

Inspection report

Aberdeenshire Council - Fostering Service Fostering Service

Carlton House
Arduthie Road
Stonehaven AB39 2DL

Inspected by: Patricia Matheson
(Care Commission Officer)

Type of inspection: Announced

Inspection completed on: 19 February 2009

Service Number

CS2004083982

Service name

Aberdeenshire Council - Fostering Service

Service addressCarlton House
Arduathie Road
Stonehaven AB39 2DL**Provider Number**

SP2003000029

Provider Name

Aberdeenshire Council

Inspected ByPatricia Matheson
Care Commission Officer**Inspection Type**

Announced

Inspection Completed

19 February 2009

Period since last inspection

12 Months

Local Office AddressPavilion 5
Castle House
Fairways Business Park
Inverness
IV2 6AA

Introduction

Aberdeenshire Council operates its fostering service through the Family Placement Service, an integrated service since March 2003, which had three teams, each with responsibility for a discrete geographical area. Uniform practices and procedures are adopted throughout the teams. Two team managers shared lead responsibility in fostering and the third team manager had lead responsibility for adoption and inter-country adoption.

Aberdeenshire Council's Fostering Service provided a service for children and young people from birth to eighteen years and their families, who were assessed as in need of this service and who either lived in, or had connection with, Aberdeenshire Council. Young people can remain fostered in placements up to the age of 19 in exceptional circumstances. The Supported Lodgings Scheme provides for foster carers to convert to Support Lodgings providers to provide transitional care for an additional 2 years (3 in exceptional circumstances). This means that young people can have continuity of care and support into early adulthood. The agency recruited and supported carer families to provide a range of fostering services including temporary care, respite care, short term care and long term permanent foster care.

The service was registered with the Care Commission in December 2005.

At 31st December 2008 there were 17 short term foster carers, 20 long term foster carers, 40 carers approved to provide both short and long term care, 47 respite carers, 8 approved kinship carers and 1 approved private foster carer and 14 other carers. There had been 9 new foster carers in the previous year.

The number of applications for foster carers outstanding as at 31 December 2008 were: 5 short term care, 1 long term care, 2 both short and long term care and 5 respite care. A total of 23 new foster carer applications were received in the previous year.

There were 40 children and young people receiving both short and long term care, 53 children and young people receiving short term care, 59 children and young people receiving long term care and 3 children and young people in respite care. There was 1 private foster placement. There had been 65 new foster care placements and 12 children were awaiting placement.

There were approximately 120 children and young people in Kinship Care arrangements.

Based on the findings of this inspection the service has been awarded the following grades:

Quality of Care and Support - 5 - Very Good

Quality of Staffing - 5 - Very Good

Quality of Management and Leadership - 5 - Very Good

This inspection report and grades represent the Care Commission's assessment of the quality of the areas of performance which were examined during this inspection.

Grades for this care service may change following other regulatory activity. Please refer to the care services register on the Care Commission's website (www.carecommission.com) for the most up-to-date grades for this service.

Basis of Report

This report was written following an announced inspection which took place over two weeks beginning on 9th February 2009. Two Care Commission Officers conducted the inspection.

Before the Inspection

The Annual Return

The service submitted a completed Annual Return as requested by the Care Commission.

The Self-Assessment Form

The service submitted a self-assessment form as requested by the Care Commission.

Regulation Support Assessment

The inspection plan for this service was decided after a Regulation Support Assessment (RSA) was carried out to determine the intensity of inspection necessary. The RSA is an assessment undertaken by the Care Commission Officer (CCO) which considers complaints activity, changes in the provision of the service, nature of notifications made to the Care Commission by the service (such as absence of a manager) and action taken upon requirements. The CCO will also have considered how the service responded to situations and issues as part of the RSA.

This assessment resulted in this service receiving a low RSA score and so a low intensity inspection was required. The inspection was based on the relevant Inspection Focus Areas and associated National Care Standards, recommendations and requirements from previous inspections and complaints or other regulatory activity.

During the inspection process

Evidence

During the inspection visit evidence was gathered from a number of sources. Documents examined included the following:

- Service users records
- Relevant policies and procedures
- Information leaflets provided to service users
- Analysis of questionnaires
- Minutes of meetings
- Completed questionnaires in respect of grading

Discussion took place with a range of staff and service users including:

- Social Work Manager
- Three Team Managers
- Six staff from the Family Placement Service
- Three staff from the fieldwork/permanence teams
- Three foster carers were spoken with on a one to one basis and visited in their own homes

This inspection was conducted simultaneously with the inspection of the Council's Adoption Service, which is subject to a separate report.

Inspection Focus Areas and links to Quality Themes and Statements for 2008/09

Details of the inspection focus and associated Quality Themes to be used in inspecting each type of care service in 2008/09 and supporting inspection guidance, can be found at:

Fire Safety Issues

The Fire (Scotland) Act 2005 introduced new regulatory arrangements in respect of fire safety, on 1 October 2006. In terms of those arrangements, responsibility for enforcing the statutory provisions in relation to fire safety now lies with the Fire and Rescue service for the area in which a care service is located. Accordingly, the Care Commission will no longer report on matters of fire safety as part of its regulatory function, but, where significant fire safety issues become apparent, will alert the relevant Fire and Rescue service to their existence in order that it may act as it considers appropriate. Further advice on your responsibilities is available at www.infoscotland.com/firelaw

Action taken on requirements since last inspection

The Care Commission received an action plan from the service detailing how it would meet any requirements and recommendations arising from the last inspection. There was one requirement made as a result of the previous inspection.

‘The Agency should progress alternative options for purchasing clothes for children and young people that does not compromise their dignity’.

This had been fully actioned.

Comments on Self Assessment

The Self-Assessment had been completed prior to the visit. The Self-Assessment had been completed to a very high standard and noted what the agency thought they did well and areas in which they thought they might improve. The detailed content assisted with the inspection.

View of Service Users

Service Users spoken with during the course of this inspection were very positive about the quality of service provision they received.

Several Foster Carers were spoken with. Comments noted included the following:

‘I feel part of the team and not ‘just a foster carer’.

‘The managers are very approachable and open to suggestions’.

‘We have a very professional link worker. She is more than just a link worker’.

‘We have a very good relationship with our link worker. It is very open and honest’.

‘The social worker is very good at keeping us updated’.

‘We know that the workers are just at the end of the phone’.

‘We are very happy with the service we receive’.

‘We appreciate the training courses available – even the refresher type courses’.

‘I feel it is a very proactive service now – listening to foster carers’.

‘I feel able to participate and feel I am being listened to’.

‘I feel the service values and respect the work of the foster carers’.

‘There are a lot of training opportunities for foster carers’.

‘I like the training involving foster carers, social workers and link workers. The wide spectrum of people at training courses is very helpful’.

View of Carers

No birth parents were spoken with during this inspection.

Quality Theme 1: Quality of Care and Support

Overall CCO Theme Grading: 5 - Very Good

Statement 1: We ensure that service users and carers participate in assessing and improving the quality of the care and support provided by the service.

Service Strengths

Service users experienced a service which supported participation in a number of different ways. They had good opportunities to make their views known. The manager and the staff were very positive about involving service users and carers in assessing and improving the quality of the care and support provided. The service had recently formalised the participation process through the development of a participation strategy. The strategy acknowledged a number of principles based on mutual trust, respect, flexibility and working in partnership.

Questionnaires were routinely distributed to gain the views of all relevant parties and feedback was used to assess and improve the quality of care and support provided by the service. Foster carers received questionnaires to complete at various stages during the preparation training, assessment process and following attendance at the Fostering Panel. Feedback from these questionnaires was used to assess and improve the quality of care and support provided by the service.

A questionnaire was given to foster carers which asked their views and the quality of care and support, quality of staffing and quality of management and leadership. They were asked to grade the service and to offer suggestions as to the three top priorities for the development of the service for the coming year.

Foster carers routinely contributed to a range of recruitment campaigns and training situations. An experienced foster carer was one of the core group of trainers who presented the training programme for prospective foster carers.

Foster carers received regular visits from their link social workers, including unannounced visits. The foster carers spoken with as part of the inspection confirmed that they were well supported. They were very positive in their comments about their link workers. They described them as being very approachable, competent, experienced and professional. They stated that they could contact their link worker at any time to express their views, gain advice and guidance. Foster carers also commented favourably in relation to the accessibility of all levels of management for the service who responded timeously to any issues raised.

The foster carers spoken with were very positive about the opportunities available to them to provide feedback and be involved in consultation sessions in relation to service development. Foster carers stated that they felt listened to and that their views and opinions were valued by the service.

Foster carers were reviewed on an annual basis. These reviews provided foster carers with the opportunity to express their views both verbally and in writing. Reviews were proactive about carer specific issues, including support from link workers and training.

Children and young people were supported to have their say through the childcare and Foster Carer reviews as well as through contact with their social worker. They also had

access to advocacy services including a Children's Rights Officer.

The service had a leaflet entitled "Have Your Say" which provided information as to how to make a compliment, comment or complaint in which they state 'if you want to suggest how we can do things better, you can tell us in person, or on the attached reply card'. The manager and staff indicated that all suggestions would be welcome and would be incorporated into the evaluation process to ensure continued improvement of the service.

The foster carers spoken with confirmed that they were aware of the comments/complaints process and how to access it should the need arise.

Areas for Development

The service identified the following areas for improvement in the self evaluation document returned to the Care Commission prior to the inspection:

- the progression of a mentoring scheme to be provided by existing, experienced foster carers for newly approved foster carers.
- consideration to be given to experienced foster carers being involved in the manning of Aberdeenshire's 24 hour support line for foster carers.
- the exploration of how parental views are sought regarding the quality of the service offered in order to improve service user participation.
- the improvement of recording how service users and carers views lead to service improvements.
- the development of a participation strategy.

At the time of the inspection, the participation strategy was in place and progress had been made in relation to the other areas for improvement.

In order that the current very good practice is maintained the service provider should continue to progress the areas identified for improvement.

CCO Grading

5 - Very Good

Number of Requirements

0

Number of Recommendations

0

Statement 3: We ensure that service user's health and wellbeing needs are met.

Service Strengths

Rigorous systems were in place aimed at ensuring the health and well being of service users was protected. The agency had clear procedures in place relating to the medical aspects of adoption and fostering.

The health of foster carers was assessed before approval and updated every 3 years. The

health of foster carers was further monitored through annual reviews, supervision and support visits. Examination of case files and discussions with foster carers confirmed that the service completed all the required medical checks and routinely reviewed the health needs of foster carers.

The health and well being needs of children was included in the preparation training attended by all foster carers. There was a range of courses available to foster carers in relation to the health needs of children and young people. Health professionals had also previously given presentations at the foster carers support groups. All foster carers had received a copy of the 'Caring About Health: Improving the Health of Looked After and Accommodated Children in Scotland'. They also received a selection of reading materials relating to the health needs of children and young people.

The service had adopted the use of BAAF Looked After children documents to review the health needs of Looked After and Accommodated Children (LAC). Children's files viewed by the Care Commission Officers during the inspection confirmed that health care assessments were carried out, health needs were referenced at C reviews and referrals made to specialist agencies where required. Foster carers spoken with during the inspection advised that the health and wellbeing needs of children were discussed prior to placements being made. They also gave examples of specialist health professionals they could access including community paediatrician, speech and language therapist, health visitor and physiotherapist. Every child who was looked after was registered with a General Practitioner.

The service had access to a Senior Nurse Looked After Children appointed by Grampian Health Board who cared for the needs of children and young people who were in the looked after system. The foster carers spoken with confirmed that they were aware of the role of Senior Nurse and were able to access her if there were any concerns or if they required any advice.

All staff working within the service were aware of their roles and responsibilities in relation to child protection issues. All were familiar with the service's policies and procedures and had access to the Children's Charter and Framework Standards for Child Protection. Staff had to routinely attend child protection training and refresher courses.

Foster carer preparation training included child protection and safe caring. There was ongoing refresher training in relation to child protection and safe caring for all approved foster carers. Foster carers received copies of the Children's Charter and Framework Standards for Child Protection. The foster carers and staff spoken with demonstrated an understanding of the child protection procedures they would follow in the case of concerns.

A procedure was in place for the management of allegations against foster carers.

Areas for Development

The self assessment completed by the agency acknowledged the limits placed on the medical advisor and the Senior Nurse Looked After Children due to their responsibility to provide a service to other local authorities within the immediate area.

The self assessment also made reference to the development of the 'buddy/mentoring' system which may also improve the general well being of service users as it would allow foster carers to have greater access to advice from experienced foster carers.

Staff and foster carers explained that difficulties had been encountered when attempting to have all looked after and accommodated children registered with a dentist. These difficulties were as a result of a shortage of dental practices in a position to take on new referrals. The manager advised that they would continue to work towards getting all looked after and accommodated children registered with a dentist.

CCO Grading

5 - Very Good

Number of Requirements

0

Number of Recommendations

0

Quality Theme 2: Quality of Environment

Overall CCO Theme Grading:

Quality Theme 3: Quality of Staffing

Overall CCO Theme Grading: 5 - Very Good

Statement 1: We ensure that service users and carers participate in assessing and improving the quality of staffing in the service.

Service Strengths

This Quality Statement has also been reported within Quality Statement 1.1.

Carers and service users were given a variety of ways in which they could participate in assessing and improving the quality of staffing in the service.

Prospective carers had the opportunity to provide feedback at various stages during the preparation process, and this included their views regarding training as a whole. Foster carers received regular supervision from their link workers which allowed for ongoing feedback in relation to support. Foster carers were invited to comment on the quality of staffing during their annual reviews. Contributions from foster carers via their reviews were actively considered both in relation to their individual relevance but also in relation to the development of the service. Foster carers were also encouraged to be involved in various consultation meetings set up to review service provision and development.

There was a complaints procedure accessible to all foster carers, children and young people. Foster carers were aware of the complaints procedure and how to access this should the need arise. The foster carers spoken with as part of the inspection were clear regarding the management structure and confident they could approach senior staff if they had any concerns or issues they wished to raise. Discussion with the manager and examination of evidence indicated that the outcome of complaint investigations was used to assess and improve the quality of the service where necessary.

Children and young people had the opportunity to feedback through the Looked After Children reviews and the Foster Carers annual reviews. Children also had access to advocacy services such as the Children's Rights Officer.

Areas for Development

The service is encouraged to progress the developments noted in their participation strategy as detailed in Quality Statement 1.1.

The service should continue to build on current very good practice.

CCO Grading

5 - Very Good

Number of Requirements

0

Number of Recommendations

Statement 3: We have a professional, trained and motivated workforce which operates to National Care Standards, legislation and best practice.

Service Strengths

The agency ensured that staff were appropriately trained and were both professional and motivated in undertaking all tasks associated with their roles.

The agency had a range of policies and procedures including protection of vulnerable adults and children, whistle-blowing, recruitment, confidentiality and employee development which supported staff in all aspects of their work.

Discussion with the service manager, team managers and staff confirmed that regular supervision and annual appraisals were in place through the agency's Supervision Policy and Employee Development and Review Scheme. Staff spoken with confirmed that there were regular training opportunities which ensured that staff were able to meet the requirements of their Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) registration. Staff training needs were discussed in supervision and were used to inform the agency's annual training analysis.

Individual staff spoken with confirmed that they were supported by managers and other colleagues within the agency. Family Placement Service staff were situated in Children and Families Teams which encouraged the establishment and continued development of positive working relationships. Staff also confirmed that they were able to access the expertise of social workers in other teams such as Criminal Justice or Mental Health as and when required. Both managers and staff spoke very positively of the support provided to the service from the agency's legal services team.

Staff were aware of the National Care Standards (NCS) which were taken account of within their practice. Copies of the NCS were also provided to all foster carers.

Managers and staff advised that monthly team meetings were aimed at improving team practice and providing opportunities for cascading information from the Social Work Manager on strategic issues affecting the service. The agency had recently considered re-structuring the Family Placement Service and managers and staff confirmed that they had been consulted and their views sought on this development. Discussion with staff and evidence provided indicated that staff were regularly encouraged to contribute to consultations and participate in working or focus groups.

Discussions with staff at all levels within the service indicated that they were highly motivated and committed to ensuring that the needs of all users of the service were met in a competent, confident, knowledgeable and caring manner.

Taking account of all evidence provided during the inspection, the service was found to have very good practice in relation to the quality and professionalism of staff, response to current and proposed changes to legislation, the use of the National Care Standards and the promotion of best practice.

Areas for Development

The service is encouraged to maintain its current high quality in relation to its workforce

CCO Grading

6 - Excellent

Number of Requirements

0

Number of Recommendations

0

Quality Theme 4: Quality of Management and Leadership

Overall CCO Theme Grading: 5 - Very Good

Statement 1: We ensure that service users and carers participate in assessing and improving the quality of the management and leadership of the service.

Service Strengths

This Quality Statement has also been reported within Quality Statements 1.1 and 3.1.

There were various opportunities for foster carers to participate in assessing and improving the quality of the management and leadership of the service. As stated previously in this report, various methods were used to gain the views of all relevant parties including questionnaires, foster carer review meetings, Foster Carer Support Group Meetings and consultation meetings. Feedback was acted upon and taken into consideration when reviewing practice and developing the service.

Foster carers received information relating to the service through newsletters, letters, questionnaires, one to one meetings, support groups and training events. The foster carers spoken with during the inspection confirmed that they received good levels of information relating to the service and their views on the service were sought at various stages. Foster carers stated that their views and comments were welcomed, appropriately considered and actioned where possible.

The service also benefited from the information provided by two members of the Fostering Panel who have direct experience of fostering and two adopters who are members of the Permanence Panel who have direct experience of fostering and whose views are provided to the service through the business meetings for each Panel.

Areas for Development

The service manager had identified as an area for improvement in the self evaluation document, the need to develop a more formalised participation strategy that ensured that service users are more fully involved in informing practice improvement and shaping the future of the service.

The service should progress the identified area for improvement and continue to build on current very good practice.

CCO Grading

5 - Very Good

Number of Requirements

0

Number of Recommendations

0

Statement 4: We use quality assurance systems and processes which involve service users, carers, staff and stakeholders to assess the quality of service we provide.

Service Strengths

The agency had a clear and realistic vision of improvement, the process of change and their future goals. There was evidence of planning processes within the council which evidenced clear links and ongoing work between operational managers and those involved in strategic development.

The Social Work Manager and team managers demonstrated a forward thinking and committed attitude towards service user involvement and this was evident from their participation strategy and the plans to extend the range of methods to be used to gather views.

Consultation was seen as important by the manager of the service. As stated previously within this report there were various formal and informal systems in place for staff, foster carers and service users to provide feedback about the service.

Staff spoken with as part of the inspection confirmed that they had the opportunity to be involved in development of the service. Staff indicated that they found the manager of the service to be approachable and open to suggestions and feedback. From discussion with the manager, team managers, social workers, and foster carers it was evident that all were motivated to ensure that the quality of service provision was of a high standard.

Discussions with staff and service users indicated that issues of concern could be raised with relevant staff and managers and that these were taken seriously. Where appropriate, meetings were held which provided an opportunity to discuss and resolve these concerns. Evidence provided indicated that where service users lodged any formal complaint, this was thoroughly considered and responded to within an agreed timescale.

Discussion with the Social Work Manager, Team Managers and examination of evidence provided confirmed that team managers within the Family Placement Service had responsibility for undertaking the quality assurance of all aspects of the work of their teams. This was seen to include quality assurance of reports for the Permanence and Fostering Panels and for Court. The Social Work Manager had the responsibility for quality assuring all Form Es of children who will be considered by the Permanence Panel.

The Scottish Government Self Evaluation Document 'How Good is our Team' was required to be used by all teams in Aberdeenshire.

Recommendations made by the Care Commission and other inspecting bodies were used to improve the service. Action plans requested by the Care Commission were developed and submitted and actions identified were seen to have been acted upon.

A comprehensive Annual Report for the Fostering Service was produced and this highlighted the work of the agency and identified key issues and developments in the previous year. The report also identified the gathering and use of feedback from service users at various stages in the process to influence practice improvements. Finally, the report identified key objectives for the forthcoming year.

During discussion with the manager of the service she demonstrated a good understanding

of the notification processes to the Scottish Social Services Council and the Care Commission.

There was an appropriate complaints policy and procedure in place and this further enabled stakeholders, staff and service users to express their views. There was evidence of how comments /complaints had informed and developed practice.

Areas for Development

The service was encouraged to maintain the current processes used to quality assure all aspects of performance which was identified by the service within the self-assessment document.

CCO Grading

5 - Very Good

Number of Requirements

0

Number of Recommendations

0

Regulations / Principles

National Care Standards

Enforcement

There has been no enforcement action against this service since the last inspection.

Other Information**Requirements****Recommendations**

Patricia Matheson
Care Commission Officer