

Leeds City Council Fostering Service

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

Unique reference number	SC051076
Inspection date	11/06/2010
Inspector	Stephen Smith / Michael McCleave
Type of inspection	Key

Setting address	Leeds City Council, Department of Social Services, Merrion House, 110 Merrion Centre, LEEDS, LS2 8QB
Telephone number	0113 2478700
Email	
Registered person	Leeds City Council Department of Social Services
Registered manager	Sarah Johal
Responsible individual	Jacqueline Wilson
Date of last inspection	24/07/2009

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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

The service provides care for children and young people who are looked after by the local authority and whose needs are best met in a family environment. A range of foster placements are provided. These are based on a number of schemes that are temporary, permanent, fee paid, remand, task centred, fee paid permanency, assessment and family resource carers. The service is responsible for the recruitment, assessment, training, support and development of all its foster carers. It also arranges the placement of young people with independent agencies where necessary.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

Leeds City Council fostering service is a strong service that provides good outcomes for children. It is well managed by an authority that is committed to its continued improvement. A significant investment of resources and management input has resulted in significant improvements and demonstrates a strong capacity to improve further.

The fostering service works very effectively with health and education services. This joint working helps produce some very good outcomes for children and young people. The authority places an importance on involving young people in its operation and children are well consulted about their care and wider matters important to them. Children are supported to have appropriate contact with family members and arrangements to help them in the transition to adulthood work well. New developments within the fostering team are in place to support the more effective recruitment of foster carers and assessments of new carers are thorough and of a good standard.

The fostering service's procedure for approving carers is flawed. Incorrect panel constitution and a lack of quoracy in some panel meetings means that, on occasions, carers are not correctly approved. However, the rigour with which panels undertake their deliberations and a careful decision making process minimise the effects of this upon outcomes for children. Some additional areas of improvements are necessary, including the quality and completeness of recording in foster carer files and some areas of foster carer supervision, training and review. The monitoring of some areas of the daily operation of the service has also not been effective enough to identify some of the areas of shortfall noted above.

Improvements since the last inspection

At the last inspection the authority was asked to do a number of things to improve the service it provides. In relation to helping children to be healthy it was asked to update its medication policy to instruct carers to record any medication administered to children. In relation to equality and diversity it was asked to improve support for children's skin and hair care needs. In order to improve children's safety the service was asked to improve the rigour of its staff recruitment process, deal with complaints more effectively, undertake risk assessments before fostered children share a bedroom and ensure that all carers have safe caring policies in place. The service was also asked to develop strategies to recruit sufficient carers for the needs of all children.

All these matters have been given rigorous and thorough attention by the fostering service and have all been addressed fully and comprehensively. These, along with other developments and improvements, have resulted in a service that is much improved and meets children's needs well.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Children's health is promoted well. The authority has developed effective partnerships with health services at a strategic level and these translate operationally into strong support for fostered children and young people. Children's needs for routine and emergency medical treatment are identified and arrangements for delegated consent are made plain to foster carers. This ensures that children are able to receive any treatment they need promptly. Children are registered with the primary health care services they need and they receive very good support for any specialist health needs they have. For example, support for children with significant health problems is creatively provided by very good joint working between carers, the authority and health services. Access to mental health services for fostered children is good and effective arrangements exist for children to receive annual medical checks as children looked after by the local authority.

Foster carers do not all receive first aid training and this could mean that children do not get the immediate help they need after an incident or accident. However, a wide range of other training is provided for carers in specialist health issues as well as matters relating to the promotion of good health and healthy lifestyles. Young people receive advice and support about sexual and emotional health and safety. Looked after children's nurses are very closely engaged with the fostering service. They provide direct work with young people, advice to carers and strong support to the service in terms of their advice to panel and the fostering service's decision making.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The authority's fostering workers visit foster carers' homes regularly and ensure that they are appropriate and homely places for children to live. Health and safety checklists, used to monitor the physical safety of foster carers' homes, are completed and updated annually. However, these are not sufficiently wide ranging and do not assess some areas of potential risk. Risk assessments are undertaken for all situations in which young people might share a bedroom which helps to protect children.

The authority provides a range of foster carers that are, in terms of their ethnicity, broadly well matched to the needs of children who need placements. Despite a pressure on placements arising from an increasing number of children needing foster placements and a shortage of foster carers that reflects the national situation, matching is carried out in an appropriate manner. A significant financial investment is being made within the fostering team to increase the number of foster carers available to the service. The authority has good information sharing systems that support the making of planned placements. Where emergency placements are made the authority usually ensures that the information known about children is passed onto their new carers quickly. Placements are risk assessed to ensure their suitability and the social workers of children in placement are consulted about the placement of an additional young person. Exemptions from the usual fostering limit are used in a considered manner and well monitored to ensure that young people's needs are being met. Placements made with independent fostering agencies are monitored and the authority is clear about the reasons for these placements being made. Long-term placements are well matched and closely considered by the fostering panel to ensure they are suitable before they are agreed. Placement stability is good with high levels of support being provided to foster carers and children from the fostering team, social workers and other avenues.

Fostering social workers visit regularly and meet with children. Children's social workers carry out their duty to visit children with diligence. As such, young people are able to raise any concerns they have and placements are well monitored. Children feel safe and well cared for in their placements and know who to speak to if they are worried. Young people report positive outcomes from their foster placements. One said that foster carers 'stuck it out with me' and described the significant quality of life and opportunities provided. The authority has a clear procedure for responding to any complaints, allegations or significant events and for notifying the relevant people.

The fostering service provides mandatory training in child protection and behaviour management to its foster carers so they are able to care for children safely. Foster carers develop safe caring policies for their homes. However, these are not always sufficiently detailed and specific to the young person concerned and have not been agreed with children's social workers to ensure that children are as protected as they should be.

The authority operates a robust and careful staff recruitment procedure that ensures that all the required checks on the suitability of new staff members are carried out. This helps ensure that young people are kept safe. The manager is a suitable person to run the fostering service. She is well regarded by her managers, staff and foster carers alike and has driven significant developments within the fostering service in her relatively short time in post.

The authority has four fostering panels. They are thorough in their consideration of the cases presented and receive full information on which to base their deliberations. Panels will not consider cases presented without full supporting documentation. They are robust in requiring additional work to be done if required and will recommend that carers are not approved if they are not assured of their suitability.

The authority's fostering panels are not correctly comprised in line with the national minimum standards as they do not each have the required number of independent members. The authority has not been clear about the definition of an independent member. This has resulted in a number of panels being inquorate. Additionally, two panels have taken place since the last inspection without the number of members required by regulation. As such, the breadth of opinion brought to the consideration of cases at these panels has not been as great as it should be. However, the potential consequences of this are minimised by the otherwise robust approach taken to the panels' consideration of cases and the authority's decision making processes. Panel minutes are appropriately maintained, clearly record the composition of the panel and provide a full and accurate record of key discussions and deliberations undertaken and the final decision taken by the authority.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Children and their families receive a service that values them and supports their diverse needs. The authority recruits and prepares carers from a range of different backgrounds and cultures to help it provide relevant placements for children. Applicants' ability to reflect diversity and promote equality is assessed before they are considered suitable people to care for children placed by the authority. Foster carers' preparation training covers equality and diversity and ongoing training is mandatory. As far as possible children are placed with carers who are matched to their individual needs. The authority works hard to ensure that children are able to retain their cultural identity and retain links with their communities. Carers are provided with support based on their own cultural needs and those of the children fostered. For example, the service runs an Asian women's carer support group.

Children with disabilities and those with very pronounced health needs are very well served by the authority's family placement fostering service. This provides children with disabilities and their families with support packages based on their individual needs. Effective close working relationships with health and education services and good ongoing support and management of carers promotes anti-discriminatory

practice. Very good individual support is provided to children to minimise the disadvantages they face and promote positive opportunities.

The children and young people's department of the authority engages in a very effective strategic partnership with the education service. This provides children with good support for their education. A well developed 'virtual school' for looked after children ensures that prompt and focussed support is provided to children where needed. Positive outcomes for children from these arrangements are demonstrated in effective work to manage and support the school attendance and attainment of fostered children. Educational achievement is monitored closely and focussed work takes place to improve indicators for children in this area. An increasing number of fostered young people are remaining in their placements beyond their 18th birthday and are engaged in higher education.

Foster carers are provided with training, information and advice about education arrangements, how to help children and the support available to them. Personal education plans (PEP) are promptly drawn up for children looked after by the authority and these are then updated regularly. Foster carers support children with homework and attend meetings at school. Records are kept of children's academic achievement and educational equipment can be provided for children where needed.

The authority's family placement service provides foster care for children and young people within a range of services from a daily sitting service to long-term matched foster care. Within this service, very good short-break care is provided to young people, many of whom have profound and complex disabilities, and their families. Foster carers are well trained and the service uses its own foster placement agreement to fully reflect the complexities of short-break care. This allows children to experience a positive lifestyle while promoting the involvement of families as the people central to their children's lives.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Children are supported to maintain contact with family and friends wherever this is appropriate for them. Contact arrangements are taken into account when matching children with carers and are clearly set out in foster placement agreements. Children's social workers or social work assistants support and supervise contact where necessary and carers undertake these duties where appropriate. Records of supervised contact meetings are maintained for future evaluation and planning purposes. The authority is working to develop its contact arrangements by the provision of three dedicated centres which will provide supervision, activities and appropriate environments for children to meet with their families.

Children are well consulted about the care they receive. Foster carers listen to and take notice of children's opinions and ensure that these are reflected in care planning discussions. Children are consulted before their own reviews and able to record their

views on paper or express them verbally. Their views are also sought for the reviews of their foster carers. This helps ensure that placements remain suitable for them. Young people receive clear information about being fostered and are provided with information about how to complain and advocacy services available to them. A children's rights service, commissioned from an independent agency, allows young people further opportunities to have their voices heard and express any concerns they may have.

The authority is continuing to develop its arrangements for young people to be involved and participate in wider aspects of the authority. A children in care council exists which works closely with the authority's corporate parenting board. The authority has developed its 'pledge' to young people with the involvement of young people themselves. Young people are involved in the recruitment of senior staff within the authority and are involved in foster carers' preparation training, sharing their experiences of what being fostered is like. These initiatives mean that the voices of fostered young people are increasingly well heard and considered within the authority.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

The authority works effectively to ensure that the planning to assist children to leave care supports their move into independence. The authority's leaving care team engage with young people promptly and children's social workers have received training in commencing young people's pathway plans. Foster carers are provided with support and advice regarding the promotion of independence. Such matters are covered in foster carers' supervision and support sessions where appropriate. Foster carers work with children to help them learn some of the skills they will need to live independently, such as cooking, washing and handling money. Carers receive good support to maintain placement stability. Robust arrangements to match long-term placements help young people to develop relationships and remain in foster care beyond their 16th birthday. A good and increasing number of young people remain in foster care beyond their 18th birthday. Children with disabilities have transition plans developed promptly and work is ongoing to help young people remain with their foster carers into adulthood.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The authority recruits carers from a range of backgrounds, cultures and communities to reflect the needs of children who need placements. Children with disabilities are well served by the authority's family placement service and the authority endeavours to match children with appropriate carers. Carers' assessments cover equality and diversity matters and training in this area for carers is mandatory. Young people have been involved in the preparation of a guidance booklet for all carers about looking after a young person from a black or

minority ethnic background.

The Statement of Purpose for the fostering service accurately and comprehensively sets out its approach to working with foster carers and the service it provides. This has been recently updated and agreed by the council. The authority has two children's guides to fostering; one for younger children and one for older. These include pictures and are well presented giving children and young people useful information about being fostered and who they contact if they have concerns or worries.

The authority displays an impressive commitment to the management and development of its fostering service. It has robustly actioned all matters identified at previous inspections and continues to develop further. The executive side of the council and senior officers are committed to improving the service provision and have invested heavily in restructuring and increasing the capacity of the fostering team. Strong work has also been undertaken in the development of effective working partnerships with education and health services which improve the lives of fostered young people. Day-to-day management is good although quality monitoring systems are not as effective as they should be in all areas. For example, weaknesses in panel operation identified earlier in this report were not identified and addressed by the service. Additionally, an inconsistency in the quality and completeness of some recording demonstrates further monitoring weakness. There are clear lines of communication between the fostering team, foster carers and children's social workers. Staff members are appropriately trained, supervised and supported and workload management systems are in place to ensure they can do their jobs effectively.

The service has become more effective at managing the foster carer recruitment process and continues to recruit new foster carers. New developments in the fostering team are aimed at increasing the number of applications to foster and the service is clear about the high standards of applicant required. Preparation training is good and includes input from foster carers and fostered young people. Thorough suitability checks are undertaken.

The service assesses applicants' competence to foster as well as considering their background and experiences of child care. Recent assessments seen are of good quality or better. The service seeks feedback from fostering panels about all assessments presented in order to continue to improve these. This thorough assessment process means that new foster carers are well prepared and suitable to look after vulnerable young people.

The fostering service provides its carers with good support. Supervising social workers visit foster carers regularly. Foster carers speak very highly of the support provided to them. A range of support groups are provided based on geography and the type of care provided. For example, there are support groups for Asian carers and family and friends foster carers. Supervising social workers carry out unannounced visits annually to monitor the work of foster carers. Formal supervision for carers is not as consistently provided. In some cases this happens regularly but in

others formal supervision is very infrequent with only brief unspecific records being retained. This limits the effectiveness of the organisation's management of and support for carers and, consequently, does not support placements well enough.

Foster carers' reviews take place annually with the first taken to panel for its consideration. Subsequently any reviews at which the carers' terms of approval change are also taken to panel. Reviews take into account the views of children in placement and their social workers. They also ensure that health and safety checklists and Criminal Records Bureau checks have been updated. However, health assessments of foster carers are not updated on a periodic basis unless the nature of the fostering task they undertake changes significantly. This means that reviews do not fully consider carers' ongoing suitability to foster as changes in health could significantly affect carers' work with young people. The service is introducing the use of independent people to chair foster carers' reviews to make them more independent and robust.

The authority provides its carers with a range of mandatory and developmental training. Training is provided on a rolling programme but also specific training can be provided based on the individual needs of carers or the circumstances of the children they are looking after. For example, very good training is provided around children's individual health needs. The authority's arrangements to train people to the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) National Occupational Standards for foster carers are well in hand.

Children's records are generally well maintained. Files are well structured and contain copies of all key documents relating to the young person. Files contain clear chronologies that allow easy access to information about key events happening to the young person and their family. Records about children are appropriate to assist planning and act as a reference for children in future should they wish to look back at their history. Administrative records held by the fostering service are generally well maintained. However, the files of foster carers are not kept in the same well ordered manner as young people's files. The structure of these files does not facilitate access to key information and the quality of recording and filing is inconsistent. For example, documents such as training records, dog assessments and key information about children are retained on some carers' files and not others. Some documents are not fully signed and completed. This weakness in recording does not support the good quality service provided in practice well enough.

Arrangements to assess and support family and friends carers are effective. This is a growing area of the authority's work and is well managed. The authority has developed a team specifically to work in this area and carried out a lot of work to ensure that assessments are of good quality and reflect the specific sensitivities of this type of placement. Assessments are of good quality and good support is provided to family and friends carers in a way that reflects the different nature of the care they provide. Although assessments carried out under Regulation 38 of the Fostering Services Regulations 2002 have not always been carried out in a sufficiently timely manner the team structure and working arrangements in place now provide a strong basis for effective and prompt practice in this area.

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 each carer is given basic training in first aid (NMS 12.5)
- ensure that carers' homes are free of avoidable hazards that might expose a child to risk of injury or harm. Specifically, that health and safety risk assessments are sufficiently wide-ranging in the matters covered (NMS 6.6)
- ensure that safe caring guidelines are specifically relevant to each child and are cleared with the child's social worker (NMS 9.3)
- ensure that fostering panels are correctly constituted in line with the regulations and that no business is conducted by a fostering panel unless at least five of its members, including the chair or vice chair, at least one of the social workers and at least two of the independent members meet as a panel (breach of regulation 25(1) of the Fostering Services Regulations 2002)
- ensure that there are effective procedures for monitoring and controlling the activities of the fostering service and ensuring quality performance (NMS 4.1)
- ensure that supervising social workers meet regularly with carers to supervise their work and that foster carers' files include records of supervisory meetings (NMS 22.6)
- ensure that foster carers' reviews fully consider their continued suitability to foster. Specifically, that health assessments of carers are updated with appropriate frequency (NMS 21.2)
- ensure that foster carer's records are consistently well maintained, fully completed and signed. (NMS 25)