

St Helens Council Fostering Service

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

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Inspector	Sharon Lloyd
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Date of last inspection	19/12/2007

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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

St. Helens Social Services Fostering team are based in Atlas House, St. Helens, close to the town centre.

The fostering team's function is to recruit, assess, train, supervise and support foster carers who provide care for children and young people. The team also assesses and supports private foster carers and raises awareness amongst the public and other professionals about private fostering. Short break carers provide respite placements for children with disabilities.

The office accommodation is on the ground floor of the building and a small public car park and large staff car park are available. The team has sufficient space for its function, including access to meeting rooms. A 'hot desk' arrangement is in place and staff report that this is successful and workers are able to carry out their duties appropriately. The team is based with other children's social work teams and the looked after children nurse. This aids communication between teams. The manager is based with the team and senior managers are also on the premises and easily accessible so that communication at all levels is good.

The service currently supports 137 approved fostering households who look after 164 children. Of these, 64 children are with family and friends carers.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

A proportional announced inspection of the service included meeting with 11 foster carers and 9 fostered children as well as staff. Three foster families were visited. 21 children, 1 parent and 10 foster carers completed questionnaires and their views were taken into account. Professionals working alongside the service also contributed to the inspection.

St Helens fostering service has many strengths and much of its practice in supporting foster carers and children is outstanding or good. The number of foster carers has grown rapidly in recent years and staffing levels have not kept pace with the demands of the service so there is a heavy reliance on agency staff to assist with administrative support and assessments of new carers. Many family and friends carers are supervised by community support workers to reduce the burden on qualified social workers so they are not getting the same quality of supervision as mainstream carers. Assessments of family and friends carers are not carried out within the regulatory timescales and this places children at risk of exposure to unsuitable carers.

Improvements since the last inspection

No actions were raised following the last inspection. Two recommendations for good practice were made. One was to provide foster carers with training in sudden infant death syndrome and this has been addressed. A number of foster carers have completed this training and further events are to be held in the future. The second recommendation was to develop the out of hours support to carers. This has also been addressed. Residential support staff provide out of hours telephone support and community support workers give additional practical support at weekends and during the evenings. This has contributed to the sustainability of placements for challenging children because foster carers are receiving a high level of support when they need it.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Good consultation with the Looked After Children (LAC) nurse and other health professionals ensures that children's health needs are effectively assessed and met. Foster carers receive a high level of support and training to enable children to live healthy lives. Good nutrition is promoted and children's mental health and emotional wellbeing are prioritised so that children build resilience. Children's individual health needs are regularly reviewed so that they continue to receive the treatment and advice they need. Foster carers have consent to routine medication, although some could not find it for inspection. The service is reviewing its procedures for providing medical consent because the current system has resulted in delays for some children in receiving the treatment they need.

Young people confirmed they are encouraged to lead healthy lives and receive the health advice, support and treatment that they need. They have been involved in designing a healthy meals cook book for use by foster carers and young people to promote more healthy eating by foster carers and looked after children. Meals include a selection of recipes from other cultures.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The service has developed substantially under the leadership of an experienced and competent manager who receives good professional support. This means that children and young people receive a good standard of care. Criminal Records Bureau checks at the appropriate level are taken up on all staff prior to them taking up post and are renewed every three years. Not all written references are verified by telephone. This means the service cannot be assured of their validity and compromises the good practice otherwise in place to protect children from contact with potential abusers.

Children are cared for in foster homes that are safe and well maintained. They are kept safe because foster carers are trained in safe caring and safeguarding and this is a priority within the service. Only one incident of a child being missing from home within the last 12 months is recorded in the log. At least one further incident has been reported to the police but it has not been recorded in the log and this means that management information used to monitor the service is not wholly reliable. In both instances, appropriate action was taken to safeguard the child. Complaints and allegations against carers are investigated and referred to the safeguarding team as necessary. Recommendations made as a result of these are followed up so that children's wellbeing and safety are promoted.

Children's diverse and sometimes complex needs are taken into account when they are matched with foster carers. Care is taken to ensure that carers have the skills to meet individual children's identified needs and that children are placed within the terms of foster carers' approval. Additional training is provided to carers to ensure they have the skills and knowledge they need to look after particular children. For example, carers of children who have suffered abuse or self harm are offered appropriate training in these areas. This results in a low number of disrupted placements and children usually only move placement in a planned way. Disruption meetings identify any foster carer training needs and help to inform plans for children's future placements so that children are placed with carers who have the skills to meet their needs.

Children are matched to long term carers carefully. This is because comprehensive matching reports and assessments are considered by the permanence panel and recommendations are then made to the agency decision maker. This process is also followed prior to special guardianship applications so that an up to date assessment of children's needs and carers abilities to provide a caring and stable home is provided to the court. Where children's needs cannot be met within the service, specialist foster placements are secured through agency placements and are carefully monitored.

The fostering panel is appropriately constituted and checks and references are taken up on panel members. However, in some instances checks and references have not been completed before a panel member starts work. This means that the service allows people to have access to potential carers' and children's confidential information before they have ascertained their suitability for the work. This compromises children's welfare.

The fostering panel is well organised and provides quality assurance feedback to the service through the panel advisor and the panel minutes. On one occasion since the last inspection, the panel has met without being fully quorate in that there was no social work representative present from the service. This means that recommendations made on that occasion were made without the expertise of a registered social worker and crucial scrutiny may have been missed.

The panel works as an effective safeguarding body and approvals are only made where all information is available and all checks are completed on prospective carers.

The agency decision maker scrutinises panel papers and recommendations before coming to a decision and records are maintained of her comments and the reasons for her decisions.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The service recruits carers from a range of backgrounds who can meet the diverse needs of the children requiring placements. It values diversity and equality and considers each child's particular and diverse needs prior to placement. Foster carers receive training to equip them to meet children's identified needs. For example, specialist training is available in meeting the needs of teenagers and in providing sensory stimulation for children with a range of sensory impairments.

Education is promoted and valued and children receive support and advice to reach their potential. Children confirm that booster lessons and private tuition are available to support them with their learning. The service provides guidance to its carers on supporting educational achievement. Carers value education and promote good levels of attainment.

Wherever possible and appropriate, children are placed within close proximity of their school and continue to attend the same school from their foster placement. Transport is provided to enable children to travel to school where necessary so that the level of disruption to a child's education is minimised. School attendance and performance are closely monitored and action is taken to address any issues that arise. Children's level of educational attainment is rising because education is prioritised.

The fostering service ensures that foster parents promote the leisure interests of children placed with them. Free leisure passes are provided so that children can easily access sporting activities. Additional funding is available to enable children to participate in educational activities that interest them. For example, this money may be used to pay for such things as a laptop, school trip or dancing lessons. Community support workers assist foster carers by providing transport and additional supervision on outings and by taking children out for some individual time and leisure. Foster carers value this support and children enjoy the time they spend with the community support workers.

The development of the short break service during the last 12 months means that the fostering service has a number of short break carers available to children with complex health needs who remain living with their families. Short break carers have received good information about their role and the need to work closely with parents.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

Children and young people are consulted about matters that effect them and routinely contribute to their reviews. Their comments and opinions are sought prior to the annual foster carer review. Two participation groups meet with the children's rights officer and contribute to the planning and development of the fostering service. For example, young people have been involved in developing the new recruitment strategy and in interviewing staff. Representatives from the young people's participation group attend the corporate parenting forum and routinely contribute to strategic planning. Young people have been assisted to develop a website for the use of children in local authority care and have designed a range of publicity materials including a DVD and a written children's guide to the service.

Consultation methods for children who use the short break service are not yet developed. However, children are just starting to be matched with carers and have not yet been placed. The matching process takes place over an extended period with parents and children visiting the carers until parents feel their children are secure and happy with the carers and are confident to leave them for a short break. Excellent care profiles are provided for children and families who use the short break service so that children can familiarise themselves through photographs and written information with their prospective short break carers.

Children maintain contact with their families and friends because the service ensures that foster carers know the contact arrangements and support children to attend contact visits. Community social workers supervise contact where necessary and keep records. Children are regularly consulted about contact arrangements and their views are considered in making alterations to arrangements. There have been some instances where children have missed contact because it has been postponed when community support workers have not been available to supervise it. The service has reviewed the arrangements for supervising contact to prevent such incidents from happening.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is outstanding.

The fostering service works closely with the leaving care team to ensure that young people receive the support, advice and guidance they need in preparation for adulthood. They are encouraged to attend higher or further education or to engage in apprenticeship schemes so that they are equipped for future independent living. Training is available to help carers prepare young people for moving towards independence. Young people confirm that they receive guidance about such matters as sexual health and self care. They are consulted about their futures and involved in planning. Young people who wish to remain with their foster carers until they reach 18 are enabled to do so and consideration is given to funding placements beyond this where it is in the young person's best interests. Foster carers are encouraged

and assisted to apply for special guardianship orders to secure children's futures when this is appropriate and agreed with placing social workers. Funding is available to support children on special guardianship orders up to their 18th birthdays.

Foster carers receive payments above the fostering network guidance and additional payments are linked to skills and training. This means that children live in households that are economically sound and where there is sufficient funding to meet their needs. Additional financial resources are available to fund children's activities and develop their talents. Funding is available to enable foster carers to learn to drive so that they can transport children themselves and reduce the impact of being looked after on children. This provides children with greater security and a higher quality of life because they are no longer reliant on public transport or assistance from community support workers.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

A detailed written statement of purpose accurately outlines the services provided to children, their families and foster carers. It is available in a selection of languages as well as in Braille and British sign language so that it is widely accessible to most sections of the community. A specialist statement of purpose provides information relating to the short break service for children with disabilities and complex health needs.

The children's guide is aimed at children who can read. It has been designed by children in foster care and covers all the main issues for children including contact arrangements and how to complain. It does not currently meet the needs of the many younger children in foster care or those with communication difficulties.

Recruitment of carers has been prioritised and the service has grown substantially in recent years so that a range of foster carers is available and this enables good matching of children to foster families. Although there has been an increase in social work staff, this has not kept pace with the increase in foster carers and children using the service so that some respite carers and friends and family carers are supported and supervised by community support workers. This means they are not receiving high quality supervision from qualified staff. Some carers have not received supervision in accordance with the service's policy. The service recognises this shortfall and is introducing new systems to ensure that all family and friends carers receive supervision from a qualified social worker.

The staff team is well organised and responsibilities are clearly defined. However, the staffing complement for the service is not sufficient to meet its needs. The team is supplemented by a number of contract social workers who focus on carrying out mainstream assessments and an additional administrative support worker. This means that most social workers have manageable workloads. However, because of the successful recruitment of a number of short break carers, the workload of the supervising social worker specialising in short breaks is becoming excessive. This

means that foster carers who are matched to children for short breaks do not get the level of support the service would like to provide to ensure they are meeting children's needs effectively.

Thorough assessments of carers are carried out by qualified social workers who are registered with the General Council for Social Care. Experienced and qualified agency social workers assist the team with this task to enable permanent staff to supervise and support foster carers already approved.

Viability studies are carried out by the placing social worker on prospective family and friends carers where children are placed in an emergency. The carers are brought to the fostering panel within six weeks of placement. The studies provide limited information, including an emergency police check and the quality is varied. Foster care assessments do not begin until after the viability study has been to panel. Assessments are not always completed and approvals made within reasonable timescales and some children live with family and friends carers for up to 12 months before they are approved as foster carers. This means that children may be living with carers for several months before the service makes a decision about their suitability and this procedure puts children's welfare at risk.

The service's current procedures allow for children who are placed with short term foster carers to move to live with family and friends carers before an assessment of their suitability is made. This compromises children's welfare and is in breach of regulation 34 that requires an assessment of carers to be made prior to the placement of a child except in the case of an emergency.

Foster carer reviews are carried out annually and presented to the review panel. This ensures that foster carers' work is monitored effectively and changes to approval are considered as necessary so that children are placed with carers who can meet their needs. Appropriate monitoring arrangements are in place to ensure that children living with agency foster carers continue to receive a high level of service. Children who are settled in long term, stable agency placements remain there even though placements are available within the service. This is because children's attachments are valued and their emotional welfare and stability are given high priority.

Staff receive regular one to one supervision and attend routine team meetings and a range of training events. This enables them to deliver a good service to foster carers so that they can provide high quality care to children. Excellent relationships exist with a full range of other professionals and children are usually referred quickly for additional support. Older children receive help and advice from a specialist nurse who is based with the leaving care team and easily accessible to them. Supervising social workers work closely with children's social workers and with foster carers to ensure children receive the best possible care.

Good systems are in place to support carers, through visits, telephone calls and e-mails as well as a range of support groups, supervision and training. In addition, some foster carers receive practical support from the five community support workers. This includes taking children out, babysitting and transporting children. This

is particularly valued at weekends and during school holidays. Respite care is available for children who need this and together the support measures available enable challenging placements to be sustained so that children have good continuity of care in stable placements. This helps them to develop self esteem, social skills and resilience.

Training courses have been reviewed to ensure they meet the Children's Workforce Development Council standards and carers receive financial incentives to attend three training sessions a year. An increasing number of foster carers are attending training and are developing their skills in looking after children with a range of needs. For example, training is available in topics such as helping bereaved children, supporting children who self harm and developing healthy lifestyles. Foster carers contribute to the training strategy group and influence the range of training provided so that it meets their needs. Short break carers have additional training that supports them to meet the specific needs of the children they look after.

The service is well monitored and management information is collated and used to provide an overview of the operation of the service and to plan future developments. There are minor shortfalls in some of the information held in that not all incidents are recorded in the appropriate logs. This means that the manager does not always have accurate, reliable information to inform developments of the service.

Foster carers' and children's files are mostly well kept and demonstrate that children are well supported in their placements. However, there is evidence of some slippage in meeting responsibilities to children and carers where appropriate documents are not completed and supervision is not well recorded. Files are audited by managers so that shortfalls are addressed.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Children's complex, diverse and individual needs are identified and met. Carers are recruited to meet the needs of the children needing placements and children are carefully matched with carers who have the skills and competencies to provide good quality care.

Constant monitoring of the service ensures that action is taken to address shortfalls and embrace new developments. This means that the local authority is continually improving the service it provides to children in foster care.

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
30	ensure that the panel is quorate every time it meets and review recommendations and decisions made at the panel held in January 2008 (Regulation 25)	31/03/2009
17	ensure that carers are appropriately assessed before children are placed or within six weeks of an emergency placement with family and friends, in line with regulations 34 and 38 (Regulation 34, 38).	31/03/2009

Recommendations

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

- ensure that foster carers have a written health record for each child placed in their care that is updated during the placement and moves with the child to any future placement and that it contains parental consent to medication and treatment (NMS 12)
- follow up written references on staff with a telephone call (NMS 3.2)
- ensure there are requirements about the suitability of foster panel members, including Criminal Records Bureau checks and that no panel members are allowed to begin work until all checks have been satisfactorily completed (NMS 30.3)
- ensure that the fostering service's administrative records contain all significant information relevant to the running of the service as required by the regulations (NMS 25)
- provide the children's guide to the service in different formats to meet the needs of different groups of children and ensure that children receive a copy as soon as they are fostered (NMS 1.5)
- ensure that each approved foster carer is supervised by a named, appropriately qualified social worker and has access to adequate social work support (NMS 22.3)
- appoint an adequate number of sufficiently experienced and qualified staff to meet the needs of children for whom a service is provided and ensure that the full time equivalent staffing complement is adequate to meet, at all times, the needs of the fostering service in line with its statement of purpose (NMS 17.1).