

# Suffolk County Council Fostering Service

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

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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, which is part of the local authority's Corporate Parenting Service, provides a range of respite, short and long-term foster placements for children who are looked after by Suffolk County Council.

The service comprises a number of separate teams that are distributed across the county and one countywide team responsible for the recruitment and assessment of new foster carers. The managers of these teams are supervised by the Head of Fostering Services. The service is in the process of re-structuring.

The fostering service includes a number of specialist schemes for children with additional or more complex needs, all of which are managed by the locality teams. One of these schemes, known as 'Link', provides carers who offer regular short-term breaks for children with disabilities. The fostering service also supports kinship ('family and friends') foster carers.

### Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This full inspection was announced beforehand.

Overall the service provides a good level of care for children and young people placed with it. It has a number of outstanding areas. The service meets young people's health needs and keeps them safe exceptionally well. Young people have very positive relationships with their carers, they are highly appreciative of these. They have very good opportunities offered to them, including developing leisure interests and education. The promotion of equality and diversity in the service is outstanding.

There are some areas where there is a lack of clarity and consistency across the service, such as unannounced checking of foster homes, delegating authority to carers and guidance for young people staying in placements beyond 18 years of age. Senior managers hope that the forthcoming re-structuring will help address these. The service is well managed and actively seeks to improve the quality of care it provides.

### Improvements since the last inspection

Following the previous inspection recommendations were made relating to providing information to carers, consulting with young people, safe care guidelines, the children's guide, the register of carers, unannounced visits and young people's case records.

In their survey results most carers said that they get satisfactory or good information on children. Some said it was outstanding and some said it was inadequate. While there can be inevitable problems providing information for emergency placements, efforts are made to provide appropriate information wherever possible. This helps to ensure better matching and preparation for carers to provide good care. There have been improvements in consultation with young people, most of whom now say that their views are listened to. Carers have training in safe care and there is an effective process in place to ensure that carers have written safe care guidelines to help them plan their care of the young people placed with them.

The children's guide has some contact information for Ofsted in it, but not all that is set out in the national minimum standards. The register of carers is clear and comprehensive, so providing accurate information. Carers are visited once a year unannounced. This allows supervising staff to see the home as it is. There is some lack of clarity over the process for unannounced inspections and this can lead to inconsistencies in ensuring they continue to meet the needs of children. Young people records are kept and they provide appropriate information on the progress they make in placement as well as the young peoples histories.

### **Helping children to be healthy**

The provision is outstanding.

Young people placed with the fostering service have their health needs met exceptionally well. Their responses to questions about health in the pre inspection survey were very positive. Foster carers are trained to be able to meet young people's health needs, including very specific and complex health needs. Individual health needs are recorded on young people's files and carers are extremely knowledgeable about them. This, along with a high level of support for carers from the service and external agencies, helps to ensure positive outcomes for young people. Foster homes are well maintained, homely and comfortable. Carers and fostering staff are well aware of safety issues, which helps to protect young people from accidents. However, there is a lack of clarity and consistency in how the homes are checked to ensure their ongoing safety and suitability. While there are extensive systems to ensure young people's safety, this does limit it to a small degree.

### **Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe**

The provision is outstanding.

Young people say that they feel safe in their foster homes. All foster carers have safe care training and write individual safe care policies. Consequently, they are well informed in order to look after young people in a way that actively safeguards them and promotes their welfare. All carers undertake child protection training, which helps them recognise and respond appropriately to signs or concerns of abuse. Training also provides carers with information on acceptable risks for young people and this is further addressed in supervision sessions. This helps carers to allow young

people to take some acceptable risks as they grow towards adulthood and learn how to keep themselves safe. There are very clear procedures in place to inform carers how to respond when young people go missing from care. These include someone independent speaking to young people when they return, so that they have an opportunity to say if they are running away from anything in the foster home. This provides an important safeguard. Episodes of missing from care are thoroughly monitored by the service, so that patterns can be identified and additional safety measures put in place.

## **Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do**

The provision is outstanding.

Young people describe extremely positive relationships with carers. They made comments such as:

'they give me hugs and cuddles when I'm feeling scared...I never want to leave because it is such a loving caring family'

'they do not give up on me even when I am being difficult'

'I feel as if I am in a proper home. I am well fed, encouraged and supported'.

Carers are very well supported to help young people develop appropriate behaviour. This includes training, which they describe as effective, and supervision using a range of resources to help carers manage behaviour. Young people say that the expectations of their behaviour are fair and they like knowing what their boundaries are.

Young people in foster care enjoy very good opportunities to pursue leisure interests. In the service's own survey 84% of young people said that they had a good choice of activities. Carers say that the service provides funding for young people to attend a range of extra curricular activities. Young people speak highly of their opportunities to develop leisure interests. One described their experiences in foster care as life changing. This all helps young people to develop emotional, social, creative and physical skills as well as enhancing their self esteem. One aspect of their care that young people find frustrating is the need for carers to check with others before they can undertake normal childhood activities such as staying overnight with friends. There is currently a lack of clarity over this. However, the service is piloting new planning processes which they hope will make it clearer what decision making authority can be delegated to carers.

The educational achievement of young people is very well promoted. Young people made positive comments about their education and the support they receive. There are some innovative and highly practical programmes to encourage the educational development of children and young people. These include providing them with parcels of books appropriate to their age and development, and extra curricular visits to places such as museums and theatres. These activities are evaluated to ensure

their ongoing effectiveness at supporting young people's educational development. Effective support is provided for carers and young people to help address any specific educational needs. One carer described it as fantastic.

### **Helping children make a positive contribution**

The provision is good.

Young people's wishes and feelings are sought and taken into account in making decisions about their lives. Young people said that they are listened to and their views are taken into account. They made comments such as:

'when I am angry they still listen to me and still love me'

'I can talk to (carers) about anything, anytime'

'they always listen to me'.

Overall carers feel that young people are listened to, but they expressed more mixed views about this than the young people did. The service's own survey found that 73% of young people felt that their wishes and feelings were listened to in their looked after children (LAC) reviews. Fostering service staff seek the views of young people to feed into reviews of foster carers. Young people can have access to independent advocates if they wish or need this. They are always asked about this at their LAC reviews. The service is good at helping young people to develop positive self views, emotional resilience and knowledge and understanding of their background. Carers record milestones in young people's lives and help them to remember happy or important times through collecting keepsakes and taking photographs. This is particularly important when young people may move placements, as memories that contribute to their understanding of their lives can be lost or forgotten otherwise. All staff and foster panel members attend equality and diversity training, so that they have a good understanding of issues relating to this and how to ensure that young people's individual needs can be identified and met. The recruitment and assessment of foster carers includes exploring their views on equality and diversity. Carers think the service is good responding to equality and diversity matters.

Wherever possible young people are able to move into carers' homes in a planned and sensitive way, but this may not always be possible when placements are made in emergencies. Young people's very positive comments about their care suggest that they feel part of the family. One said 'I would like to stay where I am forever'. The service undertakes careful matching of young people and foster carers to help ensure appropriate and stable placements that can meet young people's needs well. The positive comments from young people shows this is working.

## **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is good.

The fostering service helps young people to develop skills and understanding that prepares them for adulthood and independence. The local authority commissions a specialist leaving care service and young people made positive comments on this. Carers help young people to learn skills for independence in an age-appropriate way. There are clear and comprehensive procedures for planning for young people's moves to independence and leaving care. However, there is not a clear policy to provide young people and foster carers with information on all aspects of a young person continuing to live in a foster placement beyond their 18th birthday. There is a lack of clarity on this in the service, so young people are not assured consistent responses, although there are positive examples of young people being able to stay in placements while, for instance, they continue education.

## **Organisation**

The organisation is good.

There is a comprehensive and robust system for recruiting and assessing foster carers to ensure that they are suitable to meet the needs of young people. This includes all of the required checks, which are clearly recorded on carers' files. Carers describe the process as thorough, but sensitive. Recruitment of carers is undertaken by a dedicated team, so they have the opportunity to develop skills and expertise in this area. The standard of assessments is very good and this is commented upon by the panel chair. The panel chair and vice chair are very experienced. The panel has access to appropriate expertise to fulfil its role. It also carries out a quality assurance role to ensure that assessments remain of a good quality. Panel minutes are detailed and clear. The panel makes recommendations and the agency decision maker takes account of these in making the final decision on carers' suitability.

There is a Statement of Purpose and a children's guide, so that young people, carers, parents, staff and placing social workers can be clear about the aims and objectives of the service. The children's guide has details of Ofsted's telephone number, but does not inform young people how they can contact Ofsted by email or letter. The guide is available in alternative formats or large print, making it more easily accessible to a range of children. Only one version is available for the whole range of ages of young people who use the service, but the manager is aware of the potential limitations of this and there are plans to develop another version so individuals can have more age-appropriate versions.

The service is well managed by suitably qualified and well experienced staff. There are good monitoring and quality assurance processes to review and improve the quality of care for young people. There is a sound process for recruiting staff to the service. All required checks are undertaken, but records do not always show the date of the checks, so it could be difficult to ensure that these are always completed before someone starts work. Foster carers and staff receive a good and varied range



of training to help them meet the needs of the young people placed with them. There is core training that all carers have to undertake and specialist or optional courses such as behaviour management for dads and training to meet specific needs. Carers are generally appreciative of the training. Carers receive regular supervision from their support workers. Their comments on supervision were varied, but overall positive, with many being very positive. They made comments such as 'they listen and act on requests when possible' and 'my social worker supports me in every way they can'. This level of support helps carers to care properly for the young people placed with them. There is a process for carers to move to a higher level of fee, but due to the criteria and as it is resource led, it is not applied equally to all carers.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. This is achieved through policies and procedures as well as training and a clear focus on meeting young people's individual needs. Allegations and suspicions of harm are handled effectively, so that young people are protected; training for carers covers child protection. Independent support is available for foster carers who are subject to allegations of abuse.

Family and friends foster carers receive the support they require to meet the needs of children placed with them. Young people made some very positive comments about their family and friends carers. One said that 'they love me and I would not want to live anywhere else'. The majority of comments from carers were positive. There is a specific support group for family and friends carers, but they can also attend the main support groups if they wish to. They receive support and training to help them in their role of caring for the young people placed with them.

## **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):

- ensure that foster homes are inspected annually, without appointment, to ensure they continue to meet the needs of foster children (NMS 10.5)
- ensure that carers are supported to make reasonable and appropriate decisions within the authority delegated to them, without having to seek consent unnecessarily (NMS 7.4)
- develop Staying Put policies that provide foster carers and young people with information and guidance regarding all aspects of continuing living arrangements beyond the young person's 18th birthday, including criteria for continuing these arrangements beyond 18 (Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 4 paragraph 3.125)
- ensure the children's guide sets out for children how they can contact the Children's Rights Director and Ofsted (NMS 16.4)
- ensure that recruitment records show when each check was completed and who

carried out the check (NMS 19.4)

- ensure that the criteria for calculating fees and allowances are applied equally to all foster carers. (NMS 28.7)