

Bath & North East Somerset Council Fostering Services

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

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Inspector	Wilfried Maxfield
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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.

This report details the main strengths and any areas for improvement identified during the inspection. The judgements included in the report are made in relation to the outcomes for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and the relevant National Minimum Standards for the service.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

- Outstanding: this aspect of the provision is of exceptionally high quality
- Good: this aspect of the provision is strong
- Satisfactory: this aspect of the provision is sound
- Inadequate: this aspect of the provision is not good enough

Service information

Brief description of the service

The fostering service is part of a County Council's Children's Service which provides a range of services for children in care through its Safeguarding, Social Care and Family Services. This includes the Fostering Service which provides placements for 140 children in care and 22 Family Link placements. At the time of the inspection 17 children were fostered in kinship placements.

The key responsibility for the recruitment, assessment, support, supervision and training of foster carers lies with the Family Placement Team. The range of services includes: emergency and respite placements; short-term placements leading to a return to their family or adoption or permanence; long-term placements; Therapeutic fostering placements and Family Link placements.

A team around a consultant community paediatrician provides essential health services. Children with emotional and behavioural difficulties receive additional support from the Community Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service. Education provision is supported by the Virtual School.

Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

This is an overview of what the inspector found during the inspection.

This was an announced key inspection. The reason for this visit was to look at the progress the fostering service provider has made with the nine recommendations made at the last key inspection and to inspect the service against the key national standards for fostering services and the fostering services regulations.

The previous inspection report rating of outstanding has been maintained in all outcome areas. Economic well being which was rated as good is now also outstanding.

Improvements since the last inspection

The fostering service has acted to make improvements to all of the nine recommendations made at the last inspection:

The last inspection report included two recommendations relating to the roles and areas of expertise of individual foster panel members. This visit found that the foster panel fully complies with the relevant standards and regulations regarding the range and type of its membership.

The management of the service has considered the introduction of an individualised health record for children and young people and decided against its introduction. Instead, the current practice includes a full health assessment to be available within the health record notes and to produce a health action plan. This plan is produced in consultation with children and young people and shared with all who need to know. All of the current systems produce outstanding results for children and young people and fully comply with the current guidance.

Staff, carers and young people are being provided with internet safety training sessions. Written policies on 'Safe Internet' and 'Safe Mobile Phone Use' have been published in the relevant handbooks.

Review notification letters to children and young people have been revised to include advocacy information and advice. The letter supports children's rights to have someone for additional advocacy present at their review meeting. This service is being provided by a local advocacy service.

The introduction of a foster carer's mentoring system has been discussed in consultation with foster carers. The carers have rejected the formal introduction of such a scheme. However, carers are happy with the support provided for them and praise the systems and support networks currently available to them.

The service has greatly enhanced the support for the birth children of foster carers. The Children of Foster Carers support group now meets regularly.

Agreed pocket money is now being included in placement plans. In addition, pocket money issues are formally discussed at every children's review meeting.

Family placements for larger sibling groups can now be provided. The service can ensure a sufficiency of households that could accommodate a sibling group of three or more. No groups of children that should be together have been split since the last inspection.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

The foster service provides for high quality health care and promotes the physical, emotional and social development of children and young people. Children with specific health, psychological and/or behavioural needs receive a wide range of outstanding services. Foster carers praise the intensive support and commitment of the looked after children's nurse service, the consultant community paediatrician and associated team, and the community child and adolescent mental health team for looked after children. The service successfully supports models of therapeutic fostering. It provides therapeutic support to meet the needs of children with multiple and complex needs in order to improve their chances of staying within a fostering setting and avoid placement breakdowns.

Foster carers' knowledge of the health needs of the children in their care is outstanding. Carers are provided with excellent health-related information before and during a placement. Case files contain a wealth of health-related recording. Health assessments are detailed and the information is regularly updated. After a period of consultation, the service decided not to provide young people with an specialised health record (health passport). However, current arrangements follow best practice and guidance and provide children and young people with excellent and flexible systems and access to their individual health records.

Foster carers receive a wide range of training designed to promote the health of children in their care. The high standard of the training packages on offer reflects the needs of the children and young people. Good levels of training and specialist support are available for respite carers of disabled children.

Children and young people benefit from excellent and established local networks and links with health agencies. All have been provided with a comprehensive health pack designed to inform about everyday health issues. The looked after children's nurse provides an dedicated phone service enabling young people to seek help and advice on health issues around the clock.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

The managers of the service have the qualifications, skills and experience necessary to promote and safeguard the welfare of the children and young people placed in a fostering setting. All undertake training as appropriate to ensure that their knowledge of child protection and safeguarding requirements is updated regularly. Senior managers have been selected carefully by employing good recruitment and vetting procedures.

Children and young people benefit from a service which provides them with foster carers who can offer them a safe, healthy and nurturing environment. Homes of carers visited at this inspection were maintained to a high standard and presented as homely and well looked after. Rigorous and frequent health and safety checks are in place to ensure that the environment is free from avoidable hazards.

Rigorous systems are in place to ensure that children are carefully matched with the most suitable and safe fostering setting. Assessments and care plans of children and young people and the assessments of foster carers themselves are of an outstanding quality. The quality of this information allows for informed and considered placement decisions. Pre-placement meetings are held to achieve best possible levels of information sharing and manage a careful introduction between child and carer. A number of documents describe how the specific needs of children will be met by the carer. A formal process follows before an agreement will be reached. The current level of information documenting this process meets the standards and regulations. However, the service does not have a unified placement agreement document comprising all of the elements of the relevant schedule.

Children and young people are protected by a service with a strong commitment to promote and safeguard all placements. Foster carers are provided with all of the key policies and procedures and are given professional guidance and support in all areas of safeguarding. Training opportunities for foster carers in this area are excellent and include a wide range of safer care and safe parenting topics designed for keeping children safe. Processes to protect children from abuse and neglect are constantly updated. The Local Safeguarding Children's Board has recently reviewed the arrangements for managing concerns and allegations against foster carers in order to bring the process in line with the best available and most recent guidance. The council has consolidated complaints systems by employing a dedicated complaints officer. The current system provides for the most efficient and effective monitoring and recording of complaints and clearly evidences what actions have been taken.

All staff working for the service are suitably qualified and are recruited by employing robust vetting procedures. There is good networking between the council's human resource department, senior management and the managers of the service itself to ensure that children are safeguarded from people unsuitable to work for a fostering service. Applicants apply using the council's online application process. The electronic application form is currently under review to further ensure that all of the elements of the fostering standards and regulations are being met.

The foster panel provides the service with an outstanding and robust quality assurance function. Scrutiny of the assessment and reviews of foster carers employs carefully reached decision making. Panels include members which have been selected for their expert understanding of the fostering task. The group has access to a wide range of professional and personal expertise. This more than comprises the roles and functions of individual members prescribed by the relevant standards and regulations.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Carers and professionals praise the fostering service's commitment to promote and support children's individual differences, development and aspirations. Equality and diversity issues form a primary focus in all of the children's and foster carer's assessments. In line with the outstanding commitment to quality, matching children's needs is given the highest priority in terms of their backgrounds, possible disabilities and orientations. Carers benefit from good guidance in the foster carer handbook and from a range of training opportunities. Scrutiny of the carers' commitment to valuing and supporting differences is an essential part of the carers' annual review process.

Children and young people are provided with outstanding educational and vocational support and opportunities. The recent transition to a 'Virtual School' model for looked after children has been highly successful in further extending the already strong partnerships with education support services and schools. Personal education plans

are in place for all and document how educational needs are being met and how children and young people are involved in a process of ongoing consultation. Foster carers are being strongly supported to help and enable them to meet children's educational needs. Good systems are in place to collate and monitor educational and vocational progress and attainment.

The service provides an efficient short-term breaks and respite service for children in crisis and disabled children. A separate set of policies and procedures ensures that the particular needs of children using the service are known and met. Outstanding levels of additional training are in place for carers who offer specialist care to children with challenging needs.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

Foster carers promote and support contact arrangements with birth families in the best interest of the children and young people in their care. Carers receive good levels of support and advice and have received training specific to the task. Arrangements are clearly documented and agreed. Outcomes of visits are communicated to all who need to know.

Participation and consultation with children is a particular strength of the service. Children's views are sought, encouraged and supported over all issues. Children's services have developed a dedicated participation strategy. High quality advocacy services are available for all and children are well informed about their right to complain and voice concerns. Support to input and feed back on a range of services is available and encouraged. Birth children of foster carers are supported and meet regularly for additional and invaluable peer support.

Individual looked after review meetings are strongly promoted and advocacy information and advice is offered formally and on every occasion. A particularly high number of children attend their review meetings. Care plans are updated in line with review decisions and contain data on specific benefits provided, such as pocket money.

The Children's Care Council has started operating in line with the national Care Matters agenda. There is an excellent commitment to hear children's opinions on this and all other levels. Young people have been engaged in a series of consultation events which are well attended. This includes elected council members who play a very active part in supporting the service.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is outstanding.

Support for care leavers is outstanding. The service strives to improve their participation in training, employment and education after leaving care. Foster carers

are clearly expected and enabled to prepare young people for independent living. The fostering service and children's looked after teams draw up pathway plans in consultation with the carers. Good systems are in place to encourage foster carers to look after young people after the age of 18 years and continue to support their educational and vocational ambitions. The council supports a successful Teenager to Work scheme which gives care leavers priority access to apprenticeships.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

The Statement of Purpose outlines the aims and objectives of the fostering service and what facilities and services are being provided. The document is regularly reviewed. Foster carers and their children are being provided with a wealth of information and guidance. The foster carer handbook has recently been revised to a good standard. The council provides the service with an excellent website.

Social work teams deliver an efficient and effective foster care service. Staff benefit from excellent systems and clear management structures. The leadership and management of the team is highly effective and praised and respected by individual team members. Professional supervision and case load management are good. There is an outstanding commitment by managers to enable social workers to spend as much direct time with children as possible. Excellent professional development and training opportunities are available. Supervision and performance review processes are in place for all staff. Team members are suitably qualified and able to provide a high quality service. Staff hold social work qualifications and a significant number of workers have extensive experience in supporting a fostering service. Newly qualified social workers are exceptionally well supported.

There is a clear strategy to continue to expand the service and provide the widest possible choice and range of carers. The fostering service now has a sufficient number of foster care households that can accommodate a sibling group of three or more young people. Carers are full of praise for the effective high quality support they receive from their allocated support social workers. After consultation foster carers decided that there was no need to organise additional peer mentoring on their behalf. Excellent systems are in place for supervising, monitoring and reviewing the services of carers. Training opportunities are outstanding. Carers and children benefit from excellent respite care arrangements. The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding.

The quality of case recording and file keeping is good. Files are regularly audited and record keeping systems are strictly monitored. Information kept in foster homes is well defined and monitored by supervision social workers. Staff recruitment files are maintained by the fostering service in conjunction with the human resources department. Systems provided do not always allow for the effective administration and processing of all of the necessary staffing information. The premises are suitable for the purpose. There are efficient and robust administrative and information technology systems.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Recommendations

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

- unify all of the current systems and elements to produce one dedicated foster care agreement document (NMS8, Regulation 28, Schedule 5)
- ensure robust administration and monitoring of recruitment and vetting files. (NMS25)