

Nottingham City Council Fostering Service

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

The authority provides the full range of local authority fostering services although some of the functions are contracted to independent agencies. In November 2011 there were 231 children in internal foster care placements and 166 children and young people in independent sector foster placements.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This full, announced inspection finds that the overall quality rating remains good with good attention to issues of equality and diversity. A key concern for the service at present is the challenge presented by tighter budgets and substantially higher demands. These matters are being addressed in a systematic and inclusive way through clear leadership and strong performance management. Significant initiatives have been implemented and a period of consolidation is anticipated in the new year.

Carers are aware that the service has experienced some shortfalls. However, they are now engaged with staff in moving forward. This report highlights a small number of recommendations. However, in almost all regards the management team is already aware of and acting upon gaps in the service. Greater clarity is necessary for children and young people's individual placement plan targets. Clarity is also necessary regarding the ongoing competence of second carers in households with two approved foster carers. Friends and families carers (connected people) training is insufficiently focussed on their needs.

The three recommendations of the previous report have been addressed satisfactorily.

Improvements since the last inspection

The last inspection made three recommendations. These have been adequately addressed. In particular, there is now particularly close attention paid to the number of children placed with foster carers. The normal fostering limit of three is rarely exceeded now, which helps to ensure that foster children receive good standards of care.

Carer support group venues are now appropriately supported and records are dated and contain the required information.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

There are good systems in place to promote the health of children and young people. Foster carers are well trained and supported. Specialist support is available from a dedicated health team and individualised training is available for carers of children or young people who have particular health needs. Similarly, the specific health needs of children and young people from overseas are identified and receive attention. Action is taken to respond to research on national trends, for example regarding the rising problem of obesity.

Short break carers establish strong links with parents so that there is good continuity of care. This contributes substantially to the progress demonstrated by many children and young people who use the service. Improvements are made, for example, to their tolerance of new circumstances, of new kinds of food and of diverse people. This has significant benefits for their social integration and access to public amenities.

Improvements have occurred to achieving timely dental checks and immunisations. There is also good attention paid to the emotional assessment of children and young people so that difficulties may be addressed as early as possible. There is particularly prompt support from the children's mental health service. These steps contribute substantially to the good health of children and young people in foster care.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

Foster carers successfully keep children and young people in foster care safe and ensure they feel safe. All children and young people have someone outside the household they can ask for support. The service ensures that emerging risks are assessed and planned for, such as the sexual exploitation of children and young people; there are also procedures to ensure that vulnerable individual children and young people are identified and protected. As in other areas, the service has effective partnerships with partner-agencies, for example the police. This contributes to particular success in avoiding children and young people in foster care going missing. This is also testimony to effective matching processes and successful relationship building by foster carers.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Foster carers provide clear and positive role models for children and young people. Children and young people are involved in all aspects of their foster families day-to-day lives and therefore have good opportunities to practice skills and resolve conflicts positively. Help is provided when individual children and young people require

additional support so that disruptions to and breakdowns of placements are minimised. These features are important contributions to success in all areas of children and young people's lives.

A virtual school is in place that promotes the education of children in care. In particular, there is improved liaison with partner agencies so that the needs of children and young people who are in care are prioritised. Good individual support is provided to those children and young people who need it with their education, for example through personal tuition and by sending them educational packages of information to use at home. Several children reported that foster carers help them with their home work. This leads to significant improvements in literacy and numeracy, which helps children and young people benefit from the same opportunities as their peers. School and college attendance are facilitated particularly successfully. Most children and young people feel their education is supported well and a significant number go on to university.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Children and young people provide their views in a wide range of ways including improved use of independent reviewing officers and regular surveys. There has also been an improvement in the corporate leadership of consultation through the Corporate Parenting Board and the Children in Care Council. This has led to children and young people contributing to the latest strategy to support teenagers into independence. In addition there is close attention to the needs of children and young people who have personal communication difficulties by use of translators and individualised communication systems. Children and young people know how to access the independent advocacy service and the independent visitor service. Their complaints are treated seriously and acted upon promptly.

Children and young people receive good support for their individual needs. One said, 'everything I need is always there'. Good support is provided to the maintenance of appropriate links with their own families, which is an important part of promoting their individual identities. Similarly, any cultural or religious needs are addressed. The short break needs of children and young people who have disabilities are particularly well met through ongoing liaison with their parents by specialist staff. Most foster carers have written details about the targets for each child or young person. However, attention to targets is inconsistently recorded by carers as is the associated support and advice by supervising social worker's. This means that children and young people are potentially making less progress than possible.

A wide range of leisure and sporting opportunities are available in the authority that is either free or at subsidised rates for foster families. Healthy lifestyles and social opportunities are encouraged by all carers and children and young people pursue a wide range of musical and sporting activities. Ideas are circulated in the newsletter sent to all carers. For example, schemes are available to promote children's development, such as 'Music is Power', which promotes children learning about music

and instruments. Money has been spent in a number of ways promoting group activities like a summer picnic and Christmas parties. The authority also promotes award events, which reward achievements and serve to encourage aspirations and resilience.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

Young people are successfully supported into independence by the authority: a large majority of care leavers are in employment, education or training and most are in suitable accommodation. Further improvements mean that a range of supported lodgings are now available through private providers and nearly all teenagers over fifteen have a written plan in place. These plans are an important way of ensuring that individual needs are met, such as addressing self-esteem or facilitating attendance at college. Most young people understand what is in their plans.

The needs of those young people who are on the verge of leaving care are met by a dedicated team and work is underway to ensure that planning begins promptly in every case. This team also manages the specialist needs of asylum-seeking young people so that their rights are met and their opportunities are maximised. In a small percentage of cases, young adult's individual needs are met by them staying with foster carers, which is a positive reflection on the flexibility of the service. Young people in care are helped to make successful transitions to adulthood by the authority using its corporate size to offer them preferential work placements.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

Although there is currently a vacancy for the service manager, the service is well managed and monitored. Substantial changes are underway to meet both budgetary constraints and an increase in demand. There is close attention to any shortfalls, such as the needs of young people with learning difficulties who are not eligible for adult services. Strong, innovative partnerships are in place both within the authority and with the independent sector, and the Children in Care Council now has a significant voice in new developments. In several cases, such steps have not only reduced costs but increased the capacity of the service to meet individual's needs.

There has been a recent period of significant change for staff, which has included an amalgamation with the adoption team and an increase in caseloads. Staff support and training is being maintained, however, and there is a clear focus on ensuring that key performance targets are met. Staff are being supported to fill any gaps in their knowledge. As a result, this means that most foster carers continue to receive good support. The support available to them has also been improved by regular business meetings with managers that they can attend; these supplement the regular carers support meetings. Foster carers also benefit from access to an independent advocate, which is particularly valuable to them and their families if an

allegation is made.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The service recruits carers from across the community so they reflect the range of needs presented by children and young people. A strong emphasis is placed throughout the service on ensuring as far as possible that the individual needs of children and young people arising from their age, disability, gender, faith and culture are met. Where appropriate, for example, the panel gives clear guidance about cross-faith matching. Panel operates in a satisfactory and timely way. It is appropriately constituted and is suitably independent of the service. It provides objective comments on the assessments that are presented to it, which serve to raise standards.

The service benefits from a clear recruitment strategy that takes into account anticipated future demand, and provides, for example, for the recruitment of contract carers for short break support. This increases the short break capacity of the service and increases the independence and social opportunities of children and young people with disabilities. Ongoing work is underway to increase the overall capacity of the service and to ensure the service continues to reflect the cultural and diverse demographics of the community. An independent agency undertakes most assessments of new carers and a good standard is achieved. Carers feel positive about the pre-approval training they receive. Induction training is complete for the majority of carers and some carers have demonstrated a higher level of competence by completing relevant qualifications. Subsequently, however, it is not sufficiently clear how the competencies of the partners of main carers are recorded and reviewed. This means their engagement with the service is potentially less than necessary.

Most children and young people are suitably matched. This is reflected in a low level of disruption and strong outcomes in education. Placement stability is assisted by maintaining appropriate limits on foster children in households. Clear guidance about carer approval is provided by the panel. Matching is highly successful in the short break service where the process is undertaken at a pace that suits the child or young person and the families. Carers consider that sufficient information is usually provided prior to a placement or soon afterwards. A substantial proportion of children and young people are placed in independent fostering agencies because they are able to meet their needs best. This particularly applies to parents and babies and to sibling groups.

Satisfactory arrangements are in place to support family and friends foster carers. Improvements have occurred so that close attention is now paid to implementing procedures in a timely way. Potential carers are told about the implications of the options available in terms of practical and financial support. Matching is successful and is well received by children and young people. The approach to training carers, however, does not reflect their circumstances adequately, which means there are shortfalls in attendance at core training events.

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 foster carers meet children's individual needs as set out in the child's placement plan and that this is reflected in carer's records and supervising social worker's records (NMS 2.3)
- ensure foster carers maintain an ongoing training and development portfolio which demonstrates how they are meeting the skills required of them, with regard to each foster carer (NMS 20.4)
- offer training that addresses the particular needs and circumstances of family and friends foster carers. (NMS 30.11)