

Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council Fostering Services

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

Unique reference number	SC043216
Inspection date	14/12/2010
Inspector	Marian Denny
Type of inspection	Key

Setting address	Reddish Green Centre, St. Elizabeth's Way, Reddish, Stockport, Cheshire, SK5 6BL
Telephone number	0161 947 4662
Email	
Registered person	Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council Children & Young People's Directorate
Registered manager	
Responsible individual	Susan Westwood
Date of last inspection	04/09/2007

© Crown copyright 2010

Website: www.ofsted.gov.uk

This document may be reproduced in whole or in part for non-commercial educational purposes, provided that the information quoted is reproduced without adaptation and the source and date of publication are stated.

You can obtain copies of The Children Act 2004, Every Child Matters and The National Minimum Standards for Children's Services from: The Stationery Office (TSO) PO Box 29, St Crispins, Duke Street, Norwich, NR3 1GN. Tel: 0870 600 5522. Online ordering: www.tso.co.uk/bookshop

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

Stockport MBC (Metropolitan Borough Council) has a fostering service which provides a range of placements to meet the needs of children and young people. These include permanent and temporary foster care and emergency placement, child specific carers who care for their relatives and carers who provide a short break service. A service manager and two team managers are responsible for the supervision and management of the social work and support staff.

Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

This was an announced inspection and covered all the key national minimum standards.

The service actively promotes children and young people's health and development. It has been extremely effective in meeting these needs through its collaborative work with other services and in adopting a multi-agency approach to these issues.

The service is extremely child focussed and works hard to safeguard children and young people. It is very careful to ensure foster carers' homes are safe and that children are placed with carers who can look after them well. The service has a diverse group of carers, responds well to the need for foster placements and is highly effective in matching children with suitable carers. It provides extremely good support and training for carers, which supports and maintains children's placements with their foster carers. The fostering panel is well chaired and there is a range of experience amongst its panel members. The panel is robust in its consideration of matters presented to it and this helps keep children safe.

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

The service provides its foster carers with outstanding support and management. Assessments and reviews of foster carers are extremely thorough. Children benefit from living with extremely well-trained and very well-supported carers. Excellent 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 carried out and contribute to an understanding of their life events.

This is an extremely well-managed service, which provides very good support to its carers and extremely good outcomes for children.

Improvements since the last inspection

The last full inspection was carried out in September 2007 and resulted in three recommendations being made. These related to three of the key outcome areas of staying safe, enjoying and achieving and organisation. At the time of this inspection the agency had effectively addressed these matters. The service has ensured that all necessary information is recorded in personnel files. The service had carried out its planned developments in relation to the short break service. Policies and procedures for the monitoring of placements of independent fostering agencies are in place.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

The fostering service is extremely proactive in promoting the health and development of children and young people.

Excellent preparation and training is provided to enable carers to meet children and young people's health needs. A variety of courses relating to health matters are provided, for example, first aid, sexual health, communicable diseases, emotional abuse and neglect. In addition, the fostering service works in collaboration with other partners to encourage children, young people and their foster carers to participate in community sports schemes and health events, which help to encourage and promote exercise and healthy living.

The service has a clear expectation that placing social workers will provide health information for all children prior to placement or in situations of emergency, as soon as possible afterwards. In practice, this usually happens, with information obtained prior to placement, carefully considered during the matching process. This ensures children and young people are placed with carers, who are well able to meet their needs.

The service monitors the quality of this information through supervisory visits carried out by the family placement officer and the looked after children's reviews. This ensures foster carers are fully aware of the young person's current health needs and they work extremely hard to ensure they are met.

Children in foster care are registered with doctors, dentists, opticians and receive specialist services as necessary. Foster carers and professionals help children to attend any appointments necessary. Additional training and support can be provided, if carers are looking after a child or young person with complex needs. Young people are given information about a range of health and support services, which they can access directly. The service is very good at ensuring that annual health checks for fostered children are carried out. An extremely high proportion of children receive

these checks. There is a very effective system in place to monitor whether medical checks take place, both for in-house placements and for those children placed with other agencies.

There is a well-established multi-agency approach to meeting children's health and development needs. The service has strong links with the mental health services, which has resulted in children and young people having easier access to these services. A designated educational psychologist offers support and advice to family placement officers and foster carers. The looked after children nurse is on panel and is available for advice on specific issues and is involved in training.

Foster carers keep good records and the service is kept up-to-date regarding children and young people's health, including any medication administered. 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 the health and well-being of the children or young people is being promoted.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

The fostering service is extremely child focused and does its utmost to ensure children and young people are safeguarded. The recruitment and selection of foster carers is robust and includes enhanced Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) disclosures, which are renewed every three years. References for carers are in place and the views of prospective foster carer's adult children and those still living at home, are obtained and clearly recorded. In addition, the views from previous partners are also elicited, which ensures a thorough assessment is undertaken.

Policies are in place, which give information to foster carers on bullying, safe care, transport and the use of car seats and missing from home. The service encourages foster carers to use positive behaviour management strategies.

The service has a strong link with the safeguarding unit and regular safeguarding training is provided to staff and foster carers. Annual reviews and supervisory visits focus on the provision of a safe and healthy environment and comprehensive health and safety assessments are updated annually. Carers have safe caring policies in place that are developed during their assessment and reviewed regularly so that they are specific to the needs of the children placed.

There is an effective system of recording and monitoring any complaints or allegations made about carers, which helps keep children safe. The service acts effectively to investigate and respond to these. Records of accidents, illness and other significant events are also maintained and monitored.

The recruitment strategy is regularly reviewed and real efforts are made to recruit a diverse group of carers to meet the differing needs of children and young people, who need to be fostered.

Placing social workers provide good quality information to the fostering service, which informs the matching process. The service's family finding and matching policy, as well as planning processes for long-term placements have been significantly strengthened. Written foster placement agreements contain reference to elements of matching and specify how children's needs will be met. Comprehensive, qualitative support plans are also in place for long-term placements and this has greatly increased placement stability.

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 is rigorous in ensuring that placement agreement meetings happen either before or, in an emergency, within 72 hours after the placement is made. Where children are placed in emergencies with little information available about them, the service makes sure that information is passed to carers as soon as it becomes known.

The service is effective at managing the use of exemptions from the usual fostering limit. Exemptions are relatively low and well monitored when they take place. The authority has a clear commissioning strategy regarding the use of Independent Fostering Agencies, with placements made very carefully and on the basis of children's needs.

Children indicate that they 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 to them by the service to help them care for children's welfare.

The fostering panel meets regularly and is properly constituted with members bringing a wide range of expertise to their roles. The panel has access to medical and legal advice. It is well organised, has very good administrative support and is effectively chaired. Panel discussion is robust and the minutes of good quality. The decision maker ensures all information relating to a case, including the panel minutes, are thoroughly scrutinised before making a decision. All decisions are made in a timely way.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The demographic make-up of the local authority area is largely white British. There are only a very small proportion of residents from other ethnic or cultural backgrounds. However, the service has been proactive in recruiting a diverse group of carers and largely meets the needs of children and young people requiring foster placements.

The service values diversity and promotes equality. There is a rolling programme of diversity and equality training which all staff regularly attend. Training for staff and

foster carers incorporates anti-discriminatory practice and venues and times vary to allow everyone to access them. The service provides foster carers with good information about promoting equality and diversity within the foster carer handbook. Equality impact assessments are undertaken on all new policies. The service has links with the authority's disability database manager and carers and young people have information to allow them to engage with appropriate services.

Children with disabilities receive very good support from the service and its foster carers. Excellent individual training is available for carers working with children with disabilities based on the children's specific needs and circumstances. Foster carers are provided with any specialist equipment needed by children. The service matches children with foster carers effectively to ensure their individual needs can be met.

The education and leisure needs of children and young people are actively promoted. The authority places a high priority on the education of looked after children. They have a well-established virtual school. This team, together with the psychological service works extremely hard to encourage and support young people to attend school or some form of educational provision and to do well. Considerable help and support is available to carers on a range of educational matters, including help in avoiding exclusion, home work, changing schools and training. The virtual school also has some personal support advisers, who can provide at an early stage, specific and practical individual help in school and at home. Educational equipment and resources are also made available to children in foster care where needed. All fostered children have personal education plans (PEP) and young people aged 15 years and over have pathway plans. The educational progress of all looked after children is closely monitored and these services provide very good support to children and young people to achieve their potential.

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

The fostering service has strong links with and works extremely closely with the virtual school, the psychology service, as well as the Kite team and the nurse for looked after children. This has resulted in a bespoke service being provided, which meets the holistic needs of children and young people well.

Foster carers are very aware of the educational needs of young people in their care and communicate well with education staff to meet those needs. An annual achievement award ceremony recognises the achievements of children in all aspects of their lives, but in particular in education. This is a well attended and valued event that promotes children's self worth and a sense of pride in their achievements.

There have been positive developments in the short break service, which provides respite for children with disabilities and which is also used to prevent children coming into the looked after system. There is a clear recognition that parents remain the main carers and foster carers follow their wishes and guidance. Many of the fostering service's policies and procedures also cover the short breaks service, however there

are some that are specific to this service. The supervision and support of carers is the same as in mainstream fostering. The quality of assessments is high and full information about the children is held. Children's views are recorded and their participation is evident.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

The service actively promotes contact to meet the needs of children and young people. Foster carers are extremely committed to supporting them to maintain relationships with friends and family members. Contact arrangements and plans are taken into consideration when children and young people are matched with suitable carers. They are clearly outlined in the planning processes where arrangements are complex. Foster carers spend considerable time supporting contact. Both pre-approval and ongoing foster carer training addresses a child and young person's right to contact and the importance of working in partnership with parents. Foster carers are supported through supervision with contact arrangements. However, if difficult contact issues arise a planning meeting is held to address them. Foster carers' record children's reactions to contact and this information is used when developing and reviewing children's plans. Training in life-story work is provided to carers. This stresses the importance of children having positive contact with their families where possible.

Children's files contain clear information about any arrangements for contact and any legal basis for the arrangements. Children receive good support to have contact with their families wherever this is appropriate.

The service is excellent in consulting children and young people about the care they receive and wider aspects of the authority's work. It employs a communications and engagement manager, who has developed a range of projects and events to promote consultation and participation. Foster children and young people have been involved in most of the projects, for example the children's guide. They are listened to and their opinions sought about matters concerning them. Examples were given where decisions and practice have been changed as a result of listening to children. The service provides encouragement and support so that all foster children and young people are able to express their views in their reviews. Their views are also sought for foster carers' annual reviews and are a significant source of information. Children and young people know how to complain and who to speak to if they have a problem. Some young people have been trained to take part in recruitment and selection of staff. Information about the fostering service is provided in a format accessible to them. They have access to advocacy services.

Foster carers are involved in service development and have been consulted on a variety of issues. They are also involved in planning and delivering training.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is outstanding.

Foster carers have access to extremely good guidance and training to help them prepare young people for independence. The service provides carers with very good support to help maintain and support placements as children become older. A high percentage of fostered children stay in their foster placement beyond their 16th birthday. Financial arrangements are in place so that young people can stay in placement after they reach 18 and at the time of the inspection a number of young people had chosen to do so.

Foster carers are paid the recommended government rates. Carers are well informed about this scheme and there is an effective system in place for making these payments. Financial support for special circumstances and the provision of any necessary specialist equipment is good. No carers complained about the payments or arrangements for allowances.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding.

The council's strategy and performance unit works corporately to promote the equality of opportunity and social inclusion within the council. This unit provides guidance and information on policies and procedures, which are subject to a diversity and impact assessment.

The service values and promotes equality and diversity. Its policies and procedures can be produced in a variety of formats to meet the differing needs of people. The service's practice fully supports equality and inclusion for all children, who are looked after. All staff and carers have undertaken equality and diversity training. The service provided examples which demonstrate children and young people's religious, ethnic and special needs are being met. Foster carers ensure children have mementos, photographs and a life story book to take with them when they move. The views and opinions of children and young people are actively sought and listened to. Children whose parents foster are also able to share their views and opinions through consultation with agency staff.

The fostering service's Statement of Purpose outlines the aims, objectives, services provided and is kept up to date. The service has its own children's guide for younger and older children. These guides were developed by children and young people and can be produced in a variety of formats to meet children's differing needs. These guides are attractively presented, written in a child-friendly form and contain all the required information.

The fostering service is extremely well-managed operationally and strategically. The

managerial team have extensive, relevant social care experience and appropriate qualifications. They are committed to the continuous improvement of the service and outcomes for children. The fostering service is an integral part of children's services in Stockport and has strong links and good communications with other services.

There are very good monitoring systems in place. File audits are carried out at regular intervals and remedial action identified. Foster carers are sending in written notification of events, which are collated by the managers and supervision of staff serves to inform managers of any concerns. Records demonstrate that child protection issues, allegations and complaints have been dealt with appropriately and that all necessary agencies are informed of significant events.

Staff working in the team are suitably qualified and extremely experienced. They are well supported and have access to regular, very good quality supervision, training and personal development. The service is sufficiently well resourced to allow them to do their jobs well. 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 officer who is also responsible for the retention of existing carers. There is a very good recruitment strategy in place and recruitment materials are of good quality and inclusive. Successful recruitment campaigns have resulted in a steady increase of carers each year. Improvement in the range of foster carers available has enabled the service to have some choice in matching children with carers.

There are systems in place to respond to enquiries from people thinking about fostering. Foster carers were very positive about their first contact with the service. The service is extremely thorough in the way it assesses prospective foster carers. Assessments include preparation training provided by fostering staff and other professionals from the authority. Very rigorous checks are made regarding applicants' suitability including checks with CRB, local authorities, children's schools, birth children, previous partners, employers and other referees. They are visited and interviewed frequently as part of the assessment process. All applicants are assessed on their competency to look after vulnerable children as well as their background and experience. The standard of assessments is very good and appropriate systems are in place to monitor the quality of them prior to their presentation at panel. Foster care agreements contain the required information to ensure carers undertake their role effectively.

The fostering service manages their carers well and provides excellent support to them. They are visited regularly by their family placement officer and they are also able to access excellent support from staff in the fostering outreach service, if required. There is an out of hours' service and telephone advice and support is readily accessible. There are a variety of foster carer support groups to meet the varying needs of carers and these take place on a regular basis. Foster carers' supervision regularly takes place and very good records are maintained. Discussion within supervision is extremely child focussed and addresses the five outcomes

identified in Every Child Matters. Records clearly identify any actions or support needs and these are followed up at the next meeting. Unannounced visits take place appropriately. The fostering service also holds an annual event for foster carers' birth children.

The service has an extensive training programme available to carers. It has also been very successful in enabling a high percentage of their foster carers to complete the Children's Workforce Development Council's fostering induction standards. Foster carers speak extremely positively about the quality and range of training provided.

Arrangements for undertaking foster carers' annual reviews are very effective. Reviews take place annually and consider how well the carer meets children's needs. They also consider the quality of support and training provided to the carer. The fostering service places a high priority on getting the views of fostered children and their social workers for the reviews of their foster carers. Reviews contain reports from children and social workers that are considered alongside the foster carer's comments and those of the supervising social worker. Reviews are carried out by a mini-panel for second and subsequent reviews where there are no issues that need to be considered by the fostering panel. Clear recommendations are made regarding the ongoing terms of the carer's approval and any additional support or training identified.

The records held by the fostering team for the carers and young people are well ordered, comprehensive and securely stored. The carers' files contain a range of information from the initial contact to the department through to the latest supervision and annual review report.

Similarly, the children's records are comprehensive, contain all the necessary documentation required to help a child or a young person understand their life history. The fostering service works hard to ensure that carers receive sufficient information about the young people placed with them. Children's reviews take place as required and monitor how well foster placements continue to meet children's needs. Foster carers receive training and support to maintain a record of children's life events.