

Blackburn with Darwen 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

This local authority fostering service forms part of the borough's services to children and families. Social workers in the fostering team recruit, assess and support foster carers. At the time of the inspection 123 fostering households provided long term, short term and respite care placements to approximately 220 children and young people looked after by the borough council. A further 31 children are placed with independent fostering agencies. The service provides short break care for children with complex needs.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

All key standards were assessed, with a particular emphasis on standards relating to Staying Safe. A proportional inspection was made of standards under Enjoying and Achieving and Achieving Economic Wellbeing. This is because the service has shown sustained good practice at promoting these outcome areas over the last two inspections.

Questionnaires were sent to all foster carers and to children over the age of eight; 72 foster carers from 53 fostering households and 48 eight children and young people participated in the inspection. Seven children were case tracked and visits were made to three fostering households.

The fostering service has many good and some outstanding practices that serve to protect children and promote their welfare. Although the service has many strengths in promoting children's good health, there are occasional shortfalls in key areas and this means that the service does not meet the health needs of all children. An action is required.

Very good and outstanding practice ensures that children's safety is promoted. The service promotes children's education well and provides opportunities for them to pursue their interests and enjoy their leisure time. Children feel they are listened to and arrangements are in place for them to contribute their views to the review of foster carers. The service has minor shortfalls in the way it includes young children and children with complex needs in decision making about their own lives.

Children receive support to develop the social skills necessary for future independent living. The fostering allowance and additional payments are sufficient to meet the needs of the children. However, some foster carers are not clear about the arrangements for claiming additional funding and this impacts on the quality of care some provide to children.

The service is well managed and foster carers receive good support to provide children with suitable placements. Records are mostly well kept. However, the investigation of complaints is not always timely and the complaints records do not show sufficient details of the investigation process. More effective monitoring is required.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good.

Improvements since the last inspection

The service was required to address four breaches in regulations following the last inspection. Three of these related to safeguarding children and one related to effective monitoring arrangements. Nine recommendations for good practice were also made. There has been significant, sustained improvement in the service and in particular in all aspects relating to children's safety. This means that children's safety is promoted through excellent procedures and effective monitoring. Recommendations for good practice have been addressed leading to an improvement in outcomes for children.

The service has continued to grow and develop and 50 per cent of foster carers who participated in the inspection said the service has improved over the last 12 months. For example, a carer commented, 'the service is moving forward. We value the improvement.'

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

The fostering service provides carers who promote the health and well-being of the children in their care. Good systems and practices promote children's health and development well, in most cases. For example, children are routinely registered with a G.P., optician and dentist and receive help from specialist health services as required. Foster carers have basic information about children's health histories wherever this is available. They receive good advice and support in meeting children's emotional health needs.

The 'Children in Our Care' nurse is based within the local authority children's services and this ensures good liaison with the health service, so that children's needs are quickly identified and addressed. All children receive an annual health assessment that foster carers contribute to. This ensures that children's emerging health needs are monitored and referral is made for medical attention where necessary. This promotes children's good health.

Although in most cases, foster carers have all the required health information they need, they do not routinely record health matters relating to a child in a dedicated health plan, that can move with the child, at the end of the placement. This increases the potential for important health information about a child to be lost when

a child moves.

Supervising social workers check that foster carers are promoting children's health at routine supervisory visits and they assist in obtaining specialist health advice for children and foster carers, where appropriate. Children and young people know about healthy eating and the importance of exercise. Almost 85 per cent of children report they usually or always receive support to be healthy. Typical comments include: 'I have a healthy balanced diet', 'I always get told to eat fruit and veg'. 'I go to the gym'. Through the provision of free leisure centre passes to all looked after children, the local authority encourages fitness.

All mainstream carers have received basic training in promoting children's good health and a further 25 per cent of carers have received additional training in promoting health and/or first aid during the past year. Foster carers have access to training in paediatric first aid, managing medicines, safeguarding sexual health and drugs awareness. The service cannot identify how many of its carers have completed these courses. However, it has begun to collate information on foster carer training in order to identify which carers have outstanding training needs and address this.

Shortfalls in the service have resulted in a few children experiencing delay or potential delay in receiving medical treatment. These issues have been addressed and action taken to ensure that lessons learned have led to an improvement to the service. This includes the provision of medical consent to treatment within 24 hours of an emergency placement. Further information and practical support is provided to foster carers through a variety of means to ensure that children who need treatment are supported to receive that treatment at the earliest possible opportunity.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

A competent manager leads the fostering service and is well supported by the service manager and senior managers. Together they ensure that the service promotes the safety and wellbeing of children through excellent safeguarding practices.

Foster carers are carefully recruited, assessed and supported to provide children with safe, healthy and nurturing environments in which they thrive. Typical comments from children include: 'I always feel cared for and safe with them. I love them', and 'They treat me like their own. They're really good to me'. Excellent matching procedures ensure that children are carefully matched to carers and unmet needs are identified and addressed through additional support to ensure that children have the best possible chance of a successful placement. Even though the service is under tremendous pressure due to a significant increase in the numbers of children coming into care, the stability of placements is good and this means that few children have had more than three moves within the last 12 months.

Good risk assessments effectively address the safety needs of individual children and

foster carers know how to keep them safe. Foster carers and children together complete safe care policies aimed at ensuring safe care practices are adhered to within the home. Ongoing training in child protection is available to all foster carers and 15 per cent of carers have completed this training within the last 12 months. Although the service has begun to monitor attendance at training, it cannot demonstrate how many carers have completed mandatory child protection training. This means it cannot demonstrate that it has trained its carers to recognise and respond appropriately to allegations or disclosures of abuse.

Effective, robust recruitment procedures ensure that those working for the fostering service are suitable people to work with children. This protects children as far as possible from the risk of coming into contact with potential abusers. Panel members are also carefully vetted to ensure they are suitable and have the necessary skills and expertise to be effective panel members. Scrutiny of assessments is thorough and the panel is highly effective in providing a quality assurance function in relation to assessments and foster carer reviews. It makes sound, well considered recommendations for approval, review and matching. This ensures that children are placed with carers who are suitable to provide good quality care.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The service continues to operate within a framework of anti-discriminatory practice. It values diversity and promotes community cohesion and equality. Children's individual needs, including their religious, ethnic, cultural, language and complex health needs are considered at the point of placement and wherever possible, action is taken to ensure their diverse needs are met. The service has excellent links with the local Muslim community and has access to a wealth of knowledge of other cultures. It has staff members, panel members, foster carers and children from a range of black and ethnic minority backgrounds and they add to the cultural diversity of the service.

Where the service is unable to meet a child's ethnic, religious or cultural needs, an appropriate placement is sought from a local independent fostering agency. On occasion, a transracial placement is made and the service works hard to ensure the child's particular needs are met. However, foster carers who look after children with different cultural and religious needs to their own are not always trained in equality and diversity.

Additional support is provided to children as necessary. Some carers are unclear about how to access additional monies for specialist equipment, especially for children with disabilities and as a result, some children have not had access to the full range of support that is available. Delay in appropriate planning for some children has resulted from staff shortages and changes within the social work teams, so that children have remained in culturally unsuitable placements for extended periods. There is evidence that the service has attempted to address the children's needs in the best way possible without moving the children unnecessarily.

The service has worked with a group of children and young people, including a child with complex needs to produce pictorial questionnaires for use in foster carer reviews and safe care policies. These have proved particularly effective in helping young children and children with communication difficulties to express their views and understand what safe care practices they need to follow. Not all children have yet used them as they have been introduced within recent months and this means that some children with complex needs have not had the opportunity to comment on the care they receive.

A short break service provides children with complex needs with regular, known carers who work well with birth families. Additional monies are available to enable children having a short break to access a range of activities during their stay with foster carers. Children have access to the facilities at the local authority residential respite centre and can play safely with a range of appropriate play equipment and enjoy the light and sound rooms and specialist outdoor play area. A support group for short break carers enables them to meet together to discuss the particular issues associated with their role. This ensures they have the support they need to meet children's specific and complex needs.

The service provides children with a good level of support to promote their educational achievement. Foster carers are encouraged to value education and to ensure good attendance and full participation in school life. Children have the opportunity to take part in school trips including trips abroad and a range of out of school activities. Over 70% of children said they always receive help with their education and many commented on the additional work they are doing in an attempt to catch up. Annual achievement awards are given to those who have made good progress educationally. The service supports children to attend further education and university. It works closely with connexions to find appropriate work and college placements for young people. Foster carers liaise well with the Children in Our Care education support team and participate in drawing up and reviewing personal education plans for each child. Children's education needs are assessed and they receive additional support as needed.

Children attending secondary school all have access to a computer within the foster family. Plans are in place to provide all children in foster care with a personal laptop by the end of 2009. Some children, including those with complex needs would benefit from using a laptop as soon as possible.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The promotion of contact is good. The service ensures that contact arrangements are clear. It provides support to children and foster carers so that children are able to maintain and develop relationships with family and friends. Where necessary contact is supervised and supported at a local children's centre where suitable facilities are available. Children know their contact arrangements and are consulted

about them.

Ninety percent of children said that foster carers always listen to their views. For example, 'They ask for my opinion when making decisions'. The service has introduced new documentation to enable younger children and those with disabilities to express their views better for the foster carer review. This includes canvassing the views of very young children with the aid of early years specialist workers. However, young children and those with complex needs are not routinely invited to their own statutory reviews and documentation for that is not always appropriate to the communication level of the child. This means they do not always have the opportunity to give their views.

All children said they know who to approach with a problem and 85 per cent said they know how to make a complaint. This information is provided in the children's guide.

The service consults with several groups of children, including young children and some with complex needs and these have been involved in producing appropriate literature and influencing the development of the service.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

Children receive support to develop their self care skills and independence in accordance with their age and ability. Foster carers who look after teenagers are invited to attend training in 'Becoming Independent' so that they can better support these young people to prepare for future independent living.

The service provides foster carers with a fostering allowance and agreed expenses to cover all costs of caring for a child. Payments are graded according to the level of skill of the foster carer and the complexity of each child's needs. Carers are encouraged to improve their level of skill by attending training so that they provide high quality care to children. Family and friends carers are paid the lowest band initially but can quickly move up to Band 2 and above by attending the Skills to Foster and other training. Those who have done so value this training and consider it gives them a good insight into the fostering task and the emotional and physical needs of the children.

The service publicises its payments policy annually and writes to all foster carers with revised allowance information. The allowances are sufficient to enable foster carers to provide children with a good standard of living. However, there have been two complaints about allowances and a small number of foster carers find it hard to ensure children have wide and varied life experiences on the payments and additional allowances made. This is because they are not clear about how and where to apply for additional funding.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The service has a clear statement of purpose that is updated annually. It sets out the aims and objectives of the service and provides comprehensive, detailed information. It is available to all who use the service. Two children's guides are available and provide well presented information about the service in both written and pictorial form so that it meets the needs of most of the children in foster care. However, it is only available in English and is not routinely translated in written form for children whose first language is not English.

There are clear arrangements for monitoring and controlling the service and ensuring quality performance. Records of complaints and allegations are maintained and monitored by the manager. There is some delay in responding to complaints and the reason for this is not always recorded. Investigations are not always kept up to date and relevant important information is not always included. This means that the manager cannot effectively monitor the complaints about the service and that the service is not addressing complaints in good time. This delays any action to address issues raised by complaints and compromises the otherwise good quality of service.

Lines of accountability are well known and communication between managers and staff and between the fostering service and other social work teams is excellent. Good liaison exists between the service and other professionals involved with children, including health and education workers. This ensures that a multidisciplinary approach is taken to meeting children's needs and that they have the best chance of successful outcomes.

Staff are well organised and managed. Workloads are monitored to ensure that each foster carer receives a good level of support from a named supervising social worker. Staff receive effective supervision and training regularly so that they are well supported and prepared to provide a high quality service to children and foster carers.

Appropriate monitoring arrangements are in place to ensure that children placed in independent fostering agencies are appropriately placed and make good progress. Good systems ensure that assessments and approvals are carried out without delay and decisions for children are made in good time wherever possible. Administrative support is excellent and the imaginative use of a support worker to provide information and take up statutory checks on new family and friends carers ensures that carers are clear about their role and the expectations of the service from the beginning of the placement. It also ensures that information required to determine the suitability of the carers is available quickly so that children do not remain in unsuitable placements for any length of time.

The service recognises that with the increase in placements and the development of the service there is a need for a second manager to share the workload and this post has been advertised. Additional social work staff have been recruited during the past

12 months. Staff turnover is low and one full time agency worker assists the team during the long term absence of a permanent team member. This ensures that foster carers continue to receive a good service.

A recruitment officer leads the recruitment strategy for carers and organises a selection of events and publicity materials aimed at recruiting a range of carers. Good links with the Muslim community ensure that promotional events are well attended and have resulted in a number of new assessments of Asian carers. The service continues to have a shortfall in short break carers and long term carers offering permanent placements for children but continues to target these.

Assessments are thorough and of a high quality. They provide the panel with sufficient evidence to ensure that good decisions are made about prospective carers' suitability to foster and subsequent approval status. This enables the service to match children to carers well. Prospective mainstream carers attend Skills to Foster training prior to approval. Family and friends carers, where the child has already been placed in an emergency, are encouraged to attend this training after approval. Foster carers report that the training provided is good, interesting and relevant. It includes half a day training on promoting children's health and half a day on supporting education. It also covers equality and diversity and foster carers consider this is a strength of the service.

Foster carers are well supported by the staff team. A typical comment is 'support is always on hand'. They receive regular supervision focusing on all areas of development for each child they look after. They keep good records including records of any illnesses or accidents and photographs so that they build up a recorded history of the placement for the child. Out of hours support is provided. This includes additional support regarding behaviour management from the local children's home. Carers have access to good advice from experienced members of staff. Family and friends carers receive an excellent service and are well supported to provide good homes for the children they look after. The service recognises the particular relationship they have with children and birth parents and provides a support group to enable them to meet together to discuss issues pertinent to their circumstances.

Confidential records relating to children and foster carers are well kept and contain all appropriate information, including placement plans that identify their individual needs and how these are to be met. They are stored securely. Foster carers use lockable metal filing boxes to store children's information securely within the foster home. This means that children's privacy is respected. Foster carers receive information about children at the point of placement except in the case of an emergency. In most emergency circumstances, the relevant information is provided within 24 hours of placement. However, on occasion, this information is not available and carers are supported to meet the needs of the children the best way they can. Equipment needed is provided or financed to ensure children are well looked after. This means that at times foster carers do not have all the information they need to meet children's specific individual needs.

Arrangements to support the children of foster carers include organised outings and

social events as well as routine participation in the foster carer review. A regular support group is not held. The service is aware that some children need additional support when foster children move on and this is an area identified for development.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The service values each individual child and ensures that diverse needs are identified and met wherever possible. The make up of the fostering service staff team reflects the local population and staff are able to communicate with children and parents in their first language in most cases. Good links are maintained with the local Muslim community. The short break service provides invaluable support to parents of children with disabilities.

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 each child has access to such medical, dental, nursing, psychological and psychiatric advice, treatment and other services as they may require and is provided with such individual support, aids and equipment which they may require as a result of any particular health needs or disability they may have (Regulation 15)	22/08/2009
17	provide foster parents with the training necessary to care for children placed with them, and ensure that a foster parent is given information regarding the state of health and any health needs of the child; including consent to the child's medical or dental examination or treatment at the point of placement (Regulation 17).	22/08/2009

Recommendations

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

- ensure that each carer is provided with a written health record for each child placed in their care and that this is updated during the placement and moves with the child (NMS 12)
- ensure all children are provided with equipment that is necessary to support their homework and promote educational achievement (NMS 13)
- ensure that the policy on allowance levels is well publicised amongst carers and

that all carers receive clear information about the allowances and expenses payable, and how to access them before a child is placed (NMS 29)

- ensure that children's opinions and those of their families and other significant to the child are sought over issues likely to affect their daily lives and their future (NMS 11)
- ensure that the quality and adequacy of complaints records is effectively monitored and remedial action is taken where necessary (NMS 25)
- continue to recruit a range of carers to meet the needs of children and young people for whom you provide a service (NMS 17).