

# Peterborough City Council Fostering

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

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## Service information

### Brief description of the service

The fostering service is part of Peterborough City Council's children's services. The fostering service is responsible for the recruitment, assessment, approval and support of foster carers.

At the time of this inspection, the fostering service was catering for 126 children and young people in 104 households; there are a total of 182 carers.

### 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 **adequate**.

The last inspection of this fostering service was in 2008 and found that the service was satisfactory. It was noted that, after being found to be inadequate in 2007, improvements were evident. Eight recommendations were made, most of which have now been addressed. A period of consolidation was anticipated after 2008. However, reorganisation and restructuring continued and there were further changes in service manager. The fostering service then came under inspection scrutiny in 2011 as part of an inspection of children's services as a whole. This found that the anticipated consolidation and improvement had not occurred and that the children's services department was inadequate; recommendations pertaining to the fostering service were also made, some of which reflected previous shortfalls. Since December 2011 new managers have been recruited to both the children's services department and to the fostering service. As a result, staff, carers, and children and young people are welcoming a further opportunity to consolidate and improve the service, which is now operating at an adequate standard.

Senior personnel clearly demonstrate the skills necessary to improve the service. For example, systems for monitoring activities are strong overall and accountability is a high priority. Managers understand the major weaknesses of the service. Performance is closely tracked and shortfalls are addressed promptly. In tandem with this, there are fewer temporary or agency workers and all supervising social workers are qualified. The use of exemptions has fallen substantially, which means that

children and young people benefit from more personalised care. At the same time, however, overall capacity has fallen significantly since 2008 and nearly the same number of children and young people are fostered in the independent sector as are fostered in-house. This challenge is being met by a rigorous recruitment campaign that is showing early signs of success.

Children and young people enjoy excellent relationships with their carers; they receive care that is carefully personalised and there is close attention to ensuring placement stability. This contributes substantially to positive outcomes for children and young people, including their feelings of security and their opportunities to address emotional issues. Consultation with children and young people regarding the development of the service is not yet well established.

There are breaches of regulations regarding foster carer training and panel administration. There are also other shortfalls applying primarily to quality of care and leadership. These issues have held back the development of the service and have the potential to adversely impact on children and young people's welfare. Nevertheless, managers are aware of the developmental needs of the service and are making good progress to address them.

## **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 the wishes, feelings and views of children and those significant to them are taken into account in developing the fostering service (NMS 1.7)
- ensure that the manager of the fostering service carries on and manages the fostering service with sufficient care, competence and skill. This is with regard to the operation of the panel and the decision making process (Regulations 8(1) and 10(2))
- ensure that, unless an emergency placement makes it impossible, children are given information about the foster carer before arrival, and information (including where appropriate, photographic information) they need or reasonably request about the placement, in a format appropriate to their age and understanding (NMS 11.3)
- ensure that the reviews of foster carers' approval are sufficiently thorough to allow the fostering service to properly satisfy itself about their carers' on-going suitability to foster. This is with regard to demonstrating the competencies of each carer in a household (NMS 13.8)
- provide, where a child requires it, the children's guide through suitable alternative methods of communication, e.g. Makaton, pictures, tape recording, translation into another language (NMS 16.6)
- ensure there is a written development plan, reviewed annually, for the future of

the service. This is also with regard to the development plan addressing changes in the national minimum standards and inspection framework (NMS 18.2)

- provide foster parents with such training, advice, information and support as appears necessary in the interests of children placed with them (Regulation 17(1))
- ensure that consideration is given to any help or support needed by the sons and daughters of foster carers (NMS 21.6)
- ensure that on approval, foster carers are given information, either a handbook or electronic resources, which cover policies and procedures and which is updated regularly (NMS 21.10)
- ensure all supervising social workers have a good understanding of the policies of the fostering service. This is with regard to having up-to-date policies and procedures, including the frequency with which they should see foster children and supervise 'second' carers, and that they are applied (NMS 23.4)
- ensure carers are provided with a statement of payment at the end of each tax year. (NMS 28.2)

## Outcomes for children and young people

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

Children and young people have a good variety of ways in which to express their views. These range from individual conversations with their social workers and supervising social workers to statutory reviews and formal consultation exercises. Supervising social workers endeavour to see children and young people regularly. This helps to ensure that their needs are being met, whether these are perceived needs or those agreed in their reviews. However, the application of this practice is not yet consistently applied.

Children and young people perceive that the fostering service does not consult with them. However, their engagement with the local authority and specifically with the fostering service is gradually improving even though it is not yet embedded in their expectations. It includes those individuals who have communication difficulties or are at other risk of becoming marginalised; a befriending service is available for those who have insufficient external support. Children and young people feel extremely positive about the care they receive; they rarely feel the need to complain about it although they know how to. They have been consulted by the organisation and by Ofsted about how safe they feel and are very positive about this too. However, it is clear that the placements children and young people find themselves in are not always the placements of choice. This is being addressed through recruitment of more carers. In addition, children and young people often feel they do not know enough about their prospective placements. This creates unnecessary anxiety.

There are particularly high levels of placement stability. This has many positive benefits for children and young people. In particular, it supports the development of

their emotional resilience. Disruptions are anticipated well and extra resources are provided to support households if required. Close attention is paid to supporting children and young people to understand their backgrounds too so they can more readily understand why they are in foster care. Carers ensure that contact agreements are fulfilled and in many cases sibling groups have been placed together. In cross-cultural placements, as well as others, the cultural and religious parts of children and young people's identities are identified and addressed positively. Some carers have undertaken imaginative work compiling scrapbooks and others have gone as far as learning a child's birth language. As a result, children and young people feel settled and valued. This contributes substantially to their ability to benefit from the many opportunities that are available.

Children and young people commented on the difficulties a minority of them have experienced with their social workers; this has been exacerbated by the high turnover of social workers in recent years. One young person reflected these concerns by saying, 'I don't like my social worker but that's OK because my foster parents speak up for me.' Another child's carer said, 'I am often more in tune with her (i.e. the young person) than her social worker is – probably shouldn't say that – but it's true.' The authority is aware of these problems and is addressing them by ensuring that nearly all social workers are permanent members of staff.

The individual needs of disabled children and young people are adequately met overall and there are highlights in many areas, including the strong advocacy provided by carers for their foster children. The link care service is highly regarded too and steps are underway to expand it. According to social workers, children and young people are 'thrilled that they have one-to-one attention from carers in a domestic environment'. These children and young people are confident and secure in their time away from home. Careful matching occurs and carers have access to bespoke training for each child or young person. Some carers have experienced substantial difficulties obtaining necessary equipment for disabled children. This has caused unnecessary worry for them. However, recent improvements have been made to the communication between relevant professionals so that decisions and guidance can be provided more promptly; this is part of the changing culture in the service.

One young person represented the majority by saying, 'I call my carers by their first names, but they are really like my family – I'm happy here.' Children and young people enjoy normal life events, such as holidays, contact with their families and visiting friends for overnight stays where appropriate. Children and young people enjoy a good range of stimulating activities. One said, 'We went to the Olympics, it was amazing!' They also get involved in their communities through joining groups such as the cadets or having paper rounds, or making new friends.

Children and young people benefit from good attention to their health needs. Supervising social workers ensure that the promotion of health issues is promptly undertaken by carers, including personal and sensitive issues. For example, a health professional said that one foster child 'developed a really good awareness of sexual health' as a result of education by her carer. Other health professionals commented

that children and young people thrive in their placements because they get the emotional support they need. Health checks are pursued rigorously and all children and young people are aware of the range of health services they can use. Good efforts are made to make the health services accessible and less threatening, for example, by controlling the number of different health professionals a child or young person will see. There is also liaison directly with carers, if necessary, to ensure a holistic approach to health care. There is particularly effective work undertaken by the psychological services with which carers can have direct contact, for example, regarding children and young people's sexualised behaviour or the effects on them of foetal alcohol syndrome.

Children and young people attend pre-school, school or other educational provision that provides for their statutory entitlement of 25 hours per week to the end of Key Stage 4. All the children and young people returning Ofsted surveys felt their education was being addressed well. They make adequate progress overall in their learning taking into account their starting points, with many doing exceptionally well. One social worker said: 'We know foster care impacts. A good example is when a particular child returned to foster care after returning to his birth family. There was a bit of a delay in informing school but teachers had already noticed an improvement. They didn't know she was back in foster care and it all made sense when they realised.' Another social worker reported that because of sound childcare practices, her foster children now have the correct school uniform, as a result of which they do not get bullied at school. This means they are able to concentrate on their work. Through multi-agency cooperation, improvements are continuing in reducing the number of young people over 16 who are not in employment, education or training.

A young person represented others when he said, 'I'm 18 but I'm going to stay (with my foster carer); I have to pay board now!'. Young people are benefiting from improved attention to their transitions into adulthood. Policies in this area are being reviewed, particularly around funding, to ensure that there is a proper continuum of care for young people and young adults. In many cases good practice is shown by planning occurring at an early stage prior to their transfer to the leaving care team. One professional said, 'There are now no excuses for not forward planning; it is carefully monitored'. This helps to avoid disruptions to placements during this sensitive period and prepare young people effectively for adulthood. Social workers are very positive about the direct training of young people undertaken by carers.

## Quality of service

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

Foster carers are part of the team working with children and young people and share responsibility with other key professionals in the child's life. However, this has not prevented a small minority feeling estranged from the professionals they work with, partly due to the recurring organisational changes. Despite this, they show clear consideration of the age, ability, ethnicity, faith, gender, gender identity, language, religious belief and sexual orientation of the children and young people placed with them. They ensure that positive outcomes are achieved, and as a result children and

young people are extremely positive about their placements. For example, one carer has arranged additional professionals' meetings to ensure that all their foster child's racial needs are met. This is given a high priority by the supervising social workers.

Most supervising social workers are well regarded by carers although some carers retain the view that the quality of support has varied too much. In some cases, extremely negative views are held. These arise from misinterpretation of events, rumours, and, until recently, inadequate communication by the service with carers. Consistency of supervising social worker practice is being addressed by the recent improvements in quality assurance and case reviews. The service has recently embraced the Foster Carers' Charter and is in the process of engaging carers with it too. This clarifies mutual expectations and is a further contribution towards better communication.

Carers benefit from unannounced visits and regular reviews. Managers also make home visits and are more visible than before. Some improvements have occurred in engaging second carers by having meetings out of office hours. Support groups have resumed and are reasonably well supported. However, it is not sufficiently clear how the on-going competence of second carers in households is assessed. The guidelines for supervising them are not consistently addressed either. Similarly, the support of birth children is not established, although work has started on this important area. Supervising social workers also see foster children but this practice varies too. The required level of consistency is not supported by the foster carers' handbook, which is incomplete and inaccurate. However, its planned replacement is subject to a very thorough action plan.

Children and young people who enter mainstream foster care feel they do not get enough information about foster carers before they arrive. One represented many by saying, 'I just arrived really; it would be good if we knew more about them before.' Because of this, their role in the matching process is under-represented. However, work is almost complete in compiling family profiles of foster carer households. These will help remedy this shortfall, which does not occur with disabled children and young people or with connected person (kinship) care. In other regards, documents show how matching decisions are made, which are an important part of children and young people's histories. Insufficient in-house carers has created difficulties in this area but placement planning meetings are usually arranged promptly and address shortfalls. Due consideration is also given to all the people who are living in a household, including those who are in supported lodgings or adult placements. Appropriate work is on-going to reduce the number of exemptions and to enable children and young people to have permanent placements.

Foster carers are supported to ensure that children and young people are cared for in line with their individual placement plan or short break care plans. Carers have access to sufficient services and support to enable them to meet children and young people's physical, emotional, and psychological health needs well and in some cases particularly well. Not only do children and young people receive good health care but carers themselves are extremely well supported too. With regard to the effectiveness of the psychological service, they say 'it's absolutely brilliant!' One-to-one support is



available and carers can contact the service directly. This means they get good support, which has a direct benefit to children and young people.

The ability of foster carers to meet the needs of children and young people is compromised due to inconsistent approaches, attendance and inclusion in training. This shortfall is demonstrated by shortfalls in induction training that have persisted since the last inspection. Additional shortfalls apply to some second carers in households and also to core training that should occur within a year of approval. This means that some carers are less able to meet the needs of children and young people. It also means that some are less engaged with the service than is desirable.

Until recently the recruitment of new foster carers has not been effective, particularly among minority groups in the community. However, a new campaign is underway and is showing early signs of success both numerically and also in terms of reaching minority groups. The recruitment of foster carers increasingly shows a consideration of ethnicity, faith, gender, gender identity, language, and religious beliefs to ensure that positive outcomes are achieved. Each step of the recruitment process is now carefully monitored for every household so that any slippage can be addressed promptly to avoid potential carers dropping out unnecessarily. As a result of this campaign's higher visibility, the fostering service is better placed to provide foster carers who are able to meet the needs of the wide range of looked after children.

Panel members have attempted to provide an essential service during challenging times but have been compromised by inadequate practices in the service. In most cases there is robust interrogation of evidence and appropriate recommendations to the decision maker. However, in some recent cases, assessments were inadequate but approvals were recommended, the advice to panel has not been adequate, and decision making has not provided the necessary fail-safe mechanism. In addition, the monitoring of panel business has not been sufficiently robust in terms of papers to panel being presented on time and decision-making timescales being too long. With regard to the most serious of these deficiencies, they were recognised by the service and rectified with minimal impact on carers and none on children and young people. There are also shortfalls in the range of panel members and in the written procedures for panel, including their assessment and reviews of second carers. Changes to personnel and procedures have been made and all those involved consider the major shortfalls could not arise again. Assessments are more rigorously monitored and panel business is managed efficiently. However, these recent shortfalls remain symptomatic of the organisational challenges, particularly around communication and engagement, in this case with and between panel members.

### **Safeguarding children and young people**

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

Nearly all those children and young people who responded to recent surveys by the organisation and Ofsted feel safe in their placements. One said, 'It couldn't be better, I feel absolutely safe.' Steps have been taken by the new management team to analyse and address any shortfalls. Carers, children and young people know how to

complain and do so, although no complaints have been received in the past year about carers. Colleagues from other disciplines, including those specialising in safeguarding children, consider that the fostering service staff and carers have a good understanding of safeguarding issues and act promptly and appropriately. The process for the recruitment and vetting of staff is thorough in its attention to detail relevant to child protection.

Foster carers receive good support from psychologists and supervising social workers when addressing children and young people's negative behaviours. This is a major contribution to placement stability because carers are helped to understand the causes of such behaviour. No incidents of physical intervention have occurred by carers and they understand that this can only occur in specific, extreme circumstances. Bullying too is managed effectively and no children or young people raised it as a concern.

A small number of children and young people put themselves at risk by going missing or absconding. Clear and thorough procedures are in place and all incidents are followed up by a dedicated team. As in other areas, part of the new culture within children's services is to 'escalate' any problems or delays promptly to avoid drift and minimize risk. In all cases, children and young people are carefully monitored and supported through close inter-agency liaison. Strong and proactive relationships with the police support and promote children and young people's safety. Supervising social workers feel confident that they are driving the number of incidents down.

## **Leadership and management**

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

The last inspection was in 2008 and made eight recommendations. Work began immediately but has been affected by repeated changes in managers. With regard to most recommendations therefore, planning and implementation have only occurred effectively this year. However, most recommendations have been addressed, although attention to induction training of carers is not complete. This is an on-going challenge for the service. As a result, not all children and young people benefit from carers who are as competent as necessary. Children and young people now have comprehensive health records that are kept up to date. This is a useful record for them and the adults who support them. There is also better attention to recording how placement decisions are made and how the diverse needs of children and young people are met. The health and safety of children and young people are also addressed appropriately in most regards. However, the shortfalls in carer training increase the potential risk slightly.

Managers in children's services and the fostering service have the skills and knowledge necessary to address the shortfalls. However, they have only had a number of months to initiate change. They are being supported by improved attention to corporate parenting strategies affecting all the children's services.

Managers are actively engaged with staff and foster carers and are respected practitioners. Monitoring in particular is thorough and has benefited from independent auditing. In particular, there is an improved culture in which staff expect to be routinely challenged about their practice. This means there is less indecision and more consistency, which is important for carers in particular.

Staff feel positive about the support they receive now and their professional development. They also feel more confident in their actions and are more likely to behave proactively, which has been welcomed by other professionals. This is extremely positive for carers and therefore foster children and young people. A service development plan is not in place yet because of the other urgent improvements that are occurring and because a permanent manager is not in post (candidates will soon be interviewed). At the same time it is not sufficiently clear how the service intends to address professional developments such as the new national minimum standards and the inspection evaluation schedule.

Children and young people are involved in revising policies including the children's guide. Currently this is not available in formats for children and young people with different reading styles. However, this has a relatively low impact because the majority of such children and young people are admitted over a protracted timescale.

There has been significantly improved attention to the support of connected people although the overall number remains low. There has been closer liaison with fieldwork colleagues, increased training and staff have been assigned to a specific team. As a result, there is better attention to timescales and carers feel well supported. Connected person carers access training and other support groups.

There is a clear system for payment of fees and allowances. However, carers do not receive an annual statement of payment at the end of each tax year, as required. This has no impact on children and young people but is unhelpful to carers as they are self-employed.

## 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.