

# Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council Fostering Team

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

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| <b>Date of last inspection</b> | 17/09/2007  |

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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

Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council Fostering Service provides a wide range of foster placements from short-term emergencies to medium and long-term care. The friends and family carers provide care to children who are known to them and this may be on a short or long-term basis. The service also has carers who provide short breaks to families and other carers of children with disabilities.

The service is led by a designated manager and a senior practitioner and it is located within the children in care services.

### Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This announced inspection covered all the key standards under each outcome area. It is a good service with outstanding features in the areas of enjoying and achieving and positive contribution.

The service is good at promoting children's health. Children receive good general and specialist health care provision and support. Young people receive encouragement and good support to have an annual health check.

The service works hard to keep children safe and generally ensures that foster carers' homes are safe. The service responds well to the children's needs for foster placements and makes suitable matches. It provides good support and training for carers to help maintain children's placements with their foster carers. The fostering panel is well chaired and panel members have a wide range of experience. The panel is robust in its consideration of matters presented and this helps keep children safe.

Children are provided with good help and support with their education and also in involving themselves in community activities. Academic achievement is promoted and recognised. The authority places a real commitment on seeking the views of fostered children regarding their own care, their views of their foster carers and the running of the service. Support for children's contact with their friends and families is good.

Foster carers are provided with good support. Assessments of foster carers are extremely thorough and they are well managed. Foster care agreements are always completed, although not always signed by both carers. Annual reviews and unannounced to foster carers visits are carried out, however they are not always completed within the prescribed timescales.

Children benefit from living with well-trained and very well-supported carers. Good records are kept relating to foster carers and the overall management and monitoring of the fostering service. Children's records are comprehensive, provide evidence of the work being done with them and contribute to an understanding of their life events.

This is a well managed service which provides is providing good outcomes for children and young people.

### **Improvements since the last inspection**

The last full inspection was carried out in September 2007 and resulted in two actions and one recommendation being made. These related to two of the key outcome areas, staying safe and organisation.

At the time of this inspection the agency had effectively addressed these matters. The service now ensures that, before a child is placed, a foster placement agreement is in place which addresses all matters required by fostering regulations. It has also ensured that care plans and other essential information is supplied for all children and young people placed in independent fostering agencies. A system has been devised to ensure Criminal Record Bureau checks are renewed every three years.

### **Helping children to be healthy**

The provision is good.

The fostering service actively promotes the health and well-being of children and young people. Good quality preparation and training is provided for carers to enable them to meet children and young people's health needs. They have attended courses on a variety of subjects, for example, first aid, sexual health and emotional abuse and neglect.

The fostering service ensures full information is obtained about children and young people's health needs. This information is carefully considered during the matching process and ensures they are placed with carers who are able to meet their needs.

Carers ensure all children or young people are registered with dentists, doctors and opticians. Children with complex needs are supported to access specialised health services. Additional training and support can be provided if carers are looking after a child or young person with complex needs.

Carers actively and effectively work in partnership with a variety of health professionals to promote the health of children and young people: They are knowledgeable about health services in the area. A high percentage of young people have annual health assessments.

Foster carers provide good quality information regarding the children or young people they are caring for in planning and review meetings.

Foster Carers keep good records and the service is kept up-to-date regarding children and young people's health. They also provide details of serious accidents, illnesses and action taken. This information is carefully monitored to determine the quality of care being provided and to ensure that health is being effectively promoted.

### **Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe**

The provision is good.

The service is managed by staff, who have the necessary qualifications, experience and knowledge to do so effectively. The recruitment policy and procedure for all staff ensures that there is robust vetting of prospective staff. A full employment history is gathered and where gaps in employment have been identified these are explored. References are sought and further confirmation of references is followed up by telephone. All staff have enhanced Criminal Record Bureau (CRB) disclosures in place and these are updated every three years, in line with good practice.

The recruitment and selection of foster carers is also robust and includes enhanced CRB disclosures, renewed every three years. References for carers are in place and the views gained from prospective foster carer's own children, both adult children and those still living at home, are clearly recorded. In addition, the views from previous partners, where there have been children are also gathered which ensure a thorough assessment is undertaken. Health and safety checks, including pet assessments and vehicle checks, are completed and updated annually in each foster home. However, health and safety checks are not sufficiently robust, for example, the health and safety household check does not include window blind chords.

Carers feel that the recruitment process is robust and are fully aware of why in depth assessment and references are undertaken so that the welfare of children and young people is safeguarded.

The recruitment strategy is regularly reviewed, so that the service recruits a diverse group of carers to meet the diverse needs of children and young people. Effective arrangements are in place to provide well matched foster placements for children. The service is generally effective in ensuring that children are placed with foster carers in a planned manner, with introductions to their carers arranged. The proportion of emergency placements of children with carers is low and this helps ensure that foster carers get good information about the children being placed with them. The service does its utmost to ensure that placement agreement meetings happen either before, or in an emergency very soon after, the placement is made.

The service is effective at managing the use of exemptions from the usual fostering limit. Exemptions are limited, monitored on a monthly basis and the fostering panel

is regularly updated on these exemptions. Once placements have been made support to carers and children is good and there are few placement breakdowns. The authority has a clear commissioning strategy regarding the use of independent fostering agencies. Placements made with them are very carefully arranged on the basis of children's needs.

Children's safety is a priority for the fostering service. Children feel safe and well cared for in their placements. They know how to make a complaint and who to speak to if they have a problem. Foster carers are very satisfied with the support provided. Foster carers prepare safe caring plans for each child and young person; these are regularly updated and reviewed. This ensures that children and young people are protected as far as possible within foster carer households.

Carers receive training in child protection, behaviour management and some have undertaken training in a parenting programme. The local authority designated officer has provided additional support and advice to the staff and carers in dealing with allegations and other safeguarding matters. Safeguarding issues raised in the last 12 months have been well handled. There has been an exceedingly small percentage of young people reported missing from home and these incidents have all been reviewed by the manager.

The fostering panel is child focused and organised to ensure that good quality decisions are made about the approval of foster carers. The panel chair and members have a wide range of relevant experience which they use in the decision-making process. The panel exercises robust scrutiny of information presented and have a quality assurance function which informs the improvement agenda for the agency.

### **Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do**

The provision is outstanding.

The agency greatly values and actively promotes equality and diversity for all children and young people. This is clearly reflected in the agency's policies, procedures and practice: Foster carers are recruited to meet the diverse needs of children requiring a foster placement; they are well trained and supported to ensure children's needs are met in relation to religious, cultural and disability factors; foster carers demonstrate a very good understanding of their role in promoting equality and diversity.

The education and leisure needs of children and young people are promoted. The authority places a high priority on the education of looked after children. Through the life chances team the education provision of all looked after children is monitored. Additional schemes are also in place to try to encourage all young people to attend school or some form of educational provision and to do well. The team provides help to carers on a range of educational matters, including help in avoiding exclusion, home work, changing schools and training.

Children and young people are also encouraged to develop their interests, skills and talents through involvement in community activities. This enables them to develop self worth and to realise their full potential.

Carers state they are well supported and receive good quality training, which they value. Children's records contain good information about their educational achievement, leisure interests and the support provided.

The authority has a well-established short break service for children with disabilities. However, care is not always available when required due to the ongoing need for foster carers. This matter is being actively addressed through the commissioning of services from an independent fostering agency.

### **Helping children make a positive contribution**

The provision is outstanding.

The service promotes and supports contact with families effectively. Foster carer training includes the importance of maintaining contact and the service's expectation is that foster carers will work with parents for the benefit of the young people. Contact arrangements are taken into account when children and young people are matched with suitable carers. These arrangements are set out in foster placement agreements and discussed when placements are made. Foster carers are extremely committed to supporting children and young people to maintain positive relationships with friends and family members. They are often involved in maintaining frequent and complex contact arrangements. Foster carers keep contact records, which detail the impact of contact on children and young people. Supervising social workers effectively monitor contact arrangements and help to resolve any difficult issues which arise.

The local authority is excellent at consulting with looked after children about the care they receive. It employs a participation and inclusion officer, who promotes consultation and actively seeks the participation of all looked after children in the development and delivery of children's services. The children in care council, known as 'Care 4 us', is also extremely proactive and ensures the voices of looked after children are heard and it is a powerful force in shaping children's services.

The fostering service also actively encourages and supports children and young people to express their views and opinions regarding the services that are provided in their reviews. Their opinions are sought for foster carers' reviews, however, further work is being undertaken to improve this system. Children who are, or have been looked after, present 'Total Respect' training to elected members, staff and foster carers.

Children and young people know how to complain and who to speak to if they have a



problem. Information about the fostering service is provided to them in an accessible format and they have access to advocacy services.

## **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is good.

The agency supports young people who are preparing for independence in a number of ways. Carers receive training and guidance in assisting young people, including support with basic budgeting, cooking and self-care. The leaving care service which is commissioned from Action for Children becomes involved with all fostered children at the review prior to their 16th birthday and ensures pathway plans are in place for young people. Carers receive very good support to help maintain and support placements as children become older. Financial arrangements are in place so that young people may stay in placement after they reach 18.

Foster carers' allowances and expenses are paid to carers to enable them to achieve good outcomes for children and young people. Entitlements are clear, payment methods followed and delay in payment is avoided. There are robust systems in place to provide good management information about foster care payments.

## **Organisation**

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The service has developed its policies, procedures and practice which supports equality and inclusion for all children who are looked after by carers. These documents can be produced in a variety of formats. Carers and staff have received training and guidance in promoting equality and diversity. Carers are able to demonstrate a good understanding of their role in promoting equality and diversity. The service also ensures through the matching process that carers are able to meet the diverse needs of young people placed.

Foster carers ensure that children have mementos, photographs and life work to take with them when they move on. The views of children and young people are actively sought, which ensures they have an opportunity to voice their views and opinions.

The fostering service's Statement of Purpose is thorough and it is kept up-to-date. The service has its own children's guide for younger and older children. These guides can be produced in a variety of formats to meet children's differing needs. These guides are attractively presented, written in a child-friendly format and contain all the required information.

The fostering service is well-managed operationally and strategically. The managerial team has relevant social care experience and appropriate qualifications. They are

very committed to the continuous improvement of the service and achieving good outcomes for children and young people.

The service has good links with other teams and effective collaborative working relationships exist between them. The life chances team monitor outcomes for children and co-ordinate the additional resources available in conjunction with the fostering and placing social workers.

Staff are well qualified and experienced. They are very well supported and have access to regular, good quality supervision, training and personal development. The service is sufficiently resourced. Staff know their carers, communicate effectively with them and they work well together. This ensures that children and young people are well supported in their foster homes.

The service has a recruitment strategy in place and the recruitment materials are appropriate and interesting. Successful recruitment campaigns have resulted in an increased number of carers. This has in turn improved the matching process.

There are good systems in place to respond to enquiries from prospective foster carers. Foster carers were positive about their first contact with the service and the pace of the assessment process. Thorough assessments of carers' abilities to parent looked after children are undertaken. Assessments include preparation training provided by fostering staff and other professionals from the authority. The standard of assessments is good and these are effectively monitored them prior to their presentation at panel. Foster care agreements contain the required information to ensure carers undertake their role effectively. However not all foster care agreements have been signed by both foster carers.

The fostering service provides good support and management to their carers. They are visited regularly by their supervising social worker. Telephone advice and support is accessible out of hours. Foster carer support groups take place and newsletters are produced for carers. A good training programme is also provided. Foster carers' supervision takes place on a regular basis, with good records being maintained and agreed with the foster carer. Discussion within supervision is child focussed and records clearly identify any actions or support needs and these are followed up at the next meeting. Unannounced visits take place although these are not always within the timescale.

The annual review of carers includes the collation of a good range of relevant information and the compilation of a report, which goes to the panel. The service places some importance on getting the views of fostered children and their social workers for the reviews of their foster carers, however, the service has identified shortfalls in the system and is actively addressing this. Generally, reviews contain information from children and social workers and are considered alongside the foster carer's comments and those of the supervising social worker. Clear recommendations are made regarding the ongoing terms of the carer's approval and reviews identify any additional support or training needed. Whilst the majority of foster carer's annual reviews are undertaken, these are not always carried out within timescales.

The service has a comprehensive training programme in place for carers. In addition, the Children's Workforce Development Council training has been introduced and this is being undertaken by the service's current carers. Training is discussed at the carers' review and any issues identified are raised in the review. Foster carers speak positively about the quality and range of training provided.

The records held by the fostering team are well ordered, comprehensive and securely stored. The carer's files contain a range of information from the initial contact to the department through to the latest supervision and annual review report. Children's records are comprehensive; they contain all the necessary documentation required and would help a child or a young person understand their life history. Children's reviews take place as required and monitor how well foster placements continue to meet children's needs. The administrative and management information systems support and enable a good fostering service to be provided. Foster carers receive training and support about carrying out life work with children and maintain a record of children's life events.

The arrangements for friends and family carers are good. Assessments are detailed, and include a viability assessment which goes to panel. These carers are afforded the same level of support and access to training as other foster carers working for the authority. Staff take into account the existing relationships and family structures in assessing and supporting the 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 foster carers' homes are free of avoidable hazards that might expose a child to risk of injury or harm (NMS 6.6)
- ensure all foster care agreements are signed by all foster carers (NMS 22.4)
- ensure unannounced visits are carried out in the necessary timescales (NMS 22.6)
- ensure foster carer's annual reviews are completed in the necessary timescales. (NMS 23.8)