

North Lincolnshire Council Fostering Team

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

Unique reference number	SC043224
Inspection date	26/07/2012
Inspector	Monica Hargreaves / Lynne Busby
Type of inspection	Full

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Date of last inspection	24/06/2009

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Service information

Brief description of the service

North Lincolnshire Council's fostering service recruits, assesses and supports a range of foster carers to provide short-term and long-term placements to children and young people with a wide range of needs. It also recruits carers specifically to provide a short breaks service for children and young people with a disability, and assesses and supports friends and family carers. The service had 109 approved fostering households and 117 children and young people placed as at 31 March 2012.

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 **outstanding**.

The service is very successful at making good quality placements that offer consistent care for children and young people. The overwhelming majority of children and young people who are looked after by this authority are placed with foster carers. Where it is possible and in their best interests, children and young people are placed with friends or family, with excellent support provided to all carers. The authority has a clear commitment to achieving permanence for children and young people. There is an established system of financial and other support for legal measures such as special guardianship or residence orders in order to secure this.

The outcomes for children and young people in foster care are excellent. Placement stability is very good with very few unplanned endings. Children and young people are healthy and enjoy taking part in a wide range of activities that promote their social and emotional development. They enjoy very good relationships with their carers and report that they are looked after very well. Children and young people make very good progress in education from their starting point on coming into care. Attendance levels are extremely high, which maximises their opportunity to achieve. Young people are very well supported in transition to adulthood. The overwhelming majority of young people progress into further education, employment or training. The number of young people going on to higher education is increasing year on year.

The authority has developed excellent and highly effective working relationships with partner agencies. This ensures that there is a multidisciplinary approach to supporting children and their carers which in turn promotes very positive outcomes for children. There is a robust and proactive approach towards safeguarding which ensures young people are kept safe.

Children and young people are at the centre of everything the service does. Their opinions are valued and are actively sought and their input has a significant impact on practice and service developments. Leaders and managers are committed to the continuous development of the fostering service. Arrangements for monitoring the quality of the service are rigorous and very effective in ensuring that high standards are maintained.

Outcomes for children and young people

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

The overwhelming majority of children and young people who are looked after by the local authority are placed with foster carers. Young people are at the centre of everything the service does and there are excellent arrangements in place to secure positive outcomes for them.

The participation of young people in the decisions that are made about their own care and in the development of the service is extremely good. The authority has developed different Children in Care Council groups for children and young people. These are very effective in giving young people a voice. One young person said that it was 'definitely worthwhile' being a member of this group as 'we are able to help things to change'. Young people identify a number of ways in which their views have influenced the service. For example, they have helped to develop a number of forms specifically for young people, such as the individual safe care plan, a guide about the risks to young people if they go missing from care, and the different children and young people's guides to fostering. They have also helped to arrange events for children, young people and foster carers and they have a role in the recruitment of carers and staff. The authority's corporate parenting board meets very regularly with young people. Young people themselves report that they enjoy these meetings and that they feel able to represent the views of young people. They say that managers and staff listen to them and take their views seriously. This helps to empower young people and enables them to take a part in driving improvements in the service. At an individual level, children and young people are fully consulted about their own care. Young people have helped to develop care and placement plans that are produced in a child-friendly booklet. This is excellent practice as it ensures that the views of young people, in their own words, are fully reflected in their plans.

The stability of foster placements is excellent and there are very few unplanned endings. This has in part been achieved through the recruitment to the service of a number of additional fostering households and the implementation of a rigorous risk assessment and placement matching process. This has allowed for greater placement choice which supports stability of placements. The excellent support that is provided

to foster carers and young people themselves has also helped to sustain placements. This continuity of care supports young people's emotional development and in turn helps them to achieve positive outcomes.

Care for children and young people is highly individualised. It is based on excellent and detailed assessments and comprehensive care plans. This enables all young people to receive the appropriate care and support whatever their needs. Children and young people enjoy contact with their family and friends when this is safe and appropriate to their needs. This helps them to maintain ongoing relationships and promotes their sense of identity. Contact is very well supported by the fostering service and its carers.

Children and young people are fully supported to be healthy and develop a healthy lifestyle. Of particular note is the excellent work that has been done in relation to routine health screening. For example, almost all children and young people have had an annual health assessment, routine dental checks, and up to date immunisations. This ensures that their general health needs are identified and met.

Young people understand about healthy lifestyles. They report that foster carers talk to them about how to stay healthy and make sure that they eat healthily and exercise. The local authority has provided foster carers with free leisure passes so that they, their families and the children they foster can access a range of facilities. Foster carers also seek out appropriate activities in the wider community which engage young people in pursuits that reflect their interests, talents and skills. Children and young people report that they take part in a wide variety of activities that they enjoy, such as dance, art, football, swimming and running. Involvement in such activities helps young people to develop and sustain friendships, supports their emotional well-being and their general development and learning.

The health and well-being of children and young people are also promoted by excellent partnership working between the fostering service and a variety of agencies, such as the looked after children's nurse, substance misuse service and the child and adolescent mental health service (CAMHS). These arrangements ensure that young people and foster carers have prompt access to highly effective advice and support to make sure that the physical and emotional health needs of young people are met. CAMHS and the fostering service have developed a tiered foster care service. Carers, social workers and staff from the CAMHS team meet regularly to discuss the needs of individual young people and their carers. They provide a planned programme of intervention and support that is tailored to meet those identified needs. This service has been widely acclaimed as a success in the authority and is highly valued by foster carers, social workers, and managers. This particular service was recently nominated for a national award.

There are highly effective arrangements in place to ensure that children and young people have an education placement that is appropriate and relevant to their needs. A group of managers and staff from the education service and the social work teams meet very regularly to consider the educational needs and placements of individual children. There is very close liaison with schools across the authority, and the

progress of young people is very closely monitored to ensure that they have the support they require to maximise their achievements. Attendance levels are very high, with the overwhelming majority of children and young people achieving over 95% and a number achieving 100% attendance. Managers and staff, both in the education and fostering services, have a very good knowledge of the young people who are looked after and there is a prompt response if young people experience difficulties. There are almost no exclusions, which means that young people are able to maximise their opportunity to achieve. Children and young people generally make excellent progress in education from their individual starting points.

Young people report that they feel they are developing the knowledge and skills they will need for later life. Carers recognise that the support they give to young people to help them to prepare for independence has to be appropriate to the age and stage of development of the individual young person. They provide this support within the context of a normal family life. Managers and staff have high aspirations for children and young people. There is an emphasis on promoting further and higher education and training in order to broaden the opportunities that are available to them in later life. The overwhelming majority of young people who leave foster care remain in education, training or employment. An increasing number of young people are remaining with foster carers past their 18th birthday and the authority has put in place clear systems to support such arrangements.

Children and young people report that they feel very safe in their foster homes. There is little evidence that children and young people who are fostered engage in risk-taking behaviours. For example, there are almost no incidents of young people going missing from their foster homes and almost no young people become involved with the criminal justice system.

Quality of service

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

The service has a very clear sufficiency strategy and managers have an excellent knowledge of the children and young people for whom the authority needs placements. The authority has made a clear commitment to improving and developing the service, creating a new service manager post specifically for fostering and increasing the number of qualified social worker posts in the team. As a result of this increase in staff together with a robust recruitment drive, the service has been successful in recruiting a number of new carer households. This increase in the number of available carers has greatly improved the ability of the service to match children and young people to the most appropriate carer. This in turn has contributed to the stability of placements, thereby benefiting children and young people.

The preparation and assessment of foster carers are extremely thorough and ensure that a range of safe and suitable carers are recruited. Foster carers are committed to developing and maintaining their knowledge and skills and they have an excellent understanding of the fostering task. Almost all carers have completed the required

Children's Workforce Development Council's training, support and development standards for foster care. Carers also have access to a wide range of training that is directly relevant to the needs of the children and young people they care for. For example, there are training days on issues such as mental health and resilience, youth and mental health, first aid, working with challenging behaviour, dealing with suicide and self-harm, and child development. The fostering service works closely with partner agencies in order to develop such training. For example, in conjunction with the CAMHS team, specific training in attachment and development theory has been rolled out to all carers. Carers report that this training is excellent. Foster carers who look after children and young people with disabilities and complex needs are given additional training in specific areas of care. This includes disability awareness and keeping disabled children safe, the management of epilepsy, gastric tube feeding and moving and handling.

The fostering panel works extremely well. The authority's central list includes professionals and individuals with a range of experience, such as a teacher, a councillor, a representative from the CAMHS team, a parent and a foster carer from another authority. There are two paediatricians who attend panels alternately. This ensures that there is broad range of expertise and knowledge available. Panel members undertake a rigorous analysis of assessments and review reports and make very clear recommendations to the service about the suitability of carers. The panel also makes an excellent contribution to the improvement and development of the service through its quality assurance function. Fostering panel minutes provide a very clear and detailed overview of the discussions. Assessment reports and fostering panel minutes are closely scrutinised by the agency decision maker, which ensures that decisions are rigorous and safeguard children and young people.

The overwhelming majority of foster carers reported that they are treated as professionals and that they feel that they are a core member of the team working to support children and young people. The managers and staff in the service ensure that carers are fully involved in all the planning for the children and young people they look after. The individual and specific needs of children and young people are thoroughly assessed and identified in comprehensive care and placement plans. These are shared with foster carers so they have a clear knowledge of the children and young people they look after. Foster carers are expected to attend all meetings that are arranged for and about children and young people, and their participation and commitment are excellent.

Foster carers are very positive about the service and say that they feel that they are well supported and valued. Staff take every opportunity to make sure that the achievements of carers are celebrated and rewarded. A recent example of this was the garden party and awards ceremony for carers, which they said that they had greatly enjoyed.

Safeguarding children and young people

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

There are highly effective arrangements in place which ensure that children and young people are safeguarded and their welfare is promoted. These include rigorous systems for checking the suitability of foster carers and staff, and effective training for carers and staff. The arrangements for supervising and supporting carers are excellent. Supervisory visits take place at least monthly and unannounced visits to foster carers take place four times a year.

Comprehensive care and placement plans ensure that foster carers have the information they need to safeguard and promote the welfare of the children in their care. Extremely thorough risk assessments are undertaken as part of the matching process to ensure that all possible areas of concern for children and carers are considered. Foster carers prepare a safe care policy that addresses all aspects of household routines and safety. Carers also develop an individual safe care plan for each child that considers their specific needs. Children and young people complete their own individual safe care plan in the form of an age-appropriate booklet. This enables social workers and carers to assess their understanding of safeguarding and to take any further action that is needed in order to ensure their safety and well-being. All plans are reviewed regularly to keep them up to date and relevant to the needs of the individual child and the foster family.

Children and young people very rarely go missing from their foster placements. The very few who do are protected by highly effective partnership arrangements between the police, social work teams and other agencies. The independent advocate always visits any young person on their return to listen to their reasons for going missing. Prompt action is taken to support young people and prevent any further incidences. Young people speak very highly of the independent advocate, who provides an excellent service to all children and young people who are looked after.

The local authority has a robust system for managing and reviewing allegations that is overseen by the head of safeguarding, who is also the agency decision maker. The fostering service manager is fully involved in the process. There are very few allegations against foster carers. Those that arise are responded to promptly and investigated thoroughly with a clear focus on the safety and well-being of children.

Children and young people report that they get on very well with their carers. They say that they are looked after very well and feel very safe. They also say that they feel comfortable talking to their carers if they have a problem. They confirm that they know how to make a formal complaint should the need arise and they have easy access to the independent advocate. Children and young people do not experience bullying in their homes. Foster carers support them very well if bullying is an issue for them at school or college in order to ensure that they are protected and feel safe.

Leadership and management

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

The service is exceptionally well managed, with a clear structure and lines of accountability. Staff are well supervised which ensures that their work is of a high quality. There are extremely robust and effective monitoring arrangements in place that enable excellent oversight of the work of the service. Managers make very good use of current research and developments in fostering in order to inform future service developments. For example, the service manager is currently exploring issues around concurrent planning. All recommendations made at the last inspection have been fully addressed and there have been significant improvements in this service since that time. This has resulted in the outcomes for children and young people being greatly improved.

The service manager provides very regular reports on the performance of the service to the authority's corporate parenting group. They in turn meet regularly with members of the three Children in Care Council groups. The service works closely with other parts of the local authority and there are strong links with partner agencies. The views of children and young people are routinely sought and are central to the development of the service. There is a strong supportive culture that permeates the whole organisation. This inclusive approach gives staff, foster carers, children and young people ownership of improvements made by the service.

The local authority has increased the size of the fostering team, with the appointment of a service manager and new social work posts. These developments have enabled the service to recruit and approve additional foster carers and demonstrate a clear commitment to the development of the service. The co-location of social work teams and the fostering service supports good information sharing and ensures that foster placements are very well supported.

Foster carers are valued and feel valued as part of the team working with individual children and young people. They are fully involved in the care planning and reviewing process for the children in their care. They are also involved in service development through a variety of means, such as the Foster Care Association and a range of support groups. The local authority has adopted the principles of the Foster Carer Charter and developed its own charter. This was done in close consultation with carers, children and young people and staff. The authority recognises and promotes the importance of the role of family and friends as carers and ensures that such placements are actively considered before a foster placement is sought.

Managers and social workers in the fostering service are appropriately qualified and experienced. They have the skills and knowledge they need to enable them to deliver an excellent service to foster carers and children and young people. This in turn supports young people to achieve very good outcomes. Morale among staff and foster carers is very high. This has a positive impact on the service that is given to children and young people.

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.