

# Leicestershire 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

Leicestershire County Council fostering service is managed by the service manager family placements. Two team managers are responsible for managing social work staff and for the day-to-day provision of the service. The fostering service undertakes the full range of fostering activities, recruiting, assessing, approving, reviewing, training and supporting carers and maintaining an active duty point for placement requests. A senior practitioner is responsible for processing and supporting friends and family (kinship) care applications.

At the time of this inspection 213 fostering households were providing placements for 247 of Leicestershire County Council's looked after children.

### Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

Foster carers feel that they have access to appropriate training and are well supported by a stable and experienced fostering team who, in turn, speak highly of the training opportunities available to them and of systems for both formal and informal support.

The foster care agreement, issued to carers, does not currently contain all the necessary information required by the Fostering Regulations, and needs to be updated. Signed foster placement agreements are not always in place and health and safety checks on fostering households are not always being completed in a timely manner. The fostering service cannot demonstrate that all fostering households are receiving at least one unannounced visit each year.

Although the authority implemented a comprehensive health passport document some time ago, the fact that this is the property of the young person, and that carers themselves do not routinely retain separate health recordings in relation to young people in placement, means that there is not always a written health record that is updated throughout placement and moves with the young person.

Although some young people are being appropriately supported to develop the necessary skills for independence, other young people aged 16 and over, and their foster carers, are not being practically or financially supported in accordance with the service's written procedures and specifically do not have pathway plans in place.

Foster carer recording continues to be inconsistent, with some carers still retaining one record in respect of siblings. Several documents and entries in carer records

retained by the fostering service are not dated and some entries are difficult to decipher.

### **Improvements since the last inspection**

Three recommendations were made during the previous inspection in August 2006. The fostering service manager was advised that safe care policies should be completed for all carer households and that, where children shared bedrooms, risk assessments should be evidenced on carer files. The service manager was additionally advised that there was insufficient evidence of the matching of children to foster placements. Safe care policies have now been implemented for all foster carers, though some are household rather than child specific and therefore do not always adequately reflect strategies carers will put in place to fully safeguard children from their own, and other children's, potentially risky behaviours. Although the fostering service records better demonstrate young people's individual needs, and a matching pro-forma is completed to highlight potential shortfalls in a proposed placement, there is still no clear record demonstrating consideration of young people's identified individual needs in relation to carer's specific skills. Where potential shortfalls are identified, there is no information recorded about how these will be addressed.

The fostering service was additionally advised that foster carers' records, including supervision and contact logs, should consistently demonstrate how children in placement were having their needs met. Recording by supervising social workers now provides a better indication that young people's individual progress in placement is given appropriate consideration during carer supervision. At the time of the foster carer annual review carers now complete placement reports, in relation to young people who have moved on, identifying whether sufficient information was received, whether they were able to appropriately help and support these children, whether they were able to deal appropriately with any specific behavioural or identity issues and whether they felt appropriately supported by fostering and placing social workers.

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

The provision is satisfactory.

A specialist looked after children's health team monitors young people's health assessments and has input into foster carer training. Annual health assessments provide a holistic overview of children's general health and wellbeing with initial assessments undertaken by a paediatrician and subsequent reviews by health visitors and school nurses. A good range of basic training is provided including courses such as 'nits and nasties' and 'oral health and hygiene' and carers also have access to specialist training to meet particular health needs. Placing social workers say that: 'specialist training for carers, around young people's medical needs is easy to access and is good' and that carers are generally good at providing a balanced diet and access health advice appropriately. Independent reviewing officers chair young people's reviews and endeavour to monitor that the actions identified in young

people's health plans are implemented, although health care plans are not routinely made available at young people's reviews. The Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) team provides a monthly surgery for fostering service workers and for carers to help them support young people's mental health needs. Some carers and social workers commented that referrals of young people for CAMHS involvement often involved long delays. The LAC nurse has consulted with 16-18 year olds about how they would like health services to be offered to young people preparing to leave care.

The authority implemented a comprehensive health passport document some time ago. At the time of the previous inspection the inspectors understood that this was being issued to carers to complete with young people in placement. Because the Clayton file is issued to young people rather than foster carers it is not, in the majority of cases, providing an ongoing health record, which moves with the young person. Carers themselves do not routinely retain separate health recordings in relation to young people in placement. The carers' handbook details that carers will receive a copy of young people's health plans subsequent to their annual health assessments but, in fact, the LAC health team provides these to placing social workers to give to young people to place in their Clayton files and the contents are not always being shared with foster carers. Some carers have young people in placement who do not have a Clayton file and it is not clear whether this is because it has been lost or because it has never been provided.

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

The provision is satisfactory.

There are clear written recruitment and selection procedures for fostering service staff and personnel files are maintained to a good standard demonstrating that all required checks have been undertaken. Fostering service managers are appropriately qualified and experienced and provide effective leadership of the team.

Carers are provided with appropriate training to equip them to keep young people safe and to manage their behaviour. The carers' handbook also contains good guidelines for carers on managing difficult behaviours. Where carers provide placements to young people with very challenging behaviour, which may involve physical intervention, they are provided with certificated training and have written safe holding agreements in place. Each carer household has a written safe care policy, although some of these are household rather than child specific and do not reflect how young people's identified behaviours will be managed to ensure their own and other young people's safety. Carers providing task centred placements say that a written risk assessment is completed in relation to each young person placed but this is not the case with other placements. Placement agreement meetings often identify potentially risky behaviours but do not identify how these will be managed within a particular foster placement. Fostering service procedures detail that health and safety risk assessments are undertaken as part of the approval process and are reviewed annually but they are not to be found in all carer files. Where these assessments have been completed they are not always dated and signed.

None of the young people completing questionnaires were concerned about being bullied. The children's rights officer told inspectors about one young person being well supported, to challenge bullying, by both their carer and the supervising social worker.

Carer files include colourful, estate agent type details about themselves, designed to give children basic information and photographs about their prospective placement, family members and pets. Referrals for long-term placements are carefully discussed at regular team meetings when supervising social workers consider carers whose skills and experience would most appropriately meet children's identified needs. Referral forms, completed by the duty social worker, contain some information about young people's individual needs and a basic, tick-box matching pro-forma is completed to highlight potential gaps in matching a young person to a placement. Currently however, where shortfalls are identified, there is no information recorded about how these will be addressed and there is no clear record demonstrating consideration of young people's identified individual needs in relation to carer's specific skills. Placement agreement meetings are generally held in a timely manner but appropriately signed placement agreements are not always in place. Where the authority commissions foster placements from independent fostering agencies good information is retained to demonstrate the prioritising of appropriate matching and these placements are well monitored.

Foster carers' approval status is not always clearly stated within documents supporting the matching process, such as exemption forms, where carers are given an approval extension to accommodate more than three young people. The way some approvals are recorded makes them appear to be illegal, even where they are not, as some records indicate that carers are approved to permanently accommodate four young people and this is not a permissible approval status under the terms of the 1989 Children Act.

The fostering panel is appropriately constituted and is effective at deferring decisions when it is felt that the information provided is inadequate. Panel minutes do not currently differentiate between voting panel members and other regular attendees and do not always provide sufficient detail to demonstrate how a decision has been reached (as required under regulation 25.2), particularly where issues of concern have arisen. The panel members have access to appropriate training opportunities. A very good booklet has been developed, for prospective carers, to introduce the panel members and to explain the remit of the fostering panel.

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

The provision is good.

There are systems in place to monitor the ethnic origin of carers and looked after children. A Black Cases Panel considers the needs of black children and those from other ethnic minority groups and can give advice on accessing support and additional services. Fostered children who are dual heritage can attend the 'two halves one

whole' group run by the family service unit. Placements for asylum seeking young people are usually commissioned from an independent fostering agency, where more culturally appropriate matches can be provided, but some are provided in-house and carers work well to meet the specific needs of these young people. Equality and diversity training is mandatory for all staff and managers must attend 'managing diversity' training. Foster carers also have access to regular training on 'valuing diversity'.

The school attendance of all Leicestershire's looked after children is monitored through the welfare call agency so that non-attendance can be quickly identified and responded to and regular multi-agency meetings look carefully at the needs of those young people who have difficulties securing or maintaining a school place. A service manager, with specific responsibility for the education of looked after children, has recently been appointed and is in the process of gathering a team of staff who will work closely with designated teachers to improve the attendance and achievements of young people. Information provided by the fostering service details that attainment of five good passes at GCSE level is above the national average. A number of places have been purchased, for young people in foster care with emotional and behavioural difficulties, at a special school in the north of the county to prevent them needing to be resident at schools further away. Foster carers and young people value the support provided by the 'step up' project and particularly the books provided to children through the 'letterbox club'. Foster carers spoken to during the inspection demonstrated a sound awareness of their role in promoting young people's educational achievements. The looked after children education team is actively involved in providing a range of training to foster carers.

Some carers say that education placements for asylum seeking young people are not sought pro-actively enough and there can sometimes be lengthy delays in them receiving any educational input. This can present particular difficulties when the young people speak no English and are anxious to learn.

Young people are encouraged and supported to access a broad range of leisure and sporting activities and their achievements, educational and otherwise, are recognised and celebrated by the fostering service and local authority through specially organised events.

The inspectors were advised that not all young people have access to a computer to support them with school work and that, in some cases, this is due to foster carers' reluctance to have a computer in the home or to permit young people access. The fostering service manager advised inspectors that all carers of school age children are able to obtain a computer through the corporate parenting group and she will take steps to investigate young people's access.

Standard 31, relating to short breaks, has not been inspected.



## Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Some professionals feel that not all carers are fully supportive of young people's contact needs but the foster carers tracked and spoken to during the inspection were very aware of their responsibility to encourage and support young people to maintain contact with family and friends and were supporting young people well by providing transport. One carer tracked had advocated very positively on behalf of a young person who was unhappy about contact arrangements with a sibling. Carers receive training to educate and prepare them for some of the potential challenges that contact arrangements can present.

Some carers commented on improvements during the last year in the authority's consultation with young people. The Corporate Parenting Team supports a group called T2C, for looked after children aged 13 to 18, which meets on a weekly basis. The young people have participated in the pre-approval training for potential carers for the past year. This has had very positive feedback from the young people involved and from fostering applicants. A fostering team manager now attends one meeting each year with T2C to ensure that issues raised by young people are fed back to the fostering team for action. The local authority children's rights officer also meets regularly with the fostering service managers to discuss both general and specific issues raised by young people in foster care. The children's rights officer has a good profile with foster carers, and contributes regular articles to the 'Grapevine' magazine and to the quarterly corporate parenting newsletter, to re-enforce the role of carers in advocating for young people. Independent reviewing officers often refer issues of concern, arising from LAC reviews, directly to the children's rights officer for action.

There are less opportunities for younger children to express their views but a small group of children under 11 was recently gathered together for a meeting with the JAR inspectors. This group has subsequently been involved with the T2C group in delivering a presentation to designated teachers at an education conference.

82.3% of young people attend their LAC reviews and the independent reviewing officers are currently working hard to get carers and workers on board with better supporting young people's contributions. They have also developed various ways in which young people are able to represent their views if they do not wish to attend their reviews. A consultation document can be completed or young people can meet individually with their IRO or have the IRO contact details so they can text or e-mail their views. Currently the fostering service does not directly obtain the views of young people in placement at the time of the carer's annual review. Young people's views about the placement are sought by their placing social worker and are only briefly referred to within their report. As the fostering service is aware, this is inappropriate, and a pro-forma questionnaire is currently being developed by members of the fostering team, which will be sent directly to young people. A pro-forma is already provided to carers' children to obtain their views.

Placing social workers spoke positively about foster carers' commitment to consultation with young people: 'All foster carers are committed to treating young people in a professional and understanding manner'; 'Despite language difficulties, this young person has been encouraged to express his views and has gained confidence'.

## **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is satisfactory.

The carers' handbook advises that carers should 'start asking for a Pathway Plan once your child reaches the age of 15' and the self assessment, completed by the fostering service, details that 'we have good systems for young people in foster care to move from having a child care operations worker to a 16+ worker. The transfer happens in the summer after young people have moved from compulsory education.' The indication is, however, that young people's experience of this transition is often not positive or helpful. Two of the young people tracked were aged well over 16 and neither had an allocated 16+ worker or a pathway plan. Many carers were critical of the social work support provided to young people aged over 16 and in fact one carer had made a formal complaint about the inadequacy of the information and support provided to one care leaver. This complaint had been fully investigated and, as a result, some positive changes were made to support systems for care leavers. Currently a young person reaching 16, who has younger siblings in care, is not allocated a 16+ worker but retains the family's social worker to maintain continuity. This can only be an appropriate arrangement providing that appropriate support can be assured and pathway planning is fully implemented.

The authority has clear policies detailing that carers will be financially supported and encouraged to continue to support young people who continue in education post 18. Some carers detailed that this was not always happening in practice.

The fostering service is aware that carers supporting young people preparing to leave care need particular support and has recently, in conjunction with 16+ workers, invited all carers, who are caring for a young person aged 16, to meet with them. The purpose of the meeting was to increase carer awareness about supported lodgings and to talk about the very specific role of the 16+ service. The intention was to promote the idea of young people remaining in their placement rather than thinking that they have to move on. The first meeting was not well attended but further meetings are planned. Placing social workers say that support for young people to develop independent living skills varies between placements and there needs to be some consistency with carers. Many also reflect an awareness that the fostering team and the 16+ team are working together on developing this at present. A number of professionals and foster carers are able to describe situations where young people have received very appropriate support to make a successful transition into adulthood and some carers are particularly skilled in promoting this.

Departments across the local authority are encouraged to offer work placements to looked after young people and a group of local businesses have worked in

partnership in the 'Flying Fish project', a joint city and county venture to offer looked after children opportunities to increase their skill levels.

The fostering service provides carers with clear information about payments and allowances as well as tax and insurance liabilities. Professional fees are paid to some carers in recognition of more complex placements.

## Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

The fostering service statement of purpose provides appropriate information about services provided and two, leaflet style, children's guides provide essential information for children and young people.

The fostering team is a stable and well-experienced group. Staff speak highly of the training opportunities available to them, and of systems for both formal and informal support. Both fostering service staff and child care operational staff say that working relationships between the teams are good. The fostering service continues to strive to recruit suitable carers, particularly to meet the needs of older children, those with very challenging behaviour and larger sibling groups. A new fostering scheme has recently been launched to specifically meet the needs of older children, often with a complex care history. The task-centred scheme offers additional payments based on age, not on level of difficulty, meaning that young people do not have to have a label of being difficult in order to receive a service.

Foster carers speak positively of the support they receive from their supervising social workers: 'This has been a very difficult and intense placement but I have had excellent training, advice and financial support to put in place a complete support structure around the young person'; 'I think the family placement team deserve medals. They are wonderful, caring people with only the carers' and the children's interests in mind at all times. They are friendly, fun and hard working and my link worker will go that extra mile to help out'. Carers also feel that they have appropriate access to training opportunities to support them in the caring task. The determined frequency requirement for supervision of each carer, is clearly identified within the carer annual review, and is generally adhered to. Carers do not currently receive a written record of their supervision. Annual reviews are carried out in a timely manner and the format used provides a good reflection of work undertaken by the carer during the year. No record of unannounced visits was seen on the carer files tracked during the inspection and some carers seemed unclear whether they had received these or not. Foster care agreements are appropriately signed and copies are retained on carer's files. The agreement does not currently include all the detail required under schedule 5 of the Fostering Services Regulations.

A foster carer support line operates to provide support and advice and all carers are paid members of Fostering Network as well as receiving support from the local foster care association. The 'Grapevine' newsletter also provides a range of useful information and advice. The foster carers' handbook has been revised to include

useful information and advice for carers on a range of topics.

The fostering service is fully aware of the requirement to implement the new Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) standards, in relation to foster carer training, from April this year. A new post has been created to support this implementation and training for supervising social workers is already scheduled.

Foster carer recording remains inconsistent, with some carers still recording placement information relating to siblings in one record, and others stating that they have developed their own systems to suit them. The carers' handbook section, on record keeping and the use of a diary, gives quite good guidance about what should be recorded and about the need to differentiate between fact and opinion, but it is not explicit about records being separate for each child. Several documents and entries in carer records, retained by the fostering service, are not dated and some entries are difficult to decipher. Appropriate records are retained in respect of complaints and allegations. Only one complaint has been received by the service in the last year.

A kinship care leaflet is available to provide relevant information to prospective family and friends carers. A kinship placement was tracked during this inspection and the carer and young people are receiving good support. A senior practitioner is responsible for processing and supporting friends and family care applications and a part time social worker post now provides additional support. The senior practitioner is knowledgeable and experienced in this area, works well with associated professionals and provides valuable advice and support to kinship carers. He has been involved in the development of a regional kinship group providing a forum for the sharing of best practices.

## **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):

- provide carers with a written health record for each child placed in their care, which is updated during placement and moves with the child (NMS 12.4)
- ensure that a written foster placement agreement is always in place, covering all matters specified in schedule 6 and identifying areas where foster carers need additional support to compensate for any gaps in the match between the child and the carer (NMS 8.4)
- demonstrate that foster carer households are free from avoidable hazards that might expose a child to risk of injury or harm by the completion of regular risk assessments (NMS 6.6)
- ensure that each young person preparing to leave care is consulted, in a timely manner, about his/her future and encouraged to be actively involved in decision

- making processes and implementation of the Pathway Plan (NMS 14.5)
- make occasional unannounced visits, at least once each year, to every carer household (NMS 22.6)
- review and update the foster care agreement, in line with schedule 5 of the Fostering Services Regulations (NMS 22.4)
- ensure that an up-to-date comprehensive case record is retained for each child or young person in foster care which details the nature and quality of care provided and contributes to an understanding of her/his life events (NMS 24.1)
- ensure that written entries in records are legible, dated and signed (NMS 25.9).