

Sheffield Local Authority Fostering

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

Unique reference number	SC043767
Inspection date	10/03/2009
Inspector	Stella Henderson
Type of inspection	Key

Setting address	Floor 2, Exchange Street, Sheffield, South Yorkshire, S1 2AH
Telephone number	0114 273 5155
Email	
Registered person	Family Placement Service (scc)
Registered manager	
Responsible individual	
Date of last inspection	13/08/2007

© Crown copyright 2009

Website: www.ofsted.gov.uk

This document may be reproduced in whole or in part for non-commercial educational purposes, provided that the information quoted is reproduced without adaptation and the source and date of publication are stated.

You can obtain copies of The Children Act 2004, Every Child Matters and The National Minimum Standards for Children's Services from: The Stationery Office (TSO) PO Box 29, St Crispins, Duke Street, Norwich, NR3 1GN. Tel: 0870 600 5522. Online ordering: www.tso.co.uk/bookshop

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

Sheffield Family Placement service provides foster care as part of a full range of accommodation for looked after children and young people.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

The purpose of this visit was to follow up on recommendations made at the last inspection and to undertake a key inspection. Six outcomes were inspected: Being Healthy, Staying Safe, Enjoying and Achieving, Positive Contribution, Achieving Economic Well-being and Organisation.

Improvements have been made since the last inspection and there are several project and pilot schemes underway aimed specifically at improving outcomes. The manager and staff have the appropriate training, skills and knowledge to provide a good level of support to foster carers and the children and young people who are looked after.

There are no significant weaknesses relating to health and safeguarding. Procedures are in place that make sure that children and young people are protected and kept safe from abuse. Foster carers make sure that health care needs are met so that the good health of children and young people is maintained. There is satisfactory management oversight into how the service is running and the manager already has an action plan in place to address some of the shortfalls identified in this inspection.

Improvements since the last inspection

At the last inspection several good practice recommendations were made, such as ensuring that any sharing of bedrooms are risk assessed and that mandatory checks are in place prior to people beginning their employment with the fostering service. It was also recommended that fostering panel develop its quality assurance role. Evidence from this inspection demonstrates that these recommendations have been met. A requirement to ensure that all children and young people placed in independent fostering agencies with care plans was also met.

Recommendations were made to ensure that the service increase the numbers of children and young people who have personal education plans and that all family and friends assessments are conducted within required timescales. These recommendations have not been met and are raised again for a second time.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

The general health, development and well-being of children and young people is underpinned by a well-managed and consistent process that assesses their health needs, supports foster carers to meet these needs and identifies where specialist services are required. Health assessments are undertaken at an early stage of admission to the service and the majority of children and young people receive annual health assessments thereafter.

Registration with primary health care services is routine, and specialist help is sought where necessary, such as referrals to the child and adolescent mental health services. Carers are provided with a wide range of training on health matters, including those specifically affecting black and ethnic minority children, such as sickle cell anaemia and thalassaemia. One carer commented that they received 'training on health and healthy eating and supervision includes talking about children's health - physical, emotional and mental'.

The fostering service takes an effective approach to health promotion. Developing a sensible attitude to healthy food is one example of this and ensures that children and young people have an understanding about eating well and maintaining a proper diet. At events for children and young people healthy snacks are always provided. One young person noted in their survey that 'My carer always talks to me about being healthy and what foods are good for me'. This promotes the health and well being of children and young people in the short term and equips them with information to help them make healthy choices in future.

Specialist Looked After Children nurses work closely with children, young people and their carers and help to facilitate drop-in sessions for older teenagers and care leavers. The fostering service works well with colleagues in health agencies and one stakeholder commented that 'liaison meetings are held at management level to iron out any issues before they become problems'. The fostering service protects younger children by not allowing smokers to foster children under the age of five years and a stakeholder commented that 'the fostering team has made good progress with smoking protocols'.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The fostering service ensures that children and young people are safeguarded. Fostering managers and staff are all suitably qualified, experienced and skilled practitioners. There is close attention to safe working practices in the teams and children and young people are seen frequently by a range of professionals. The service works well in partnership with the local safeguarding board, children and

families teams and other agencies. One stakeholder commented in their survey that 'carer newsletters features articles around safety aimed at carers and children'

Children and young people benefit from living in safe, healthy and nurturing environments. One young person commented in their survey 'I have been in care for eight years with the same carer and I feel I have been looked after very well and I know she will be there for me when I leave care'. Another commented 'I'm very happy with my carers and school and everything else'. Clear matching processes ensure that children and young people are placed with carers who have the necessary skills and competences to meet their individual needs, however aspects of the foster placement agreement are not compliant with regulations.

Children and young people are looked after by carers who are themselves effectively supported. Once approved the fostering service ensures that foster carers are fully supported with good access to training, unannounced visits and reviews of foster carer competences against standards. One foster carer commented that 'supervising social workers support us by listening to us, acting on our behalf and getting information for us'. Regular supervision also takes place however national minimum standards do not allow for supervision of foster carers by student social workers.

Foster carers stated that the fostering service has improved since the last inspection and one carer described their supervising social worker as 'capable and confident, always prompt in getting back to me'. Health and safety checks are undertaken on an annual basis and each foster family has safe caring guidelines usually with specific reference to the individual child or young person they are caring for.

Children and young people are also protected through other safeguarding measures including recruitment practices which are comprehensive and thorough with checks and references. Foster carers are supported in acquiring specific equipment or adaptations needed to ensure that children and young people with disability are kept safe. Records are kept on the number of foster children and young people who abscond and on those who have accidents, with action taken if concerns or patterns emerge.

Children and young people have access to children's rights workers and there is a good deal of information about how to make a complaint. One stakeholder commented that 'complaints by children and young people about carers are always responded to robustly and promptly', and all allegations against foster carers are thoroughly investigated and carers de-registered where necessary. Procedures are unclear, however, on the thresholds for referrals through the Protection of Children Act.

The fostering panel is organised to be effective with the safety of children and young people central to its deliberations. The fostering service approves only those individuals who can meet rigorous standards of approval and prospective foster carers are subject to thorough assessment and scrutiny. Panel does exercise its right to refuse to recommend unsuitable applicants and the agency decision-maker also takes an active part in the approval process.

The fostering panel is supported by efficient administration and panel advisers who, commented one panel member, 'seem increasingly to be prepared to ensure that practice issues raised by panel members are actively considered and reported on'. The quality assurance role of panel has improved since the last inspection and all first reviews of foster carers go to panel however panel is not provided with management information about subsequent annual reviews of carers.

The fostering panel consists of a wide range of child care professionals including a care experienced individual and access to medical and educational expertise is in place. All members are recruited subject to providing appropriate references and checks.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Children and young people are provided with services that value diversity and promote equality and the fostering service is good in ensuring that their needs are met in terms of gender, religion, ethnicity, culture, disability and sexuality. Investment has been made in providing information, training and support to foster carers to help them to provide appropriate care for children and young people from diverse backgrounds. Some examples of this include 'Ideas for supporting a child's identity', 'Practical advice for caring for a black child' and 'Working with Children with a Disability'.

Returned surveys note that carers, parents and stakeholders confirm the service addresses issues of culture, ethnicity and disability in either a good or outstanding manner. One carer commented in their survey that training around equality and diversity is 'outstanding. Lots of training is offered about this'. The fostering service represents the community it serves although it is always seeking to recruit a more diverse range of carers. The fostering panel is unbalanced in terms of ethnicity and gender but the manager is actively seeking to address this.

The fostering service ensures that all children and young people are supported to do well and to reach their potential. It uses available resources and any additional support or help identified to meet the educational achievement of children. There is an expectation that carers will attend parents evenings and provide an environment that is conducive to study.

Computers are provided for all fostered children and young people, and there is access to funding for specific educational needs. One young person commented in their survey that their carers were 'very helpful in what I do at school' and a carer stated that there was 'lots of help given in gaining secondary education for one of my placements'. This otherwise good practice is undermined by the fact that only 88 out of 227 young people have the personal education plan to which they are entitled.

Enjoying and achieving is seen as important in its widest sense. Children and young people participate in a range of extra-curricula activities and are offered the opportunity to engage in a wide range of cultural and leisure activities, helped by access to leisure facilities which is free or at a reduced cost. These opportunities help children and young people to develop positive self-esteem as well as equipping them with new skills and interests.

Specific short term break services are provided for children and young people with disability. This ensures they receive expert care and support from carers who recognise that parents remain central to the promotion of health and educational needs. One parent commented in their survey that the fostering service is 'outstanding in making sure my child is well cared for', and another that 'our children use respite care and there is good communication between all parties concerned'.

Appropriate support and specific training for carers is available, and there is good practice in that young people transferring to adult services have person-centred plans that are written in the first person. This enables young people to feel valued and have the opportunity to have some choice over future plans.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is satisfactory.

The fostering service ensures that children and young people are helped to make sense of their family relationships and for contact arrangements to be successful. Contact is organised in a way that enables children and young people to feel safe and, where older children are concerned, to exercise an element of choice and control.

Such arrangements are discussed at an early stage of the placement and are detailed in care plans. Any restrictions on contact are made clear and effective risk assessments are in place where required to establish the level of supervision required, if any. This enables young people to maintain their links with family whilst ensuring that everyone involved in the arrangement is, as far as possible, safeguarded.

Children and young people are listened to and their views and experiences taken seriously. Asked whether carers listened to what young people have to say one young person commented 'she has no choice - I'm loud!' and another that carers 'acted upon the problems I have'. Stakeholder, foster carer and parent surveys were positive on this issue and included the comments 'children are more encouraged to be involved with the service they receive' and 'children with disability cannot always give their views but the service always tries to involve the child to the best of the child's ability'.

Children and young people are asked for their views and experiences of the fostering service, either through surveys or open-door meetings with the head of service, and

there is a corporate parent in place who has regular consultation and contact with children and young people. The majority of children and young people attend their statutory reviews and it is clear from the minutes of such meetings that their views are incorporated into the proceedings. As well as reinforcing a sense of self-confidence, this enables children and young people to feel respected and valued by the service.

There is however inconsistency in representing children and young people's views at fostering panel. In surveys and discussion panel members reported concern about the infrequency with which children and young people's views are brought to panel, especially where decisions are made about their long term future. One panel member commented that 'I am struck by the fact that the appearance of and sometimes reports from the child's social worker is a rarity'. Several comments in panel minutes note concerns about the lack of this kind of information such as 'panel would have liked more fieldwork information and the views of the child'.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is satisfactory.

There is some good practice with regard to helping young people with the transition to independence. Where pathway planning has been implemented in a timely fashion by the team known as 'No 92', young people are prepared for adulthood and are helped to develop the skills, competence and knowledge necessary for independent living.

Pathway plans in these instances have very clear targets and objectives and details who needs to do to ensure young people have the appropriate services in place when they leave care. Consultation with young people is clearly evident during this process, and one young person commented in their survey that pathway planning has 'helped me gain independence in everyday tasks'. Young people who are continuing their education are supported up to and beyond the age of 18 years wherever possible.

There are instances however, where pathway plans are either not in place or have been put in place considerably beyond their 16th and sometimes 17th birthdays. This aspect is not the primary responsibility of the fostering service although foster carers, with the support of their supervising social workers, encourage young people to acquire skills such as budgeting, opening a bank account and learning household tasks, for example.

There was no evidence that any training or clear guidance has been provided for carers on how to support young people when they are leaving care and a foster carer commented in the council's own survey that 'I feel that this (No 92 service) is the weakest part of the link when children are at a crucial time of their life'. Another carer felt that 'it was the luck of the draw' as to whether young people were allocated a worker or not from the leaving care service.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

Children and young people experience improvements to their development and well being across a range of outcomes. This is achieved by a clear management focus on safeguarding, good practice and the generally effective implementation of a range of policies and procedures.

The management team delivers an effective service that is conducted in the best interests of the children and young people it serves. Managers are approachable and responsive, whilst maintaining clear professional boundaries and exercising proper management responsibility and clear lines of accountability. One stakeholder commented that the fostering service 'works at good communications at managerial levels and the service is much more open than they were'. Another stakeholder stated the fostering service is 'good at working in partnership'.

The fostering service is staffed by a professional, confident and appropriately qualified team of people who are clear about their responsibilities, and are supported by team meetings, regular supervision and effective training. There are suitable staffing levels, work loads are manageable and reflective practice, up-to-date research and legislation informs the work of supervising social workers. For example, lunch time seminars are provided by the local university and staff are able to undertake post-qualifying courses. The fostering service is also good at providing development opportunities for its unqualified staff to gain social work degree qualifications which assists the retention and recruitment strategy.

Children and young people are cared for by people who are themselves supported in the task of looking after young people in care. Through regular support, supervision and training, foster carers are equipped with the skills, knowledge and understanding they need for the task of caring for children and young people. Their competence to care for children and young people is reviewed on an annual basis and safeguarding is reinforced with unannounced visits and updates on health and safety checks and risk assessments. Carers confirm that they feel very well supported by the fostering service and enjoy positive relationships with all of the team members.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Young people receive a service designed to meet their diverse needs as is evidenced by, in general, the level of care planning and the response to changing individual need. Evidence across the five outcomes supports a consistent and effective commitment to improving equality and diversity in practice. This is seen by carers, parents and stakeholders as a strength of the service. The fostering team reflects the community it serves and provides good support for foster carers providing trans-racial placements and in promoting the self-esteem of children and young people.

Children and young people benefit by staying with family members and friends as their primary carers, where such individuals have been successfully vetted, using the same robust processes applied to all other foster carers. Friends and family assessments are not carried out within required timescales, however, this means that children and young people may be in unsuitable placements and cause drift and delay in care planning.

There is suitable management oversight of the systems which protect and promote the well-being of young people. This ensures that children and young people can enjoy environments where standards in the quality of care are maintained in foster homes which offer them an opportunity to develop to the best of their potential. More rigorous monitoring of the service under Schedule 7 of these regulations would however have identified some of the shortfalls identified in this inspection, such as the lack of pathway and personal education plans and the occasional poor quality of care plans.

The privacy and confidentiality of children and young people is maintained by the secure storage of administrative and case records. The majority of information is now kept electronically, and separate logs are held with regards to complaints, allegations, children, carers and staff employed. These are effectively used for monitoring and quality assurance purposes.

The statement of purpose provides a good range of information about the service. The document is regularly reviewed to ensure it accurately reflects what it provides for children and young people in care. This enables young people to know what they can expect from the fostering service and how they will be cared for.

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
8	before making a placement enter into a written agreement (in these regulations referred to as the 'foster placement agreement') with the foster parent relating to the child, which covers the matters specified in Schedule 6 (Regulation 34)	10/04/2009
32	assess all family and friends placements within required timescales (Regulation 38)(2)	10/04/2009

Recommendations

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

- provide fostering panel with management information about the outcome of foster carers annual reviews (NMS 30.6)
- ensuring that each young person preparing to move to independent living is consulted and encouraged to be actively involved in decision making processes and implementation of the Pathway Plan (NMS 14.5)
- ensure that each foster carer is supervised by a named appropriately qualified social worker (NMS 22.3)