

Dudley Local Authority Fostering Agency

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

This is the fostering service of Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council. It is based in the centre of Dudley in a building shared by other Social Services workers. The fostering service has also developed a therapeutic fostering service, based on the Oregon model. The project is called Flipside and has seven foster carers. Four young people are currently placed with foster carers in this project.

The service has 206 foster carers who are providing placements for 355 young people.

Foster carers receive the Fostering Network recommended allowances.

Summary

The overall quality rating is inadequate - notice of action to improve.

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

This is an announced key inspection. It focuses on the 17 key Standards relevant to this fostering service. These include National Minimum Standards (NMS) relating to health, staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution and organisation. The inspection also included consideration of NMS 29, relating to payment to foster carers and National Minimum Standard 2, 5, 22 and 26, relating to the management of the agency and its premises and the support to foster carers. The inspection considered the progress made by the fostering service in meeting the requirements and recommendations made at the last inspection.

The inspection found that the fostering service had made only limited progress in meeting outstanding requirements and in some areas there has been a deterioration in the service provided by the fostering service due to a serious lack of resources. There are serious concerns regarding the assessment and support of family and friends foster carers.

Improvements since the last inspection

A number of requirements and recommendations were raised at the last inspection relating to safety and organisation; they centred around gathering appropriate information, staffing levels and the suitability of the accommodation. Many of these have not been dealt with adequately, impacting on the quality of the service offered to children, young people and their carers.

The fostering service has developed foster placement agreements, which are used for planning placements for young people and identify the needs of the young person

and how they will be met. The service has issues guidance regarding medical consent and consent for school trips and holidays.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is satisfactory.

Foster carers encourage young people to lead healthy lifestyles. They ensure that young people receive appropriate medical and dental treatment, encourage healthy eating and an active lifestyle. This is supported by the authority who provide swimming lessons for young people and free access to leisure centres. Foster carers are expected to record information about young people's health and provide an update at the young person's statutory review.

Almost 80% of young people have received an annual health assessment, which is undertaken by the Looked After Children's (LAC) nurse. In some cases a health plan is developed, but supervising social workers are not provided with a copy of this and therefore cannot ensure, during supervision visits, whether foster carers are implementing the plan.

Foster carers do not always receive all appropriate information about a young person's health needs at the time of placement and on occasions have to wait many months before this information is available. Whilst guidance has recently been issued delegating consent for routine treatment to foster carers if parents have given their consent, on occasions foster parents do not have either a foster placement agreement or LAC placement plan for the young people placed. Consequently there is no clarity regarding who can give consent for medical treatment. This has the potential to result in young people's health needs not being met in a timely fashion.

Foster carers are provided with training in respect of first aid, paediatric first aid and the administration of medication so that they can meet young people's health needs. Guidance is also provided in the foster carer handbook.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is inadequate.

Whilst foster carers keep young people safe, by providing warm, safe environments in which young people are cared for, the processes the authority have in place to support young people's safety are not sufficiently rigorous.

Young people often have to share a bedroom with another young person, due to a shortage of foster placements. Details of risk assessments are not on the appropriate files, and foster carers are not aware of risk assessments being completed regarding young people sharing bedrooms. The service's referral form and foster placement agreement do have space for the completion of risk assessments but do not specifically refer to risks in respect of sharing bedrooms and is therefore reliant upon the young person's social worker including this information.

The fostering service undertakes health and safety assessments of foster carer's homes and cars at the time of a foster carer's initial assessment and these are renewed on an annual basis. Nonetheless, health and safety assessments are not being undertaken consistently. For example, some health and safety assessments have not been completed at the time of the initial assessment and others have not been updated.

The fostering service is unable to appropriately match young people to foster carers with the right skills and experience to meet their needs, as the service does not have sufficient foster carers. Due to a lack of available placements, siblings often cannot be placed together and trans-racial placements are made. Young people with challenging and complex behaviours are placed with newly approved, inexperienced foster carers, as these are usually the only foster carers who have no other young person in placement and therefore meet the need for a singleton placement.

The fostering service has developed a matching assessment form, however, it does not then match this to the foster carers' skills and experience. In addition the foster placement agreement does not include information as to why a young person is matched with a foster carer, so does not demonstrate how well young people are matched with foster carers. The matching of young people to suitable foster carers is seriously hampered by a lack of available places. Consequently, the matching process is not being effectively used as the main criteria as to whether a young person is placed with a foster carer. Rather it is whether the foster carer has a vacancy. The exception to this are placements within the Flipside project, where young people are very carefully matched with foster carers.

The service has a high number of exemptions; this is where more than three young people are placed with foster carers. An even higher number of young people are placed outside a foster carer's approval. Whilst some foster carers are able to meet the young person's needs, national research and evidence provided from within the service confirms that this results in an increase in placement breakdown, further traumatising the young person. The exemptions do not cover all required areas, for example, whether the placement can meet the needs of all the young people within the placement, including the foster carers' own children. The service does not provide foster carers with a copy of the exemption and exemptions are not always returned by the Head of Service to confirm agreement with the exemption.

There are clear child protection policies and procedures in place, these were updated in December 2007 and staff and foster carers receive training in respect of child protection issues. Safe care training is provided for foster carers both during the pre-approval training and in post-approval training and they receive a copy of Fostering Network's Safer Caring booklet. Nonetheless, safe caring documents are not in place in all placements. The fostering service has issued guidance regarding safe caring and the need for foster carers to complete their own safe caring plan, however this is not being done consistently.

Risk assessments are completed prior to a placement being made. These are on

most files, although foster carers frequently do not receive a copy and are often not given detailed information about the young person being placed with them prior to placement to enable them to make an informed decision as to whether they can keep the young person safe and meet their needs. The child's social worker do not always complete the required information.

The fostering service keeps a record of allegations made against foster carers. There has been eight allegations made against foster carers in the past year, with disciplinary action being taken against one foster carer. However there is often long delays before strategy meetings are held and before investigation are completed. This has the potential put young people at risk and is stressful for both the young person and foster carers.

The nominated manager and staff are suitable and appropriate checks and references have been undertaken in respect of their appointment. Checks and references have also been undertaken in respect of foster carers assessed by the fostering service. However, checks in respect of family and friends foster carers have not been undertaken as required, with delays of months in some cases before Criminal Bureau Record (CRB) checks have been sought. This delay could potentially put young people at risk as workers cannot be confident that the carers are suitable. This affects a large number of children.

The panel is properly constituted, has an independent chair person and wide range of experienced practitioners as panel members. Minutes of meetings are extremely detailed; however, they do not identify in what capacity members sit on panel and therefore do not show whether panels are quorate.

The panel considers all new assessments of foster carers, including those undertaken by district social workers in respect of family and friends foster carers and the first review of all foster carers. Minutes of meetings and other records indicate that panel are approving family and friends on an interim basis and that this decision is being endorsed by the agency decision maker. This is not permitted under existing legislation.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is satisfactory.

The fostering service has clear policies regarding valuing diversity for staff and foster carers; however, these policies are not always not into practice effectively. For example, there is higher breakdown of placements for young people from black or mixed race backgrounds but the reasons for this is not explored. The fostering service has a number of trans-racial placements but there is a lack of support for such placements. There is only limited training to support these foster carers, with staff from black or minority ethnic backgrounds being requested to provide support in addition to their normal workloads. There is no recognition of the additional costs for hair and skin care, with foster carers not receiving additional allowances to meet these specific needs.

The fostering service has a lack of placements for young people with disabilities; this results in young people with disabilities either being placed in a residential unit, which does not allow them to experience family life or with foster carers from an independent agency, which could potentially result in them being placed a distance from family, friends and support. Foster carers do have access to training in respect of disability issues to assist them to meet the needs of any young person placed with them.

Foster carers and the fostering service place a high priority on supporting young people's education and support is given to young people to pursue leisure activities to enhance their self-esteem. The fostering service holds award ceremonies to celebrate and recognise the achievement of children in care in a wide range of fields.

Young people and foster carers are provided with support from the Looked After Children's Education (LACE) team, who provide additional support where a young person is experiencing difficulties at school. There is a lack of support for those young people who are excluded from school. For example, during the inspection a young person was being supported in the office by staff because he was excluded from school. This is not appropriate as it cannot fully meet the young person's educational needs and could lead to breaches in confidentiality, due to the open plan nature of the office. The majority of young people placed in foster care obtained one pass at GCSE and a minority gain five or more passes.

The provision of short term breaks for children with disabilities is contracted to an independent fostering agency and is no longer the responsibility of the local authority's fostering service.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Foster carers and the fostering service ensure that young people's contact with family and friends is given a high priority. Most foster carers assist in facilitating contact for young people placed with them, with some foster carers managing very complex arrangements. However, written risk assessments are not undertaken regarding contact, although the foster placement agreement has room for generic information regarding risk assessments. Arrangements for contact are recorded on young people's files and are reviewed at young people's statutory reviews to ensure that they remain appropriate. However the arrangements to support contact are not always applied consistently.

Young people are listened to by their foster carers. Foster carers advocate strongly on behalf of young people to enable the young person's views to be taken into consideration. Young people have regular opportunities to express their views at meetings with their social worker and are encouraged to contribute to their own reviews either in person or through the completion of consultation documents. However, there is no formal format for them to give their views in respect of their

foster carers at the annual review.

Young people know how to complain and five complaints have been made about the service in the past year, with three of these complaints being upheld. Young people can access an advocate through the National Youth Advocacy Service if this is required.

The fostering service and foster carers are working with a group of young people through a grant provided by Mediabox to produce a film giving their views of being in care.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is inadequate.

Foster carers receive a fostering allowance, which is in line with Fostering Network's recommended rate. In addition the fostering service operates a payment for skills scheme for its foster carers, with three different levels, dependent on the skills of the foster carers. Due to the lack of funding the scheme is not operating effectively. Very few foster carers have progressed to the next level, although they have the required skills as there is not sufficient money in the budget to support carers at a higher payment level. This is having a negative impact on morale of foster carers and staff and is likely to have a serious impact on the authority's ability to recruit and retain foster carers.

Organisation

The organisation is inadequate.

There are insufficient foster carers and staff to make the service either efficient or effective. There are strategic problems regarding the management of the fostering service, especially in respect of the assessment and support of friends and family foster carers. The authority's therapeutic programme of foster care is not monitored internally to assess the outcomes for young people, with managers, staff and foster carers stating that there is often a conflict between the services for limited resources.

The fostering service has a clear statement of purpose and carers' handbook to provide information to foster carers and parents, so that they understand the service. The service has developed a children's guide, which contains useful information for young people regarding the fostering service but is not child friendly, which could result in young people not understanding the information it contains.

The fostering service is managed by an experienced service manager, who is responsible for a team of qualified social workers who support foster carers. The team is provided with a good level of administrative support. Supervising social workers are well supported by the manager and assistant manager and receive regular supervision and information at fortnightly team meetings. Nonetheless, due to a lack of resources, morale has declined in the past year, as staff feel that the

service is undervalued within the authority.

The fostering service does not have sufficient staff to enable it to effectively recruit, approve, supervise, support and train foster carers and ultimately to provide suitable safe placements for young people. The social worker, who supports family and friends foster carers once they have been approved, supports an excessive number of foster carers. This is unmanageable, especially when many of the foster carers do not understand the worker's role or that of the local authority regarding the placement of young people with them.

There is a lack of understanding of the role of the fostering service within the wider children's directorate, with supervising social workers frequently undertaking tasks, which should be undertaken by the young person's social worker. There is poor communication between the different teams, which exacerbates this situation.

The fostering service has 142 foster carers, 58 family and friends foster carers, seven therapeutic foster carers providing placements for 355 young people placed. This does not provide a sufficiently diverse pool of foster carers to provide enough suitable placements for young people. The majority of foster carers have two or three placements. In addition, as previously reported, the service has a high number of exemptions to the normal fostering limit and many young people are placed outside foster carers approval range.

Assessment of prospective foster carers is undertaken by members of the fostering service, with the exception of assessments for family and friends foster carers, which are still undertaken by area social workers, who do not fully understand the requirements of the Fostering Services Regulations 2002. Assessments of mainstream and Flipside foster carers are of a good standard and provided robust assessment of the prospective carer's ability to provide good quality care for young people likely to be placed with them. This is not the case with respect of assessments of family and friends foster carers. Assessments do not cover all areas required and do not contain checks in respect of the safety of the premises. There are frequently considerable delays in obtaining CRB checks in respect of household members. Consequently the assessments of family and friends foster carers do not protect the young people placed with these foster carers.

Foster carers receive support from their supervising social worker, who provides regular supervision, although records do not always accurately reflect the level of support offered. Dudley Foster Care Association is very active and offers a great deal of support to foster carers and the young people placed and includes support for foster carers' birth children.

The foster care agreement, which identifies the roles and responsibilities of foster carers and the fostering service, requires updating as it is not compliant with the current legislation. It does not accurately reflect the support available to foster carers as it indicates that foster carers will only receive two supervisory visits per year. Annual reviews of foster carers' approval are undertaken by supervising social workers and signed off by the team manager or assistant team manager. There is no

independent scrutiny of these reviews except for first reviews, which are presented to the fostering panel.

The fostering service is accommodated in a large, open plan office in the centre of Dudley. The office has been partitioned to provide interview rooms but these provide little privacy. A lack of sound proofing results in conversations being overheard by occupants of neighbouring rooms. This could result in a breach of confidentiality, especially as some young people undertake therapy sessions in these rooms and staff have supervision with their managers.

Payments for Family and Friends carers are inconsistent. Support is not always available for purchasing essential equipment for the children and fostering allowances are not always being paid automatically at the time of placement.

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
12	ensure that all carers are provided with written information regarding the health needs of any young person placed with them and the arrangements for giving consent to medical and dental examination or treatment. Regulation 17 (3)	14/03/2008
6	ensure that where a child has been abused or has abused another child, a recorded risk assessment is carried out before any decision is made to allow sharing of bedrooms. Regulation 12(1)(a)	14/04/2008
6	undertake a health and safety assessment to ensure that there are not avoidable hazards within the household of all foster carers, including family and friends foster carers. Regulation 27 (2)	14/03/2008
6	review, at least annually, the safety and suitability of foster carers' homes. Regulation 29 (2)	14/03/2008
8	make placements only, that are clearly within a foster carer's approval range and for which they have the appropriate skills. Regulations 33 and 34	14/03/2008
8	ensure that foster placement agreements are completed, meet the requirements of Schedule 6, and contain specific reference to elements of matching. Regulation 34 (3)	14/04/2008
8	ensure that where an exemption from the usual fostering limit is granted the requirements of Schedule 7 are fulfilled. Children	14/04/2008

	Act 1989 Schedule 7(4) (2)	
9	ensure that foster carers receive all information to enable them to appropriately care for the young person placed and to keep them safe. Regulation 17 (3)	14/03/2008
9	ensure that strategy meetings are held promptly and that investigation of allegations against foster carers are undertaken without delay. Regulation 12	14/03/2008
15	undertake CRB checks and other appropriate checks in respect of all foster carers, including family and friends foster carers and as a matter of priority where a young person has already been placed with foster carers. Regulation 27 (5)	14/03/2008
30	review the fostering panel's practice of recommending interim approvals for family and friends foster carers. Regulation 38	14/05/2008
13	ensure that any education provided for any young person is efficient and suitable to the young person's age, ability, aptitude and any special educational needs they may have. Regulation 16 (3)	14/05/2008
29	review the payment structure for all its foster carers, including for family and friends foster carers and analyse the effect this will have on recruitment and retention. Regulation 44	14/05/2008
17	ensure that there are sufficient experienced and qualified staff to meet the needs of the service. Regulation 19	14/05/2008
17	ensure that all social workers who undertake assessments of foster carers have received appropriate training in the assessment of foster carers. Regulation 19	14/05/2008
17	improve the range and number of carers to meet the needs of children and young people. Regulation 33	14/05/2008
22	ensure that all foster carers have an up to date foster care agreement which includes all the matters as set out in schedule 5. Regulation 28 (5) (b)	14/04/2008
32	ensure that all foster carers including family and friends foster carers are assessed and supported as necessary to support the interests of children placed with them Regulation 17	14/05/2008

Recommendations

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

- enable each child or young person to receive health care which meets her/his needs with reference to supervising social workers having access to young people's health plans. NMS 12.1
- monitor each child or young person being placed in foster care to ensure she/he is carefully matched with a carer capable of meeting her/his needs with reference to copies of all exemptions being placed on the foster carer's file. NMS 8.1
- ensure that safe caring guidelines are in place for each foster home. NMS 9.3
- develop the policies and porcedures of the fostering panel to include in panel

minutes the designation of all panel members. NMS 30.1

- value the diversity of children and young people by reviewing payments available to foster carers who have young people placed with specific hair and skin care requirements. NMS 7.1
- undertake a written risk assessment prior to contact taking place between a young person and their family. NMS 10.6
- seek young peoples views as part of the foster carer's annual review. NMS 11.1
- develop a more child friendly children's guide. NMS 1.5
- develop the arrangements of foster carer's reviews by considering arrangements to enable independent scrutiny of these reviews. NMS 21.2
- maintain an accurate record of work undertaken by workers. NMS 25.1
- ensure that the premises used as offices are suitable for the purpose by exploring solutions with regard to sound-proofing and privacy NMS 26.
- ensure that family and friends foster carers receives an allowance and agreed expenses, which cover the full cost of caring for each child or young person placed with him or her, and that this is compliant with the Mumby Judgement. NMS 29.1