

Sandwell Local Authority Fostering Agency

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

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Inspector	David Morgan / Carole Moore
Type of inspection	Key

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Date of last inspection	21/08/2006

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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

Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council Fostering Service is part of the local authority Education and Children's Services Department. It provides foster care placements for children and young people who are looked after by the authority. The service consists of three sections: fostering recruitment, fostering support and Friends and Families fostering. The Statement of Purpose says that 'Social workers and foster carers are highly committed to provide a high quality service to Sandwell's looked after children. The service is inclusive, flexible and low cost'. At the time of inspection 201 households were approved and provided 409 places.

Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

This announced inspection was undertaken over four days by two inspectors. Additional time was spent in preparatory and feedback meetings and attending a panel meeting. Questionnaires were sent to a sample of carers and the service managers provided written information. Meetings were held with staff and also health and education professionals.

Issues of equality and diversity were considered in detail and are reflected in this report. The foster care of children with disabilities is largely subcontracted to another organisation.

No complaints have been received by Ofsted since the last inspection. Children and carers raised no major concerns during this inspection.

Overall this was a positive inspection with extensive evidence of good practice and positive outcomes for children. There have been substantial developments since the last inspection and these are reflected in this report. Obstacles to progress have included: not having full and stable staff teams which has resulted in caseloads being unallocated; not having sufficient carers who are able to care for children and young people who present very challenging behaviour or are remanded by the court, and a lack of direct time and resources to target the recruitment of foster carers. Children reported favourably on the service.

During this inspection, inspectors did not consider placements made outside the borough, children with disabilities, preparation for adulthood, life-story work.

Improvements since the last inspection

Matters raised in the last report have been addressed. A support group for the children of foster carers has been set up so that they have their views heard. Staff have received health and safety training to improve their ability to minimise the risks to children and families. In order to ensure placements are made appropriately, foster carer approvals are kept up to date.

Exemptions to carers approval are more closely monitored by the manager and this helps to ensure that exemptions are kept to a minimum and are appropriate to the needs of children and foster families.

Files are now audited regularly to ensure that all the required elements of foster placement agreements are in place, including the consent to medical treatment.

An extensive training programme has been implemented for foster carers and appropriate records are kept. Attendance at training events has increased and this will benefit both carers and children.

A marketing officer has been appointed to help recruit more carers.

Special guardianship orders are outside the fostering standards but are included in the work of the team. The increase in their usage has contributed significantly to the permanence of children's placements and also to workloads.

The number of children travelling by taxi to and from school has been reduced thereby making their daily routines more normal.

A youth club for foster children has been started to provide peer group support.

There has been a significant improvement in the number of annual health assessments of children. This means that any health issues can be addressed more quickly.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is satisfactory.

Health

Agencies within the authority have improved their communication with each other so that health outcomes for children have improved. This is evidenced by the increase in the annual health checks of children. The looked after children's nurse produces and monitors a health action plan for each child. Health action plans are clear about how children's needs are met and address any issues that arise out of the child's ethnicity, race, disability, sexuality, faith or belief. Carers keep up to date records of visits to the doctor, dentist and any other medical appointments.

Supervising social workers ensure that carers are meeting the health needs of children in care and that they are kept under review.

Carers have access to relevant health information via placement planning meetings. Carers are aware of children's health needs and told the inspectors they provide balanced diets.

Carers reported on the high standard of therapeutic support that is available from the Barnford placement support unit.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is satisfactory.

Suitable managers

All managers have been recruited appropriately and are suitable for their positions.

Suitable carers

Carers are well motivated and provide suitable accommodation for children. Foster children have their own bedrooms and this is reflected in procedures. Some households have insufficient communal space and toilet facilities for the total number of individuals living in them. The service and the panel must take these factors into account and ensure they are reflected in procedures.

Some carers speak little or no English. Managers reported that the proportion of carers with no English was falling and that there is always a main carer who speaks English. Training in English is also available. However, some main carers are male and are therefore not providing personal care of girls in their household. This means that significant elements of children's care is not undertaken by the English-speaking main carer. All carers must be encouraged and facilitated to speak English and this must be an important consideration in the assessment of new carers.

The format for health and safety assessments has been improved and staff have received training. Further training is planned for carers. This will help to prevent and reduce accidents. Carers are helped to acquire equipment and adaptations to ensure children are kept safe.

Matching

Interviews and observations indicated that substantial consideration is given to the matching process but this is not evidenced in the records. Satisfactory placement agreements are compiled. Children are helped to develop an understanding of their heritage. Inspectors were unable to compile sufficient evidence to comment on whether children were sufficiently consulted about their placements. However, children reported that they had regular contact with their social workers which indicates they are consulted routinely.

The training programme for carers is being improved so that carers are better able to meet the needs of existing and future placements.

The manager provided evidence of improved attention to extensions and exemptions to carers approvals, which are now under her personal management. The fostering panel have also noted an improvement in this area. The existing procedures governing this matter are satisfactory but the written policy remains unclear.

The number of carers that have no placements is currently approximately 22%. This is a key part of the capacity of the service and contributes to whether or not suitable matches can be made. The manager was able to provide reasonable explanations for

the high proportion of vacancies.

Appropriate use is made of the new Special Guardianship Orders to achieve permanence. This means that children can be placed with people they know and helps to minimise the risk of placement disruption.

Protection

Carers receive pre- and post approval training that helps them to protect and look after foster children. They displayed satisfactory understanding of procedures.

Guidance is provided on all aspects of care including physical intervention.

Records are kept of allegations so that monitoring can occur. The format of records has been improved.

Suitable staff

Appropriate recruitment checks occur and clearances are renewed at appropriate intervals. The manager undertakes telephone enquiries with the referees of candidates but this evidence is not forwarded to the recruitment team.

Link workers and unqualified staff are committed and knowledgeable. Qualified sessional staff are employed for assessments and are supervised by a team manager.

Fostering Panel

The panel has clear written procedures and policies that are implemented in practice. There is an experienced chairperson and effective members who understand the

needs of children. Membership and tenure of the panel were found to be satisfactory. Independent members provide additional expertise in education, health and experience of being looked after in the care system. The recruitment of panel members includes the necessary checks, which were found to be robust.

Observation of the panel and reference to minutes of previous meetings demonstrated that the panel was thorough in its deliberations.

Plans are in place to address the training needs of panel members but other parts of its remit, such as quality assurance and being kept abreast of developments within the service, are currently not addressed.

The decision maker is actively involved in making appropriate choices for children.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is satisfactory.

Diversity

Evidence obtained throughout the inspection indicated that issues of diversity and equality are given a high priority. This was shown during meetings attended by inspectors and is reflected in the high number of staff from a wide range of community groups. Carers are assessed to ensure they can meet each child's cultural, ethnic and religious needs.

Visits to carers homes indicated that children are helped to pursue their talents and interests. Children with disabilities are usually referred to another agency and this area of care was not inspected. Carer training covers diversity and equality issues. Children who are presented for placement are usually able to speak English with

asylum seeking children being the main exception. Their placements are as culturally appropriate as possible and they have access to specialist support.

Education

Statistics show that the authority is improving its educational results for the children it looks after. Foster carers are clear about the need to support and encourage school attendance.

Education for looked-after children is overseen and audited by a specialist team. It was particularly significant that the team were in full support of the authority-wide drive to maintain placement stability as well as maximising educational attainments.

Short-term breaks

An external agency provides the respite care for children with disabilities. Such agencies are inspected separately. However, a respite carer for children with disabilities has been recruited to the pool of mainstream carers.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is satisfactory.

Contact

Statistics show that the number of carers taking children for contact with their birth families is increasing. This is important because it helps to make the arrangements more normal and can contribute to effective communication. Foster carers and parents use a book to communicate about the child during contact; this is good practice.

It was noted that foster carers were managing some complex arrangements with support from the children's social workers and the fostering service worker. This is also good practice because it helps communication and minimises the number of people directly involved.

Consultation

Since the last inspection, the authority has improved its efforts to consult with the children it looks after. This is represented by the Looked After Children Board (LAC Board). The seven children and young people who are members of the LAC Board provide a voice for children from all care settings. It has contributed to policies and handbooks as well as to authority-wide issues like corporate parenting. Managers are aware of the importance of the LAC Board to the development of children's services. Children have regular opportunities to express their views via meetings with their social workers and contributing to their own reviews via consultation documents. Children know how to complain and in the past year five complaints have been made against carers. These are monitored appropriately.

Sons and daughters of carers are involved in pre-approval courses and, this year, a support group has been started for them. This is an important contribution to placement stability.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is satisfactory.

Foster carer allowances

Foster carers were positive about the payments they receive and did not report any concerns. They receive a pay scale higher than the national average and the rates were increased by 3% in April 2007. This has contributed to carer satisfaction with the service and aided placement continuity.

Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

Statement of Purpose

There is a clear and up-to-date Statement of Purpose. All foster children are given a children's guide. However, it is not in community languages or formats appropriate to children with learning difficulties or disabilities.

Management

The management team have the necessary knowledge to manage the service effectively. Substantial changes have been made to the management team which are almost complete. This has had a positive bearing on the quality of the service.

Monitoring

There are clear roles for managers and staff and communication is effective. Improvements have been made to the monitoring of files since the last inspection. Managers have the benefit of information from a substantial number of monitoring tools which have contributed to maintaining and improving service quality. However, there is insufficient focus on the fostering service itself.

Staff organisation

Staff are organised effectively and there is a clear management structure. Managers are appropriately experienced and qualified and there is adequate administrative support.

The adequacy of staff and carers

Shortfalls in the complement of staff have been clearly identified and are addressed through a strategy that includes use of agency staff and ongoing recruitment. Staff retention is considered to be strength of the service. A Community Support Worker joined the service in April 2007 and provides additional support to carers, particularly where a case is unallocated.

There is a clear strategy in place to recruit carers and particularly those who can meet specific needs.

Staff training

New staff receive induction training and there is a training programme for the use of all staff. The training team ensure that all the issues raised in the National Minimum

Standards are covered and also the Children's Workforce Development Council Induction standards. A spreadsheet is maintained of training that staff have attended. Training opportunities include post qualifying course for social workers and National Vocational Qualifications for carers. Social workers have also attended health and safety training, as recommended in the last inspection. The training team are planning to attend carers pre-approval training to contribute to its effectiveness and provide a more 'joined-up' service.

Supporting staff

Policies and procedures are in place for the guidance of staff. Staff were aware of the procedures. However, several procedures were out-of-date or undated, for example, foster carer support and supervision. It was also found that some procedures were insufficient, for example, regarding the distinction between visits by a member of staff and supervisory visits by a qualified social worker. Staff have regular supervision meetings.

Supporting carers

Carers receive regular supervisory visits, which were evidenced in files and by carers themselves. Unannounced visits and support groups are also part of the system of support. Foster carer agreements are in place as required and guidance is available in the foster carer handbook. Updates to the handbook are sent to carers and suitable alternative sources of support are also available. Carers reported difficulties contacting their social workers and few of them were aware of the full range of methods available, for example, email. This has caused delays and frustration. Service social workers have easy access to children's social workers.

Training of carers

The service ensures that carers are offered suitable pre-approval training. Carers felt that this training was appropriate and useful. Records indicated that post-approval training in the six months to March 2007 was undertaken by about 70% of carers. This is a substantial increase in uptake but training also needs to occur for the remaining carers who are not on the tracking spreadsheet. National Vocational Qualification assessments are undertaken as well as courses to train other carers.

Children's records

Children's records in the fostering service are not up-to-date. However, those kept by the children's social worker are current. Life story work by carers was not inspected. Carers keep records. However, the nature and quality of such records varies substantially. The service is introducing a new recording procedure at the moment.

Premises

Suitable accommodation is provided by the service. Interview rooms are available but are not sufficiently soundproof: conversations in adjacent rooms can be clearly overheard. Also, staff were heard undertaking confidential conversations in the reception area.

Family and Friends carers

Carers who are family or friends are assessed by the family placement team. This is

a growing area of work that is attracting additional resources, especially as it involves particularly complex family dynamics. Established carers were positive about the improvement in support provided by the service. Gaps in the staff complement are filled by sessional and agency staff.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Statutory Requirements

This section sets out the actions, which must be taken so that the registered person/s meets the Care Standards Act 2000, Fostering Services Regulations 2002 and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider(s) must comply with the given timescales.

Std.	Action	Due date
1	make available children's guides in community languages and also in formats appropriate to children with learning disabilities (Regulation 3)	28/09/2007
4	monitor and review the performance of the service (Regulation 42)	28/09/2007
6	ensure there is sufficient communal space and toilet facilities to meet the needs of all the occupants of households (Regulations 27, 28)	28/09/2007
6	encourage and facilitate all carers to speak English and this must be an important consideration in the assessment of new carers (Regulations 27 and 28)	28/09/2007
8	ensure that evidence of the matching process is placed on records (Regulation 20)	28/09/2007
19	implement the planned training and development programmes for staff (Regulation 21)	28/09/2007
23	implement its policy on post-approval training of carers (Regulation 17)	28/09/2007
26	make arrangements to ensure that all conversations in reception and adjacent rooms are confidential (Regulation 23)	28/09/2007
30	implement a training programme for panel members including an induction programme for new members (Regulation 21)	28/09/2007
30	address the quality assurance function of Panel and keep members abreast of developments within the service (Regulation 26)	28/09/2007

Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further the registered person should take account of the following recommendation(s):

- consider pre-approval and pre-placement whether foster carers homes have sufficient bathing and toilet facilities and integrate this into procedures (National Minimum Standard 6)
- encourage and facilitate all carers to speak English and establish in procedures whether or not non-English speaking carers will be recruited in future (National Minimum Standard 6)
- send evidence of telephone reference enquiries to the recruitment team for filing (National Minimum Standard 15.3)
- compile a policy regarding extensions and exemptions (National Minimum Standard 8)
- review, date and amend as necessary all policies and procedures and circulate to staff and carers (Standard 20)
- monitor as outlined in the regulations applying to independent agencies (National Minimum Standard 4)
- consider alternative ways in which carers can maintain contact with staff and distribute such information
- implement the information recording policy with all carers (National Minimum Standard 25).