

Manchester 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

Manchester Children and Families and Social Care provides the fostering service for the City of Manchester. The fostering service offers emergency out of hour placements, short-term, long-term and permanent placements for children and young people who are looked after by the local authority. There is also a disabled children's family placement team that provides short-term placements via the short break and multi link service for families where there is a child with a disability. The service also provides for family and friend carers. The service has developed a multi dimensional fostering service for children between the ages of three and six. An additional service of support workers is available and these workers support foster carers, children and young people placed.

The fostering service is situated in the Gorton area of Manchester in a single office site and is accessible to people with disabilities. The service is in an area that is serviced by good public transport routes.

Manchester fostering service is responsible for the recruitment, assessment, approval and support of foster carers. Although family and friend carers are assessed initially by social workers based in the area teams, the comprehensive assessments are completed by the family placement workers.

The fostering service is divided into three teams. The teams are north, central and south district to link with the district teams. In addition, the fostering service has a team dedicated to the assessment of short breaks and multi link services undertaken by the disabled children's family placement team. The multi dimensional fostering team called TOPS is a multi professional service providing support to young people aged three to six in accordance with the aims and objectives of multi dimensional fostering. Each team has its own designated team manager with responsibility for the management of the team. There is a principle manager who is responsible for the overall fostering service.

Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

The inspection was unannounced and took place over five days. All the key national minimum standards were inspected. The service has many strengths including: an excellent children's rights team, a multi dimensional treatment foster care programme for children aged between three and six, a multi disciplinary team for children with disabilities providing a short break service, a supported lodging scheme managed by the fostering service and effective educational support for looked after children. Carers are supported well by the fostering service supervising social

workers and there is access to a comprehensive training programme. The development of the children's care council has enabled excellent opportunities for young people to meet with senior managers and elected members to share specific issues and have an open opportunity for an exchange of views. Outcomes are generally good for children and young people who have been placed in long term placements. However, the fostering service has lost a number of carers through retirement, resignation or de-registration. This has increased pressure for placements and the number of placements with independent fostering agencies remains high. The multi dimensional foster treatment scheme called TOPS is providing a high level of support to carers

The system in place for the assessment and monitoring of emergency placements (regulation 38) plus the family and friends placements are not held with the family placement supervising social workers from the onset. These assessments are undertaken within the district social work team. Initial assessments vary in content and not always as robust, this includes statutory checks that are not always completed within timescales. The fostering panel acts as a quality assurance function in some cases, this creates additional work for panel and the panel are deferring a number of assessments due to this.

Whilst the district social workers maintain responsibility for these cases, documentation and supervision of individual carers does not always adhere to the fostering regulations. This has been acknowledged by the service and an overall audit of all regulation 38 carers and short term family and friends carers has commenced. The fostering service will take overall responsibility for these in full from April 2010 to enable a consistent level of service to be provided. This will also ensure that foster care agreements and placement agreements are available on all files and that supervision and support of carers is clearly recorded and risk assessments are in place for all carers.

The management of the fostering service has been agreed and the appointment of permanent managers is providing consistency to the teams. Many of the supervising social workers have worked for the service for a number of years and provide a wealth of knowledge and skills. However, the number of agency workers remains high although funding for these posts has now been agreed and recruitment has commenced. This will ensure that carers have continuity of support from their supervising social workers.

There are additional plans for the family and friend carers to be assessed and supported by the fostering team both prior to and following full approval at panel. This is to ensure that carers receive the same level of support as recruited carers.

Improvements since the last inspection

The service has made good progress and continues to review the action plan to ensure compliance and improvement.

At the last inspection two requirements were made. The first one was regarding the arrangements for giving consent for medical treatment and carers having clear

information and guidelines to adhere to. This has been partially addressed. The policy is in place and carers who are supervised by the fostering team have this routinely monitored. The second requirement made was in relation to the level of staffing within the fostering team being adequate to meet the demands of the service. The service has approval for the recruitment of supervising social workers and this has commenced. Agency workers are still in place whilst this recruitment campaign is ongoing. Caseloads for supervising social workers have decreased and this has been beneficial for the level of support provided to carers.

There were seven recommendations made including: ensuring that carers have the necessary information regarding allowances available, children and young people having personal education plans in place, adequate numbers of independent reviewing officers and the foster carers handbook reflecting the statement of purpose. Some of these recommendations have been completed. These include an increase in the number of independent reviewing officers to enable foster carers reviews to be held within appropriate timescales. Most young people have a personal education plan in place and where it has been identified that this is outstanding, appropriate action has commenced to ensure that this is addressed. However, some carers say that they have not received information about the allowances payable. This appears to be for family and friends as carers rather than recruited carers.

The development of the 'Right 2 be cared 4' consultation group for young people has enabled them to have an effective forum to raise issues with senior members of the authority and local councillors. Young people are very positive about this.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is satisfactory.

All looked after children and young people have an initial health care assessment undertaken by a paediatrician. Annual health care assessments are undertaken by nurses or health visitors. A designated looked after children's nurse has the strategic lead for all nurses undertaking these assessments which are an intrinsic part of a young person's health care plan. However, in some cases, these plans are not made available at the time of placement. This information also includes authorisation for administration of medication. Where this is identified as an issue, supervising social workers liaise with children's social workers to request that this information is provided to the carers. However, some carers say that they have not received all relevant paperwork despite this.

Children and young people who spoke with the inspectors or who completed a questionnaire say that they think that their carers support them with their health care needs. One young person said that their carer, 'always looks after me when I don't feel very well.'

Support and information is provided to carers at the initial skills to foster training and developed further through specific health training. This includes training for carers providing support to babies and young children, first aid, child development and

healthy eating. The service has also introduced the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) foster carer training for all carers. Carers say that this has been a positive initiative and enables them to evaluate the work that they undertake with children and young people.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is satisfactory.

The principal officer and fostering managers have appropriate qualifications, skills and experience to manage the service effectively.

Over the past two years, a strategic improvement plan for the council has been undertaken. As part of this, the fostering service has identified that additional carers are required to provide care and support to children and young people living within the authority. They are also aware that the service continues to have a significant number of external placements with independent fostering agencies. A comprehensive recruitment campaign has commenced to raise the profile of fostering for Manchester City Council including open evenings, posters and information on local radio stations. These have received positive responses.

All carers recruited have assessments undertaken in accordance with the criteria from the British Association of Adoption and Fostering (BAAF). These assessments are undertaken by social workers within the fostering service. Initial assessments for an emergency placement or with family and friends are undertaken by social workers within the districts. Some of the required documentation has not been completed with regards to these placements, this includes some risk assessments, placement agreements and foster care agreements. This does not ensure that the care needs of the young person are addressed effectively. However, the service is aware of this and has undertaken a full audit of placements to ensure that any outstanding information is in place. Plans for the assessment and supervision of these carers are in place and commencing in April 2010 the fostering service will be involved in these assessments from the initial referrals to ensure that carers have continuity of support.

Foster carers are reviewed on an annual basis and the recruitment of additional independent reviewing officers has enabled a greater number of reviews to be undertaken within appropriate timescales. Mechanisms are in place for ensuring that external placements are monitored effectively.

Training for carers regarding safeguarding and child protection is in place and all carers for the service are encouraged and supported to attend this. In addition, individual assessment is in place via the introduction of the CWDC foster carer training. The authority seeks to safeguard and protect children from abuse and neglect through its Local Safeguarding Children's Board (LSCB) with responsibility for coordinating safeguarding and protection across the city and the safeguarding policies and procedures. There have been a number of significant incidents over the last 12 months and the response to these has varied, in particularly with regards the

recording and monitoring of some complaints and allegations. The recruitment of a complaints officer to the fostering service has enabled an overview of complaints and allegations to be analysed and responded to. Further training and guidance is planned and a flow chart completed to demonstrate the process for all staff to follow when a complaint or allegation has been received.

Young people are provided with appropriate information about bullying. There is an active children's rights service that promotes anti-bullying and provides information regarding this. Young people spoke positively about the support provided by children's rights service.

Matching of placements continues to improve within the constraints of the current number of carers. Matching in short breaks is a strong feature of the service. Social workers and fostering social workers meet so they are able to look closely at the match in the first instance. This ensures that the arrangements can meet the child's needs and carer's skills.

Carers visited as part of the inspection process are providing a good standard of accommodation and support for the young people placed with them. Young people say that they feel safe and happy within their placement.

The panel offer a quality assurance role and will defer items or request additional information if required. However, some information is not made available to panel and this can lead to delays or approvals made on a temporary basis. The panel chair is experienced and has a good knowledge of the role and function of the panel and this is demonstrated clearly at panel meetings. At the time of the inspection, the panel were in the process of recruiting a panel member with a background in health due to the recent resignation of the previous post holder.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The approach to equality and diversity for the service has been further developed to enable effective support of children and young people. Carers have access to training regarding equality and diversity and are able to demonstrate a good understanding of the issues for young people.

The education of looked after children is supported effectively. Training for carers regarding education is available at preparation training and within the carers' handbook. Good links are in place to support young people remain in education and exclusions from school are minimal and managed effectively. The personal educational allowance for children and young people is utilised effectively and carers are consulted regarding this. Carers spoken to and those responding to questionnaires say that they feel that education is supported exceptionally well and gave examples of support being provided to access nursery and school education. Overall children and young people are achieving well at school and specific initiatives are enriching their education experience and outcomes. Personal education plans

(PEP) are in place for children and young people. Education is discussed as part of the foster carer's annual review to ensure that carers have the necessary skills and resources to effectively meet children's needs.

The short break service recruits a range of carers to provide short breaks for children and young people with complex needs. Carers are provided with a high level of support and ensures that these carers have the same access to training and development as main-stream carers.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Carers and staff promote contact effectively and children say that they are happy with the level of contact and the support provided. Carers spoken with say that they are aware of their role and responsibility in promoting this. Supervised contact is recorded. This is good practice.

The local children's rights service is proactive in support for children and young people. They have developed a number of information leaflets and packs which are made available to all children and young people. The formation of the 'Right 2 be cared 4' council has enabled young people to meet with senior staff and council leaders to share their views about being in foster care. Young people who are involved in this told inspectors that this is a very positive step to ensure effective communication and to ensure that their wishes and views are heard.

Young people have a real opportunity to participate in their statutory reviews and this can be done by completing questionnaires, talking with independent reviewing officers prior to the meeting and attendance at their meeting. Their views are also gained in relation to their foster carer's reviews and children and young people feel that they are listened to the majority of the time. When a situation arises that they do not feel that this has happened they are able to access the complaints procedure and are supported effectively to do so. This can be completed either through the children's rights service or through the formal complaints service. The information leaflets available regarding this are appropriate for different ages of young people. Young people say that they are aware of the procedure and feel able to make a complaint.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

The service has a supported lodgings service that is linked to and managed by a fostering manager. The supported lodging scheme enables young people to live with approved supported lodging carers to enable them to further develop their independent living skills within a safe environment. Pathway plans are in place and set out clearly the needs of the young people and how those needs will be met.

The leaving care service is provided by Barnardos and young people who are aged 15 and a half are provided with a leaving care service pack which enables young people and foster carers to access appropriate services. Information is provided to carers regarding the leaving care service as part of the induction to fostering.

Manchester City Council pay the Government recommended rates to carers and details of payment levels are provided to carers. However, some carers say that allowances are not always clear to understand and some carers who provide emergency placement have not been provided with this information. The service has a new computer system in place and although it was acknowledged that initially there were issues regarding payments being made on time, this has now been rectified. All questionnaires received from carers identify that payments are made within appropriate timescales.

Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The service has policies and procedures that supports equality and inclusion for all children who are looked after by carers. Carers receive training in equality and diversity and children are provided with opportunities to have a say about their care, their participation in events and to live a healthy lifestyle in a safe environment. They are also involved in areas that relate to their educational opportunities, contact with family and significant others and to be properly prepared to live independently and to develop a positive sense of identity. The short breaks service provides a good service to children and their families.

The statement of purpose has been updated and is made available to prospective carers, parents and other interested parties. The children's guide is available to all children and young people who use the service. The children's disabilities team have developed the guide making information available in an accessible format. The multi dimensional foster treatment programme has also a statement of purpose in place containing information about the service and the support provided. However, the future plans for this service are unclear at the present time.

The principle manager for the fostering service has been in an acting post for the past two years and this is due to the ongoing development of the service improvement plan. There are three managers for the fostering service, one for the children with disabilities service and one for the TOPS multi dimensional foster treatment service. The three fostering managers have recently been confirmed as permanent staff following a period of the posts being filled in an acting capacity. This will enable the service to have greater stability. However, the service continues to employ a large number of agency staff. Recruitment for these posts has been agreed and the recruitment process has commenced. The impact for foster carers on the number of agency staff has resulted in a number of changes to their supervising social worker and some carers have expressed concern regarding this along with the ongoing issue of children's social workers changing as well. The fostering service has

recently been aligned to the district teams resulting in three teams representing the north, central and south areas of the authority. Carers were offered the opportunity of remaining with supervising social workers even if the social worker was no longer in their district. This has provided some continuity to carers who elected to stay with their current family placement worker.

The service has identified that there is an ongoing need to recruit carers as there is an insufficient number of carers to meet current need. The service continues to have a large number of children and young people placed with independent fostering agencies. The service has lost more carers, through retirement, resignation and de-registration than gained in the last few months. A detailed recruitment strategy and campaign has commenced and early indications have identified that this is effective in raising the number of overall enquires to the service. A decision has been made to out source all assessments for recruited foster carers and this has commenced. The fostering manager will oversee the quality of the assessments. Family and friend assessments and regulation 38 assessments are not undertaken within the family placement team. These assessments vary in quality and some information is not made available at the time of going to panel. This does not enable effective approvals to be made and carers are not provided with the same documentation and level of support as provided to recruited carers.

All carers who contributed to the inspection were satisfied with the support received from the fostering service. Carers spoke highly of the fostering service social workers.

The arrangement for annual reviews of carers has developed further with the recruitment of additional independent reviewing officers. Foster carers reported that this has been effective in establishing their views and those of the children and young people in placement. The additional staff have also ensured that the number of reviews held within timescale has increased significantly.

The standard of record keeping varied on both carers and children's files. All files are subject to a file audit although some of these have not been undertaken. Some basic information is wrongly recorded and a clear audit trail is missing in these cases. Some carers are not provided with information regarding the child placed and are not maintaining records regarding the placement. This is apparent in short-term approval placements where there is not a supervising social worker allocated.

The arrangements for the support to family and friend carers after they have been given initial approval does not currently meet the national minimum standards, in that they have been fully approved and their cases are not transferred to the fostering team. A detailed audit of these carers has commenced with the overall agreement that with effect from April 2010, family and friend carers will be transferred to the fostering service to ensure they receive the same level of support as recruited carers.

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):

- ensure that, in a foster parent is given such information, which is kept up to date, as to enable him to provide appropriate care for the child. This includes, the state of health and health needs of any child placed and the arrangements for giving consent to the child's medical or dental examination or treatment (breach of regulation 17 (3)(a)(b))
- ensure that information as specified in Schedule 3 relating to the prospective foster parent and other members of his household and family, and any other information it considers relevant is obtained prior to placement (breach of regulation 27 schedule 3)
- ensure that when assessing suitability of staff to be employed telephone enquiries are made as well as obtaining written references (NMS 15.3)
- ensure that appropriate risk assessments are in place to promote the safety and well being of the child (NMS 6.6)
- ensure that written foster placement agreements are in place for each young person in placement (breach of regulation 34 (3))
- ensure that a copy of qualifications is obtained for all social work staff employed by the service (NMS 15.5)
- ensure that the panel membership is reviewed to include a social worker who is a family placement worker (NMS 30)
- ensure that all cares have an enhanced criminal records bureau disclosure in place and these are completed in a timely manner(NMS 15.4)
- ensure that all carers receive clear information about the allowances and expenses payable and how to access them (NMS 29.2)
- ensure that foster carers are provided with the necessary information to help the child understand and come to terms with past events (NMS 24.6)
- ensure that the carer receives appropriate training regarding effective recording of significant events (NMS 24.7)
- ensure that there is an effective system in place to monitor the quality and adequacy of records (NMS 25.3)
- ensure there is an effective system in place for recording complaints and allegations and include details of the investigation, conclusion reached and action taken (NMS 25.13)