

Southend Fostering Service

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

Southend Fostering Service is part of Southend-on-Sea Borough Council. The fostering service is managed within the Department of Children and Learning, Specialist Services. The service is a significant aspect of the provision offered to looked-after children. At the time of the previous inspection, in January 2007, Southend fostering and adoption services were jointly managed. The service was restructured, to effectively separate these two services, and a dedicated fostering service manager is now in post and is supported by a dedicated social work team and administrative staff. The fostering team is responsible for the recruitment, training and support of foster carers. The service currently supports 93 carer households, currently offering 143 placements for young people. The service is located in shop front office premises near Southend town centre.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This visit is a Key inspection of the service looking at standards identified by Ofsted as key areas of care. The overall judgment is based on the outcomes of the standards inspected. The service provides a good standard of practice in all key outcome areas for children. No significant shortfalls have been identified in this inspection and only three recommendations have been made. The service performs particularly well in the outcome groups related to being healthy and positive contribution. The service is very well managed to ensure the needs of staff, carers and placed children are met consistently and that placements are well supported.

The separation of the fostering service from adoption and the appointment of a permanent manager, with a clear vision and a dedication to improving outcomes for young people fostered in Southend, has raised the profile of the fostering service within the authority's provision for looked after children. Service development has been positively supported by senior management. Social worker support for carers is good and carer support groups are strongly encouraged. Administrative records and individual records relating to carers and young people are well maintained and securely stored.

Improvements since the last inspection

All the requirements and recommendations from the last inspection report have been addressed though some are still being developed by the service. These include the need to recruit more foster carers, especially from different ethnic backgrounds and the development of the computerised register system.

In response to the requirements, from the last inspection, the service has; improved the system for recruitment checks; developed links with psychological health services ;ensured case files contain all the required information in sufficient detail; ensured kinship carer's assessments are completed.

In response to the recommendations, from the last inspection, the service has; ensured that risk assessments with regard to sharing bedrooms are completed; carers are more involved in placement decisions; improved links between the placing social workers and the service's social workers; ensured that unannounced visits to carers are achieved; developed life story work with young people and their carers; ensured prompt payments to carers.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

The service promotes the health and development of children. One young person says, 'I get a lot of help with healthy eating.' The service provides carers with comprehensive health information on the children and young people who are placed with them. There are clear procedures governing the consent for medical treatment. The files that were looked at had evidence of medical consent being granted.

Carers feel well supported by the Looked After Children's (LAC) nurse that who is available to them through the fostering service. One carer says, 'we have a LAC nurse who is available to us for on-going help. We are offered training on anything relevant to our role as carers.' Foster carers confirm that good health care is appropriately prioritised and that young people attend medical appointments as necessary. The health checks and appointments, for young people, are monitored by the LAC nurse who has regular contact with carers and offers support and advice. The carers' handbook also includes good guidance on the promotion of physical and emotional health and wellbeing. Carers keep health records for children.

The service offers carers and young people access to training on various subjects including personal health awareness. The service has developed good working relationships with different health agencies that support both carers and young people. For example, the service is part of a multi-agency group currently developing a health directory for foster carers and young people. Foster carers are provided with good access to medical advice and support where needed. The needs of children with disabilities are well met. The service provides support, links and access to appropriate health, social care and advice networks for carers working with children with disabilities. For example, 'Team Around the Child' (TAC) meetings are held and attended by carers and all other agencies involved in the care of the child. These meetings discuss and review the service provision for the needs of the child concerned. Carers demonstrate an excellent awareness of the needs of children with disabilities and access appropriate agencies, training opportunities and professional to help them meet the needs of the children in their care.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

Children are protected through regular and thorough checks on all staff, including the manager and those carrying on the service. Young people are placed with carers who have been subject to a comprehensive assessment. Part of the assessment process involves ensuring that the environment provided to children and young people is safe and secure. Health and safety assessments are updated regularly at annual reviews. Risk assessments produced include pet questionnaires and risk assessments in relation to the sharing of bedrooms. Carers are provided with guidance in relation to health and safety, though their training does not cover basic hygiene issues. Fostering supervising social workers carry out unannounced visits and health and safety checks of foster homes.

There is a good standard of matching children to placements. The service shares information with carers to make sure they are well prepared to care for the children. Information on matching is recorded on the carer's files. There are times when exact matching is not possible, for example in placing some children from specific minority ethnic groups. In these cases the service uses other recourses to make the matching good enough. Examples of other resources that are used includes other carers acting as mentors, the child's extended family, community groups and specific books and toys. The service also uses four preferred agencies to offer alternative placements for young people that they are unable to place in the local area. The placements with these agencies are assessed and monitored. The agency is developing its local provision through continued recruitment events, with established carers and social workers in attendance. Those carers visited felt the children placed with them had been well matched to their families. A social care professional linked to the service says, 'I feel that the team of social workers are committed to ensuring high standards in terms of placements meeting the needs of children.'

The service provides safer caring guidelines to all foster carers through the carer's handbook. Carers are aware of the need to implement 'safer caring' guidelines and receive training as part of their pre-approval training. Each foster family has produced a set of 'house rules' that protect everyone in the household. Young people feel safe and well cared for. Their comments include, 'I feel part of a valued family', 'They look after me', 'My carer thinks about us before anything else' and 'My carer is kind, helpful and loving.'

The fostering service works to protect children from abuse and neglect. Child protection matters are covered in initial carer training. In addition carers are expected to undertake specific child protection training. The service takes allegations made against carers seriously. As part of the service's safeguarding procedure carers who have been the subject of allegations are taken back to the fostering panel following the conclusion of the investigation. This provides the service with a formal opportunity to consider any implications for the children in its care. When necessary carers are de-registered. Carers are provided with support during any investigations.

The service's foster panel is well organised and effectively ensures good quality decisions are made about carers. Clear, written policies and procedures are in place covering the operation of the fostering panel and the chair confirms that these are implemented in practice. Prospective foster carers are provided with information about the panel process. Observation of the panel and discussion with the panel chair indicate a clear objective to promote and safeguard the welfare of children. Panel members are subject to a robust vetting procedure and receive training appropriate to the task. The panel includes experienced and qualified members, who actively contribute to discussions with regard to assessments and reviews of carers. The panel has access to medical and educational expertise.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The fostering service values diversity. Training in diversity is included in the initial skills to foster training course. On-going training with regard to diversity is provided. However, evidence from training records indicate that the uptake of diversity training is limited and this can limit carers' understanding of the needs of young people from different ethnic backgrounds. The service and the foster carers council acknowledge that the number of carers from different ethnic backgrounds are limited. They are committed to increasing the numbers through recruitment events.

The service is supported by an education liaison officer and advisory teacher. They work well with social workers and carers to ensure that the educational needs for the young people are met. They demonstrate a good awareness and commitment to enabling and supporting the young people and their carers to maintain school placements and build upon the young people's achievements. The service gives a high priority to meeting the educational needs of children. The service uses an external agency to monitor the achievement and attendance levels of the Looked After Children from their area. Figures provided to the service indicate that the vast majority of placements across the agency maintain stable full-time school attendance.

Carers take an active role in encouraging children in education. Carers spoke of attending school meetings and of encouraging young people to complete homework. Young people feel well supported by their carers and the agency. Their comments include, 'I am helped as we always talk about my future, college, work and being responsible', 'We have a lot of school books at home to look at', 'I receive the right help about school from my carer'. The fostering service is well supported by the local authority that takes its role as a 'corporate parent' seriously. The service has also developed good links with the sports and leisure services and uses these to promote sport and leisure opportunities to foster carers and fostered children. A number of leisure activities and outings have been organised for foster carers and young people. Carers consider their role in the education and social development of young people as important and feel supported by the service in helping the young people achieve their goals and potential.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

The fostering service promotes contact for the children who it cares for. The manager has improved the contact system, since the last inspection, as all contact is arranged by designated workers and the local family centre is used to support contact time. Foster carers recognise the importance of contact for children. Contact arrangements are recorded on children's records and there is good practice in promoting contact in individual cases. Consideration is given to safeguarding the welfare of children and carers during contact. Carers are aware of the need to monitor and record children's behaviour after contact.

The young people say that they know how to make a complaint and who they can talk to if they are unhappy. Their comments include, 'when we do complain they sort it out', 'My carer always listens to what I have got to say', 'Any time I am upset, my carer takes it into consideration and deals with it' and 'My carer always looks at me when I am talking'. Information about how to complain; how to access an advocate; how to be sure of their rights; all about fostering is made available to them in child-friendly formats. The National Youth Advisory Service (NYAS) is contracted by the authority to provide a children's rights service.

There is a significant commitment to consultation with children and young people. The young people say that they are involved in their care plans, reviews and education planning meetings. They feel listened to, as do their carers. Carers are very aware of their role and are supporting young people to raise issues of concern when necessary. One carer's comments include, 'We have a youth council for youngsters to have their say. At reviews each young person is given the opportunity to have their say, either in private or with invited persons. The service is developing events for foster carers children to attend. Regular social events for all carers and young people take place throughout the year. The carers feel well supported, listened to and appreciate the opportunities to meet up with other carers and their children. It is evident that the fostering service is committed to ensuring their Looked After Children in their care have the opportunity to be heard and listened to.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

There is a clear statement of the aims and objectives of the fostering service. There is also a user-friendly children's guide. Both documents are under review. The separation of the fostering service from adoption has brought clarity to management

and staff roles and much better defined lines of accountability. The fostering service manager is dedicated and enthusiastic and has effectively led positive developments in service provision since her appointment to this post. Her enthusiasm and commitment have raised the profile of the service. One carer says, 'the service has greatly improved recently and is working well towards more improvement.' A health professional says, 'I feel that they are working hard to meet improved outcomes for our local Looked After Children and young people.'

Senior managers monitor the service and make changes to improve the service. There is a clear management structure and the manager has appropriate skills and qualifications. There is good staff retention and staff are positive about the service and their managers. The service has an adequate number of experienced and qualified staff. Although staff are busy they are currently able to perform their jobs appropriately. Staff are well supervised. The quality and commitment of manager and staff helps to ensure that the service runs well and that children are well cared for by the service. There is a thorough assessment of carers. Supervising and placing social workers report improvements in communication between childcare operational staff and the fostering team with improved understanding of and respect for one another's roles.

The fostering service has fully clarified its expectation of carers in relation to training in the foster care agreement. An excellent training programme is provided for both staff and carers. However, the uptake of training by some foster carers is insufficient. The manager is aware of this shortfall and recognises that carer training needs are to be monitored and developed. The service has begun to implement the Children's Workforce Development Council's standards for fostering with a pilot group of twenty carers. There is also a good awareness of the need to develop targeted training for family and friends and kinship carers. These carers are well supported by supervising social workers and provided with information to help them with their role.

The staff team feel well supported by their manager. Training and support is delivered through the introduction of 'learning sets' for qualified staff in the field, adoption and fostering teams. Integrated training days are organised and attended by foster carers and other link agencies such as the LAC nurse and education team workers. A recent training day on attachment theory and current practice was well attended and much enjoyed by carers and staff.

Carers feel well supported by the fostering service. Their comments include, 'I have a hard working supervising social worker. I receive on-going advice and support' and 'I feel that I have good communication with my supervising social worker and know that any phone calls and queries will be answered asap.' A number of carer support groups operate and carers receive regular supervisory, support and unannounced visits from their supervising social workers. The service has developed a carers council that meets regularly and looks at issues and areas for development for both carers and young people and is involved in service consultation events. The development of carer's area meetings, coffee mornings and the carers council is much appreciated by the foster carers, especially as they are attended by the manager and social workers. One carer says, 'I am privileged to be involved in a lot

of additional foster meetings - area representative meetings - foster carer council and to see the work that goes on 'behind the scenes'.'

There are comprehensive records for children as well as staff, carers, complaints and allegations. Carers are given guidance on recording and support workers review the carer's records. Life story work is done with support and guidance from the linked family centre. These records help children to understand and know some of their past as well as providing information which is useful in reviewing their care. Excellent pieces of work are completed by the young people with careful input from their carers and support workers. As one young person says, 'I have been helped with my past and now I am ready for my future.' The support provided, for young people and their carers, by this service ensures that the future of the children in their care is positive.

General administrative records and individual records relating to carers and young people are generally well retained. Records enable a good consistent oversight of children's welfare and placement suitability. Those children's records seen showed a good chronology of their lives and contained the necessary information. Children's records are well maintained and organised. The service ensures that confidential records and information are stored securely. Carers are aware of the need to keep up to date records of the care provided to children in their care and ensure that significant information is shared with the service. The overall level of administrative support is very good. Computer-based records and data collection generally support paper records though the computerised version of the register has yet to be completed. Records of key events and incidents are well maintained.

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):

- ensures that their foster carers support and encourage each child to develop skills to help him/her to deal with all forms of discrimination. Foster carers' preparation and training cover this. National Minimum Standards 7.5
- ensure that foster carers preparation and training cover health and safety issues. NMS 6.7
- ensure that carers undertake on-going training and appropriate professional and skills development. Carers maintain a training profile. National Minimum Standard 16.9