

Sefton Metropolitan Borough Council Fostering Service

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

Unique reference number	SC056238
Inspection date	13/01/2011
Inspector	Marian Denny
Type of inspection	Key

Setting address	Ellesmere House, Crosby Road North, Waterloo, Liverpool, L22 0LG
Telephone number	0151 285 5269
Email	
Registered person	Sefton Metropolitan Borough Council
Registered manager	
Responsible individual	Colin Pettigrew
Date of last inspection	11/03/2009

© Crown copyright 2011

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

Sefton Council fostering service is part of the local authority's children's services department. The fostering service recruits, assesses and supports a range of foster carers who provide placements to children and young people looked after by the council. Foster carers are recruited and approved under the registration categories of short-term fostering, concurrent placements where foster carers are also approved as adopters for the child for whom they are going to care for and permanent foster carers. The service also provides a short-break scheme for children with disabilities who live with parents and main carers.

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. Placement Agreement meetings are held. However, the foster placement agreement does not contain all the regulatory information required. The service 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 extremely good help and support with their education and also in involving themselves in community activities. Academic achievement is promoted actively, recognised and celebrated. 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 very 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. Annual reviews and unannounced visits to foster carers are carried out, however not all annual reviews contain full information.

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. The service's recruitment policies and practice did not meet the regulations in every case, and selection procedures, however, two personnel files contained all the required regulatory information.

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 on 11/03/2009 and resulted in one action and 10 recommendations being made. The action related to the key outcome area of positive contribution and the recommendations related to the four key outcome areas: being healthy, staying safe, economic wellbeing and organisation.

At the time of this inspection the service had effectively addressed these matters. Foster carers are now provided with appropriate information regarding children's health needs. In addition, the system for medical consents have been reviewed and improved. The service has also reviewed its practice on assessing carers' homes and a new health and safety risk assessment has been developed. Foster carers produce safe caring plans to meet the specific needs of each child or young person placed with them. Recruitment and selection procedures for the appointment of staff in the service have been revised. The service has improved its payment scheme for carers and payments are now made promptly and at the agreed time. Foster carers annual reviews address their health and training needs. Foster carers have received record training and record any significant life events relating to a child or young person. Complaint Records are kept and details of any investigation undertaken and the outcome are now recorded on the relevant files.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

The fostering service actively promotes the health and well-being of children and young people. Strong and effective partnership exists between the children's trust and its partners, for example, the Sefton Primary Care Trust and the Local Safeguarding Children Board.

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

A good system has also been introduced with foster carers visited within 24 hours of

a child or young person being placed with them. During this visit, the supervising social worker ensures foster carers have received all the necessary documentation and information available about a child or young person.

At the time of their initial placement, health care assessments are carried out. These identify a child or young person's current health needs and are reviewed regularly through the looked after children's statutory reviewing system and updated health assessments.

Good quality preparation and training is provided to enable foster carers to meet children's and young people's health needs. They have attended courses on a variety of subjects, for example, first aid, sexual health, safer caring, substance misuse, as well as emotional abuse and neglect.

The service has two looked after nurses available. This, together with effective multi-agency working and regular supervision by the fostering service, has ensured foster carers are fully aware of their responsibilities to promote the health care of the children and young people in their care. Carers ensure all children and young people in their care are registered with dentists, doctors and opticians. Those children and young people 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.

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 monitored carefully to determine the quality of care being provided and to ensure that health is being promoted effectively.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

Those involved in managing the agency are suitable people to run a business concerned with safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children and young people. There is a recruitment policy and procedure for the selection of all staff, however, this is not sufficiently robust, for example, no second written references are obtained for internal candidates who are appointed to another job.

The recruitment and selection of foster carers is robust and includes enhanced Criminal Records Bureau 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 usually obtained. In addition, the views from previous partners are obtained 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.

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 and real efforts made to recruit a diverse group of carers to meet the needs of children and young people, who require foster placements. Placing social workers provide good quality information to the fostering service, which informs the matching process. 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 and 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. However, the foster placement agreement does not contain all the regulatory information required.

The service is effective at managing the use of exemptions from the usual fostering limit. Exemptions are limited, monitored regularly and the fostering panel is updated regularly on these exemptions. Once placements have been made support to carers and children is good, which reduces foster 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. The service has recently revised its foster care support groups and they are largely satisfied with the support provided. Foster carers now prepare safe caring plans for each child and young person, which 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 and behaviour management. The service has a strong link with the safeguarding unit and regular safeguarding training is provided to staff and foster carers. 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. Safeguarding issues raised in the last 12 months have been handled well. There has been some young people reported missing from home and these incidents have all been reviewed by the manager.

The fostering panel meets regularly and is properly constituted with members bringing a wide range of expertise to their roles. It is well organised, has 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 scrutinised thoroughly 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 service greatly values and actively promotes equality and diversity for all children and young people. This is clearly reflected in the service's ethos and in their 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 their disability, religion and culture. Foster carers demonstrate a very good understanding of their role in promoting equality and diversity.

The service ensures there are a variety of initiatives to address discrimination and raise children and young people's self-esteem, for example, bully-busters, the celebration of children's achievements through the annual 'No limits' project and the 'Super Stars' event. These initiatives are effective and have raised the confidence and self-esteem of a number of children and young people in foster care.

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 virtual school which, in collaboration with other multi-agency services, works extremely hard to encourage and support children and young people to attend school or some form of educational provision and do well. Considerable help and support is available to carers on a range of educational matters, including help in avoiding exclusion, changing schools and doing their home work. At an early stage, the virtual school and other multi-agency services provide 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 very good support is provided 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.

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. They 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.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

The service effectively promotes and supports contact with families. 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. Supervising social workers effectively monitor contact arrangements and help to resolve any difficult issues which arise.

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 local authority is excellent at consulting with looked after children about the care they receive and wider aspects of the authority's work. It employs a participation 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 and care leavers' council, known as 'MAD' (Making a difference 4 children in care) 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 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 an important 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 and they have extremely good access to advocacy services.

Foster carers have been consulted on a variety of issues relating to the fostering service and are involved in service development.

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 team 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 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 receive allowances and expenses in order for them to meet the cost of caring for young people. Entitlements are clear, payment methods followed and delay in payment is avoided. The service though is in the process of introducing a loyalty payment and fee structured payment for its foster carers. 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 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 were developed by children and young people and can be produced in a variety of formats to meet children's differing needs. They are attractively presented, written in a child-friendly form 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. Staff ensure the outcomes for all children and young people in foster placement are carefully and effectively monitored and the very best outcomes achieved.

Staff are well qualified and experienced. They are 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. Recruitment campaigns have resulted in a slight increase in the number of carers, which has improved the matching process.

There are good systems in place to respond to enquiries from prospective foster carers. The service carries out thorough assessments of carers' abilities to parent looked after children. The standard of assessments is good and these are monitored effectively prior to their presentation at panel. Foster care agreements contain the required information to ensure carers undertake their role effectively.

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. Foster carers' supervision takes place on a regular basis, with good records being maintained. 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 appropriately.

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, there are shortfalls in the system, for example, social worker reports are not always provided. The service is actively addressing this. Generally, reviews contain information from children 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.

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.

The records held by the fostering team are well ordered, comprehensive and stored securely. The carer's files contain a range of information from the initial contact with the department through to the latest supervision and annual review report. Children's records are comprehensive, 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 comprehensive and include a viability assessment, which is presented 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 that before a child is placed, a foster placement agreement is in place which covers the matters specified in Schedule 6 (breach of Regulation 34.3 fostering service Regulations 2002)
- ensure all the required information relating to the fostering service's personnel is obtained (breach of Regulation 2(3)(d)(1) of the Local Authority Fostering Service Regulations 2002)
- ensure each carer's annual review contains full information. (NMS 23)