

Tameside MBC Fostering Services

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

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Inspector	Stella Henderson
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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

Tameside Metropolitan Borough Council has a dedicated family placement service, which is managed by the unit business manager for looked after children. Their main purpose is to provide a diverse range of carers to cater for the needs of looked after children in Tameside and, in partnership with other sectors, to ensure the best outcomes for the young people.

The team recruits, assesses, supervises and supports foster carers and is responsible for ensuring that their training needs are met. Services offered by the team include emergency placements, task centred placements, long term or permanent carers and respite care placements. The service is also responsible for kinship carers, and works with the disability team for respite placements for children with disabilities.

Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

The purpose of this visit was to undertake a key inspection. Outcome areas for being healthy, staying safe, enjoy and achieve, positive contribution, achieving economic well-being and organisation were assessed and the implementation of recommendations raised at the previous inspection were checked.

Evidence from this inspection presents a mixed picture of the performance of the fostering service, with satisfactory, good and outstanding elements of practice.

Outcomes for children and young people are generally positive. In their surveys, children and young people confirmed they are well looked after and foster carers stated that they receive very good support from their individual fostering social workers.

Good health is promoted and education and achievement is valued. There are frequent opportunities for children and young people to meet with management and voice their opinions, and things change and are improved as a result of this consultation.

The service has a range of staff and foster carers with suitable skills and qualification. Procedures are in place that make sure that children and young people are protected and kept safe from abuse. The service works effectively with other agencies to promote safety and well-being.

Key national minimum standards are generally met and the service has more strengths than weaknesses. Systems and documentation are in place in relation to

safeguarding and record management. There are occasional gaps in practice and procedure, however, which impinges on the safety and well-being of children and young people.

For example, kinship assessments are not carried out within required timescales and there is inconsistency in statutory visits to children and young people in those placements.

Young people are, on occasion, inappropriately placed outside of carers category of approval and a clear process for matching is not evident. Safe caring documents do not reflect the different needs and circumstances of young people. Some foster carers are not supervised by those qualified to do so.

Monitoring arrangements have not been sufficiently robust to identify these shortfalls or to recognise that recommendations from the last inspection have not been fully implemented.

The service is in the process of transition, however, with new management arrangements in place. When shortfalls were highlighted during the course of this inspection, the provider took immediate action to rectify the deficits identified. This ensures that children and young people continue to be safeguarded and that the service operates within the requirements of the fostering regulations.

Improvements since the last inspection

Recommendations were made at the last inspection with regard to improving the monitoring the service, safe caring documentation and increasing the take-up of training among foster carers. Evidence from this inspection demonstrates that actions to facilitate these improvements has not been fully implemented.

Recommendations for references for foster carers and records for fostering panel members have been met.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Children and young people benefit from a well-managed process that assesses their health needs and identifies where services need to be provided. All children and young people are registered with primary health care services and the majority receive annual health assessments. Health information is shared with foster carers which means that children and young people have someone knowledgeable about and responsible for their health needs on a daily basis.

Regular monitoring of children's health is undertaken through the statutory review process and other means, to ensure that children and young people maintain good health. Expert advice is sought where necessary through prompt referral to specialist services such as the child and adolescent mental health service (CAMHS). This

service also provides consultation for foster carers.

The emotional health and well-being of children and young people is also promoted through opportunities to engage and participate in a wide variety of sports and leisure activities, such as football, swimming and horse riding.

The fostering service facilitates free access to certain leisure facilities, and an annual health event has been held to convey the message that health and well-being can be fun. Age appropriate information is available for children and young people on health assessments which describe the purpose of these and why they are carried out. Young people are provided with their own health record.

Foster carers and young people are aware of the need for sensible eating. One young person commented 'I get healthy balanced meals every day'. Foster carers noted that 'we have open discussions about menus' and 'they check on their diets and give advice if there is a problem'. The foster carer supervision format provides for discussion on being healthy, and the fostering service has comprehensive systems to log vaccinations, health assessments and any health appointments.

Children and young people with complex medical needs benefit from the additional training and guidance that is provided for their carers. The way that training needs are prioritised in the fostering service, however, means that children and young people's health and safety is put at risk.

For example, first aid training for foster carers is not offered until the third year of approval, and although training on health and safety in the home is available during the first six months of approval, records show that no carers have been on this training.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is satisfactory.

The fostering service is managed by suitably qualified and experienced individuals who ensure that children and young people are placed with foster carers who will safeguard and promote their welfare. This is reflected in the feedback from children and young people who confirm that they feel safe and well cared for in their foster placements.

For example, in response to the survey question 'do you feel well cared for where you are living now?' one young person noted 'always - because they keep me safe and look out for me'. Another stated 'I always know that I can rely on my carers because I can trust them'. One young person indicated in their survey that they would tell their carers or teachers if they had a personal problem, another that 'they have set certain rules so that we don't get hurt or into trouble'.

One young person expressed the opinion that 'things are fab'. Another commented on 'my brilliant carers. They are there for me at all times. I am well fed, kept clean,

given love and affection. They support me in my football, going with me to all my matches and training. They help me with my English and any other educational needs. I am very happy here'.

The safety and well-being of children and young people is promoted through a range of effective safeguarding mechanisms. For example, there are robust selection and vetting systems for prospective staff, and all staff and carers receive training, advice and guidance on child protection.

Any allegations against foster carers are promptly and thoroughly investigated and the service keeps a record of such incidents. Children and young people in external placements are protected by the fostering services checks on those providers, assisted by the use of Ofsted reports.

Young people are safeguarded by the fostering panel's rigorous scrutiny of prospective foster carers. There is good quality assurance of reports presented by social workers. Discussion of assessments is robust and fostering panel does not hesitate to defer recommendations or refuse applications. Prospective carers are encouraged to attend panel, and a helpful document has been produced to explain the role of fostering panel and the process of approval.

Gaps in procedures impinge on the safety and well-being of young people, however. Safe caring documents are too generic and are not always updated. The careful matching of carers skills to children's needs is not always evident, although very low numbers of disrupted placements indicates that suitable matching is achieved.

Foster carer agreements are not routinely in place, and foster placement agreements are not entirely compliant with the fostering regulations. Agreements for variations are not always apparent when young people are placed with carers outside of the carers terms of approval. Panel minutes are well recorded, but do not always evidence reasons for recommendations of approval, or panel's monitoring of exemptions.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Children and young people benefit from receiving services that value diversity and promote equality. For example, an equality impact assessment has been undertaken for the fostering service and one carer noted that the service is 'very open to the differing needs of children'.

Children and young people's identity needs are explored through the assessment, planning and review process in general, and in life story work in particular. There is effective work on meeting the diverse needs of children and young people with disability.

Information on young people's cultural and religious needs is sometimes confusing,

however, which makes it difficult to determine whether their needs are being met, and the fostering panel is not entirely representative of the community it serves.

Whatever their level of attainment, children and young people have their educational needs recognised and addressed. They are encouraged and supported to do well at school or college and realise their potential. To achieve this, effective support is available for children and young people through a dedicated educational resource team.

This team provides a wide range of assistance and materials to promote good educational outcomes, such as the Letterbox project, to help younger children with numeracy and literacy, and a strong package of support is provided for young people at university by the leaving care team.

One carer noted that support for education 'is an outstanding area within the fostering service, always very good with regular personal education plan reviews'. The education resource team also provides training, support and consultation for foster carers on educational matters.

Children and young people participate in a range of extra-curricular and leisure activities, helped by free access to certain leisure facilities. One carer noted 'they support us financially when activities like horse riding are very expensive'. 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 effective care and support from carers who recognise that parents remain central to the promotion of health and educational needs.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

Establishing and maintaining contact with friends and family is integral to the service provided. This helps children and young people to develop an understanding of self, community and sense of belonging. Contact is organised in a way that enables them to feel safe and, where older children are concerned, to exercise an element of choice and control.

Foster carers understand the importance of contact to children and young people, often facilitating contact in a practical way. They confirm that they are clear about the need to report any concerns about the adverse effects that can happen occasionally during parental contact sessions. This ensures that children and young people are safeguarded by carers who recognise the implications and effects of contact on the child.

Consultation between the fostering service and children and young people is

outstanding. Children and young people are provided with frequent opportunities for dialogue and consultation with elected members and management.

Managers are visible and available and they take active steps to ensure that they get direct feedback from those who use the service. Things change as a result of this consultation, evidence that children and young people are directly involved in shaping services.

Young people with experience of the fostering system also have a role in the delivery of training for prospective carers and staff. They are fully trained and supported to undertake this responsibility. Children and young people also have access to independent advocacy through the children's rights office.

Children and young people are encouraged to participate and are fully involved, where appropriate, with the decision-making processes about their day-to-day lives and future plans. In response to the survey question 'do your carers listen to you and take notice of your opinions?' one young person commented 'we discuss the pros and cons of my opinions on whatever subject we are talking about'. Another noted that 'they listen to us and talk to us about things' One carer noted that 'children attend their reviews and we have found that their views are heard'.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is outstanding.

There is outstanding support for young people in preparing to move to independence. They are helped to develop the skills and knowledge necessary for adult living and independent life. There is full consultation with young people about their future and they are encouraged to be actively involved in decision-making processes and the implementation of pathway plans.

The leaving care team ensure that young people receive excellent advice and support with financial and housing issues, as well as with basic practical skills, such as budgeting, maintaining tenancies and dealing with external agencies. The team provides services in a multi-agency building, along with Connexions, a teenage pregnancy service, CAMHS, and drug and alcohol services. Young people benefit from effective multi-agency working which means that they can access help at a single point of reference.

Support and encouragement is provided to young people to enter employment, and financial support is available for those wanting to attend college. For example, the 'Teens to Work' scheme enables young people to experience a funded work placement of their choice during the summer holidays.

The local authority acts as an effective 'corporate parent' by providing traineeships for young carers, and there are strong packages of support for those at university, who receive a cash award at the end of their degree course to say 'well done'. Contributions towards driving lessons are also provided, and there is excellent

support for young people who are without leave to remain in this country.

The opportunity to live in 'taster flats' enables young people to sample independent living before securing permanent tenancies. This arrangement means that young people can enjoy continued support from the leaving care team throughout this period and the opportunity to return to the foster home if things do not work out. Moving into independent accommodation is facilitated by an excellent working partnership with local housing agencies.

Young people confirm that they are helped to think about their future. One young person noted 'I have general discussions with both my foster carers'. Another commented 'I tell my carers and teachers about what I want to do and then they tell me if it's a good job and if you get the right money'.

Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

The statement of purpose accurately reflects the services being provided by the fostering agency. This, along with the children's guide, is presented in a form that is easily understood by children and young people and their families.

The management of the service, which is in a period of transition, is viewed positively by foster carers and staff. Carers commented on the 'fantastic support from the team' and noted that new management arrangements have 'really embraced foster carers again - makes us feel really valued' and 'allows carers to be involved again at a strategic level'.

Supervising social workers are supported in their roles through individual supervision, training and team meetings. There are opportunities for development that encourage staff to stay with the service, and good use is made of the individual skills and interests of staff in the fostering service.

Staff have access to a large range of policies and procedures which provides guidance to all aspects of their work. A recruitment strategy is in place to ensure that the service has sufficient numbers of carers to meet the needs of children and young people.

Children and young people are looked after by foster carers who have the skills, competences and understanding they need for the task of caring for those in the care system. Foster carers confirm they are very well-supported by supervision and access to training, and that there is effective communication with supervising social workers. Prospective carers are subject to a comprehensive assessment procedure and scrutiny by the fostering panel before being recommended for approval.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Equality and diversity is embraced as part of the culture of the service. In general, the diverse, individual needs of children and young people are considered at the earliest stage alongside any needs

relating to disability, culture and ethnicity. Carers receive good support for trans-racial placements.

Case records are in good order, methodically and systematically arranged, where they exist in hard copy, and containing all essential information on electronic systems. This ensures that children and young people have a permanent record of their history. Systems are in place to provide good administrative support to the fostering service, and significant information about children and young people is kept safe and secure.

There are shortfalls in practice which, whilst largely procedural, impacts on the safety and well-being of children and young people. For example, although wherever possible the fostering service seeks to maintain the child or young person within their own family or friendship circle, friends and family assessments and visiting patterns to children are not carried out within statutory timescales.

There is some slippage with carers annual reviews and unannounced visits. Some carers are supervised by staff not qualified to do so and the take up of training is not monitored, so carers may go some time without receiving training. Monitoring systems have not been robust enough to recognise these shortfalls in practice, or identify that recommendations from the last inspection have not been fully implemented.

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):

- provide basic training on health and hygiene issues and first aid to each carer (NMS 12.5)
- place a child with a foster parent only if the terms of his approval are consistent with the proposed placement and he has entered into a foster care agreement (breach of regulation 34 (1) (a)(b))
- make a written record of the reasons for recommendations made at fostering panel (breach of regulation 25 (2))
- establish clear procedures for monitoring the activities of the fostering service (NMS 4.1)
- ensure that each approved foster carer is supervised by a named, appropriately qualified social worker (NMS 22.3)
- ensure that friends and family assessments and visits to children are undertaken within regulatory timescales. (breach of regulation 38)