

Trafford Metropolitan Borough Council Fostering Services

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

Trafford Family Placement Team provides a fostering service for Trafford local authority. The service recruits, approves and supports a range of carers. These include family and friends carers, recruited carers, respite carers for children with complex needs and treatment carers who look after children engaged in the multi-dimensional treatment foster care programme Me2.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

The fostering service promotes the health, welfare and safety of children and young people very well. There are shortfalls in the recording of medication in some fostering households. Children and young people live healthy lifestyles. They receive encouragement and support to attend school and improve their attainment levels. They enjoy participating in new experiences and developing new skills. They develop confidence and self esteem. They contribute to decisions made in their daily lives and to statutory reviews of their care plans. They learn the skills they need for future independent living. Children and young people are happy in their foster families and many said they feel like part of the family.

Foster carer recruitment is good. Assessments vary in quality. The panel effectively scrutinises assessments and foster carer reviews and makes balanced recommendations to the agency decision maker. Foster carers receive a good level of support, training and supervision from competent staff. However, there is inconsistency in the level of delegated authority for foster carers to make day to day decisions. Foster carers are not routinely involved in personal education planning so are not recognised as a core member of the team around the child in every case. Arrangements for contact between children and their families are not always robust and are sometimes cancelled at short notice. Communication with the children's social workers is sometimes poor so that children, parents and foster carers become frustrated with the lack of response and the delay this causes in decision making.

The quality of the information about children provided to foster carers is very variable. There are inconsistencies in the way that children and young people are introduced to foster carers, with some having very little information about the carer before an initial visit. Children who are in long term foster care do not always have information about their history and identity and some have few photographs of their time in care. The service requires its carers to keep daily records, but some do not comply with this.

Family and friends carers do not receive the same level of service as recruited carers however, they report they receive a good service. Communication between children's

social workers and parents, children and foster carers is not always satisfactory. The organisation and management of the service is good. Senior managers know the strengths and shortfalls of the service and a clear development plan is in place to address areas for development, including those identified in this report.

Improvements since the last inspection

There were four shortfalls noted at the last inspection and all have been addressed. The training programme for family and friends carers has been developed further so that it meets the needs of these carers. Each foster family has a safer caring policy which is updated in line with risk assessments provided by the child's social worker. It addresses the individual needs of the foster children living in the family. Personal education plans have been reviewed and updated so that they are working tools that identify and address children's educational needs. Children's files contain a detailed and comprehensive chronology.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

The service provides children and young people with good access to health care resources. Children and young people confirm they are encouraged and supported to attend medical appointments that meet their needs. Their emotional health and well-being is promoted and they have timely access to psychological support. One young person said: 'I am so well cared for that my carer has become like my second mum: she knows my medication off hand and is totally tuned in to my complex medical needs'.

Foster carers receive training on health and hygiene, medicine administration and first aid. However, not all carers routinely record medicines they administer to children or report minor ailments. Foster carers promote healthy eating and encourage children to live healthy lifestyles. One young person said: 'The food is always delicious and they cope with my dietary needs'. Children and young people have the opportunity to participate in a wide range of physical exercise in line with their interests. All foster families receive leisure passes to enable them to access community leisure facilities within the borough. Children and young people who smoke or misuse drugs and alcohol receive professional support and advice to alter their behaviours and develop healthy lifestyles.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

Children and young people report they are safe in their foster homes and all said they are very well looked after and feel they belong in their foster families. For example, one said 'I feel safe and my foster carer looks after me perfectly'. There are no reported incidents of bullying. Another said: 'I feel like I am safe. My carers are always there to listen, no matter what'.

Foster families receive support to develop safer caring policies and these are reviewed annually or more often as required. Social workers complete risk assessments prior to the placement of each child and this informs the development or review of the safer caring policy. This ensures children and young people's individual safety needs are identified and addressed.

The good working relationship between the local authority and the police ensures that children and young people who are missing from care are responded to as a high priority and this promotes their safety and wellbeing. One carer said, 'the police are fantastic' and another reported, 'the agencies work together very well'.

Foster carers know the procedures for reporting significant events to protect children. Management systems are in place to collate, respond to and investigate information about allegations, disclosures of abuse and complaints from children and young people. Managers address concerns effectively and implement changes to policies and procedures to improve the service. They refer child protection concerns to the local safeguarding team and act upon the recommendations of safeguarding strategy meetings so that the safety of children and young people is promoted.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Through multi-agency working, and good training and support to carers, the service ensures that children develop resilience, self control and improved social skills. This means their social and emotional needs are promoted and they are enabled to develop appropriate friendships with peers and positive relationships with their carers. One young person said, 'I have learned a lot from coming here, like how to communicate better with people. They offer me emotional support and always listen to my problems'.

Most children and young people in foster care report that being in care provides them with plenty of opportunities they might not normally have. They are supported to participate in community activities and groups such as scouts, air cadets and swimming lessons. Children and young people value these opportunities.

Not all carers have received delegated authority to make timely day to day decisions, such as agreement for school trips and hair cuts. Children and young people find this frustrating. For example, one said: 'social workers don't know us like carers do. It should be the carer who makes the decision with us'.

Children and young people are effectively supported to attend school and make the most of their education. For example, one said, 'I am always encouraged to do my best at everything and to try new things'. Close and well established multi-agency working ensures that children and young people's additional education needs are identified and appropriate levels of support are provided, in particular to children and young people approaching GCSEs. One young person proudly reported they have

moved up two sets within one school year. However, additional support is less readily available for younger children and this impacts on the ability of some to fulfil their potential.

Educational outcomes for children in care consistently exceed the national average. Children and young people who have made good progress or tried hard receive achievement awards at a celebratory, whole service event. Highly effective management monitoring ensures that any slippage in an individual's attendance or attainment level is quickly addressed. The service has improved its personal education plans and these are a more effective working tool. However, foster carers are not routinely involved in the personal education plan meeting and this means they are not fully involved in education planning for the children they foster.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Children and young people report they are listened to and their views are taken into account in day to day decisions and future planning. For example, one said: 'I am always asked what I would like to do and my carer goes out of her way to make sure that this can happen'.

Children and young people know how to complain and have access to good advocacy services, including dedicated children's rights officers. One child reported 'whenever I'm sad my carer will sit down and talk to me about it and give me a big hug'. Another said 'I can speak to my foster carer and my social worker and my uncle. They listen to me'.

The integrated services enable children who have low self esteem to easily access specialist courses provided by the child and adolescent mental health service. Through these, children and young people effectively develop resilience, self esteem and confidence.

There is inconsistency in the level of support provided to enable children and young people to understand their background and heritage. For example, some young people who have lived in long term foster families, have little information about the reasons they are in care and some have few mementoes from previous foster families when they move placement.

Foster carers and children and young people know their individual contact arrangements. However due to the increased demand on the service for supervised contact, there is some shortfall in the arrangements for supporting contact and for some children this has meant curtailment of contact with families at short notice. A parent commented: 'I want more contact, but the process of arranging this is very slow'. The service has made plans to address this with the recruitment of additional contact support workers.

There is inconsistency in the level of information and preparation children receive

prior to a change of placement or a move to a respite placement. For example, despite it being a planned move, one child said 'it was scary 'because they did not know where they were going and had no photographs of the foster family they were moving me to'. Foster carers do not routinely provide a welcome pack or photographs of their home and this opportunity to alleviate children's anxiety at the point of a move is missed. In contrast, some children and young people have been well prepared for a change of placement and this has meant a smooth and successful transition.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is outstanding.

Children and young people report that they receive a very good level of support to develop self care skills so that they know how to look after themselves and are well prepared for future independent living. One said, 'my foster carers help me to think about cooking, cleaning, money, jobs'. They receive support and advice to attend training, college or work. The local authority is developing an apprenticeship scheme and opportunities are available for young people in care to engage in these opportunities. Stability of placement is very well promoted and young people appreciate being able to remain with their carers beyond legal adulthood. Some placements change to supported living arrangements in recognition of children and young people's needs.

There is a 12 week skills for life programme that enables children to develop additional life skills for future independent living. Young people are encouraged to participate in the Children in Care Council where they develop excellent communication skills and influence the development of the service.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The manager of the family placement team is suitable, qualified and knowledgeable. He competently monitors the operation of the service. The local authority is highly committed to providing a good service to children in care and the service continues to grow, with increasing numbers of social workers, foster carers and support workers. The local authority has made a financial commitment to support children and young people to remain in their placements over the next few years. Senior managers are very well aware of the strengths and areas of development for the service and a clear development plan demonstrates direction, prediction and priorities for the future.

Robust and pro-active recruitment of foster carers ensures that the service provides a diverse range of carers to meet children's needs. The service has successfully focused on increasing the number of carers available. A foster carer commented: 'the recruitment drive has been fantastic and opened fostering up to more people'. Responses to enquiries and initial visits take place promptly. To address increasing

demand, the family placement team assessors are supported by independent assessors and experienced social workers from other teams. Assessors are qualified social workers and are appropriately supervised by the family placement team manager. However, the quality of reports varies and some are insufficiently evaluative. For example, some do not sufficiently address carers' competencies and strengths.

An effective and competent panel has the expertise to robustly scrutinise assessments and reviews and make well balanced recommendations to the agency decision maker. The service is increasing the number of panel members to ensure a diverse membership with a broad range of expertise, including experience of receiving social care services. Delays in completing assessments and in annual reviews of foster carer assessments have largely been addressed. The service is taking action to ensure reviews are carried out at least annually.

Children and young people are suitably matched to carers because there is a good procedure that facilitates positive matching. This promotes stability of placements and all children and young people who contributed to the inspection said the service had matched them well to foster families, with over 90% scoring their foster families as 9/10 or 10/10. A typical comment is: 'I love being with my carers. They love me and care about me and I am doing very well'.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The home from home scheme provides respite carers for children with complex needs. Most parents expressed satisfaction with the level of communication and care provided. For example, one said: 'they are extremely understanding and cope with all my child's problems with compassion and common sense'.

The Statement of Purpose provides a clear outline of the aims and objectives of the service and complies with regulations and guidance. The statement is available to carers and is on the website. It is updated annually or more often as required. A separate, equally informative Statement of Purpose is available for those involved with the treatment foster care programme Me2. The children's guide is available in written format only and is not suitable for younger children or those with communication or learning difficulties.

Recruitment of staff is robust and good staff retention ensures a stable and competent staff team from diverse backgrounds. Children, young people and carers report that they are well supported by the family placement team as well as other specialist workers, including education and health services. For example, a foster carer said: 'our supervising social worker is very approachable and supportive' and another said: 'a number of different organisations work together well to provide good care for children'.

Supervision and support of carers is good and staff demonstrate commitment that is recognised and appreciated. For example, parents comment that staff are, 'a credit to Trafford'. Foster carers report that 'support from the family placement team is excellent' and supervising social workers, 'go the extra mile'. However, there is less

satisfaction with the level of support provided by children's social workers and a number of children, young people and foster carers report that communication with some is problematic. In particular, children and young people find it frustrating when social workers do not return their calls or texts. Parents and foster carers also commented on the 'poor communication' from some social workers.

There is inconsistency in the level and quality of information provided to carers so that some do not have good quality placement plans. Some do not have written delegated authority and this impacts on children's daily lives. There is also inconsistency in record keeping between carers, with some keeping no records at all.

A comprehensive training programme provides carers with the necessary skills to meet children's specific needs. Carers are encouraged to undertake the Children's Workforce Development Council's training so that they have a solid knowledge base for caring for children and young people. Carers appreciate the training provided to meet children's emotional needs for example, attachment and separation training. Carers feel that training is of great benefit because it helps them understand children's needs better so that they have the skills to support children well. Some family and friends carers have not completed all the training they need to provide the best quality care to the children they look after.

In response to the integration of services for children locally and since the last inspection, the fostering service has moved to its current premises alongside the social work permanency team, psychologists and health services. This promotes very good communication and working together between children's servicers. The premises of the fostering service are suitable and confidential information is securely stored both on the premises and in foster carer homes.

Treatment foster carers receive good remuneration as well as satisfactory allowances for children's care. Payments for mainstream carers are satisfactory. Family and friends carers are on a different allowance structure and discussions have taken place within the local authority to address this inequality. Family and friends carers do not receive the same incentives as other carers for completing training.

Parents, children and foster carers report that this is a good fostering service. Comments include: 'thank you very much for helping my children', 'I feel I am one of the family' and 'they are doing everything right'.

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 the children's guide is produced in a format which is appropriate to the age, understanding and communication needs of children who may be fostered by the service, including children with learning or communication

difficulties. Ensure also that the document is reviewed annually (Volume 4, statutory Guidance, 4.3, 4.4)

- ensure that foster carers keep a written record of all medication, treatment and first aid given to children during their placement (Volume 4, statutory guidance, 3.62)
- ensure that foster carers are recognised as a core member of the team around the child with an important contribution to make in planning and decision making about the child, in particular in relation to personal education planning and contact arrangements (Volume 4, statutory guidance, 2.5)
- ensure that foster carers are given authority to make day to day decisions regarding health, education and leisure except where there are particular identified factors which dictate to the contrary (Volume 4, statutory guidance, 3.10)
- ensure that children and young people are supported to develop a positive self view, emotional resilience and knowledge and understanding of their background (NMS 2)
- ensure children and young people are given information about the foster carer before arrival and any information (including where appropriate photographic information) they need or reasonably request about the placement in a form that is appropriate to their understanding (NMS 11.3)
- ensure that assessment reports of prospective carers include evidence-based information that is evaluated well (NMS 13.7)
- ensure that foster carers receive a copy of the child's placement plan that is made within five days of the placement (breach of Care planning, placement and case review regulations, Volume 2, part 3, section 9 (2))
- ensure that foster carers follow the service's policy for keeping records (NMS 26.2)
- ensure that the criteria for calculating allowances applies equally to all foster carers, whether or not they are related to the child. (Volume 4, statutory guidance, 5.71)