

East Riding of Yorkshire 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 fostering service is run by a local authority. Its aim is to provide a wide range of foster carers so that children and young people can have a choice of placement and access to consistent care. The fostering team is responsible for assessments and approvals, foster care training programmes and the supervision of carers.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

The fostering service is performing strongly in fulfilling its responsibilities to ensure that young people's experiences of care are positive. It is successfully achieving high levels of placement stability and promoting the safety and protection of young people. Its partnership with the participation and children's rights team is highly regarded and ensures that young people have a real say in decisions that affect their future. They are also consulted about and make a contribution to the way in which children's services are delivered. Educationally, young people have high levels of attainment relative to their starting point prior to coming into care. Many school leavers continue to achieve well in further education, training and employment. Pathway planning is thoroughly embedded and young people are well-prepared to make the transition to adulthood. The level of support that foster carers receive from their link workers is a strength. Panel is carrying out its functions robustly and prospective foster carers are approved in a timely manner. The service is well managed and staff are supported very effectively. Young people's health care needs are met and there is good support for young people with emotional and psychological difficulties.

Improvements since the last inspection

Since the last inspection levels of staff supervision have been increased and access to training has improved considerably. Both matters have provided staff with opportunities to reflect on practice and to share good practice with colleagues from other fostering services.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

The fostering service is meeting its responsibilities for ensuring that young people's health care needs are being met. This includes the emotional well-being and psychological needs of young people. The child and adolescent mental health service has a dedicated looked after children's team. It provides professional advice and

guidance and individual work with young people to assess emotional well-being and to offer play therapy where appropriate. Their work has made a direct contribution to effective placement stability for a number of young people.

Foster carers have a sound understanding of health care and benefit from a range of relevant training. They are ensuring that young people's health care plans are being implemented effectively. Through supervision and reviews foster carers are able to highlight health care issues and make sure that they are monitored regularly. Foster carers are fulfilling their responsibilities for the day-to-day health of young people placed with them.

Without exception young people said they always receive support and advice from their foster carers about being healthy, eating well and enjoying a healthy lifestyle. They participate in a range of sporting activities which promote good health. Young people understand their own health care needs and have a wider appreciation of health related issues. For example, they understand the need for medication to be stored securely.

The participation and children's rights team provides young people with a broad range of written, age appropriate material. The team facilitates regular meetings with young people where they can safely discuss health issues such as sexual health, the dangers of using drugs and alcohol and emotions and feelings. Young people have a very effective forum in which to share their ideas for promoting health matters.

The partnership arrangements with the looked after children's nursing team are currently being re-established and a dedicated looked after children's nurse has been appointed after a gap of approximately twelve months. The post holder is becoming familiar with the requirements of the role and has prioritised the need to ensure that initial medicals are carried out in a timely way. While this is an area for improvement, young people's health care needs are being met through the interventions of foster carers, link workers and social workers.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

Young people said that they feel safe in their placements. For example, one young person said, 'I am glad I am in care because now I am safe.' Another said, 'I don't feel scared of anything and I feel I am well loved within the family.' This reflects the strong child protection and safeguarding systems that are in place within the authority.

Young people know how to protect themselves and have discussed this in participation groups. It is to their credit that the leaflet that the group designed concerning internet safety has been distributed to schools throughout the county. Young people are also familiar with the missing person's protocol. They are aware that if they go missing a safeguarding check is carried out on their return. This makes an important contribution to young people's sense of safety and well-being.

Foster carers are fulfilling their responsibilities to protect children. One carer succinctly summarised their role as follows, 'I have to keep young people safe.' Foster carers have completed safeguarding training and are confident about the reporting procedures. The fostering service has successfully utilised the skills and professional knowledge of some carers in the delivery of training on child protection and the signs and symptoms of abuse. This is an excellent use of resources and plays a significant part in promoting an awareness of child protection issues.

Each foster carer household is required to develop and implement a safe caring plan to protect young people and their own family. Carers' birth children are aware of safe caring principles and understand why a plan has to be in place. This approach enhances the protection of all young people connected with the fostering service. There are a low number of allegations against carers which suggests that the measures in place to protect young people are effective.

Safeguarding records provide further evidence that concerns are raised promptly and are dealt with appropriately by the agency. The agency's professional approach contributes to the overall safety and well-being of young people.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Young people enjoy positive relationships with their foster families and link workers. Typically, they commented that, 'they ask if everything is okay if not they do something about it', 'you couldn't ask for better foster carers', and 'I like living with my foster parents and I am very happy.' Foster carers are providing an environment and culture that promotes a sense of well-being and enables young people to flourish. Young people approaching adulthood talked candidly about taking responsibility for their own behaviour. All foster carers have completed training in the management of challenging or negative behaviour and feel that they have acquired a range of skills and techniques that help them achieve this effectively.

The fostering service actively promotes the value of education and regularly holds events to celebrate young people's achievements. Attendance figures for the year ending March 2010 are excellent with only 1.5% of non-attendance being unauthorised. Attainment figures for young people obtaining GCSE pass grades are well above the national average for looked after children. The impressive figures are testament to the service's commitment to education. Young people above statutory school age are performing equally well and are actively engaged in further education, training and employment.

The looked after children's education team has a strong partnership with the fostering service and offers foster carers and young people with guidance and support on an individual basis. The team is also able to target specific year groups, such as Key Stage 2 students who are making the transition to senior school, for additional tuition in literacy and numeracy. All young people have a personal

education plan which has been shared with carers; the plans are being implemented effectively. The fostering service is supporting young people to achieve their education potential and fulfil their ambitions.

Young people are encouraged to participate in a wide range of activities outside school. There are well-established participation groups for young people of all ages and young people said that this had helped to give them confidence to try new things and has promoted their self-esteem.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

The fostering service has a strong partnership with the participation and children's rights team. The young people hold the participation team in high regard and enjoy the opportunities to share their views and wishes. The young people spoke extremely positively of the support, consultation, and involvement in the local authority that participation provides. They describe the support they get as excellent.

Young people are very proud of their participation service. Based on discussions they have had with young people at national participation events, they feel that it outperforms those of many of the other local authorities. The success of the participation work is testament to the commitment of the local authority to take the views of young people seriously.

The children in care council is well established and young people feel that they have a strong voice in decision making. They have delivered training to range of adults, participated in interviewing newly appointed staff and carers and undertaken presentations to the Local Safeguarding Children Board and social work students at the local university. The council meets regularly with senior managers and lead member.

Young people have very positive relationships with their independent reviewing officers and, with their support, some young people regularly chair their own looked after children reviews. They have designed their own invitation form for reviews and can make decisions about who they want to attend. There is a very popular and well-used web based form allowing young people to record their views in writing if they prefer to. Young people also have access to independent visitors with whom they can share their views.

Contact arrangements are clearly set out in placement plans and contact visits take place in line with court directions. In some cases the level of contact for individual children is high and requires considerable resources to ensure it takes place. Nonetheless, the fostering service is effectively fulfilling its responsibilities in this regard.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is outstanding.

Young people are strongly supported to make the transition to adulthood. There is a well-established pathway team that is involved with young people prior to their eighteenth birthday and can offer support to care leavers into their mid twenties. Young people are closely involved in their individual pathway plans which address existing needs in connection with housing, financial support, independent living skills and aspirations in work and further education. The vast majority of young people who have finished statutory schooling have remained actively engaged with their education and a small percentage have taken up training and employment opportunities. Young people who wish to stay with their foster carers after the age of 18 can do so. Overall, there is a strong sense that the young people are benefitting from the support that is available to them to help them make a successful transition from childhood.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. The ethnicity of young people and foster carers reflects the general population of the county and is predominantly white British. Case records provide strong evidence that care, support and guidance is highly individualised and carers promote the individual needs of young people. The participation group was attended by a broad range of young people who listened to each other respectfully and were tolerant of differing viewpoints.

The fostering service is managed very effectively and has a strong and stable senior management team. The recruitment of a second senior practitioner has enabled the service to eliminate the shortfall in supervision that was identified at the last full inspection. Fostering social workers and care co-ordinators feel well supported in their work and said that the managers are approachable and helpful in their guidance. Morale within the team is good. The service has increased the training opportunities available to staff, enabling them to reflect on their practice and to access information from leading national fostering organisations. All personnel employed by the fostering service are subject to initial and ongoing robust vetting.

The fostering panel is working well and has adapted itself to new regulations and national minimum standards. Both the decision maker and panel chair agree that the standard of assessments coming before panel is of a high standard and that all decisions and recommendations are made in a timely manner. The decision maker has not overturned any of panel's recommendations which is a clear indication that panel is fulfilling its responsibilities to robustly scrutinise applications, annual reviews and exemptions. Panel's central list has been finalised and panels are always quorate. The work undertaken by panel contributes to the ongoing safety and well-being of young people.

Recruitment of new foster carers has kept up with an increased demand for placements. There is a clear and successful marketing strategy in place. Pre and post approval support is excellent and without exception foster carers hold their link workers in high regard. They are more than satisfied with the support and supervision that is available. Typically, foster carers made the following observations, 'I sincerely can say that we have been very fortunate in having very supportive and caring fostering social workers', and, 'Our fostering social worker is very efficient, supportive and reliable.'

The fostering service is committed to the development of its carers through induction and ongoing training which meets the Children's Workforce Development Council's standards. The foster carers feel valued as team members and said that their views are taken seriously. Importantly, the support for carers enables them to meet the challenges of looking after disadvantaged young people and promote positive outcomes.

There has been a large increase in the numbers of friends and family carers used by the fostering service. They are well supported and are expected to undergo robust assessment prior to approval. There is also an expectation that they will engage with supervision and participate in training events.

Matching considerations are well managed. All staff participate in weekly placement meetings to help identify potential matches. There is strong evidence to indicate that the number of disrupted placements is relatively low which indicates that the matching process is working effectively. Where a match cannot be found within the fostering service, the authority uses local independent fostering agencies to make up the shortfall. The authority is committed to providing financial support to such placements particularly where permanency is being considered.

The Statement of Purpose has been reviewed and is up to date. It clearly sets out the aims and objectives of the service and is an accurate reflection of the fostering service and the facilities it provides. The children's guide is due to be reviewed to ensure that it is suitable for all young people of different ages and abilities.

In the last three years the fostering service has received a small number of allegations concerning the conduct of foster carers and in all cases these have been investigated and resolved. Foster carers under investigation are given access to independent support.

Records maintained by the fostering service are stored securely. The fostering service's offices and administrative systems are suitable for the service provided and are secure.

Overall, the fostering service is successfully providing secure and stable placements for many young people. One young person summed up their experience of care by saying, 'I have all I need.'