

Thurrock Borough Council Fostering Agency

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

The fostering service is funded and managed by Thurrock Council. The Service Manager supports four teams. The foster carer support team, therapeutic foster care team, supported lodgings team and the recruitment and assessment team. At the time of this inspection there were 109 foster carers providing placements for 86 children and young people. In addition, there are 14 approved carers who operate as shared care foster carers, providing respite care 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. The outcomes for children and young people, quality of care and safeguarding are good; however, the leadership and management of the service is only adequate. This is primarily because the overall monitoring of the service has not been consistently completed, especially in relation to complaints, trends or patterns relating to allegations.

Children and young people are placed without avoidable delay with foster carers who can meet their needs. Quality support is provided to sustain placements. Children and young people make good progress in relation to their starting points across all aspects of their welfare, health and education and there are effective arrangements in place to support this. Children and young people have positive views about the quality of their care and their relationships with foster carers.

The fostering service is committed to valuing every child and improving their outcomes. Foster carers are passionate about providing the best possible care and they advocate for children and young people. The service places emphasis upon keeping young people safe, alongside providing them with opportunities for personal growth and development. Young people's voices are heard.

Foster carers receive effective supervision and support and they demonstrate a good understanding of children and young people's needs. The service actively engages

children and young people in planning and they understand what is happening to them. They influence many areas of the fostering service's work.

Leaders and managers are committed to fostering; they have a clear understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the service, and are taking steps to improve it. Areas of shortfall identified during the inspection relate to the overall monitoring undertaken by the manager, outcomes of complaints and training for carers in providing parent and child placements.

Areas for improvement

Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further the registered person should take account of the following recommendation(s):

- make available support and training to foster carers, including hard to reach carers, to assist them in meeting the specific needs of the children they are caring for or are expected to care for. This is in relation to parent and child training (NMS 20.8)
- ensure effective and efficient monitoring; follow the guidance under national minimum standard 25.7, using Regulation 35 as a guide to what should be monitored within this process (NMS 25.7)
- take action to address any issues of concern that is identified or which are raised with the service. This specifically relates to outcomes following any complaint received. (NMS 25.8)

Outcomes for children and young people

Outcomes for young people are **good**.

Children and young people are nurtured and thrive within stable, secure and happy environments. They live with foster carers, where this is the placement of choice and is the best option for each individual child. Placement breakdowns are rare and some young people stay with their carers after their 18th birthday, through supported lodging arrangements. Children and young people benefit from a strong commitment to ensuring good matches, either with local authority carers, or with independent fostering agency carers. This ensures that children and young people live with carers who are committed to their welfare and who are able to meet their social, emotional, psychological and physical needs. Children with special needs arising from disabilities, benefit from carers who are able to meet those needs. Carers provide an environment where children and young people feel safe and are able to reflect on their experiences, helping them develop a positive self-view and understanding of their background.

Children and young people's experiences of the fostering service are positive, and they rate the service as good or brilliant. Some children and young people felt that

their individual carers were outstanding and were extremely positive people in their life. For example, one young person's comments included: 'I think of them as mum and dad, even though I call them by their first name.' Another said: 'I really, really, like my carers; they actually do care about us.' Children and young people develop self-care and independence skills informally, as appropriate to their age, such as getting involved in shopping, cooking and learning to do their own laundry.

Children and young people said they felt consulted about decisions in their day-to-day life and understood why boundaries are set, this despite being frustrated at times about things like not being able to access popular social media sites due to their age. They are treated as part of the family and enjoy being involved in key family events and holidays. Some children have particularly enjoyed the opportunity to travel abroad and experience new cultures. Children and young people have been able to develop new friendships and maintain existing ones, helping them to have more rounded peer support. They maintain contact with birth family in line with their specific needs and their family wishes.

The looked after children's health team provides support and advice to children, young people and foster carers in all aspects of health care, including sexual health and substance misuse. Children and young people are healthy and very well informed about healthy lifestyles. Where appropriate, they take responsibility for their own health. The percentage of looked after children's health reviews completed this year is approximately 94.5 per cent. A particular success within the council is the Thurrock Therapeutic Team, also known as the 'Three T's', which is highly valued by both carers and social workers as a resource to promote the children's emotional wellbeing. Another significant improvement is the introduction of the prescribed and non-prescribed medication recording booklets, providing children, young people and their carers, with a safer way to manage medication.

Children and young people have made good progress in their learning and from their original starting points. 86 per cent of personal education plans (PEP) have been completed this year. The remaining plans are on target to be completed by April 2013. School attendance is up for looked after children; the improvement is appropriately 85% attendance. Where there are persistent absences from school, there are clear improvement plans in place to support the child and their holistic needs. Children and young people spoken to, state that they found PEP's and other reviews positive but, think there are too many of them.

Children and young people maximise their educational potential through developing their literacy and maths skills with the support of committed carers and extra tuition. Children and young people have made good individual progress in the time they have been living with their carers, like improving their reading skills. Children and young people know that their carers will be there to watch their school plays, attend parents' evenings and equip them for their school prom. This has boosted their confidence and self-esteem, as well as their overall life chances. Additional support and advice can be sought through the virtual head teacher and other professionals. This enables the child and their carer to obtain the right care package, therefore making the placement and their educational provision more stable and safe.

Quality of service

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

All those involved with the fostering service are generally very satisfied with the service they receive. For example, they agreed that the management team is strong; and that communication between the fostering service and other professionals involved in the care of the child has improved. This has strengthened the service's ability to meet the wide range of children and young people's needs.

Since the last inspection, the fostering service has maintained stable foster carer groups who are able to meet the needs of looked after children. The preparation and assessment of foster carers focuses on the needs of children and young people, therefore giving carers an in-depth understanding of how to meet these. Foster carers said the process was thorough. All assessments were completed within timescales, from initial enquiry to approval stage. However, some applications presented at panel had taken unusually long, due to various circumstances within the team. The senior management are aware of this, and have now put in clear and robust systems within the recruitment and assessment team to manage this effectively and efficiently. Managers and staff are also aware of the difficulties in recruiting a range of carers from minority ethnic backgrounds and carers with skills to manage parent and child placements. Where such skilled carers cannot be found within the service, social workers look to a local commissioning body's preferred provider's framework and independent foster care providers across the region.

The fostering service's matching process is effective. Children and foster carers benefit from clear and comprehensive guidance to support decision-making about matching considerations. Staff are careful to ensure that the service and foster carers receive detailed information about the specific needs of children seeking placements. The service ensures foster carers have the required knowledge, skill and expertise to meet these needs prior to negotiating placements. This ensures effective and stable placements. The fostering panel functions efficiently and effectively in making recommendations about the suitability of potential foster carers. The panel is well-established with an independent chair and it is comprised of qualified and experienced individuals in their chosen fields of expertise. The fostering service has relevant policies and procedures in place and panel members receive an induction, training and appraisal. The fostering service ensures that the vetting of panel members is robust and that members are suitable to participate in the process. Foster carers and children benefit from the service's clear policies and procedures with regard to the purpose and operation of panel meetings. The fostering panel performs its quality assurance function well. The agency decision-maker is appropriately qualified.

The fostering service benefits from a dedicated member from the workforce development team, who coordinates training initiatives for foster carers. There is a clear framework of training and development, used as the basis for assessing foster carers' performance and identifying their training and development needs.

Supervising social workers follow-up on carers' training profiles and development needs through supervisory visits and annual reviews. The majority of carers have completed the Children Workforce Development Council training and there are many in the pipeline to complete this soon. Once approved, carers are offered a progression package, which is competency based assessment to level 3, with the potential to join the therapeutic foster carers. However, this depends on the availability of at least one of the carers in the household, making fostering their primary occupation. However, this structure is being reviewed, since it is linked to the pay award for foster carers. Although the training package does provide specific training when needed, there is a gap for those carers who support parent and child placement.

Placement stability is good and performance is improving. The therapeutic fostering team provides high-level support to specialist foster carers and this scheme has been extremely successful in providing high quality stable family placements to some young people with very complex needs. Foster carers have good working relationships with the fostering service. They work in partnership with the other professional services to ensure the needs of the child are being fully met. The fostering service has an effective out-of-hours service.

Safeguarding children and young people

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

The fostering service has good safeguarding arrangements, which focus on promoting children and young people's welfare. Supervising social workers undertake at least one annual unannounced visit to fostering households. Children and young people confirm that they feel safe and they do not identify bullying as an issue. Children and foster carers know how to make a complaint. The council received a judgement of good for overall effectiveness at their last Safeguarding and Looked after Children (SLAC) inspection. A 'good' judgement was also received in the outcome area, which ensures that children are safe and feel safe.

There are effective Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB) and regional arrangements with strong relationships with the Local Authority Designated Officer. The service gets regular pertinent information, enabling them to keep up-to-date on the best practice and key safeguarding issues. Robust procedures and processes ensure that allegations against people who work with children are managed in a way that leads to improved levels of safety for children. The senior management are aware more improvements can be made about having a clearer overview of the outcomes of allegations and complaints and what lessons had been learnt. Foster carers and staff receive regular safeguarding training, including understanding gang culture. Foster carers receive extensive guidance on keeping themselves and children safe. This includes safer caring training, health and safety checks and internet safety. Foster carers learn the diverse nature of abuse and neglect and recognise the impact of this on children; they take appropriate action to support them. Foster carers effectively promote positive behaviour. They do undertake training in keeping safe and techniques in de-escalation. This is refreshed regularly. The fostering service

also effectively monitors accidents and incidents.

Children and young people do not routinely engage in risk taking behaviours or offending. The incidence of children or young people going missing has decreased, supported by the multi-agency panel for missing children. This group takes a strategic overview of children who go missing from care, and has enabled the fostering team to support children in placement and try to prevent further episodes occurring. Foster carers know what action to take if the whereabouts of children is not known. The service regularly updates risk assessments and undertakes the necessary action to minimise risks. Children and young people are protected by the service's recruitment practices, which are fully compliant with regulations, standards and guidance. The organisation competently undertakes the necessary safeguarding checks, and this includes Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks at regular intervals. The service successfully recruits and promotes staff within the council; therefore, staff stability remains good.

Leadership and management

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

The senior management structure has changed since the last inspection. The senior managers are both suitable to work with children and have the appropriate skills, experience and qualifications to deliver an efficient and effective service. Both lead by example and are available to foster carers, staff, and children and young people. Partnership working is embedded and the service and the senior management team demonstrate a clear vision and ambition for children and young people who are fostered.

The senior management team monitor the delivery of the service and give an overview of the fostering service regularly to the corporate parenting panel. They use the results of the review to actively drive continuous improvement in outcomes for children and young people and service provision. There is an improvement agenda for the service, currently reviewing the payment structure for carers, increasing the number of carers and looking at demographic cultural trends specifically for remand and parent and child placements. However, although there are systems in place, the overall monitoring system of the service's performance under national minimum standard 25 has not been consistently carried out, especially in relation to allegations and complaints.

The percentage of the authority's children looked after, who are placed in foster care, is above the national average. This includes placements within this provision and with independent fostering agencies. Therefore, placement stability and security for the children has strengthened. The service also maintained appropriate links with neighbouring councils within the Eastern Region Five (ER5) commissioning partnership, working together to obtaining the best care package for each child.

Foster carers commented that they feel valued as members of the team working with

the children and young people. They feel that they play a significant role with staff in planning for individual children and that they are seen as professionals. Some foster carers are involved in steering groups for improvements for children and there is a newly established foster carers association, which is called 'Thurrock One Team Foster Care Association'. Foster carers all commented that their supervising social workers are excellent and they work above and beyond the call of duty. One carer said: 'I really, really appreciated my supervising social worker; her input during a difficult time and being there, helped me so much'.

The service benefits from having a motivated experienced and qualified staff team who are clearly focused on improving outcomes for children and young people in foster care. There is a culture of training and professional development within the team, and staff keep abreast of developments within the child care field by regularly accessing training opportunities. Staff within the council are also encouraged to develop and pursue career changes, which staff saw as positive and motivating. Staff confirmed senior managers are always accessible and they receive good quality and regular supervision. All felt the team managers had made significant contributions to recent improvements and look forward to future of the service.

Children and young people have influenced and contributed to some parts of the fostering service, mainly through the recruitment process of carers. Their written feedback about their placements also contributes to foster carers' reviews. Children and young people's achievements are also recognised by the Council through an awards ceremony. The Statement of Purpose is written clearly, frequently reviewed and details the aims and objectives of the service. Children and young person's guide about the service are suitable for all children, including younger children and those less able.

The fostering service has demonstrated a capacity for continuing improvement, based on the evidence of action since the last inspection, when there were seven requirements and six recommendations. Only one recommendation has not been fully met. This relates to the manager developing procedures to monitor the activities within the service and is identified again as a continuing shortfall. The previous requirements and recommendations mainly related to annual reviews, medication procedures and consent for health care, approvals and children's guides. These have all been met.

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 the inspection of local authority fostering agencies.