

Derbyshire County Council Fostering Services

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

Unique reference number	SC051570
Inspection date	13/03/2008
Inspector	Trisha Gibbs
Type of inspection	Key

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Date of last inspection	04/12/2006

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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 is part of Derbyshire County Council Children and Younger Adults Service. The service provides:

A central recruitment team responsible for the recruitment of new foster carers. The social workers are co-located with the support teams across the County.

Five local fostering teams based in Ilkeston, Chesterfield, Clay Cross, Swadlincote and Buxton that support and supervise foster carers.

A contract care team that supports foster carers with additional skills, to care for teenagers with specific needs who would otherwise be placed in residential or specialist care.

A disability fostering team that supports foster carers to provide short-term breaks and longer-term placements for disabled children. The social workers for this team are co-located with the support teams across the county and also work closely with the disabled children's teams.

The fostering service recruits, assesses, trains and supports foster carers. A total of 406 children and young people were placed with the service at the time of the inspection. The service supports 379 approved fostering households.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

Children are kept safe through strong safeguarding processes.

Excellent attention is given to the health needs of children and young people. The role of the Looked After Children's nurses and input from Community Adolescent Mental Health service positively contributes to their overall health and development.

Children's views and ideas are sought within creative and formal forums and their contribution is valued and taken seriously.

Sound quality assurance systems are in place to monitor the activity of the fostering service.

Good partnership working exists between the fostering disability and children's disability teams to provide and support appropriate short break placements.

In the drawing up of contact arrangements, consideration is not always given to the impact of frequent long journeys on young children.

Staff have access to good training opportunities but do not receive formal appraisals.

Improvements since the last inspection

No recommendations or requirements were made on the occasion of the last inspection.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

Children benefit from a very high standard of dedicated health care provision. Commendable systems are in place to ensure that children's physical and emotional health and development are well provided for. Health care assessments are carried out and health action plans supported in a timely manner and most children and young people (over 90%) receive their health and dental checks on time. All Looked After Children (LAC) over the age of four years are seen by the Community Adolescent Mental Health service (CAMHs) team. Dedicated specialist LAC social workers in each of the CAMHs teams ensures that children receive a service swiftly when a need is identified and a high number of children are receiving this service. Carers may access support and advice from the team as well as from two specialist psychologists.

The LAC nurses provide excellent health care training to carers and young people and work closely in partnership with social care colleagues. All carers attend a full post-approval health training programme including first aid training, to ensure that they are aware of their role in promoting good health care. A special course 'baby think twice' has recently been piloted by the LAC nurses. The eight sessions are aimed at young people to raise their awareness of the impact of becoming a parent. This initiative was very well received by the young people who participated well, and repeats of the course will now be rolled out across the county. Carers with young people in placement attending this course, are provided with a special session to make them aware of what the young people will be learning. Carer newsletters promote health awareness and remind carers about resources and future training available. The carer handbook also contains excellent health information.

Carers have been provided with a special health passport file to record health and medical information for each child placed. This record travels with the child when they move placement or attend for respite or short breaks to ensure consistent health care. A laminated signed medical consent form is maintained within these files. Independent reviewing officers utilise the LAC reviews to confirm that essential health checks and appointments are taking place and that action plans are being properly supported.

Fostering families are actively encouraged to become involved in sports and leisure activities and are currently being provided with concessionary passes to local leisure centres.

Within the family link scheme a very good exchange of health information is shared between carers and parents. Carers are provided with individualised medical and healthcare training where necessary, to meet the complex health needs of some children with disabilities.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

Children are kept safe through very strong safeguarding systems and practices. Detailed child-specific safe care plans are discussed and drawn up for each placement and include bedroom sharing and fire safety considerations. Those seen were reviewed and dated and where appropriate shared with children. Confirmation of unannounced visits were also noted. Health and safety checks are fully completed at time of approval and reviewed and updated each year. The fostering panel routinely considers health and safety and safe care plans at time of annual reviews. The fostering panel also plays an active role in monitoring and processing allegations and complaints and any other significant incidents relating to the fostering service.

Carers are provided with very good information and training to help them keep children safe. The carer handbook contains excellent guidance on safe care, health and safety and bullying. The monthly newsletter provides regular updates in relation to training opportunities as well as ongoing safety advice on e.g. use of the internet, bicycles and trampolines. For foster carers who provide care for children who have a disability, training on 'safeguarding disabled children' is available. Link carers who had attended this said that they found this valuable.

A special consultation 'staying safe' children's conference is taking place this year to consult children through creative workshops. The aim of this is to help build up good practice and produce a 'stay safe' toolkit for staff and carers. Carers are invited to participate in the preparation of this event. The involvement of children and young people to improve safe care practice is commendable.

Multi-agency safeguarding procedures have been re-written with a neighbouring authority. Conferences were organised to launch the new procedures and all social workers provided with a copy.

The local authority record systems for children and carer files are electronic. A special fostering 'matching and placement' record, which remains an open document, notes children's needs as identified in their care plans and considers these against carer skills and identifies shortfalls. Managers acknowledged that the quality of information on these forms varies and that work is still being done to address this.

Good evidence of placement matching consideration was seen on files looked at. Careful planning, matching and introduction processes are in place when providing link and short break placements for children with disabilities.

Placement agreements seen contained the required information and included confirmation of medical consent. These were properly dated and signed. In one instance the young person had signed to confirm their agreement to the plan. Most (97%) LAC reviews are taking place on time and the quality of care planning is very good.

Personnel files looked at for two supervising social workers recruited since the last inspection contained appropriate checks and references. Good systems are in place to prompt automatic reminders when carer Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks are due.

The previous fostering panel arrangement of three panels has been replaced by two (north and south) panels. One panel deals particularly with all contact and family link care. This enables members to develop particular knowledge and skills in these areas. All carer approval categories have been reviewed and terminology updated to accurately reflect carer status. It is anticipated that this will assist with efficiency of permanency planning for children. The panel chairs (independent review managers) are based within the quality assurance section of children's services and also chair local carer annual review panels. They are therefore well placed to perform a positive safeguarding role in relation to children's placements. Panel minutes looked at were very good. They demonstrate that applications are systematically and carefully scrutinised, that strengths and competencies are recognised and concerns and queries are properly discussed.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The placement matching form, completed at the commencement of each placement especially identifies where children might have special cultural and religious needs. There is an expectation that where there are placement shortfalls these are clearly accounted for.

Carers looking after children who have a disability are provided with a good level of specialist support and advice. Generally requests for additional equipment and resources to support placements are positively responded to through the disability fostering team manager. There are also specialist area based carer support groups for carers where they can share experiences and knowledge. Although there are approximately 104 children receiving a short break or link scheme service there continues to be a waiting list for children who require homes that can accommodate wheelchair users.

All carers will receive post-approval diversity training this year following a successful

pilot of this at one of the area based offices. The workshop 'helping children with difference and diversity' provided a good and thorough introduction to diversity and difference issues and was well received by carers. A very good handbook was provided to carers attending and this contained resource material and contact numbers and addresses for a wide range of organisations and community groups in the county. Additional material has also been included in the carer handbook. Equality and diversity is routinely covered in pre-approval training.

There are very good systems in place to help carers to help children to succeed and achieve at school and to monitor attendance and educational progress. Looked After Children Education Service (LACES) teachers are attached to each area team and provide a valuable range of teaching aids and materials to carers. Carer's newsletters sometimes focus on education only information and events. The LACES teacher attends support groups and provides educational workshops and training sessions. Most looked after children and young people (95%) have a Personal Education Plan (PEP) in place and pre-school children who attend nursery or playgroup benefit from an early years PEP. This year there is support from educational psychologists in the development of the PEP to consider behavioural elements where these could impact on school placements. This is known as a PEP plus. A number of positive initiatives and events take place to promote literacy including The Big Book Bash, an event that won a Community Care Award last year and is being repeated again this year.

All fostering households are provided with computers and carers are encouraged to take up basic training in the use of these. Carers are also encouraged to use community resources and libraries for books and toys. Some carers looking after children with disabilities are making commendable efforts to promote relevant learning experiences for children in placement. Children are well supported to pursue individual interests and hobbies. Sometimes these are promoted through access to special allowances.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The carer handbook includes good information and guidance about the management of contact. Pre-approval training also includes input on contact issues. Some carers spoken to had a good insight into their role in relation to supporting contact. Where carers had missed the pre-approval contact training it appeared that this had not been compensated for. This resulted in a lack of understanding about the issues that can arise out of the more challenging contact arrangements. Some carers gave examples of how they were expected to support high levels of contact for very young children placed outside of the area who were travelling very long distances. The needs of the young children did not appear to be prioritised. They were leaving home early in the morning to attend pre-school activities and were then transported to contact, arriving home tired late afternoon or early evening. This was not in their best interest.

Children and young people are well consulted by the fostering service and social workers about their placements at the time of their LAC reviews and for the carer annual reviews. Some young people are currently updating and redesigning the LAC review consultation form and are meeting with a professional illustrator to achieve this. An independent reviewing officer noted that a good number of children attend and contribute to their reviews.

Carer's own children have attended events organised especially for them and have also been given gift vouchers in recognition of their own role in supporting placements. Carers had a very good understanding of the need for children and young people to be appropriately consulted and spoke positively about the training 'total respect 2' facilitated by young people.

Professional advocates are available through the children's rights service, and complaints and information leaflets inform children and young people how to access these. The children's rights officer confirmed that about 70% of advocacy work centres around crisis and complaints and that most of these are very well responded to by managers. Other commendable initiatives such as the 'make a difference' days and summer projects focus on the promotion of creative and meaningful communication with young people to improve their placement experiences. A quarterly newsletter is edited and produced by children and care leavers, for all children in placements. A website is available for all of Derbyshire's children with a dedicated link for looked after children.

The recently formed Children in Care council is made up of 10 recruited young people, seven of whom are fostered. The group have selected key issues that they would like senior managers to consider and respond to.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The Statement of Purpose for the fostering service has recently been updated but the summary of complaints has not yet been added. A good selection of colourful and age appropriate leaflets and booklets are given to children at time of placement.

The activity and performance of the service is very well monitored and controlled by a strong quality assurance section. Good systems, including a management information data-set, are in place for this. The work of the independent review managers is central to the monitoring process. Their role as panel chairs provides them with an excellent oversight of the strengths within the fostering service and of

areas where improved performance is necessary.

The fostering service is staffed by a stable and suitably qualified and experienced staff team. Cases looked at were supported by supervising social workers who had very good knowledge of child-care and child protection. Good professional training opportunities are made available to the fostering teams. Although social workers maintain personal development plans these are not subject to any formal evaluative process in terms of performance and professional development. The fostering social workers are geographically spread over a large county and although they attend their local team meetings, they do not network as a county-wide group on a formal basis. The fostering disability social workers based in local offices also attend specialist disability team meetings. Working together promotes good communication between operational and fostering social workers and can impact positively on placements. Good informed support is provided by the administrative team.

Recruitment capacity has been increased in an endeavour to boost the ongoing recruitment campaign to attract more foster carers. The recruitment team works closely with local fostering teams in an attempt to match local demand for placements. Good carer retention schemes are in place including an annual bonus, however the number of new households approved continues to be less than those leaving the service. There are currently 50 placements provided by independent agencies and very good systems are in place to match and monitor these placements.

Carers were recently consulted through a questionnaire about the out of hours support available to them and their responses were very positive. Carers spoken to and those who returned questionnaires (15) felt generally very well informed and supported. Files indicated a good level of carer supervisory and contact visits. Very good training is available to carers who are expected to attend at least three courses a year. All carers receive a file to maintain a training and development record. This will be utilised for the introduction and evidencing of the Children's Workforce Development Council standards. The children's social care training team also runs training and development courses throughout the year for all staff involved in working with children including carers. An excellent mentor scheme is available to new carers who are carefully matched to experienced carers. Mentors receive financial remuneration in recognition of this task.

Records looked at for cases tracked were of a very good standard. The electronic recording system for children and carer files has become more established and although some staff continue to find aspects of the system unwieldy, most acknowledged the benefits. Some key documents were difficult to locate but were in place and appropriately completed. Documents were properly signed and dated. Carers confirmed that they maintained appropriate records and recognised the value of these. Some were contributing to life story work.

The electronic record of complaints and allegations records is centrally stored and was looked at during the inspection. The responding to allegations procedure is being reviewed and updated. The current procedure does not fully indicate potential

timescales for allegations to be carried out. Although carers are paid members of the Fostering Network where they can access support from during an investigation, the nature of their relationship with their local fostering team during an investigation process is not made clear.

Although there is a general public information leaflet advising how people can access their records, the carer handbook did not contain guidance as to how children and carers could access their records. This issue was raised early on during the inspection and responded to in a prompt and appropriate manner. A proposed recommendation is not included in this report since the policy document for inclusion in the handbook has been provided to inspectors.

No family and friends placements were looked at during this inspection. Foster carers of kinship placements have access to the same levels of payments, training and support as mainstream placements.

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):

- consider the need for, benefits and impact of appropriate contact for the child when finding a suitable foster carer. (NMS 10.3)
- ensure that staff receive regular appraisals from a line manager. (NMS 20.4)