

South Gloucestershire Fostering Services

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

Unique reference number	SC041041
Inspection date	21/12/2007
Inspector	Wilfried Maxfield / Thomas Webber
Type of inspection	Key

Setting address	South Gloucestershire County Council, 2a Newton Road, BRISTOL, BS30 8EZ
Telephone number	01454 866090
Email	tamsin.cowls@southglos.gov.uk
Registered person	South Glos Council Department for Young Children
Registered manager	
Responsible individual	Therese Ann Gillespie
Date of last inspection	15/01/2007

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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

South Gloucestershire Council Fostering Service is part of the Family Placement Team based at Cadbury Heath. It provides a fostering; adoption and short break service across the authority. The Fostering Service recruits, assesses, trains, approves and supports foster carers. It is located within the Department for Children and Young People (DCYP) which is managed by the Director of Children's Services.

At the time of this inspection South Gloucestershire Fostering supported 113 approved foster homes offering a number and range of placements for either individual children or sibling groups for short term, bridging, respite or on a long term basis. Overall, the service provided care for 142 children and young people within the four different types of fostering services available.

These include:

1. 'General Fostering' which provided placements for 83 children and young people.
2. 'Kinship Care' fostering with 23 children in placement. Young people in 'Kinship Care' are being looked after by relatives or friends with the knowledge of Social Services.
3. 'Family Link Service' with 35 placements. The Family Link Service provides short periods of care for disabled children and young people.
4. The 'Turnabout project' with one young person in treatment. The Turnabout Team is a specialist fostering provision for South Gloucestershire providing Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care to compliment the existing fostering service.

The management of the Family Placement Team consists of two Team Managers operating as a job share. Each takes lead responsibility for fostering or adoption. The Family Placement Team employs 9 full time equivalent social work posts, 6.5 of these posts deal solely with fostering. The team also contains a training officer (qualified Social Worker), a specialist Recruitment and Marketing Officer, a Finance clerk, 1.5 Information Assistants and an Adoption/Fostering Administrator who provides support to the Foster Panel.

Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

This was an announced key inspection. The reason for this visit was to look at the progress the fostering service has made with the recommendations made at the last inspection. No action requirements were made as a result of the last inspection. Recommendations of the last visit related to the 'Being Healthy' outcomes and included a proposal for the service to be more proactive to help foster carers to give up smoking and a recommendation to implement a more child friendly Health Care Plan. Other recommendations followed up during this inspection related to the foster

panel membership and the training of foster carers.

At this inspection all of the remaining key standards were looked at. The following action requirement and three recommendations all relate to and affect the rating of the 'Staying safe outcomes: One action is required and one recommendation made in relation to the information required when recruiting and vetting staff. The recommendation regarding panel membership made in the last report is again repeated in this report. A second recommendation concerning the operation of the panel relates to the assessment and timeframes of emergency admissions. All areas inspected were rated outstanding, except 'Staying safe' which was rated 'good'. This resulted in the overall quality rating of 'outstanding'.

Improvements since the last inspection

The previous inspection report recommended that the agency is more proactive in helping those foster carers who smoke to give up. Since then the service has conducted an in depth foster carers 'smoking audit' and updated its non smoking policy for carers in the foster carer handbook. It has also supported carers to stop smoking by providing additional information, training and assistance. It is expected that the introduction of these measures will lead to all of the children and young people enjoying a healthier, smoke free environment.

The last report recommended that the service consider the introduction of a child-friendly and personal 'Health Care Record' (Health Passport) which young people can keep with them between placements and which records such things as inoculations, allergies, illnesses etc. This inspection saw considerable progress with the construction and implementation of such a plan. A Health Passport has been created using a template developed by the British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF). The template was further developed to meet local needs by the services Looked After Nurse, a Community Paediatrician and with the participation of the Primary Care Trust (PCT). It is available for further consultation in Draft form and will be distributed shortly. The introduction of this documented will ensure that children's and young people's health needs are known to all and met even in the case of multiple placement moves.

It was also recommended that the service be more proactive in promoting National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) Level 3 in Child Care training for Foster Carers. The service has now strengthened its links with a local training provider offering an online Level 3 BTEC Certificate in Advanced Skills in Foster Care. This course is fully endorsed by BAAF and is mapped to the NVQ in caring for Children and Young people. This has added an additional training opportunity to the already excellent range of training for foster carers provided by the council and will further improve outcomes for children and young people.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

South Gloucestershire Council provides fostering services which help children and young people to receive excellent health care. A wide range of dedicated health services ensure that the physical and developmental needs of children and young people are being met. Initial health assessments are undertaken by a Community Paediatrician. A part time qualified nurse is at the centre of monitoring and assessing the health needs and outcomes of all Looked After Children. The nurse provides excellent opportunities to children and young people for contact and consultation.

Foster carers and the children and young people placed with them enjoy a well organised and developed network of mainstream and specialist health services. The nurse operates an excellent administration/appointment system ensuring that health assessments and routine checks are done within the recommended frequencies. The nurse is available to give advice to foster carers and has expert knowledge of the local specialist health services available to them.

Before each placement foster carers are provided with a comprehensive description of the health needs of a child or young person. Health care needs are identified during the early stages of the referral and matching process. The service has robust procedures in place for gathering information about the health needs of children and young people prior to placement. Part of the initial information gathering and recording is delegated to a Placement Planning meeting which ensures that health issues are identified and that all recommended procedures are understood by carers. Systems to retrieve vital information from past placements via the placement authorities are robust and rigorous.

A written health record is available in every foster home. The health care record identifies how health needs will be met within the current placement. The record is updated throughout the placement through an excellent support and supervision regime provided by Social Workers. Ongoing health needs are constantly monitored and case recordings and supervision notes capturing information exchanged between Social Workers and foster carers are of an excellent quality. A child friendly Health Passport has been created by the Nurse in consultation with other professionals to ensure that children and young people understand what is recorded about them and which young people can keep with them between placements. This document is currently in the process of being implemented.

South Gloucestershire Council provides a good range of training courses on health related issues. The service provides ample training in aspects of health, hygiene and overall physical and psychological well-being. Training provided includes Health and Safety in the home and topics relating to the developmental well-being and protection of children and young people. All foster carers have received first aid training during their pre- approval training and this training is updated at least every three years.

The fostering service provides carers with excellent support and advice helping them to promote the health of children and young people in their care. All children and young people currently placed by the service are registered with primary health services. Where health care intervention is ongoing the carers will ensure this is continued and support the child to attend any outstanding appointments. Carers duties and responsibilities are outlined in a comprehensive Foster Carer Manual. This incorporates advice on the promotion of a healthy diet, day-to-day health care and hygiene issues. The service is highly competent to make certain that foster carers are available who have the skills, training and understanding to meet the most complex health needs of the children and young people placed with them.

The fostering service has excellent links with health agencies and provides and/or helps to secure additional services for children and young people. This includes: Where NHS dental service is unavailable private treatment is paid.

An outreach sexual health worker who provides a service for Looked After Children who are deemed to be at risk.

A specialist drug worker who is also employed within the Adolescent Support Team who works closely with young people in care. Close links are kept to the Drug Action Team.

Occupational Therapists who ensure that homes of carers are properly assessed particularly in such homes where disabled children are placed.

South Gloucestershire Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) prioritise Looked After Children and offer case specific consultation to Social Work staff and carers. Foster Carers praise the bi-monthly surgery sessions made available by CAMHS. Equally, CAMHS input in training courses for specific health conditions is highly appreciated by carers and Social Workers alike. Waiting times for CAMHS services have been substantially reduced in recent months.

The service is aware of the fact that the hours worked by the part time qualified nurse are in need of a substantial increase to ensure the outstanding outcomes in the area are sustainable.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The fostering service employs two job share managers. Both managers are able to evidence considerable and in depth knowledge of the Fostering Regulations and NMS. All managers and Social Workers have the necessary skills and experience to manage and deliver a service that promotes and safeguards the welfare of children and young people.

South Gloucestershire's Department for Children and Young People's Personnel Section is responsible for ensuring that the recruiting and vetting process follows the elements outlined in Schedule 1 of the Fostering Services Regulations. This falls short of the standard; not all of the personnel files of staff connected with the fostering service contained all the information required by Schedule 1. For example, files did not contain photographs, references were missing in two different files examined and

there was no evidence that gaps in CV's were explored prior to recruitment. Criminal Record Bureau (CRB) checks were evident on all files. However, CRB guidance for the retention and destruction of such sensitive data is not being followed.

Children and young people are cared for in warm, nurturing environments. Visits to foster carers homes revealed comfortable accommodation, adequately furnished, clean, well maintained and looked after. In most cases children are accommodated in single rooms. However, where children are siblings or where children wish to share a careful assessment might lead to an exception to the rule. Only children under the age of two can share a bedroom with their carers.

Health and safety issues are discussed with the foster carers during the initial assessment process, and further developed during the induction training period. In the majority of cases Occupational Therapist assessments are performed in order to ensure that the homes of carers are fit for purpose. All of the Foster homes will undergo a health and safety check prior to approval and again annually as part of each foster carers review. Environmental monitoring is part of all visits by supervising Social Workers.

South Gloucestershire fostering service attempts to ensure that foster carers and young people placed with them have been matched appropriately and uses all available information and assessments when matching. The service is able to provide many excellent examples of carefully placing children and young people with foster carers who are capable of meeting their specific assessed needs. All placement decisions consider the children's and young people's assessed racial, religious and cultural needs. Wherever possible the service prefers a phased introduction and matching and induction visits take place for the majority of children and young people. Foster carers receive all necessary information about any child they are asked to consider well in advance. Written foster care agreements are in place containing specific reference to elements of matching.

Support workers are provided to assist with placement support and stability. Additional support meetings are held to discuss extra resources and support to a placement if difficulties arise which pose a threat to placement stability. Management systems include a Children's Review Panel and an Adoption and Permanence Panel. Both of these panels are designed to rigorously monitor and ensure permanence and scrutinise elements which might hinder a safe and secure attachment to a prime foster carer.

The fostering service attempts to protect each child or young person from all forms of abuse and neglect. Foster carers undergo a rigorous assessment process in line with national fostering assessment agreed procedures. Records of CRB checks and references are in place and have been appropriately followed up. Child protection and other safe guarding policies and procedures are well known to all staff and carers. All carers have undertaken Safe Care and Child Protection core skills training. Safe Care policies are in place for every family comprising the specific safeguarding needs of the children and young people in their care. High levels of support and supervision ensure that carers are aware of their duties and responsibilities in

ensuring the protection of children and young people.

Procedures are in place to record and address instances of bullying. The senior management team of the service has worked together with multi agency stakeholders to produce clear guidance for carers and constantly raise their awareness about children's vulnerabilities and bullying through training.

When placed the service provides children and young people with an excellent 'Being in Care' pack which informs them of their rights, details of the child protection and bullying policies and the contact details of the Reconstruct Advocacy Service, who have a Service Level Agreement (SLA) to provide independent help and support to young people placed and who will support them should they wish to make a complaint about any issue with their care.

The fostering assessment panel has sufficient expertise and experience to carry out its functions, ensuring that good quality decisions are made to safeguard the welfare of children. All members of the panel are able to evidence considerable in depth knowledge of the Fostering Regulations and National Minimum Standards. There are clear policies and procedures which guide panel practice. Additional guidance is needed to inform panel members about all the elements of Regulation 38 (Emergency Placements) and ensure that future applications keep to the legal timeframes (NMS 8).

The personnel files relating to panel members demonstrate the suitability of members. They include CRB, CV, references and photographic identification. The Looked After Nurse is also the panel's medical adviser who checks all medicals on applicants and provides an opinion on suitability. The panel also includes members with expertise in education and child health and the Foster Panel has recruited a panel member who has had personal experience of having been fostered. The panel chair ensures that quality assurance is achieved through a combination of feedback forms on the quality of assessments and the collective responsibility of the panel to monitor issues and annual review reports.

In spite of considerable efforts and a recommendation in the last inspection report the panel has still no member from a minority ethnic group.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

South Gloucestershire Social Services Staff Development Unit and a dedicated 'Partnership Officer' have together produced a 'Guide for meeting the needs of Black and Ethnic Minority Children and Families'. It is of an excellent standard and contains valuable information, survey data and advice and support from a localised perspective. In conjunction, the Council has produced a 'Race Equalities Action Plan'. It contains the specific outcomes expected of the Family Placement Team and argues the recommended strategies and services provided for children and young people from Black Minority Ethnic groups. Its central message promotes and encourages carers and staff to provide placements that respect and acknowledge diversity and

enable staff and carers to understand the wider cultural implication impacting on placement stability. Recruitment of foster carers encourages applicants from a diverse and representative range of backgrounds. Equality and diversity training is considered priority training for supporting Social Workers as well as foster carers. Subsequently, both carers as well as Social Workers understand these issues and policies and are dedicated to its values.

The Carers' handbook was seen to contain clear and detailed information about equal opportunities and valuing diversity. Policies and procedures of the service are designed to ensure that when matching children and young people with carers, the process considers individual needs in terms of ethnicity, disability, and cultural background.

South Gloucester Council has given high priority to the educational and wider needs of Looked After Children. It has designed a 'Cooperate Parenting Strategy' which is overseen by a dedicated steering group. It has embedded recommendations for strategies into the relevant departments and a Corporate Parenting Manager is monitoring progress and its implementation.

The Parenting Manager works closely with the Family Placement Team who have made excellent progress promoting the needs of Looked After Children in educational settings. A senior teaching post has been created and a teacher has been especially employed in order to network and liaise with schools. All schools in South Gloucestershire have a Designated Teacher for Looked After Children whose role is to coordinate services for looked after children and raise awareness among staff about the specific difficulties they face in school. The new post links into the existing structure and builds a bridge to a dedicated team of senior and education staff. The service is excellent in monitoring educational progress and outcomes for looked after children and works closely with schools, children and foster carers to ensure educational needs are met. The new senior teacher attends the Foster Carers Supervision Group meeting at regular intervals.

All young people of school age using the service have a Personal Education Plan (PEP) which focuses on the educational aspects of the care plan. These plans are reviewed every six months. A number of children and young people are offered additional tutoring outside school in order to support them achieving. There is a Casual Workers' Support Team who will provide educational support in the foster home should a young person be excluded from school. Additional support from the Ethnic Minority Achievement Service (EMAS) is available for schools with Black and Ethnic Minority children who are in care.

As part of the Cooperate Parenting Strategy the Council continues to support a 'Work Experience Project' for 14 to 16 year olds. A dedicated coordinator ensures that young people know and take advantage of this opportunity. Feed back from young people on the project is excellent.

A home to school transport agreement is in place between the children's social services and education teams to ensure continuity of education when a child

becomes looked after or changes placement. The fostering service has produced a written policy on the use of taxis to ensure the safety of young people travelling to and from school.

The service provides a short-term breaks Family Link Service whose carers are recruited and approved in the same way as the other foster carers in the service but who receive specialist training as part of their 'Core Skill' training programme to enable them to have the skills to care for disabled children. The Family Link Service provides short term care for disabled children and young people. Children and young people are further supported by the 'KIDS', a Domiciliary Care Agency who have a service level agreement with the Council to provide care and support to disabled children and their families who are living at home. Links between these two services are good.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

The service fully considers the importance of family contact issues for children and young people. Due regard is given to contact arrangements between families and others significant to the children and young people and foster families. Social Workers have a good knowledge in how to support children in seeing family and friends. All of the senior managers and the team of Family Support Social Workers have a good understanding of the needs of Looked After Children (LAC) in relation to contact with their family and friends. Training courses have been made available for Social Workers and carers on managing contact issues. The 'Skills to Foster' training course further covers case studies involving difficult contact sessions between children and parents and how it may raise anxieties for carers. The courses were designed to promote an understanding of how maintaining contact is fundamental to children's and young peoples well-being.

The fostering service assists with contact, by either supervising contact and/or providing and financing transport. The service has developed forms for carers to record outcomes of contact arrangements, including the views of the young people/children themselves. Children's and young people's opinions are sought through the system of LAC reviews. LAC Placement Plans are always reviewed and young people are able to attend reviews and make contributions to review planning. Attendance from young people and their families at reviews is excellent.

The Family Placement team is proactive and employs excellent systems to ensure that children and young people are provided with opportunities to express any concerns. There are excellent procedures and policies in place that prioritise the need to listen and respond to children's views. The Council employs a full time 'Children's Participation Officer' who is responsible for ensuring that all young people and children who are looked after by the authority have a forum to express their opinion on the way that their care is organised. This takes the form of regular group meetings with young people. The officer also runs a weekly Youth Group for all looked after young people. CD's, videos, and pamphlets are used to ensure that

young people are aware of this service and how to access it.

The authority promotes a number of excellent and innovative consultation and participation initiatives:

Young people are regularly involved in developing literature for the service.

A number of young people in care and care leavers have been trained in the recruitment of staff and have been routinely involved in interview panels for front line staff, with full voting rights.

A group of seven to 11 year olds are undertaking a 'Healthy Care Audit' facilitated by the Participation Officer.

Looked After Children using the service have their own Newsletter, which is produced by young people who are in or who have left care. This often seeks the views and comments of young people using the service which is fed back to the senior management team.

All complaint made by children and young people are directed to a dedicated Complaints Officer. The Complaints Officer carefully monitors complaints made and supports children throughout the process. Additionally, all Children are supported by independent advocates from the 'reconstruct' advocacy service. The services Children's Guide clearly sets out the services to be provided and how a child can complain. The form devised for supervision visits by the supervising social worker to the carers includes the views of the child in placement.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is outstanding.

Pathway Plans are in place for all young people nearing the end of their statutory education. The service works positively and proactively to prepare young people for adulthood and independent living. A dedicated service is in place for young people who are care leavers. Foster carers are well informed about supporting young people achieve independence and effective pathway planning is encouraged throughout the service. Training is provided on independence to include all legislation relating to leaving care. Requirements of what is expected of foster carers is clearly defined in the Foster Carer's Handbook. All available guidance aims to promote self reliance and living skills. Carers are involved in individual pathway planning in consultation with local authority placing social workers through the LAC reviewing system.

The service has an excellent scheme in place which enables young people in care to remain in foster care after the age of 18.

The Participation Officer supports an excellent project for those young people who have left or who are about to leave care and advises them on issues of independent living. The Council has a 'Leaving Care Training Flat' Project in partnership with 'Kingswood Young Homeless Project' and a local Housing Association where young people are supported by workers in managing household finances and affairs and in preparing for independent living.

A document is included in the foster carer's information pack, which advises them of those elements of their fee, which are intended for payable items which must be spent on the young person in their care. The service does not differentiate between mainstream and kinship carers payments to ensure that sufficient resources are available for the care of young people. There are clear policies that detail allowances paid to carers. This forms part of the foster carer contract.

An insurance policy is in place.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

A clear Statement of Purpose was seen to be in place which provides the aims and objectives of the service. The Statement is also available on the Council's website and is of an excellent quality. In addition to the information on the mainstream fostering service it also includes excellent detail on the Family Link Service, Kinship Care and the Turnabout Project. It is updated monthly.

A user friendly Children's Guide is in place for the mainstream service. It is appropriate to the services being provided. A Guide for the Family Link Service has recently been developed. Although both guides have been constructed in consultation with young people using the service and foster carers some doubts are being expressed over the quality of the Family Link guide. Concerns focuses on the lack of a recognised picture/symbol communication system within the guide for non speaking/reading children. This concern has been identified by the service and is in the process of being addressed.

A Carer's Handbook of policies and procedures is provided for the guidance of foster carers. The policies accurately reflect the Statement of Purpose.

The Family Placement Team Managers are professionally qualified. Both managers have obtained a Postgraduate Certificate in Management Studies. All other managers and practitioner staff are professionally qualified. The managers exercise effective leadership to ensure that Fostering service is managed and staffed in a manner that delivers the best possible service to children and young people. Both managers are well supported and supervised with well established lines of communication and accountability.

Workloads of individual social workers are well prioritised and monitored by the managers. Managers and staff have clear job descriptions which set out duties and responsibilities. All social work and other staff are properly accountable and supported. There is clear management and supervision for individuals and teams. An extensive and comprehensive internal training programme is in place which is delivered by competent and experienced training practitioners.

The fostering service provides experienced and well qualified social work staff. Carers, children and young people are supported by staff who have an excellent

understanding of the fostering task.

The activities of the service are overseen by the Council's Select Committee and Corporate Parenting Steering group. There are clear procedures for monitoring and controlling the activities of the service. This includes monthly monitoring, file audits: in addition there is a financial assistant providing clear financial management of the service.

There is sufficient administrative support.

All foster carers have a supervising social worker and receive regular supervision and support. Carers benefit from a well established frequency of regular supervisions. Out of hours support for carers is excellent with highly regarded levels of practical support in place for all foster carers. Support is provided through a telephone helpline run by foster carers and management support. Additional support is also available through a 'buddying' scheme. The service is committed to ensuring that adequate respite arrangements are available for carers. Respite relief for foster carers is provided when and if required.

Records about allegations of abuse are in place. Information about complaints and representations are kept.

Wherever possible, the service involves all members of the carers' household in a comprehensive training package. Carers have a range of training opportunities and their learning needs are discussed at reviews and in supervision. Effective systems and robust internal monitoring for management to identify and address the needs of carers in terms of their training are in place.

Case records held for the children are comprehensive and maintained in excellent order. Information kept in foster homes is clearly defined and foster carers benefit from clear policies with regards to recording. All carers have significant training in record keeping and understand the high expectations in terms of information sharing with the service. All records kept in foster homes are kept in dedicated secure cabinets.

The Cadbury Heath office building has appropriate security arrangements and suitable facilities for the purpose of the Family Placement Team. The office keeps records in excellent order and securely locked. It provides a reasonably, if somewhat cramped, but well equipped base for all staff with adequate IT systems.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Statutory Requirements

This section sets out the actions, which must be taken so that the registered person/s meets the Care Standards Act 2000, Fostering Services Regulations 2002

and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider(s) must comply with the given timescales.

Std.	Action	Due date
15	follow Regulation 20, Schedule 1 for the collection and retention of information required relating to the recruitment and selection of staff	01/01/2008

Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further the registered person should take account of the following recommendation(s):

- recruit a Panel member from a minority ethnic group (NMS 7, 30).
- remind panel members of all the elements of Regulation 38 (Emergency Placements) and ensure that future applications keep to the legal timeframes (NMS 8).
- follow CRB guidance for the retention and destruction of individual CRB documents (NMS 15).