

Leicestershire County Council Fostering Service

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Leicestershire County Council fostering service is managed by the Head of Children in Care. 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.

At the time of this inspection 226 fostering households are providing placements for 350 of Leicestershire County Council's looked after children. This is comprised of 161 mainstream placements, including around ten short break carers, 51 connected persons arrangements and 14 supported lodgings placements.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding: a service of exceptional quality that significantly exceeds minimum requirements

Good: a service of high quality that exceeds minimum requirements

Adequate: a service that only meets minimum requirements

Inadequate: a service that does not meet minimum requirements

Overall effectiveness

The overall effectiveness is judged to be **good**.

There have been notable developments within the fostering service during the last eighteen months. A new Head of Children in Care was appointed in March 2010 and a new Service Manager for Family and Residential Placements was appointed in June 2011. There has been a complete reshaping of the fostering service. There is a robust management structure with clear lines of accountability. Very strong co-operative working relationships have been established across the authority with a clear understanding of respective roles and responsibilities and a strong focus on working together to promote positive experiences and outcomes for young people placed with Leicestershire's foster carers.

Children and young people are generally making real progress in terms of their physical, emotional and mental health and are proud of their educational achievements. Many young people are enjoying the advantages of being placed within stable families where they can access a good range of activities, enjoy family holidays and receive support and advice to help them make successful transitions to adulthood.

The developments over the last eighteen months have involved changed

expectations of both staff and carers. The process of change has been positively lead and well-managed, with consultation taking place with staff, carers and some of the young people. This is still very much work in progress, both in terms of completing the changes and embedding new procedures and practices, but the direction of change is clearly stated and firmly established. Work is still needed to develop recording systems and practices to fully reflect the good work being undertaken, by the staff, with carers, young people and their colleagues. The fostering service has been rated as adequate in only one area and this is reflective of the slow progress it has managed to achieve in motivating many of its carers to recognise the value and requirement for regular access to training to promote their skill development. Inconsistency in recording practice, currently, does not do justice to the dedication staff show in ensuring they focus on providing solid support to carers to promote the best outcomes for young people. There is additionally a lack of clarity regarding the agreed frequency of carer supervision and the purpose and recording requirements where visits are not seen as supervisory. Too often documents reflect social workers' interpretations of young people's wishes and feelings rather than a direct representation of their views.

Areas for improvement

Recommendations

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

- ensure that systems are implemented to reflect the direct wishes and feelings of children and young people in their care and placement plans and in obtaining their views about their placements, rather than adults' interpretations of those views (NMS 1.7)
- ensure that foster carers have an awareness of the role and contact details of the Ofsted Children's Rights Director in order to enable them to support young people to make appropriate use of this service (NMS 1.5)
- ensure that all foster carers are supported and motivated to complete the required training, support and development standards within stated timescales (NMS 20.2, 20.3)
- ensure that each foster carer has a clear personal development plan reflecting how they will be supported to undertake any training identified as necessary and that each carer retains a training and development portfolio to demonstrate how they are achieving the skill levels required of them by the fostering service (NMS 20.4, 20.5)
- ensure that there is a clear understanding, by supervising social workers and foster carers, regarding the purpose of each household visit. The agreed frequency of supervision for individual carers must be clearly stated and met. Records of unannounced visits must always demonstrate that the home's continuing capacity to fully meet the needs of all young people accommodated has been considered (NMS 21.8, 10.5)

- ensure that personnel files clearly reflect the checks undertaken to promote young people's safety by making sure that relevant documents are copied and that telephone checks on references are clearly recorded (NMS 19.1)
- ensure that all entries in records are signed and dated and that foster carers are fully aware of, and complying with, the requirement for secure storage of young people's records, in line with the authority's confidentiality policies (NMS 26.4, 26.5)

Outcomes for children and young people

Outcomes for children and young people are **good**.

This authority has two very active Children in Care groups, one for children aged seven to 13 years and one for young people aged between 14 and 21 years. The groups are facilitated by the participation officer and meet at least every month. Members of the group are from residential care, mainstream foster placements and connected persons placements. These young people are very confident about their ability to talk with service managers, feel that their views are listened to and say that changes are made as a result of what they say. One of the young people is vice chair of the Corporate Parenting Board and others regularly attend the meetings. Young people feel confident to express their views within these meetings, which have been rescheduled to take place outside school hours so that young people are always able to attend. When looked after children make requests for additional funding for activities or equipment, to the Corporate Parenting team, the young people are actively involved in considering these, during their own meetings, and prioritising anonymised versions of them. This makes the young people feel very actively involved in decision making at this level.

The fostering service has worked hard to raise the profile, and increase the involvement, of the Children in Care Council, in decision making around matters affecting looked after children. Work is still in process to improve the way that the views of all young people in foster care are reflected in written documentation, with particular relation to their placement planning, their reviews and reviews of their foster carers. At present, review documents generally reflect social work staff's interpretation of young people's views, rather than their own direct input. Although records generally show that discussion is undertaken with young people about the content of their placement and care plans, the final documents do not specifically incorporate their wishes and feelings.

The children's rights service, of which the participation officer is part, has a high profile with looked after children in Leicestershire. Young people are very aware of how to contact the service and workers have worked alongside the fostering service in facilitating the involvement of young people in staff recruitment, foster carer training and designing publicity materials and questionnaires for the service. Although good information is provided, for young people, about advocacy services, none of the foster carers spoken to knew of the existence of the Ofsted Children's Rights Director. If carers are not provided with this information it restricts their

capacity to support young people to access this service, should they need to, for support and advice.

Looked after children have been actively involved in the development of 'The Pledge and Promise Me' agreement with the authority, which identifies what the authority undertakes to provide for the young people in its care. The six 'promises' are the areas identified as most important by the young people and include active involvement in decision making, access to the internet and regular social worker visits. Their involvement makes the pledge meaningful and real to them. Young people have also been linked with students from a local university to be involved in designing a new website, the 'Beacon', which is due to be launched in January 2013 and this is ensuring that the site contains the sort of information young people want to have access to.

Children and young people are encouraged to develop positive relationships with their Independent Reviewing Officer, who meets with them before their own reviews, helps them to participate, and makes sure that they understand how to raise issues of concern. Social workers say that the current reviewing officers are very child-centred and some of the young people say how easy they are to talk to. Supervising social workers regularly speak with young people in foster placements when they visit the household and there is some good joint working with child care operational workers to promote appropriate matching and placement stability. Placement stability is steadily improving for young people. This has been really helped through more formal and timely use of placement stability meetings, which are held when placements become 'rocky and likely to fail'. All professionals involved meet with the young person and carer to look at support systems, which can be implemented to restore stability. There are some really good examples of placements, which have continued because of the additional services and support negotiated. This is very positive for maintaining continuity for young people.

The ease of access, for young people in foster care, to this whole support network provides them with really good opportunities to have their voices heard and to effectively influence their care experiences. It reflects a real focus by Leicestershire, and specifically by the fostering service, on co-operative working, between all professionals, with the child as central to service delivery. In addition to services referred to above, there is really effective partnership working with the looked after children health and education teams who work closely with fostering service staff, foster carers and, where appropriate with young people in placement, to monitor and support general and specific health care needs and to promote young people's enjoyment and achievement in relation to their leisure and educational activities.

Many young people have been individually supported, by looked after children's nurses working with their carers to address issues with weight, to get advice about sexual health and to access mental health support through a fast track access system to the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service. Many young people have made really positive achievements in education and are justifiably proud of these. Some young people have achieved good success in GCSE examinations and say 'I wouldn't even have taken them' if they had not been in foster care. The education team

provides a one-to-one support arrangement for GCSE exams as well as additional support for younger pupils on maths and English, should they wish to sign up for this; this has helped many young people to achieve greater success in education. Both health and education teams are involved in delivering training for foster carers to raise the carers' awareness about how they can encourage and motivate young people to be healthy, happy and achieve well. Some young people have received extra help in preparing for adulthood through the 'Fuse project' a mentoring scheme, which involves university students supporting young people to gain self-confidence and develop their awareness about employment and further education options. Young people value this, one said: 'I love education and have a 'life plan' of where I want to be when I am older, hopefully university or a good job.'

The authority holds events to recognise both carers' and young people's achievements. At a recent event a young person received an award for getting a place at university while another was rewarded for achieving 10 GCSEs grade A to C. Children and young people are asked to nominate their carers for awards. One young person, nominating their carer for an award, said: 'I feel so positive about life with my carers. I am part of their family. They treat me like all the other children and make me feel safe and happy. They help me with school stuff, as well as social situations. They always go the extra mile for me.' Another young person, who expressed a wish to 'stay till I'm 55 if that's alright with them' said: 'My carers give me amazing support, practically and emotionally.'

More generally young people speak very positively about their foster placements and their carers. Some talk of how much they value a 'normal family life', of some fantastic holidays with their carers and of help with maintaining contact with their birth families. Others say they have enjoyed opportunities to join the guides, to learn to play a musical instrument or just learning to ride a bike. At the recent award ceremony a young person said that her foster carer did not get enough credit because people did not realise how difficult it was 'to love someone else's child and for that love to remain consistent' and that, as a foster child she appreciated and valued this.

Quality of service

The quality of the service is **adequate**.

There is good recognition by service managers and the authority's commissioning team of where the priority areas are in terms of carer recruitment. There is a shortage of short-break carers and of foster carers from Leicestershire's Black and minority ethnic communities. There is a good focus on recruitment, both general and specifically targeted, with regular advertising campaigns and circulation of literature. Recruitment campaigns are not always as successful as the fostering service would like but it has succeeded in recruiting eight additional mainstream carers this year and 12 more are currently being assessed. Strategies for recruitment are constantly assessed and reviewed. The fostering service has specifically targeted faith and community groups in Leicestershire in an effort to enhance the recruitment of carers from a range of racial and ethnic origins to specifically meet the needs of young

people referred for placement. There is appropriate and well monitored use of placements with independent fostering agencies where young people cannot be provided with in-house placements to meet their needs.

The carer assessment and approval process is robust and fostering panel minutes reflect clear identification of the strengths and potential weaknesses of foster carer applications with robust questioning of carers and presenting social workers to resolve any issues or concerns arising. Panel processes and procedures have been revised to ensure that members receive clear guidance regarding their roles and responsibilities. Panel members have received some training and particularly valued a presentation by a paediatrician covering a range of health issues such as drug and alcohol misuse and obesity. The panel provides regular quality assurance feedback in relation to assessment and annual review reports and this reflects that the quality of reports, though still variable, has improved considerably. The panel additionally receives regular feedback about service developments. However, those members who are not qualified social workers, would value training to clarify the respective roles of placing and supervising social workers and to better understand of the purpose and expected frequency of social work visits to carers' homes.

Generally there is good consideration given to ensuring that carers have the relevant skills and experience to meet the individual needs of young people placed with them. Child care workers feel that the matching process has significantly improved, though they have had varied experiences: 'In my view the services are variable, often dependent on the person you're dealing with or the particular link worker. Likewise, some foster carers I work with are brilliant and I can't praise them enough, while others do the bare minimum and are adequate only.' Improvements in placement stability are a good demonstration of the improvements achieved in matching. Work is still in progress to improve the matching process further with the introduction of new pro-forma documents to promote more detailed recording of young people's assessed needs and how these will be met by the foster carer.

There have been major revisions to the assessment and approval processes for connected persons and to the systems for foster carers' annual reviews. Since the previous inspection there have been periods when the fostering service has failed significantly to meet timescales in relation to these processes. At one point there was a five month backlog in foster carers' annual reviews. Team managers now conduct carers' first annual reviews and the assessment and review process for connected carers is tailored to their specific support needs. Dedicated social work staff have developed expertise in relation to the differential needs of short break and connected carers and this has improved services for these groups. Connected persons assessments and all annual reviews are now conducted within timescales and the fostering panel has oversight of compliance with timescales as part of its quality assurance function.

Some established foster carers have found the service developments, and changing expectations of them, difficult to adapt to. Representatives of the Leicestershire Foster Carers' Association say that at the beginning of this year carer morale was very low and that many carers had begun to disengage with the fostering service by

ceasing to attend support groups. Many felt isolated and overwhelmed, mistrusted the new management and felt they were not being consulted about changes taking place. The management team responded quickly and positively to this negativity by slowing down the pace of some of the proposed changes, working to develop the role of the Leicestershire Foster Carers' Association and through introducing good opportunities for consultation with carers. Responses received from carers in questionnaires still display very mixed views about the support they receive: 'I have always felt really supported by my link worker and the service. I have been really lucky because I can always contact link worker, she speaks with managers and the placing social worker and resolves problems. I know that others have had some problems.'; 'My link worker only works two days a week, so am stuffed the other days. They tell me to contact the duty worker, but I don't feel sure that they know me.' Thirty per cent of those completing questionnaires either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that their supervising social worker helped them to understand the needs of their foster children. In contrast the feedback from young people about their placements is almost wholly very positive.

Carer uptake of training has been poor. The quarterly management report, completed in June 2012, detailed that only 35 of the fostering service's 222 carers had completed the training, support and development standards. The required timescales for completion of this training are not currently being complied with but progress is being made and the number of carers who have achieved these has now risen to over 70. Management has recognised this as an area of shortfall and there has been a complete overhaul of training. This has included the appointment of a training and development officer, the introduction of a new, comprehensive and very relevant training programme and a real focus on motivating and encouraging carers to commit to training and development programmes. Carers still do not have personal development plans in place and are not retaining individual portfolios to show how they are achieving the skill levels required of them by the fostering service. Staff are developing processes and recording systems to formalise training expectations and these include the proposed introduction of a skill related payment scheme. These developments are crucial to demonstrating that carers are continuously developing their capacity to meet the often challenging needs of the young people they foster.

Records relating to home visits by supervising social workers are inconsistent and there is a lack of clarity regarding the purpose of these visits. Foster carers are confused about how frequently they receive supervision and they are not signing visit records to confirm their agreement with the content. Only two visits a year, to each carer household, are formally recorded as carer supervision. Unannounced visits are being made but the record of these visits constitutes a premises checklist rather than an assessment of the home's continuing capacity to meet the needs of the young people placed. Again managers are aware of this shortfall and are taking action to improve the consistency of support and supervision carers receive.

Safeguarding children and young people

The service is **good** at keeping children and young people safe and feeling safe.

Young people feel safe in their foster placements. Their safety is prioritised through safe and effective carer recruitment processes and a confident and experienced fostering panel, which has a good focus on safeguarding concerns when considering potential foster carers' suitability for the fostering task. Staff recruitment is similarly robust, in terms of ensuring that all required checks are undertaken before staff commence employment, ensuring that they pose no potential risk to young people. Personnel files are, however, retained centrally and records are very poorly organised rendering it extremely difficult to assess the robustness of checks. In some instances telephone checks are filed separately to references and are recorded on scraps of paper, in others copies have not been made of essential documents, such as certificates demonstrating professional registration for social workers.

A high priority is given to young people's safety within the household. All foster carers complete safe caring training as part of their 'Skills to Foster' training and are required to compile a household safe care policy detailing the household rules they will adopt in order to promote their own safety, that of their children and that of all fostered children. Addendums to these policies, in the form of a risk assessment, are completed each time a child is placed, to address issues specific to that child, which may require additional safeguards, for example if a young person has a propensity towards bullying.

Looked after children nurses make early contact with foster carers, where young people placed are new into the care system, to ensure that arrangements are in place for a health check. Bullying is one of the issues regularly discussed at the health check and, through the responses of young people to discussions about bullying, its profile has been raised this year. A significant number of young people say that they have experienced being bullied because they are in care and a group of young people have been involved in designing leaflets to alert others about what constitutes bullying and how it can and should be challenged. These young people launched their anti-bullying initiative, during this inspection, with a presentation to social care, health and education professionals and to carers and young people.

The Children in Care Council was involved in designing the age appropriate, children and young people's guides, which contain good information about making a complaint and about access to advocacy.

The independent visitor service is active and meaningful for young people. Some young people speak very positively about the value of having had the same independent visitor over several years and the positive influence this has had on their lives: 'I like going out with my independent visitor because I enjoy going to new places and trying new things'; 'I love seeing my independent visitor because I love being able to trust her, I feel I can talk to her about anything'; 'My independent visitor is so good she helps me understand my family problems.'

Allegations and complaints against foster carers are managed effectively. There is

appropriate and timely involvement of the Local Authority Designated Officer for safeguarding and the outcomes of strategy meetings are quickly conveyed to carers and acted upon in a way that prioritises young people's safety. Foster carers are provided with access to independent support should they be subject to an allegation.

Very few young people go missing from their foster placements but appropriate policies and procedures are in place, should this happen, and carers are aware of their recording and reporting responsibilities. Managers monitor such occurrences carefully and consideration is always given to the reason for any absence without authority and whether additional support is needed for the young person or their carer. Any instances of restraint by carers are subject to similar investigation. Carers are strongly encouraged to undertake training on managing behaviours through de-escalation and the fostering service makes it clear that restraint should only ever be used to promote safety.

Leicestershire has invested in the 'Growing Safely' initiative, which involves social work staff working to enhance children and young people's awareness about keeping themselves safe from harm, as well as supporting staff in the early identification of areas for concern regarding young people's safety. The work is very visual and can be tailored in a very age appropriate way. Some staff, in both child care operational and fostering teams, have already undertaken the training and some good work has already commenced with some young people. Inspectors saw an excellent example of this work during this inspection. The authority is currently extending the training to other staff.

The authority has additionally developed a delegated authority form and proposes to complete this in respect of all placements in order that foster carers are given the maximum capacity for decision making in respect of children and young people placed. Some carers have already been provided with the document. This ensures that young people are able to take reasonable risks as part of their growth and development and also that they do not feel different from their peers when asking for permission, for example to stay at a friend's or go on a day trip from school.

Leadership and management

The leadership and management of the local authority fostering agency are **good**.

The Head of Children in Care is the officer appointed, by the local authority, to manage the fostering service. Day-to-day management is undertaken by the Service Manager for Family and Residential Placements. Both appointments have been made within the last two years and have been part of reshaping the fostering service to prioritise recruitment and retention of both staff and foster carers and to increase the proportion of looked after children in family based placements. The service now comprises three social work teams, two with allocated responsibility for the support to and review of foster carers and one responsible for recruitment, undertaking carer assessments and covering the duty desk. Each team is led by a team manager. There was initial resistance, by both staff and foster carers, to many of the changes, which have been implemented as part of the reorganisation. Staff initially lacked

confidence in managers who, apart from the designated manager, had limited fostering experience or their experience was not recent. All however had a wealth of social work expertise in a range of associated professional fields. Staff confidence has vastly increased as they have recognised the value of changes in focussing and improving service delivery with more robust placement matching, better placement stability and a significant improvement in co-operative working with other professionals across the authority.

There is a strong, dedicated management team, who have a clear focus in terms of progressing the continuous development of the fostering service and improving the experiences and outcomes of young people placed with foster carers. Managers are seen by staff as knowledgeable and approachable with the service manager described as 'a walking fostering encyclopaedia'. There are regular team meetings and staff supervision and staff say there are excellent mutual support systems too. The reorganisation of the teams, with a clearer designation of roles and responsibilities, has greatly enhanced the capacity of the service to operate within required timescales, particularly in relation to connected persons' assessments and foster carers' annual reviews.

There is regular and robust monitoring of incidents, accidents, compliance with regulatory requirements and service delivery generally and appropriate reports are completed to demonstrate this. Monitoring is properly used to identify patterns and trends and action is taken to address any shortfalls identified. While significant progress has been made in many areas, progress in other areas has had to be managed carefully to allow staff and carers to embrace the changes while avoiding destabilising placements. Although there has been a significant increase this year in placement referrals the fostering service is managing the increased workload well. Placement stability is improving, the number of young people with three or more placements in a year has reduced from 11 per cent in 2011 to 8 per cent in 2012. An increasing number of looked after children are in foster placements, this having risen from 75 per cent in March 2012 to 77 per cent in November. Much work is still in progress and current priorities are the proposed revision of the foster carer payments scheme and a real focus on encouraging foster carers to engage with continuous learning and professional development.

There have been really significant improvements in the consultation with, and engagement of, young people and foster carers in moving the service forward. The profile of the Children in Care group has been raised and they feel actively involved and able to influence decision making. There has been significant input into developing the Leicestershire Foster Carers' Association to become a representative group, which can promote the interests of all foster carers. There have also been real improvements in co-operative working with associated professionals. There are sound working relationships with child care operational teams, with the looked after children health and education services and with the children's rights service. These relationships are clearly focussed on operating a triangulated service around the young person to promote positive outcomes. There really is effective corporate parenting demonstrated here.

Recommendations from the previous inspection have been implemented with the exception of the dating and signing of records. Although practice in this area has improved there are still some shortfalls. Some of the carers lack awareness regarding their responsibility to store young people's records securely.

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 to assess the effectiveness of the service and to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards.

The report details the main strengths, any areas for improvement, including any breaches of regulation, and any failure to meet national minimum standards. The judgements included in the report are made against the inspection framework and the evaluation schedule for local authority fostering agencies.