

Stockport MBC Fostering Services

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

Unique reference number	SC043216
Inspection date	04/09/2007
Inspector	Sue Winson / Stella Henderson
Type of inspection	Key

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Date of last inspection	06/11/2006

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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

Stockport MBC (Metropolitan Borough Council) has a fostering service which provides a range of placements to meet the needs of children and young people. These include permanent and temporary foster care and emergency placement, child specific carers who care for their relatives, carers who provide a short break service and mother and baby placements. A service manager and two team managers are responsible for the supervision and management of the social work and support staff.

Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

This inspection was announced and all key standards were assessed. The fostering service continues to meet the needs of children and young people placed and strives to improve outcomes for them. Improved staffing and increased support to foster carers contributes to this.

Improvements since the last inspection

Improvements noted in the last inspection report have been sustained and consolidated and have had an impact on the quality of services provided to children and their carers. The increases in staffing of the fostering service allow for planned developments to be implemented. There is an evident enthusiasm and commitment to improve and develop the service to achieve even better outcomes for children and young people.

Improved recording in several areas allows the service to demonstrate that effective care planning is taking place and that children's needs are being met in foster placements. Family finding for those children who need long term placements is improving in its effectiveness and is being monitored by the managers.

Links with other services and agencies, many of which are well established, continue to develop, for example, health, Education Support Team and mental health services, and benefit young people. There are improved relationships with social work teams despite the tensions which inevitably arise.

Foster placement agreements comply with Schedule 6 of Regulations.

The commitment to consultation continues and alternative ways of eliciting views and opinions have led to improved participation.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

Managers, staff and foster carers are clear about their roles and responsibilities in safeguarding and promoting the health and development of children and young people, and demonstrate that they do so effectively. There is a clear expectation that placing social workers will provide health information for all children prior to placement or as soon as possible afterwards. This largely happens in practice. The service monitors the quality of this information through supervisory visits and Looked After Children (LAC) reviews. Foster carers know the health needs of young people and work to ensure they are met.

Children in foster care are registered with a GP, dentist and optician and receive specialist services as necessary. Young people are given information about a range of health and support services (both within and outside of the authority) which they can access directly. The implementation of a new health policy has improved health planning and simplified the arrangements for children's annual health assessments. The take up of health assessments is monitored both for in-house placements and for those children placed with other agencies.

There is a well established multi-agency approach to meeting children's health and development needs. Links with mental health services have strengthened to improve access for young people. A designated Educational Psychologist offers support and advice to Family Placement Officers (FPO's) and foster carers. The LAC nurse is on panel, is available for advice on specific issues, attends team meeting and is involved in training.

There is a policy on administration of medication in foster homes and an effective system for FPO's and managers to monitor the use of prescribed medication and homely remedies. Foster carers receive training on a range of health issues, health promotion and child development. Sports schemes and a leisure key are available which help to encourage and promote exercise and healthy living. The National Healthy Schools Agenda is making progress in Stockport, and children in foster care and their carers benefit from these initiatives.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

The fostering service is managed by people who are suitably experienced and qualified. Checks are renewed as necessary and records of references are retained.

The service retains a strong focus on child protection, has links with the safeguarding unit and provides training for foster carers. Foster carers safeguard the welfare of children and young people in their care. All statutory checks have been carried out prior to foster carers having children placed and there are systems in place to monitor when these need to be renewed. Annual reviews and supervisory visits focus

on the provision of a safe and healthy environment and comprehensive health and safety assessments are updated annually. Safe caring strategies used in foster homes are reviewed as necessary. Policies are in place which give information to foster carers on bullying, safe care, transport and the use of car seats and missing from home. The use of encouragement and positive behaviour management strategies is evident. The service does not provide training on physical intervention unless there is a specific need to do so and foster carers are then trained individually. Appropriate monitoring is in place and foster carers inform the service of significant incidents in writing.

There has been an improvement in the quality of information provided to the fostering service by placing social workers to inform matching. The service's matching policy has been revised and the family finding and planning processes for long term placements have been significantly strengthened. Written foster placement agreements contain reference to elements of matching and specify how children's needs will be met.

The recording and information held in staff personnel files does not allow the service to demonstrate that the recruitment and selection procedures had been followed in practice. For example, there is no record of telephone enquiries to verify references or was evidence of qualifications. The information in two of the files was not in order so could not be checked.

The fostering panel meets regularly and is properly constituted with members bringing a wide range of expertise to their roles. The panel has access to medical expertise and the service is trying to recruit a person with experience of the care system. It is well organised, well supported administratively and effectively chaired. Panel discussion is robust and rigorous and positive comments were made about the quality of assessments of foster carers. Reasons for decisions are clearly outlined in letters to applicants but are not always included in panel minutes. Applicants are invited to attend panel. The wording of some of the recommendations made by panel is not legally correct and has been addressed.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The service values diversity and promotes equality. There is a rolling programme of diversity and equality training which all staff attend on a regular basis. All training for staff and foster carers incorporates anti-discriminatory practice and venues and times vary to allow everyone to access them. Equality Impact Assessments are undertaken on all new policies. Training for staff and foster carers incorporates anti-discriminatory practice. The service has links with the authority's Disability Database Manager and carers and young people have information to allow them to engage with appropriate services.

Young people are supported in education and encouraged to engage in leisure activities. The fostering service works closely with the Educational Support Team

(EST) who are planning to set up a virtual school to improve outcomes for children and young people. Arrangements are in place for the education of children who are not attending schools. EST staff are involved in placement planning, training and provide advice to foster carers. Foster carers are aware of the educational needs of young people in their care and communicate well with education staff to meet those needs. There is an established practice in Stockport of young people receiving educational achievement awards at an annual event held at the Town Hall.

There have been positive developments in the short break service but lack of staff has delayed progress. Short breaks in Stockport provide respite for children with disabilities and are also used to prevent children coming into the looked after system. There is a recognition that parents remain the main carers, and examples were given where foster carers follow their wishes and guidance. Many of the fostering service's policies and procedures also cover the short breaks service and the supervision and support of carers is the same as in mainstream fostering. The quality of assessments is high and full information about the children is held. Children's views are recorded and their participation is evident.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

The service maintains a continuing commitment to contact arrangements, which are clearly outlined in the planning processes and which foster carers encourage and support. Where arrangements are complex planning meetings are held to address any issues which arise. Considerable time is spent by foster carers on supporting contact. Both pre-approval and ongoing foster carer training addresses children's rights to contact and working in partnership with parents.

The fostering service, and Stockport MBC, have well established systems for consultation and demonstrate a commitment to meaningful participation. The authority has a children's participation officer who has recently written to all young people asking for their views. Notice is taken of those young people who do not wish to receive questionnaires. They are continuing to look at alternative ways to elicit views and opinions. Children attend reviews and complete a consultation document or speak with the chairperson. All statutory reviews are held within the time requirements. Young people have access to a Children's Rights Officer and know how to contact her. Some young people have been trained to take part in recruitment and selection of staff. Examples were given where decisions and practice have been changed as a result of listening to children. Children and young people who returned the inspection surveys said they were listened to and asked for their opinions.

Foster carers are involved in service development and have been consulted on a variety of issues. They are involved in planning and delivering training

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

The statement of purpose has been updated and contains all the necessary information about the services provided. It is reviewed and revised as needed.

The fostering service is now almost fully staffed and is managed effectively and efficiently by people with considerable experience, skills and qualifications. The appointment of a second team manager has improved the support to staff and allowed the service manager to concentrate on her responsibilities for the wider, strategic develop of the fostering service. Roles and responsibilities are clear for managers and staff. The fostering service is an integral part of children's services in Stockport and has strong links and good communications with other services. The managers and staff take responsibility for all aspects of children's care and improving outcomes.

Monitoring has continued to improve at several levels. File audits are carried out at regular intervals and remedial action identified. Foster carers are sending in written notification of events, which are collated by the managers and supervision of staff serves to inform managers of any concerns. Records demonstrate that child protection issues, allegations and complaints have been dealt with appropriately and that all necessary agencies are informed of significant events.

The service has a well qualified, experienced and skilled team of social worker and support workers. Staff retention is good and there is a commitment to improving practice and outcomes for children throughout the fostering service. Staff are well supported and supervised and only those who are suitably qualified carry out assessments. Annual appraisals and personal development plans are in place. Team meetings are held regularly and communication within the team is effective. Managers are available and accessible on a day to day basis and staff are well supported and managed. The managers ensure that the work of the team is carried out in a timely fashion and prioritise and monitor workloads. Placements with independent fostering agencies are monitored through LAC reviews and social workers' visits. Plans to develop a comprehensive policy for the use of agencies has been delayed.

Training for staff and foster carers is effective in equipping them to meet the needs of children and young people. There is a wide range of topics and outside trainers are brought in as necessary. Strong links with SMBC's staff development team continue and the fostering service is able to request courses to meet specific needs. Staff can initiate training. Pre-approval training for foster carers is continually

evaluated and amended or updated as necessary. Carers value training and have gained knowledge and skills which they put into practice to improve outcomes for children and young people.

A co-ordinated and well planned recruitment strategy is in place. This includes a media campaign and clear aims about the number and range of carers it aims to recruit. There is presently a focus on recruiting and training foster carers who are able to take young people who have had several placements and who will need a range of support to achieve stability. The service has a specialist person in post with business background to work on the strategy. A range of recruitment materials continue to be produced in different languages and a free interpreting service is available. Foster carer assessments are comprehensive and outline the potential, strengths and support needs of applicants. The reports include clear recommendations based on evidence.

Foster carers continue to be well supported and supervisory visits are carried out within the timescales set by the service. Support and supervision agreements are in place. Foster carers who were visited and those who completed surveys were positive in their comments. Support is also available out of normal office working hours. The recording of supervisory visits have been improved to include the five outcomes under Every Child Matters and action planning. Foster carers and placing social workers contribute to carer's annual reviews which provide full information and assessment of their skills. Reviews are carried out by a mini-panel for second and subsequent reviews where there are no issues necessitating consideration by the fostering panel. The service has reviewed the support groups and made some changes to allow more carers to attend.

The service also provides outreach workers to carry out focussed pieces of work which support children and young people in placements. There are plans to extend this service to all children aged seven years or older and two extra staff have been recruited. Records of outreach workers' involvement over the last year include service agreements which clearly outline the support that will be provided and when it will be evaluated and reviewed.

The authority has an electronic records system and is in the process of transferring paper records. All files seen were well organised and well ordered. Foster carers are trained in recording and do so in a clear and factual manner. Improvements to the administrative support to the fostering service continue. Arrangements are in place for a member of the staff to deputise when the administration manager is absent and roles and responsibilities are clear. Funding is in place so that permanent staff can be employed and trained rather than relying on agency workers. The manager is clear about the improvements that she plans to implement once the full complement of staff are employed.

The premises are to undergo alteration this month in order to provide two extra team rooms which will significantly improve staff working environment. There are an adequate number of lockable cabinets for secure record retention.

Outcomes for children placed with child specific carers are monitored and reviewed. The improvements in the service provided to child specific carers has been sustained since the last inspection. Alternative legal routes are discussed with the carers who receive the support and training to assist them in meeting the needs of children placed with them. The assessments of child specific carers are comprehensive, carried out in a timely way and are presented to fostering panel.

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):

- implement a monitoring system within the fostering service to ensure that all necessary information is recorded in personnel files (NMS 15)
- continue with planned developments to the short break service (NMS 31)
- implement policies and procedures for the monitoring of placements with independent fostering agencies (NMS 16).