

Norfolk County Council Fostering Services

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

Norfolk County Council's fostering service is contained within the Children's Services Department. The service includes support and supervision teams, a children with disabilities team, short term break carers, an adolescent services team and a recruitment team. At 1 April 2011 there were 412 approved fostering households and 675 children placed with the service.

Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

This was a full inspection of the service and was planned in advance with the service.

The service has recently been subject to a major restructuring. The changes resulting from this are still settling down and the effectiveness of the restructuring is due to be reviewed early in 2012.

This is a large local authority fostering service. Within such a large service some areas of good and very good practice were found. Also some areas were identified where standards were not being met and in some cases there was mostly good practice, but it was not consistent. An example of this is carers confidence in making complaints. Most felt that they could make a complaint should they need to, but a significant minority were not confident that the process would work fairly. There is a similar lack of consistency in areas of training for carers, carer reviews and matching of young people to foster carers.

The service is good at promoting the health and educational attainment of young people. This is helped by the strong links with health services and the priority given to education through the virtual school. There is also good consultation with young people and the local authority in-care consultation group is very well used. Young people are also consulted effectively by their carers. They have strong relationships with foster carers and are included fully in the life of the foster families and so have positive experiences of foster care.

Improvements since the last inspection

At the last inspection, shortfalls were identified relating to supporting young people in education and staff workloads. The provision of computers to support young people in education has improved and this is now a strength of the service. As part of the restructuring a maximum caseload has been identified for support workers. Generally staff feel this is manageable.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Overall foster carers and the fostering service provide a good level of support for young people to promote their health. Young people's health needs are discussed at reviews and recorded. Routine and specialist health services are readily available so that young people's health needs can be met. Young people who are of sufficient age and understanding say that they can be involved in their health care and can see health professionals alone if they wish. Generally there is good practice in training carers to manage young people's specific health needs, for example in the children with disability part of the service. However, this is not consistent and some carers do not get the training they need when they need it. In such cases their ability to provide a consistently good level of care for young people is limited. Carers keep records of any medicines given to young people and these are checked by supervising workers, which helps to ensure that young people have the correct medicines at the correct times. Information on young people's health is usually recorded on placement request forms, so that carers can be well informed about the young people's health needs. In some placements this has not been the case and so carers have not been sufficiently well prepared to meet the young people's health needs. All carers are provided with first aid training, so they are well informed and prepared to deal with any accidents or injuries to young people.

There are very good links with parts of the health service to help provide support for staff and carers in promoting the health of young people. This includes direct work with carers, consultation and joint training. Some experienced managers describe these links as the best they have known. Young people using the fostering service live in homes that provide them with a good standard of homely accommodation. These homes are appropriate to meet the young people's needs, for example younger children are protected from avoidable risks through safety measures such as stair gates and socket covers. Fostering staff undertake health and safety assessments of the homes and carry out unannounced visits to ensure that high standards are maintained.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

Young people say that they feel safe in their foster placements. They feel well cared for and most know how to make a complaint, so that any areas of concern can be addressed. Information on complaints is included in the children's guide, but not all young people get these, so some young people may not have this information readily available. Foster carers are clear that they get suitable training and information on safeguarding, which helps them to protect young people. Carers complete safe care documents and a policy on the safe care of young people is in place, so everyday foster family life does not pose a risk to young people. There are positive relationships between carers and young people. These provide important safeguards as young people will be more likely to openly discuss areas of concern or worries

with their carers because they have good relationships with them. Some carers are very well aware of how to respond when young people are missing from the home and this helps to protect them. However, some do not have access to up to date information and so are not in such a strong position to protect young people should they go missing from the foster home. Carers get training to help them work with young people to develop knowledge and skills to protect themselves.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is satisfactory.

Young people enjoy good relationships with their foster carers. This helps them to develop and maintain positive relationships in other aspects of their lives. They say that foster carers respect their privacy within their lives in the foster homes. Carers support young people if they are subject to discrimination or bullying in their wider lives. The service provides training for carers on de-escalation and restraint, but not all carers who need this receive it, so their ability to provide appropriate placements for all young people is limited. Carers do not always get appropriate information on young people before placements are made. They believe that this is a reflection on the practice of placing social workers rather than the fostering service. Foster carers provide good levels of support for young people to develop and take part in activities and interests. This helps young people to develop social and emotional skills and confidence. The service is in the process of making people aware of the authority that can and should be delegated to carers to remove unnecessary delays and bureaucracy from everyday decision making. This helps to ensure that young people in foster care can have similar experiences to all other young people, such as staying with friends and taking part in school trips and activities.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The local authority has a very active in-care council, with good representation from young people who are or have been in foster care. This council is widely used to comment on the service and plans for change. Young people throughout the service say that their views are listened to by carers. One commented that their carer 'will sit down with me and listen to what I have to say and help.' Young people and foster carers are regularly involved in the statutory review process and so are able to comment on and contribute to their care plans. The service helps young people to develop a positive self view and understanding of their background. The cultural range of carers is limited, but the service is aware of this and uses resources such as local communities and translation services to enhance the support for young people in their care. The children's guide and complaints information for young people are available in a range of formats and languages, which makes them more accessible to all young people. Young people say that they can make choices about matters such as food and clothing as would be expected in any family. They say that they are treated as part of the families they live in and do not experience any discrimination because they are fostered. This helps them to develop self esteem and resilience.

There is some good experience of appropriate matching to provide good care for young people. However, some young people and carers say that matching has not always been good. In particular carers refer to lack of information about young people in some cases. This can limit the effectiveness of placements.

There has previously been some inappropriate practice in managing the end of placements in emergencies. The service has recognised and acknowledged this and put procedures in place to address the issue. This will help ensure that in future young people are less likely to experience unnecessary disruption. Young people who reach the age of 18 are allowed to stay on in their placement if this is in their best interests. This helps to ensure that young people do not have to leave placements before they are ready.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is satisfactory.

Foster carers help young people to prepare for adulthood and independence. They talk to them about important issues and help them develop self care skills including budgeting and saving. This helps young people to be clear about what they need to do to achieve what they want for their future. Some young people do not have pathway plans to bring this work together and ensure that everyone involved with them is clear what they should be doing to help them in their transition to adulthood. Also some carers do not receive the information and support they need to fully support young people.

Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

The Local Authority has been subject to budget cuts. Consequently, the fostering service has been subject to reorganisation. This took place after a consultation exercise and is due to be reviewed early in 2012. As a result of the reorganisation some support workers have moved teams and are not currently managed by people with recent fostering experience. However, there are managers within the service with substantial experience of working in fostering services. These managers provide support for fostering staff and other managers to help ensure the continued operation of the service. Staff are clear that they value the high quality of their managers and the support they receive from them. Some staff who have moved teams spoke highly of the benefits of this support. Staff say that the training available to them is of good quality, although the frequency of training has reduced. They do not identify this as a problem and it does not impact on the outcomes for young people in the service. Staff have regular supervision and appraisals to help ensure they are sufficiently skilled for their roles.

There is a sound process of recruiting staff and members of the fostering panel. There is also a sound process of recruiting and assessing new foster carers. This provides suitable placements for young people. However, while most carers have

annual reviews, a few are considerably overdue. The service is aware of these shortfalls and is in the process of catching up, but failing to undertake annual reviews of carers removes safeguards for young people. There is a good Statement of Purpose to inform staff, carers and others about the operation of the service. There are clear children's guides in different formats, so that young people can be given information that is appropriate to their age, understanding and spoken language. The guides do not have all of the information required in them. Examples of information not included are contact details of the Children's Rights Director and Ofsted. Not all young people get copies of the guides and so they do not receive written information on the services they can expect. Not all young people have fully completed risk assessments and placement plans to ensure their consistent, effective care. Foster carers are well involved in the statutory review process of young people and support young people to also be involved.

As part of the council's reorganisation there have been changes to the way foster carer training is organised. There is some good training of a high standard. However, there are delays in providing some training and carers can be left waiting for identified training. Overall young people benefit from the good quality training that carers receive. However, some carers are not getting the information they need to provide consistently good levels of care for young people. The service is very successful in supporting carers to achieve the Children's Workforce Development Council's Training, Support and Development Standards for Foster Care and this does have a positive impact on the care they provide. Overall there are some strengths in the way that the service provides carers with the skills and knowledge to provide good care for young people, but some shortfalls limit this in some cases. The foster carer handbook has been under review and is now available on-line for consultation. Not all carers have access to this and consequently can not easily get details of policies and procedures. Most carers are very appreciative of the support and supervision they get from the service's staff, including out of hours support. One carer described her support worker as 'absolutely brilliant' and several others made similar comments. The service pays for carers to belong to a national fostering organisation, so they have access to help lines and legal advice. They also contract a mediation and advice worker from this organisation to provide independent support and advice for foster carers 17.5 hours a week. Links between the local foster carer's association and the service are strained, so all foster carers do not have the opportunity to belong to a foster carer association, that is working well with and supported by the service, to enhance the care provided for young people. There are clear policies and procedures for investigating allegations and suspicions of harm. They are handled in a way that provides protection for young people and the mediation and advice worker is available to provide appropriate support to carers should they wish to use them. As referred to above, there are some new procedures relating to emergency ending of placements (for example due to allegations of abuse) that have been introduced in recognition of problems with previous practice.

There is appropriate monitoring of the quality of the service through various systems and processes. Several of these have changed as a result of the restructuring. The processes include manager's meetings and feedback to the executive side of the local authority. The overall effectiveness of the restructuring will be reviewed in

2012. There are complaints systems in place. Many carers say that they have not had to use these, but would feel able to do so if necessary. However, a few carers do not feel confident in making complaints as they believe it may impact on the service's attitude to them and may limit future placements. Whether this is correct or not, the impact of the perception is that some carers may not raise concerns and so poor practice that affects young people may not be addressed. There is also a lack of clarity in the complaints process over raising historic issues and this is not covered in the procedure. There is a system for making payments to carers, but several carers said that this does not always work efficiently. There can be delays and lack of clarity in some cases. While there are plans for the process of making payments to change, at present the system is not always working effectively.

When family or friends act as carers for the service, they are well supported to meet the needs of the children placed with them. One said that the service 'is always there if you have any problems.' They undergo the same assessment process and receive the same support as other carers. They also have access to training and are expected to undertake training in the same way as other carers. This all helps to provide the young people concerned with safe, stable and appropriate placements.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The support workers who support carers for children with disabilities are very well experienced and encourage high levels of practice. Young people get care that is appropriate to their age and understanding. While the service has a limited number of carers from different cultures, they put strategies in place and use resources to help compensate for this. They will also use independent fostering agencies to provide placements when they cannot meet the young people's needs.

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 children's health is promoted in accordance with their placement plan (NMS 6.5)
- ensure that foster carers receive sufficient training on health issues (NMS 6.7)
- ensure that foster carers know and implement the fostering service's policy in relation to children going missing (NMS 5.2)
- ensure that foster carers receive training in positive care and control of children, including training on de-escalation (NMS 3.8)
- ensure that children are carefully matched to a foster placement, that carers have full information about a child and that unless an emergency placement makes it impossible, children can visit a foster home prior to placement (NMS 11.2 and 11.3)

- ensure that there are comprehensive arrangements for preparing and supporting young people to make the transition to independence (NMS12.2)
- ensure that reviews of foster carers take place whenever the fostering service consider it necessary, but at intervals of not more than a year (Regulation 28(2))
- ensure that children receive a children's guide at the point of placement and that the guides set out how a child can contact their independent reviewing officer, the Children's Rights Director and Ofsted (NMS 16.3 and 16.4)
- ensure that foster carers are provided with such training as appears necessary in the interests of children placed with them (Regulation 17(1))
- ensure that foster carers are given information, either a handbook or electronic resources, which covers policies, procedures and guidance (NMS 21.10)
- ensure that foster care associations are encouraged and supported (NMS 21.4)
- ensure that current and prospective carers are able to make a complaint about any aspect of the service that affects them directly and have access to regularly updated information covering complaints procedures(NMS 21.10 and 21.11)
- ensure that payments of allowances and fees are made promptly at the agreed time (NMS 28.2)
- ensure that foster carers are given a copy of the child's placement plan as soon as this is provided by the local authority. (NMS 31.2)