

Suffolk County Council Fostering Service

Inspection report for LA 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 three locality 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 four teams are supervised by the Head of Fostering Services.

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.

On 31 March 2007, the service was supporting a total of 315 approved fostering households with 404 approved places for children.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This was an announced inspection, covering all the key standards. The fieldwork for the inspection took place over a period of five days. The inspection included interviews with managers of the service, visits to three foster households and questionnaire surveys of a sample of foster carers, children and placing social workers.

The fostering service was last inspected by the Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI) in June 2006 and received a rating of 'excellent'. The requirements and recommendations made at that time included: ensuring that decisions about children's participation in school trips are made on an individual basis; making sure that foster carers follow appropriate recording practice; reviewing the use of 'bed and breakfast' accommodation for young people; continuing with efforts to recruit an appropriate range of carers to meet children's placement needs; routinely notifying CSCI of the outcome of child protection enquiries.

This inspection found that the fostering service promotes good outcomes for children placed with foster carers. Steps have been taken to meet all the requirements and recommendations from the last inspection. Good health outcomes are achieved for children. The service's policies and practices are successful in providing a good

overall standard of care for children placed with foster carers. The service has developed strong links with the local authority's safeguarding service and it has a robust staff recruitment process. An excellent level of support is provided for children's education. Contact arrangements are well supported and children have good opportunities to express their views and opinions about most of the areas that are likely to affect their lives. The service is managed effectively, in line with its aims and objectives. It has sufficient well trained and appropriately qualified staff. The service is continuing to take effective steps to ensure that it recruits an appropriate range of foster carers with the right skills and experience so that placement choice can be increased. There is evidence of careful matching of children with foster carers who can meet their needs. Carers are subject to thorough assessments and receive a good level of supervision and support. Records are well maintained and the service is continuing to improve the availability of management information for monitoring purposes and for service development.

No statutory requirements have been made as a result of this inspection. Recommendations have been made with regard to: ensuring that all carers have written household guidelines on safe caring; ensuring that children are able to contribute their views for carers' reviews of approval; improving the arrangements for monitoring the frequency of carers' reviews; ensuring that all foster carers receive unannounced visits as part of their support and supervision.

Improvements since the last inspection

The fostering service has taken steps to ensure that carers and staff are aware of guidance on children's entitlement to participate in school trips. The service reports that decisions about financial support for school trips are made on an individual basis by area social care managers, taking into account the educational benefits to the child. No issues were raised about during this inspection, by foster carers or children, about funding for school trips.

A new recording policy for foster carers was being introduced at the time of the last inspection and this has now been fully implemented. These guidelines aim to ensure that foster carers' recording practice follows the local authority's policy on access to records.

The last inspection found that a number of looked-after children were accommodated in 'bed and breakfast' accommodation instead of suitable permanent accommodation. Senior managers have carried out a review of such placements and have taken steps to reduce the use of this type of accommodation. For example, following a wider review of provision for young people who are leaving care, strategies have been developed to improve the accommodation options for this group. The service also reports that work has been undertaken to strengthen the links between the fostering service, the leaving and aftercare service and Connexions. This inspection provided evidence of young people being appropriately supported in planned moves from foster care to appropriate semi-independent accommodation.

The service is continuing to keep its plans for recruitment of foster carers under review, with the aim of recruiting a diverse range of carers to meet the placement needs of children. Good progress is being made in recruiting more foster carers from black and minority ethnic groups.

The fostering service has taken steps to ensure that placing social workers complete the health notification form at the start of each placement, so that the Looked After Children (LAC) Health Team is aware of the need to complete a health care plan for the child.

Pre and post-approval training programmes for foster carers have been reviewed to ensure that there is no duplication of training. Managers now have access to better information about the training that individual carers have attended and about the overall take-up of training courses.

The fostering service has improved its system for routinely notifying Ofsted of the outcome of child protection enquiries.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

The fostering service supports carers in promoting good health outcomes for children. For example, the service works closely with the LAC Health Team which undertakes children's health assessments and reviews. One result of this is that a high proportion of children receive an annual health check. The team also provides foster carers with valuable advice and support. Carers understand their role in health promotion and support children in attending health care appointments. Visits provided examples of children with specific health needs who are receiving sensitive and effective support from their carers. Foster carers provide reports about children's health to inform the planning and review process. Children confirm that their carers give them advice about leading a healthy lifestyle, including areas such as diet, exercise and substance misuse. Placing social workers' express very positive views about the ways in which the service supports foster carers to promote children's physical and emotional wellbeing.

The fostering service has established an effective partnership with the local child and adolescent mental health service (CAMHS) to provide advice and support for foster carers and the children placed with them. The overall provision for children who need mental health services is satisfactory and the experiences of foster carers indicate that there has been some improvement in access to CAMHS in the last year. There are examples of some very good support being provided, including children receiving regular therapeutic work and CAMHS working closely with foster carers and children to address behavioural difficulties in school.

Written health plans are available on children's files, together with medical consent forms signed by a parent or another person with parental responsibility. The majority of foster carers report receiving 'good' or 'satisfactory' background information about

children's health needs at the time of placement. However, a small number of carers say that children have sometimes arrived for short-term placements without sufficient information about their health care. In such situations, supervising social workers support carers in obtaining any missing information as soon as possible after placement. Reference is made in the Staying Safe section of this report to the service's plan for extending the use of placement planning meetings to promote good communication and sharing of information with carers.

On the whole, carers are satisfied with the health related training that is available from the service. Carers report that there are opportunities to attend additional training if they have children with specific health needs placed with them. In the last year, the service has been successful in increasing the number of foster carers attending health related training, such as a course that aims to develop carers' skills in communicating with young people about sex and relationships.

The fostering service has identified a need to develop services to promote healthy lifestyle choices for foster carers and this is included in the development plan. New practice guidance on smoking in fostering households has been implemented.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The fostering service is managed by suitably qualified and experienced staff.

The service ensures that carers provide accommodation which is comfortable, appropriately furnished and suitable for the needs of the children. Comments received from placing social workers and children, together with the records of carers' approvals and household reviews, demonstrate that the service provides safe, healthy and nurturing foster homes. Health and safety audits of carers' homes are undertaken for the initial assessment and as part of each annual review.

Managers and staff of the service place a high priority on the need to make careful matching decisions for children. All requests for planned placements are now considered at a weekly management meeting where matching information is considered on a countywide basis. The service has improved the quality of the management information that is available about placement requests and the outcomes of matching children with foster carers. Placing social workers say that fostering teams have a thorough knowledge of the carers, resulting in good matching decisions and contributing to the stability of children's placements. A central team is about to be formed to deal with placement requests and managers are confident that this will improve knowledge about placement availability and promote good matching. The planning and matching process has been improved for children who require permanent foster placements. The recruitment and assessment team now coordinates family finding activity for this group of children and this is proving to be an effective approach. Planning meetings are held before these placements commence, thereby ensuring that information is shared and considered by all the relevant people. The service is able to demonstrate that the stability of long-term

placements is improving.

The majority of foster carers who replied to the survey say that they receive appropriate and timely information about children before, or at the time of, placement. Some carers identify this as an aspect of the service which has improved during the last year and describe the information that they receive for planned placements as 'really good' and 'comprehensive'. However, a minority of carers report some deficiencies in the information that they initially receive from placing social workers. If carers are not given full information about the child, there is a possibility that matching may be adversely affected or the child may be placed at risk. The service continues to work closely with placing social workers to ensure that information about children is shared efficiently with carers and it intends to extend the use of placement planning meetings as a way of continuing to improve this communication.

The fostering service has developed very effective links with the local authority's safeguarding service to help ensure that children are protected from abuse and that appropriate responses are made to any allegations or concerns. Examples of this include the arrangements for chairing the fostering panel and the oversight of allegations against foster carers. The service has implemented a revised policy for dealing with allegations against carers, in line with the current Working Together guidance. All allegations involving foster carers and the children placed with them are referred to the safeguarding service and monitored by the Local Safeguarding Children Board. This has resulted in improved recording and monitoring of child protection enquiries and provides greater clarity regarding the outcomes for both children and carers.

The service ensures that carers are aware of children's vulnerability to bullying. Records show that supervising social workers discuss this issue with carers and action is taken regarding any reported concerns. Children surveyed and those spoken with said that they would be able to tell their carer or another trusted adult if they were being bullied.

Carers receive child protection awareness training and are conversant with the procedures for reporting abuse. Children say they feel safe living with their foster carers. The preparation course for new foster carers covers 'safer caring' practice and the children of new carers also receive an introduction to these principles. The service reports an increased take-up of training in safe caring, including a course designed specifically for male carers. As part of the current assessment and pre-approval training, foster carers complete safe caring guidelines for their households. However, not all approved carers have these guidelines written down. There is potential for risk to children if guidelines on safe caring are not completed for each fostering household. The new household review report includes checking on the availability of safe caring guidelines, in order that any shortfall can be addressed.

The fostering service keeps appropriate records of the staff recruitment process, evidencing that the information required by Schedule 1 of the Fostering Services Regulations 2002 is obtained. These records demonstrate that the service operates a

robust recruitment process and employs suitable staff to undertake work with children.

Appropriate arrangements are in place to enable the fostering panel to make good quality decisions about foster carers. The service has recently formed a second fostering panel to increase the efficiency of dealing with panel business. Each panel is chaired by an experienced manager from the local authority's safeguarding service. The records of fostering panel meetings are clear and provide evidence that assessments and reviews of approval receive thorough consideration. New written guidelines have been introduced to support the matching of children who require permanent foster placements. Induction and ongoing training are provided for panel members, including diversity training. An advisory group meets regularly to consider issues relating to the operation of the panels. Some quality assurance measures are in place and further developments to this function of the panel are being planned jointly by the fostering and safeguarding services.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The fostering service demonstrates a strong commitment to continuing to recruit carers from all sections of the community in order to improve its ability to meet the diverse needs of children requiring placements. The service has identified the barriers to recruitment and is implementing appropriate strategies to overcome them. Staff show enthusiasm and creativity in exploring ways of raising the profile of fostering in, for example, black and minority ethnic communities. Good links have been established with local groups that promote diversity. In the last year, the service has been successful in increasing the numbers of black and minority ethnic carers.

Foster carers are well supported by the service to enable them to recognise and address children's individual needs, as evidenced in carers' survey responses and file records. The service provides preparation and post-approval training for carers on how to respect and preserve each child's heritage. There are examples of very good practice, such as carers seeking appropriate help and advice to enable them to meet children's cultural and religious needs, including the particular needs of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. Placing social workers express very positive views about the willingness and ability of carers to meet children's individual needs. The service has ensured that staff involved in recruiting and assessing foster carers have completed training in diversity and equality.

Staff and carers value education and understand the role of the fostering service in helping children to achieve their potential. Overall, children receive an excellent level of additional support for their education through approaches that are tailored to their individual needs. Children's files contain Personal Education Plans that set out their educational needs and how they will be met by their schools and carers. The Looked After Children Education Support Service (LACESS) works very effectively alongside schools and foster carers to promote good educational outcomes, mainly through

focussed, time-limited packages of support. Children and carers value the assistance that this team provides, such as help in arranging school placements, providing additional tuition and attending education related meetings.

Examples of excellent educational support include the provision of computers for foster carers who have children of school age placed with them and the 'Letterbox Club' for younger children. The latter has proved to be successful in helping to raise levels of educational achievement among children aged seven to 11 in foster care. There are also examples of foster carers providing very good support for young people who attend college courses and work experience. Overall, carers state that they are well supported with regard to children's education, the only exception to this is the amount of tuition available when a child is excluded from school for a significant period of time. Placing social workers express very positive views about the support that foster carers provide for children's education.

Foster carers provide a good level of support for children's individual interests and activities, including encouragement and practical assistance with travelling. Carers are aware of the importance of providing such opportunities for children to develop their confidence and self-esteem. Children made many positive comments about the activities and hobbies that they pursue, including involvement in a range of sports and clubs. The service also organises a variety of social events and activities for children and for carers, in some cases supported by the LACESS team, and other events are arranged by the Suffolk Foster Carer Association. The majority of carers who were contacted said that the service provided a satisfactory level of support to enable children to take part in activities in the community and a few rated this as 'outstanding'. However, some carers stated that they needed more financial support for children's activities, while others said that the level of support and the opportunities available for children varied across the county.

Staff and carers in the Link scheme work in partnership with parents to provide shared care for children with disabilities. During the last year, a review of the Link scheme has been carried out and plans are in place for further development of this service, including recruiting more carers to improve the choice of placements. Earlier this year, foster carers were consulted about development of the services for children with disabilities and their views have been taken into account in the service plan.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Foster carers support the agreed contact arrangements for the children placed with them, maintain records of contact and keep placing social workers informed of developments. The assessment and preparation process for foster carers emphasises the importance of their role in promoting and maintaining contact for children. There are examples of foster carers providing children with high levels of practical and emotional support to help them maintain contact with family members. Foster carers are satisfied with the support that they receive from their supervising social workers regarding children's contact arrangements and any difficulties that arise in this area.

The service is implementing a participation strategy to increase the opportunities for looked-after children to be actively involved in policy development and planning. The Brighter Futures project has been successful in encouraging children's participation and is being extended with the creation of new posts for children's participation workers. Some foster carers stated that children would benefit from having more opportunities of this type. It is reported that most of the young people who are actively involved in consultation processes are care leavers and the service is, therefore, aiming to increase the involvement of other groups of children.

Children's placements and care plans are regularly reviewed, as evidenced in their case files. Carers and staff encourage children to attend their LAC reviews or have their views represented at the meeting and the service reports that, overall, 90% of looked-after children participate in their reviews. Children also have access to an advocacy service and, where appropriate, to the independent visitor scheme. Children's views are taken into account when long-term linking with foster carers is being considered by the fostering panel.

All the children who responded to the survey said that their carers 'always' or 'usually' listen to them and take notice of their opinions. Placing social workers refer to examples of foster carers advocating effectively on behalf of children placed with them.

The service is committed to increasing the opportunities for children with disabilities to make their views known and to participate in decisions affecting them. For example, funding has been agreed for dedicated visiting officers to increase the opportunities for disabled looked-after children, including those receiving short-term breaks, to have their views listened to. The last annual conference organised by the Link service focussed on communicating with disabled children.

As part of the process of carrying out annual reviews of approval for foster households, the views of carers' children and those of placing social workers are routinely requested and separately recorded. Placing social workers sometimes report on the views of children placed with foster carers in their own feedback for reviews. However, the review process does not explicitly provide for the views of children placed with carers to be directly requested and recorded. This has the potential to reduce the extent to which the views of looked-after children are taken into account in household reviews.

The fostering service provides children with written information, including details of how to make a complaint and how to contact an independent advocacy service. Children confirm that they know how to make a complaint. The fostering service works effectively with the Children's Rights Officers to ensure that carers are aware of the ways in which children can make complaints or raise any concerns that they may have.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The recently updated Statement of Purpose includes all the required details and provides a good description of the service. The service ensures that it takes appropriate action to meet its aims and objectives. There is a detailed service development plan and this is revised on an annual basis. The children's guide is clear and includes a range of useful information for children placed with foster carers, but the contact details for the regulatory body have not been updated to reflect the change from CSCI to Ofsted. Children are, therefore, not routinely provided with information that would enable them to contact Ofsted should they wish to do so.

The fostering service has a system that enables managers to monitor the matters specified in Schedule 7 of the Fostering Services Regulations 2002 and a range of other quality assurance processes are also in place. The Staying Safe section of this report refers to improvements that have been made in the management information relating to matching and placement outcomes. Senior managers have, however, correctly identified the need to improve the electronic database to give them better management information about some aspects of the operation of the service. For example, at present, the service does not have access to an accurate overview of the dates when all reviews of approval are completed. The service is aware that, as this information must form part of the register of foster carers, any missing or incorrect dates would reduce the accuracy of this statutory record and also reduce the effectiveness of the monitoring process. The service reports that a new information system will be in place in March 2008.

The managers and staff of the fostering service are organised effectively and have the necessary skills, knowledge and experience to provide a good professional service. Active staff recruitment takes place to fill any vacancies. All social work staff involved in assessing and approving foster carers are qualified social workers with experience of family placement work. Where necessary, the service provides new staff with training in the assessment of foster carers.

The service has an effective system for assessing potential foster carers, underpinned by appropriate policies and procedural guidance. A specialist team is responsible for the recruitment, assessment and initial training of all new mainstream and fee-paid foster carers. This team operates a robust, competency-based assessment process and produces comprehensive reports for consideration by the fostering panel. The team manager and the fostering panel monitor the quality of assessment reports. The team has improved the preparation training by, for example, extending the work undertaken with the children of prospective foster

carers. A 'children who foster' workshop and a child-friendly booklet have been designed to help prepare carers' children for the experience of being part of a foster family.

Managers are clear about the groups of children for whom the fostering service needs to be able to provide more placement choice, such as black and ethnic minority children. The service continues to take effective steps to ensure that it recruits an appropriate range of foster carers with the right skills and experience. This is the second year of a three-year recruitment strategy to increase the number of foster carers and the service is also looking at ways of increasing the retention of carers. This strategy is being kept under review and implementation plans are revised when necessary.

Carers' comments about the fostering service are mainly very positive and indicate that the majority of carers feel well supported. For example, carers say, 'whenever I need anything it is sorted quickly', 'they provide very varied training, which keeps me up to date', 'we feel respected and listened to' and 'regular supervision, excellent supervising social worker'. A small number of carers said that they would like more support, mainly in relation to the availability of children's social workers to undertake direct work and additional therapeutic support services for children.

Foster carers receive regular visits from a supervising social worker and the records of these visits are shared with the carers. However, not all carers' files contained evidence of an unannounced visit having taken place within the last twelve months and some carers did not recall these visits. This aspect of carers' supervision and support may, therefore, not be operating effectively in all cases.

The service provides foster carers with an appropriate range of written policies and guidance and has arrangements in place to review and update this information. All foster carers are members of the Suffolk Foster Care Association and are offered individual membership of the Fostering Network, a national organisation providing information and advice for carers. The service is establishing additional carer support groups, such as a group for gay and lesbian foster carers and adopters.

The service has improved the process for carrying out reviews of foster carers' approval. The content of review reports is now clearly linked to the framework of competencies that is used for the initial assessment process. However, as noted elsewhere in this report, the process does not explicitly provide for children placed with foster carers to contribute their views directly to the review.

The service keeps an appropriate range of administrative records containing information relevant to the running of the service. Separate case files are maintained for children and foster carers and these are generally well organised. Foster carers' files contain the required details, including signed copies of Foster Care Agreements, setting out clear expectations of the carers. Children's case records, which are held partly in paper files and partly as electronic records, contain the required placement planning information. A matching form is completed for some types of placement and this recording the details that have been taken into account in matching the child

with suitable foster carers. Once a placement has been made, the completed form is retained in a central file, together with documentation relating to other placement requests. This may, therefore, result in the child's case file containing an incomplete record of the matching process.

Records of allegations and complaints are kept on children's and carers' files. The fostering service also keeps maintains separate records, for monitoring purposes, containing the aggregated data on allegations and complaints.

Foster carers are provided with a written policy on record-keeping. Carers understand and follow the procedure for recording different types of information about individual children.

The fostering service's policies and procedures support its aim of providing kinship (family and friends) carers with the same level of support as other carers. Once they have been approved, kinship carers receive allowances in line with the rates recommended by the Fostering Network. A placing social worker commented on the 'high quality' of the assessments completed for kinship carers.

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):

- continue working to ensure that all foster carers are provided with full information about children placed with them, in order to promote good matching and safe care. NMS 8.3
- continue working to ensure that written guidelines on safe caring are in place for each fostering household. NMS 9.3
- ensure that children's opinions are sought and taken into account over all issues that are likely to affect their daily life and their future. This refers to making arrangements for routinely obtaining and recording the views of children placed with foster carers, as part of the process for carrying out reviews of carers' approval. NMS 11.1
- update the children's guide to include the contact details for Ofsted. NMS 1.5
- improve the arrangements for monitoring the frequency of reviews of approval and for keeping the information in the register of foster carers updated. NMS 4.1
- continue working to ensure that foster carers receive an unannounced visit at least once a year and that these visits are recorded on carers' files. NMS 22.6
- ensure that a comprehensive case record is maintained for each child. This refers to records of the details that are taken into account when matching the child with foster carers. NMS 24.1.