

South Gloucestershire Fostering Services

Inspection report for LA 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 part of a council's children's service which provides a range of services for children in care. The key responsibility for the recruitment, assessment, support, supervision and training of foster carers lies with the Family Placement Team. The range of services includes: 'general fostering' which provides placements for 88 children in care; the 'Family Link Service' with 28 children and young people in placements; 'Kinship Care' which provided for 18 placements at the time of this inspection. The service supports both foster carers and children to enhance placement stability.

The management of the Family Placement Team consists of two part-time team managers. Each take a lead responsibility for fostering and adoption with an additional assistant team manager for fostering. The team employs eight full time equivalent social workers for fostering and family link as well as a training officer, a recruitment and marketing officer, a finance officer, 1.5 information assistant posts and an adoption/fostering panel administrator.

At time of this inspection the fostering service supported 106 approved foster care households. The overall service provides for 132 children and young people.

Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

This was an announced key inspection. The reason for this visit was to look at the progress the fostering service provider has made with the one action and three recommendations made at the last key inspection and to inspect the service against the key national standards for fostering services and the fostering services regulations.

The previous inspection report judgement of outstanding has been maintained in all outcome areas except for positive contribution which is now judged as good.

Improvements since the last inspection

At the last inspection on 21 December 2007 a total of one action and three recommendations were made. The action required the service to follow regulation 20, schedule 1 for the collection and retention of information relating to the recruitment and selection of staff. It was recommended that: the service recruits a fostering panel member from a minority ethnic group; that panel members ensure compliance with the regulations relating to emergency placements; and that criminal record bureau guidance is being followed in relation to the retention of such

documents.

This inspection found that the council's human resource department had introduced excellent systems to ensure the strictest compliance with all regulations relating to recruitment and vetting. The service has also taken action to comply with all of the three recommendations.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

Children and young people are provided with outstanding health care services which meet their physical, emotional and social needs. The fostering service supports carers to access a wide range of local services and ensures that children and young people benefit from medical and other specialist provisions in their area. The agency works closely and effectively with the local child and adolescent and mental health service and will refer young people for psychiatric and psychology assessments if the need arises. The creation of a new primary mental health workers post has strengthened the links between the fostering and mental health service. Carers and social work staff praise the additional opportunities for consultation sessions around the health needs of specific children.

The service ensures that carers are well informed about the health needs of the children in their care. Good quality health care information is being provided prior to a placement. Initial assessments and ongoing review assessments provide excellent information about the ongoing health needs of all children in placement. Access to a designated doctor and nurse enables social work staff and carers to obtain advice on health matters if and when needed. The looked after children's nurse provides an outstanding quality of service. The nurse ensures that findings on all children and young people's state of health are available. Social workers and carers may consult the nurse at anytime and the nurse will visit a young person at their placement upon request. Children are well informed about the services the nurse can offer.

Carers are able to promote children's health and receive excellent levels of training, guidance and supervision specific to children's needs. Good provision of core training ensures that carers provide children in placement with a healthy and safe environment. Foster carers are well equipped to ensure the health and welfare of children and receive training in the administration of medication and are trained in first aid.

Carers are given excellent support and advice to be able to promote healthy eating and a healthy lifestyle. Leisure, sport and exercise interests are discussed at children's placement planning meetings. Carers are provided with excellent written information and guidance on these matters including a comprehensive foster carer's handbook.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

The fostering service benefits from an experienced and well qualified team of managers. The core team has worked together for a number of years and is committed to safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children. All staff and managers working for the service have a professional social work qualification and are registered with the General Social Care Council.

Children and young people are provided with foster carers who can offer safe, healthy and nurturing environments. Foster homes undergo periodic health and safety assessments to ensure that they are free from avoidable hazards. A range of excellent systems ensures that children are carefully matched with carers who can meet their needs. Foster carers visited as part of this inspection provide outstanding levels of placement stability. The management of the service monitors placement stability and can evidence secure and successful matches with good outcomes for children in long and short term placements.

There are an outstanding range of policies and procedures in place which help children to be kept safe. These policies include safeguarding children, complaints, safe caring and action to be taken in the event of a child going missing. All carers, staff and managers receive ongoing training in the safeguarding children procedures. Children and young people's specific safeguarding needs are discussed regularly. There are excellent safe caring guidelines and core agreements between foster carers and social work staff. All staff know how to access the online Local Safeguarding Children Board procedures on safeguarding children. The authority has service level agreement with two agencies who provide an advocacy service for looked after children and to whom young people can go for help and advice.

Children and young people are protected from people unsuitable to work for a fostering service. Excellent vetting and recruitment methods are in place for all staff and carers. The council's human resource department employs outstanding levels of scrutiny in the recruitment and vetting of potential employees. All case workers of the human resource department have received outstanding levels of training in safer recruitment practices and are able to apply strict recruitment and vetting procedures. Evidence of all necessary checks are in place.

The fostering panel provides the agency with an excellent quality assurance function. Systems for the assessment and scrutiny of prospective foster carers are rigorous and benefit from the outstanding levels of expertise available to the panel. Members are suitably experienced and are appropriately recruited and vetted. All members including the panel chair have undertaken training relevant to their task.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The fostering service promotes the needs of children from diverse backgrounds. Carers and staff are encouraged to provide placements that respect and acknowledge equality and diversity. Recruitment of foster carers, staff and members of the fostering panel encourages applicants from a diverse and representative range of backgrounds. Equality and diversity training is considered priority training for supporting social workers as well as foster carers. Children with a disability are given the services and support they need in order to develop to their full individual potential.

The promotion of educational achievement is given a high level of priority. Children's and young people's educational and vocational needs and aspirations are well assessed. The monitoring of the educational progress of each child is highly effective and achievement and outcomes are statistically captured and analysed on an ongoing basis. Outstanding levels of support are provided to ensure children and young people are encouraged to learn and achieve. The local authority successfully operates a 'Virtual School' which employs a headteacher and a number of teaching staff. All carers and social workers are well briefed about children and young people's educational ambitions, abilities and current achievements. Children and young people actively participate in the construction and application of their personal education plan. Extra levels of support are available through the 'Fostering and Children's Support Services' team. The team ensures that children with educational and/or behavioural difficulties are getting the best possible levels of support. Home tutoring will be provided for children who benefit from individual one-to-one sessions outside of the school setting and/or where the school placement has broken down. A range of outstanding services are being provided for children who have been excluded from school. The local authority has a 'Placement Support Team' for such children. Workers in the team will carry out direct work with young people whose placement may be in danger of breaking down. Carers praise the level of support available for their children in this outcome area and the contribution these interventions make to better placement stability.

The service provides a short break fostering service to meet the needs of children with a disability. Carers receive training specific to the needs and conditions of the children in their care and placement agreements and care plans are in place for children using these services. A distinctly separate set of policies and procedures ensures that the particular needs of children are known and met. A number of children with specific needs benefit from the outstanding contribution of 'Lifetime Nurses'.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Children and young people are encouraged to maintain and develop contact with their families and friends. Help, support and training is on offer to carers when managing complex issues surrounding contact with birth families. The fostering service provides good levels of practical assistance including the supervision of visits and financing of transport. Contact arrangements are well documented and the views of the children, young people and their families are actively sought.

A range of good systems and services ensure that children and young people have opportunities to be heard and listened to. A 'Children's Participation Officer' has the task to ensure that all young people and children who are looked after by the authority have a range of platforms to express their opinions. The council is still in the process of establishing a Children in Care Council in line with the national Care Matters agenda. A website for the Children in Care Council (CICC) has been in the planning stages for some time and is now being commissioned. It will contain a facility to enable children and young people to communicate more directly with the CICC and provide a platform for consultation, feedback, opinions and concerns.

The authority promotes a number of good consultation and participation initiatives. Young people are regularly involved in developing literature for the service. A number of young people in care and care leavers have been trained in the recruitment of staff. Plans to involve children in the recruitment of new foster carers are well under way. Children using the service have their own newsletter which is being distributed across the service. Young people train staff in the 'Total Respect' training programme which is designed to teach professionals to listen and communicate with young people.

Children know how to complain. A dedicated complaints service supports children throughout the complaints process. Children are supported by independent advocates from an advocacy service. A range of literature including the Children's and Young People's Guide sets out how children are supported in the event of a complaint.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is outstanding.

The service works highly effectively providing number of projects when preparing young people to leave care. The local authority employs a 'What Next' worker who provides an outstanding service for young people who need to make the transition to independent living. The 'What Next' project offers help with housing, work and work experience schemes. The council has expanded its highly successful 'trainer flat' which it operates in partnership with a young homeless project and a local housing association. Two flats provide young people with a realistic opportunity to experience independent living while they are still being looked after. Links with the local housing

department are excellent and the partnership has been strengthened by the development of a youth housing strategy.

Support for care leavers through the statutory system of documented pathway planning is outstanding. The children's looked after teams provide excellent and detailed pathway plans in consultation with the foster carers.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

There is a clear and comprehensive Statement of Purpose. It sets out what will be provided for children placed by the fostering service. The document is presented to elected council members and regularly reviewed. Foster carers and the children and young people in their care are being provided with excellent information material which is being distributed widely and effectively.

The two managers who job share provide the family placement team and the fostering service within it with effective leadership. Both have a professional social worker qualification and have professional membership of the General Social Care Council. All team managers have additional management training and have substantial experience in providing a service which focuses on the best possible outcomes for children and young people.

The monitoring of the service by the corporate parenting steering group is highly effective. Clear roles and management structures ensure that teams deliver an efficient and effective foster care service. Social workers praise the commitment of managers to high quality professional supervision and support. Professional development and training opportunities are available. Workloads are constantly monitored and performance reviews are managed effectively. Social workers provide a high quality service. Staff hold social work qualifications and the majority of team members have substantial experience in family placement work.

There is a clear staffing strategy to ensure that all teams are able to provide the best possible service to foster carers and looked after children. A recent shortfall in staffing levels is being managed well.

Systems in place for supervising, monitoring and reviewing the services of carers are outstanding. Training opportunities for foster carers are outstanding. However, training and development needs are not always adequately recorded in carer's annual review documents for a full appraisal by the panel. The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding.

The quality of case recording and file keeping is good. Files are regularly audited and record keeping systems are strictly monitored. Information kept in foster homes is good and monitored by supervision social workers.

The service has recently moved into new premises. The move was well managed and

staff benefit from modern offices, equipment and technology. Information technology and communication systems are excellent. Facilities for the retention of records are good and processes are underway to transfer all information on to electronic files.

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 that carer's annual reviews include an appraisal of training and development needs, which is documented adequately in their annual review report. (NMS 23.8)