will take that up and resolve it straight away.' Another stated, 'we have always received outstanding support from our fostering social worker, the foster carer support groups are well organised and cover issues relevant to what we do.' Carers are particularly enthusiastic about the benefits of having 'peer mentors' and respite carers when they first start in the work. They also highly value the direct advice and support of psychologists and nurses provided by the service. This support has enabled carers to provide stable and effective care when children's behaviour is adversely affected by their attachment difficulties or when placements come under pressure. Similarly, regular respite and assistance with contact and transport arrangements enhances the stability of long term placements for children. In addition, the funding of adaptations to properties enhances the stability of link care placements for children with complex physical and learning disabilities.

The quality of training is good overall and benefits young people because the outcomes for children are central to all training for carers, social workers and panel members alike. Carers and young people are very enthusiastic about the benefits of young people's involvement in the 'skills to foster' initial training. Carers are also equipped and skilled through undertaking the diploma in care of children and young people. Carers' annual appraisal and personal development plan focuses clearly on continuing training for keeping up to date and gaining increased expertise for fostering and providing better placements for children. For example, carers who have undertaken the 'Speakeasy' course believe it has helped them enormously to communicate with young people effectively about sex and sexuality, gender identity

and sexual health. However, during 2012, a considerable amount of planned training has not taken place and some has been cancelled at short notice. This may be in part due to the late release of the programme. It has held back some carers in progressing their skills and has the potential to reduce the effectiveness of some placements if the problem persists.

Safeguarding children and young people

The service is **good** at keeping children and young people safe and feeling safe.

Children and young people feel safe from bullying and abuse both in and outside the foster home. This is because carers are trained to recognise the signs and symptoms of abuse and know what to do if children disclose abuse or make allegations of harm. Carers are also trained to understand the impact of any abuse or neglect on the children and young people they care for and take appropriate action to support them. Children's surveys confirm that they feel safe and carers' surveys state that the majority of carers know how to deal with a disclosure. Carers work effectively with the service and do not work in isolation from other professionals involved with children. This ensures that any abuse or bullying related to ability, age, ethnicity, faith, gender, language, religious belief or sexual orientation is recognised and addressed. The fostering service follows child protection procedures robustly to ensure that children, young people and foster families are protected. The service also provides support for the person who is the subject of the allegation. One carer said, 'senior management regularly attend our monthly support groups and keep us updated on policies and procedures so we are fully aware.' However, while there is robust recruitment and vetting of staff and carers, the checks on panel members is not consistently of the same high standard. While Criminal Records Bureau checks are always undertaken, there have been a few instances when written references have not been taken up. This oversight has not adversely affected children's safety because members do not have unsupervised access to children. Furthermore, improved monitoring arrangements have been put in place to ensure that this could not be overlooked in future.

Complaints are thoroughly investigated in a timely way and the Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) and panel are involved as appropriate to ensure that investigations are child-centred and inform future care practice. One carer stated, 'I complained regarding a child from another carer not having their needs met. This was dealt with very quickly, without delay and sensitively.' A child said, 'I've known X and Y (my kinship carers) all my life - I hated it with my old carer.' Most children and young people say that they know how to complain but complaints from them are very few in number. This is a measure of the success of the service in providing good placements for children and young people. A simple children's social care comment/complaint/compliment form is available in picture and single word format for anyone who has difficulty with full sentence written word. The fostering service routinely uses an independent advocacy service and independent reviewing officers to ensure that all children receive individual representation. As a result, the voice of every child is heard and this adds to each one's safety, including the safety of children with no verbal communication.

Recruitment, assessment, preparation and supervision of foster carers, including kinship carers, has a strong focus on safeguarding and safe care practice. Carers' homes are visited on an unannounced basis at least once a year and more often if this is required. Children's care plans and safety plans and foster carers' safe care policies together address how each child's or young person's safety needs and risks are to be managed and reduced. For example, plans to protect young people's privacy take good account of gender considerations. Safety plans for children with learning disabilities receiving respite care are particularly helpful in providing safe placements for children. They address all aspects of safe caring, such as, comprehension of danger, eating, harm to others, triggers to difficult behaviours, dressing and self-care, self-harm, travelling, routines and sleeping, and how carers/adults should care and adapt their responses to keep children safe. Safety plans are not always completed by social workers in a timely way or regularly reviewed in every case and some foster carer safe care policies do not specifically address the safety needs of the children in placement. Nevertheless, in practice, carers are successfully helping children and young people stay safe. For example, young people are rarely going missing. Young people also avoid taking drugs and are receiving help to address any offending behaviour. There are measures in place to encourage young people in the safe use of mobile phones and the internet. In addition, vulnerable children and young people are learning to manage relationships safely and appropriately with good support from their carers.

Leadership and management

The leadership and management of the local authority fostering agency are **good**.

Managers demonstrate clear vision and ambition for children and young people who are fostered. They listen to children and young people and consult regularly with them. They make sure they are visible and accessible to carers and children alike, coming to 'just us' children's meetings and support groups for carers and kinship carers. Managers also organise awards nights, parties and summer events which are well attended and much appreciated. Children win 'mini Oscars', perhaps for doing well at school or going to Scouts. Carers are nominated and awarded by their children for 'being there for me' or 'helping me with my work'. Managers use children and young people's views, ideas and experiences to improve the fostering service and provide better outcomes for children. For example, their ideas are central to the advertising materials being produced and to the style of the initial foster carer training programme. As a result, children and young people feel valued and confident that those coming into foster care will receive a continuously improving service.

Managers monitor the fostering service and have a very good awareness of the effectiveness with which training, supervision and review programmes are working. They employ suitable administrative and computer systems to ensure that necessary tasks, such as reviews, are completed. They are aware of the specific reasons when targets are not being met. For example, they have planned the training, support and supervision programme to take best account of known current staff shortages, but know that many training courses have been cancelled despite this plan. Similarly,

they know that some annual reviews are a little behind schedule but have plans in place to rectify this. They also plan to employ another social worker to improve the support and review processes for kinship carers. This is because monitoring has shown them that the service for this group of carers remains somewhat weaker, despite the introduction of a support group specifically for these carers. Managers measure and monitor those matters listed in Schedule 6 and have good anecdotal knowledge of the progress children and young people are making in placement. However, written quality assurance reports do not always include all of these areas. Therefore the effectiveness of monitoring relies on the continued presence of the service manager.

Managers have addressed recommendations made in previous inspections, for example, in improving matching reports and health records. As a result, carers and support workers know how to compensate for any gaps in the matched family and can focus more clearly on securing good health outcomes for children and young people. Managers conduct a thorough and insightful review of the fostering service annually and base their current priorities upon good evidence. For example, they are prioritising effective recruitment in order to reduce the use of agency placements and create more places for sibling groups and parent and child placements. They are also beginning consultation with carers on the contents of a Foster Care Charter in order to take forward clearer recognition of carers' work and responsibilities. These priorities directly benefit fostered children and young people.

Managers know how the service effectively complies with its Statement of Purpose, National Minimum Standards and the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations. Managers are also aware of changes in inspection formats and make sure that children, young people and all carers can give their views to Ofsted while the online surveys are available. As a result, a representative number of children and young people participate in giving their views about the service. The fostering service also works closely with social work teams, psychologists, health professionals, education 'virtual heads', independent reviewing officers and the panel. As a result, every child and young person in placement receives individualised support to achieve good outcomes in all areas of their welfare and development. Managers also work effectively within changing local authority structures for looked after children. As a result, consistently good outcomes have been maintained over a period of years, including during times of significant organisational change.

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 to assess the effectiveness of the service and to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards.

The report details the main strengths, any areas for improvement, including any breaches of regulation, and any failure to meet national minimum standards. The judgements included in the report are made against the inspection framework and the evaluation schedule for local authority fostering agencies.