

Northamptonshire County Council Fostering Service

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

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| Setting address | Norborough House, Coverack Close, Northampton, Northamptonshire, NN4 8PQ |
| Telephone number | 01604 432550 |
| Email | sorchard@northamptonshire.gov.uk |
| Registered person | Northamptonshire County Council |
| Registered manager | Steven Thomas Orchard |
| Responsible individual | Heather Frick |
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Service information

Brief description of the service

The fostering service is managed by the local authority. The range of fostering services includes time-limited, respite, long-term, permanent, kinship and family link fostering. The fostering service assesses, approves and provides on-going support to foster carers. The short breaks family link service for children with disabilities is managed within the disabled children's service and has its own unique statement of purpose and function.

At the time of the inspection, the service was supporting 219 foster carer households and was providing placements for 250 children and young people. This includes 33 connected persons foster carer households, providing placements for 35 children. There are an additional 34 link family placements, providing short breaks for children with disabilities.

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 fostering service is effective, providing good quality care to all children in foster placements. Individualised planning for each child, good matching to carers, minimal delay and high quality input from carers promotes good outcomes for children. The stability of both short and longer term placements is improving over time, although it is still lower than that of statistical neighbours. However, this may reflect the larger proportions of children 'looked after' in the county.

Children are enjoying and achieving well, enabling the gap between GCSE achievements for looked after children and their peers to be markedly reduced by 10% over the last two years. Children's progress in emotional health is also very evident. Key strengths contributing to good outcomes in emotional health are placement stability, permanency planning and the assessment and approval of connected persons. This enables many children to stay with close relatives. All children and young people have positive views about the quality of their care and many can clearly describe the difference that being fostered has made to them.

Accurate, detailed and thorough assessments of foster carers are undertaken and this helps to ensure that outcomes for children are positive and that children are kept safe. Most children and young people are included well in their own plans and in the appraisal and development plans of both their foster carers and the service as a whole.

Children with disabilities and their families receive a good quality short breaks service and speak very positively about the benefits of this. Almost all foster carers agree that they receive effective, high quality supervision and that training helps them to understand children's needs, especially with respect to attachment and behaviour difficulties. As a result, children's needs are met well and almost all carers feel part of a professional team working to achieve better outcomes for them. However, some connected carers are less engaged in the fostering service. They have received a less effective service due to staffing, management difficulties and changes.

Leaders and managers who were appointed in 2012, are committed to fostering and have an accurate understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the service. They have taken action to address shortfalls identified at the previous inspection and have addressed key issues concerning the organisation and management of the service's core work. In particular, they have demonstrated clear and effective leadership to drive forward and improve the quality of assessment and support to connected carers.

Fostering teams are being expanded with trained and experienced staff and now specialise in key areas of fostering work. This benefits children because carers now receive better assessment, training and support. However, there has been insufficient time to embed improvements or see them sustained.

Some inconsistencies were found, which have not been identified through the regular monitoring activities of current leaders and managers. These slightly hold back the quality and consistency of the service but do not impact adversely on the quality of service overall or the outcomes for children. Most of these relate directly to the quality of service being assured in relation to connected carers. They do not impact negatively on the welfare or safety of those children.

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 where a family and friends foster carer is temporarily approved as a foster carer under regulation 24 of the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations 2010, that they are provided with timely and relevant information and are kept informed about the progress of any subsequent application for approval. This specifically applies to notifying connected carers of

their temporary approval, confirming the date of this and confirming the initiation of payments (NMS 13.2)

- ensure that the service provider's decision-maker always makes a considered decision within seven working days of receipt of the recommendation and final set of panel minutes (NMS 14.9)
- ensure that children receive the children's guide at the point of placement and that it includes how a child can contact the Children's Rights Director and Ofsted if they wish to raise a concern with inspectors (NMS 16.3 & 16.4)
- ensure that all foster carers are fully supported to achieve the Children's Workforce Development Council's Support and Development Standards within the required timescales. This includes clarifying the expectation upon all carers to undertake training and addressing the particular needs and circumstances of family and friends foster carers (NMS 20.2, 20.3, 30.11)
- improve the effectiveness of monitoring the service, including serious incidents, allegations or complaints about the service and individual case records, in order to identify concerns, patterns and trends and to ensure consistent recording practices. (NMS 25.1 & 25.2)

Outcomes for children and young people

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

Children and young people's wishes and feelings are taken into account in both their daily care and the operation of the fostering service. In almost every case, children are living in a placement which is the best option for them and they can participate in both ordinary and complex decisions about their lives, as appropriate. They are encouraged and supported to complete consultation forms about their experience within a fostering household. This is done as part of foster carers' review processes and provides carers and the service with each child's views.

Children and young people are actively involved in placement planning meetings and their own review meetings, where they are able to contribute to the decisions made about their care. Prior to placement, most children are given information about the foster home in the form of a child-friendly foster carer profile. They should also receive a 'Guide to Fostering' booklet designed to help them understand about living in a fostering family. These systems ensure a good level of inclusion and influence for children. However, many children say they have not received the guide and its contents do not include the contact details for the Children's Rights Director or Ofsted if children wish to complain. Nevertheless, all children have received a pledge about what the county will offer them whilst they are looked after. This links to the Foster Care Charter, so that carers are clearly signed up to the expectations given in the pledge. A small number of young people also represent the views of fostered children on the county's corporate parenting board. They have designed a new children's guide themselves, which will shortly be published and made available to all fostered children and young people.

Children and young people are safe and very comfortable in their foster homes. They are treated as part of the fostering family. One child said, 'I feel really lucky, I've been with my carer for four years and she's just like my mum now'. Children and young people are safe and comfortable because they are placed with foster carers who can successfully meet their social, emotional, psychological and physical needs. One child said, 'getting new clothes, feeling safe, eating vegetables, doing well at school. The little things made me happiest; going shopping with the family most weekends, Saturday night when we'd have a take-away. It just seemed more normal'.

Children's individual needs arising from ethnicity, faith and language are met creatively when children live in foster families that are not an ethnic match. For example, carers find and attend community and special interest groups specifically for children's own race and culture. In addition, children are sometimes matched to a placement where they are alongside other fostered children with whom they are an ethnic match. As a result, children and young people develop a positive self-image and broaden their outlook.

Most children are placed in stable foster care placements with their siblings, when appropriate. They experience minimal placement disruptions. As a result, their emotional health, behaviour and attachments progress well. Children benefit from carers who utilise information about children's histories to help them understand their life story and come to terms with it. Children and young people are also supported to keep memorabilia of their time in foster care and celebrate the progress they have made. This too benefits their emotional health.

Many children and young people are measurably physically healthier in foster care, compared with their starting points. For example, they talk about the benefits of healthy eating and exercise, and others have been supported to give up smoking and alcohol or drug misuse. One child with learning disabilities has learned how to use the toilet, bath and wash himself independently, thanks to the dedication of his carers. This pays dividends for his self-esteem too.

All children and young people benefit from good health care through regular health checks. The service is alert to related issues like the difficulty for older teenagers in talking to health professionals about sex and sexuality. The young people's view that they want to be spoken to plainly when discussing personal health has been responded to by health professionals for looked after children. This 'plain talking' approach aims to retain good take-up of health services by older teenagers. Similarly, a focus on improving fostered children's access to dentistry means that the percentage of children having regular dentistry is now higher than the national average for children looked after.

Children and young people progress well in their learning, because the service is alert to the many special requirements children have. The service ably supports children to attend regularly, succeed and close the achievement gap with their peers. Individual children are gaining improved results at school, particularly in year 11. This results from much more detailed assessment and planning around education,

enjoyment and achievement.

Children are also enjoying a wealth of hobbies, interests and activities. One child said, 'I got a Saturday job and did some work experience in nurseries. It has made a massive difference in my life'. A child with learning disabilities paddled in the sea for the first time and learned how to play with a bucket and spade on holiday.

Foster carers are very involved in the preparation and decisions made at each child's personal education plan (PEP) meeting. Funding, resources, home tutors, staffing and teamwork effectively help all children to attend the right educational placement and achieve the best they can there. For example, one young person said, 'I was out of school for 10 months and then Social Services got me funding to attend some special complementary education for this year, so I am really grateful'.

Children and young people enjoy family life and benefit from contact with their family and friends. This is because most placements are made with good proximity to home communities. It is also because many children are placed with relatives through connected carers fostering. Equally, carers are trained, supported and able to help children benefit from contact visits and understand the feelings arising from them. Children and young people are all positive about the support they receive from their carers. Many have the opportunity to stay permanently as the subjects of adoption or special guardianship orders and this further consolidates their sense of belonging and confidence for the future. As a result, unplanned endings of placements are few and some young people go on to develop successful early adult lives, often remaining with their carers after the age of 18.

Young people are generally well prepared for independence. Some young people on the children's rights group are now living independently and have benefitted enormously from the young leadership training provided by the service. This means that they can support, advise and advocate for individual fostered children, as well as arranging social activities and representing children's views to the corporate parenting board. Statistics show that at present, less fostered young people are going on to college placements post 16. The onus is now more clearly on carers to instigate and teach independence skills to young people in their care, sometimes without early involvement of a personal post-16s advisor. However, all young people have pathway plans. These have been re-developed and are now more appropriate in format. These are used with the help of foster carers to support young people in preparing thoroughly for independent adult life.

The fostering service is also developing a website for care leavers, which will be linked to education, job, training and volunteering sites. This will ensure that good quality information is available to young people. The service also intends to retain standards of service for young people who are over 16, through retaining PEP plans and meetings. These strategies will enable carers to receive continuing professional support in planning effectively for young people's further education, training and work.

Quality of service

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

Almost all children and young people say that their foster care is good or excellent. This is because the fostering service has an effective recruitment strategy which includes incentives for existing carers to recommend the work to their own friends and neighbours. The service successfully recruits a range of skilled foster carers who are able to meet the needs of looked after children as well as the needs of children who receive short break care. The fostering needs of the local authority are ethnically diverse and currently larger than statistical neighbours. Nevertheless, carers show clear consideration of the age, ability, ethnicity, faith, gender, gender identity, language, religious belief and sexual orientation of the young people placed. Children also benefit from good quality placements with connected persons and commissioned agency foster carers where this is a better match for their needs.

All carers are committed to facilitate and support children's contact with family members as detailed in the child's care plan. In addition, the service is promoting the recruitment of more carers from ethnic minorities to help better match the culture and ethnicity of children being looked after.

Almost all children and young people benefit from appropriate placements which are made without avoidable delay. Arrangements to fund carers in having time off work in order to settle children in placement, have been agreed on occasions. This supports effective placements from the outset and has enabled siblings to be cared for together. However, there remain a few children who are part of large sibling groups and a few children with complex learning disabilities who are awaiting long-term placement.

Matching decisions are always made on the basis of good information. Thorough preparation work by supervising social workers means that carers are almost always well informed about children before they come. Most children know something of their prospective carers and have had introductory visits before placements are made. Similarly, good preparation of carers helps carers develop an in-depth understanding of how important the balance is between fostered child and fostering family needs. As a result, children make good progress across all the outcome areas and feel part of their fostering family.

The contribution of the fostering panel to the timely approval of carers and of matches with identified children, is good. The central list of persons used for the panel membership is adequately diverse and has enough members to facilitate regular panels. This avoids delay and has enabled a backlog of connected carers' applications to be largely dealt with. Current panel chairs and advisors now effectively promote safe, secure placements through a successful quality assurance function. They ensure that recommendations are appropriately made, which are based on detailed, relevant information, full vetting checks and sound understanding of children's welfare and safeguarding needs. The panel also gives thoughtful advice to supervising social workers about areas for training, support and practice guidance. This drives up the quality of both assessments and the on-going support of carers.

This in turn benefits the quality of children's care. However, some service provider decisions have not been made within seven working days of receipt of the panel recommendation and final set of minutes. This delay has occurred primarily in connection with the assessment of connected carers by agency social workers, where information has been incomplete and complex. Similarly, connected persons have not always been properly notified of their temporary approval. This has resulted in delays with payments and the process of full approval. The impact on children of both the shortfalls is minimal, because they have already been settled in placement with their connected carer.

Foster carers meet the needs of children and young people well overall. Any gaps in carers' skills, knowledge and understanding are met effectively through training, support and supervision. Attendance at training is well supported by the fostering service to ensure that carers can attend. One carer described monthly support visits as an 'invaluable opportunity to discuss concerns and success'. Another carer said, 'the training and support has given us the knowledge and confidence to offer an excellent level of care'.

Carers are able to see measureable benefits to children's behaviour and the relationships in the fostering family as a result of the skills and insights afforded to carers in the 'fostering changes' training course. They say children are 'relaxed and happier' and 'more receptive and lovable'. Carers say they have 'better insight into children's moods' and are able to be 'a more challenging advocate' for them.

Family and friends foster carers are assessed fairly and now receive suitable induction, support and training. Some of these carers have made immense personal strides and are able to provide a high standard of foster care to relatives. These strides are a direct result of the support and advice of supervising social workers. However, the induction and training of connected carers has only recently been improved to ensure that it is in line with other foster carers and pertinent to their special fostering task. These carers and a small number of other carers have also not been fully supported to achieve the Children's Workforce Development Council's Support and Development Standards within the required timescales. There is no evidence to show that any child's welfare or safety has been compromised by this shortfall, but the expectation on all carers to undertake essential training is not set out, for example, in foster care agreements.

Most carers are confident about the authority which is delegated to them and almost all say that their views are valued by the fostering service. There is also evidence that many carers are helping children understand their history and collect memorabilia of their time in placement. Most carers feel adequately supported out of office hours and almost all are satisfied with the levels of support they receive. This promotes stability and a positive experience of family life for fostered children. The children of the fostering family have a 'Karing Kids' group for personal support and relaxation with peers whose families foster. These children are also included well in carers' annual reviews, ensuring that their voice is heard and that fostering placements are supported and sustained. Almost all carers feel part of the team working with children and young people. They effectively share responsibility with

other key professionals in the child's life and sign up to the Foster Carers' Charter. Many are recognised formally in an annual awards ceremony, when the vital part they play in achieving good outcomes for children is celebrated.

Foster carers understand children and young people's rights. They pledge to encourage positive outcomes for them in every area of their lives. Carers also value highly the buddy system which links them to other carers for support and advice. Many carers access support groups across the county, including grandparents and kinship support groups. One carer said, 'the support group understands what you are going through, especially when a child moves on.' Fostered children benefit directly from well-supported carers, because good support enables carers to sustain high quality care and to stay in touch with children who move on.

Safeguarding children and young people

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

The fostering service puts child protection at the centre of all it does and ensures that children benefit from being placed with foster carers where they feel safe and protected. All children consulted said that they feel safe in their placements with fostering families. Children, carers and social workers do not identify bullying as an issue, either in survey responses or in interviews. Training is available for carers in the areas of cyber-bullying and self-harm. As a result, children feel safe, including from bullying. They are confident about receiving support from their foster carers.

Support and advice from the fostering service and from independent advocacy is made available to children and they know how to use it. Placing social workers and supervising social workers agree that this works well and they ensure that children can use the local authority's children's rights service and independent reviewing officers too.

Carers understand safe care practice well and almost all ensure that their homes are carefully risk assessed in all respects. Supervising social workers ensure that any potential areas of risk such as, bedroom sharing or the need for working smoke detectors in the home, are satisfactorily managed to ensure that children stay safe.

There have been no recent allegations or complaints made by children and the fostering service are confident that carers understand child protection procedures. Any allegations made by others about foster carers are handled carefully and with careful consideration of the overall needs and interests of the children in placement. Fostering reviews are presented to panel following allegations and issues are robustly addressed, strengths identified and support needs spelt out, using comprehensive and detailed analysis. As a result, children are well protected and carers are appropriately supported.

The recruitment, assessment, preparation and supervision of all foster carers has a strong focus on safeguarding and child protection. Carers understand their responsibilities to report accidents to fostered children and do so reliably.

Recruitment and vetting of staff and foster carers is undertaken robustly, although records may be held electronically or on paper files, posing some challenge to effective auditing. The fostering panel diligently follow up with social workers any outstanding concerns about foster carer suitability checks to ensure that children are safeguarded. Unannounced visits to foster carers take place at least annually and whenever there are concerns about safety or safe care practice. These visits are recorded on foster carers' annual reviews, which enables the panel to monitor that they take place and are effective. As a result, children are well protected.

Training and support by supervising social workers ensures that carers recognise, and are supported to manage, the impact of abuse and neglect on the children they are caring for. There is evidence that carers have a good understanding of the impact of previous abuse, particularly on children's behaviour and attachments. As a result, children say 'the rules are firm but fair, they sit down and talk about things and so now we all see a huge difference in my behaviour'. Similarly, the incidence of children going missing from foster homes, or undertaking risk taking or offending behaviour is rare and reducing. This is because carers are well prepared and receive good support to reduce these behaviours.

Leadership and management

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

At about 70% in 2010/2011, the percentage of children looked after who are placed in foster care is slightly lower than comparator authorities. This is probably explained by the higher proportion of the children population of the county who are accommodated.

Leaders and managers of the fostering service have a good overview of the looked after children's service and the issues facing the authority in respect of the large numbers of children coming into care. They are focussing on ensuring that children in a position to return home from fostering are rehabilitated, and that priority is given to assessing and supporting many connected carers who are providing care and accommodation to children of their family or friendship circle. There are also renewed efforts to secure permanency within fostering for looked after children where this is appropriate. Children and young people benefit from this approach because they gain long term security wherever this is appropriate.

Managers do not all have enormous experience of fostering services, but key leaders, such as the agency decision maker, panel advisors and fostering team managers, demonstrate a wealth of such skill and experience. Managers adopt a strategic and monitoring role and demonstrate vision and commitment to improving the service in a child centred way. For example, they make good links with key personnel in looked after children's services, such as the virtual head. They have also combined the training available to foster carers with that provided to adopters where appropriate, enabling more and better focussed training to be provided. Managers are also working hard to introduce themselves to carers groups, including the male carers'

group and the connected carers' support group.

Management monitoring satisfactorily covers all areas of the fostering service, paying adequate attention to the outcomes children and young people achieve. Monitoring is regular and timely, but is less effective as a tool to identify patterns, concerns and trends through examination of case records, statistics and consultations with children and other stakeholders. As a result, some recording shortfalls are not identified and managers do not possess a clear enough overview of the service's work around serious incidents, complaints and allegations. This has not held back good quality outcomes for children, but it has the potential to do so.

The role of family and friends carers is understood and adequately supported. Leaders and managers have correctly identified previous shortfalls in the assessment and support of such carers. Reorganisation, resources, new staff and the existing skills of the fostering service have been harnessed to clear a backlog of connected carers awaiting an assessment and support service. Specialised teams are now offering an improved service which aims to narrow the gap that connected carers were complaining of between themselves and other foster carers. Previously poor quality assessment and vetting work undertaken by contracted agents has finished. Connected carers themselves have been consulted and involved, sometimes through voicing their complaints to the service. Children in connected carer placements are now benefitting from trained, supported carers and there are many examples where their behaviour, educational and sporting achievements have surpassed expectations. Similarly, connected carers no longer say they have 'been left to their own devices', and now say there is a 'glint of improvement – we, the kinship group have helped to get an induction workshop run, which helps inform kinship carers at the beginning of the journey, of the relevant things they need to know - they (Northamptonshire) seem to be getting their act together at last'.

Managers focus on areas of weakness in the service and devise ways to make suitable improvements that benefit the outcomes for children. For example, they are working to recruit more carers from black and minority ethnic groups so that they can make better matches for children coming into care. They have acted on the recommendations made at the last inspection and have re-visited these throughout the intervening four years between inspections. As a result, there is a more robust approach to health by carers in conjunction with the looked after children's nurse since the last inspection.

Similarly, there are better systems to ensure that short breaks link carers for children with disabilities have good safer caring knowledge, manual handling training, suitable equipment and more timely payments. As a result, children using the short breaks family link carers receive a consistently good service and their families benefit from this planned respite. Within the service itself, there is improved monitoring of the quality of agency contracted foster care. This includes scrutiny of returns, meeting with agency providers and comprehensive six monthly review meetings by independent reviewing officers. There is also a more robust approach to ensuring that any trainee social workers undertaking carer support are observed and led quarterly by qualified and experienced social workers. This supports carers fully in

their work and enables fostered children to benefit from well advised and supported carers.

However, staffing shortages and weak management have featured during some lengthy periods since the last inspection. These have led to some complaints and a lack of focus on the needs of carers. Issues about payments, out-of-hours support, on-going skills training and full, timely information about placements are still raised as concerns by a small minority of carers. Leaders and managers have ideas to address many of these. For example, they are thinking of using residential service managers to provide skilled support to carers at times of crisis out of hours. Nevertheless, the significant improvements made recently by new managers are not yet well embedded. Consistently high quality outcomes have not yet been sustained over a period of years.

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.