

Southampton City Council Fostering Services

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

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About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to assure children and young people, parents, the public, local authorities and government of the quality and standard of the service provided. The inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000.

This report details the main strengths and any areas for improvement identified during the inspection. The judgements included in the report are made in relation to the outcomes for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and the relevant National Minimum Standards for the service.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding:	this aspect of the provision is of exceptionally high quality
Good:	this aspect of the provision is strong
Satisfactory:	this aspect of the provision is sound
Inadequate:	this aspect of the provision is not good enough

Service information

Brief description of the service

The fostering service provided by Southampton City Council is part of the children and families division of the children's services and learning directorate of the council. It is managed by a team manager who is responsible to the service manager for resources.

The service currently has approximately 155 approved fostering households. The average number of young people placed in the fostering service each year is 160. It provides placements to meet the needs of young people in the city of Southampton who require placement away from home.

The fostering team recruits, supports and provides training to foster carers. They work closely with other children's teams including residential provisions in Southampton city.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This announced inspection assesses the key National Minimum Standards for fostering services.

The overall outcomes for young people fostered through this service is good. The outcome area of health is judged as outstanding. The service provides excellent opportunities to have healthy lifestyles. They make thorough assessments of young people's health needs and meet these with the help of specialist medical services.

A range of placements are provided to young people to meet their individual needs. Foster carers are assessed using safe procedures and are supervised by experienced social workers. The service is well managed and focuses on young people's needs.

The service provides good opportunities for young people to share their views and influence the way the service is delivered.

There are six good practice recommendations as a result of this inspection to further improve the quality of service to young people.

Improvements since the last inspection

At the last inspection there were four recommendations made. One related to collecting data about young people's religious and cultural needs to ensure individual needs are considered during the matching process. This data is now routinely

requested at the point of referral.

The second recommendation suggested young people's views and experiences are used to inform the matching process. Systems to take account of young people's views and experiences are developing well and are being used to identify appropriate placements.

The third recommendation relates to transitional arrangements for young people. Whilst there are new procedures and policies in place relating to young people's transition to adulthood there is a further recommendation relating to this area as a result of this inspection.

The fourth recommendation was to consider using independent people to undertake exit interviews with foster carers, and ensure the fostering panel is made aware of the information when considering de-registration. Exit interview information is now routinely presented to panel and used in retention analysis.

Other improvements made by the service include: development of a smoking policy that responds to the recent guidance; improved access to training for carers, including home based training packages; production of eye catching recruitment material.

The service is responsive to new legislation and consultation documents and monitors the service against the standards. Very thorough pre-inspection information provides evidence of this.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

The service is excellent at promoting young people's health and development. All young people entering the service have a very thorough medical assessment undertaken by a consultant paediatrician. This identifies the health needs of the young person and how these will be met. The assessments are updated annually. Referral on to other medical specialists is triggered by the assessments and ensures emotional, mental health and physical needs are met.

The consultant paediatrician is also the medical advisor to the fostering panel, and a panel member for the adoption and permanence panel. This gives extremely good on-going consideration of the individual health needs of children looked after by the service.

All young people are registered with a general practitioner and can access medical advice alone or with the assistance of the foster carers. The take up of medical assessment by older young people has improved since the introduction of drop in medical centres at leisure facilities. Young people attending are able to access sports and gymnasium sessions as well as a range of health advice. This imaginative way of engaging young people demonstrates the efforts the service have made to ensure

the young people's health needs are met.

Health issues are covered in foster care training and are a fixed agenda item at foster carers supervision. Foster carers are provided with first aid training and instruction on how to record accurate information about medication, treatment and visits to medical specialists. This ensures health is seen as a priority.

There is an excellent smoking policy that includes not placing young people under five in a smoking household. Carers are expected to actively discourage young people from smoking and are supported to stop smoking themselves.

An annual healthy fun day, set up by the commissioned Barnardo's children's rights service, provides extremely good opportunities for young people, parents and foster carers to gain information and advice from a range of health professionals. The day covers many subjects including: fire safety, first aid, healthy food, oral hygiene and sports and relaxation. Young people are able to participate in practical exercises and take away a lot of helpful information.

Young people's health needs are reviewed as part of the children looked after systems and records demonstrate that health needs are updated as a result of the reviews.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The manager of the fostering service has many years experience of working with young people living away from home. She has appropriate qualifications and is respected by the foster carers and staff. She has oversight of all of the fostering projects and resources and works closely with other child care managers. The social workers in the fostering team feel well supported and supervised by the manager.

There are a good range of foster carers, approximately 160, approved by the council. The assessment process is thorough and information considered includes health and safety checklists and safe caring plans. Details of suitability are considered by the fostering panel to ensure the safety of the young people placed. Re-assessment of the suitability of foster carers is undertaken in accordance with the fostering regulations. Foster homes visited provide warm and nurturing care for the young people. Comments from young people include: 'I feel like one of the family' and 'My foster carer loves me and looks after me'.

The information taken when a referral for placement is made has improved and assists the matching process. Whilst risk assessments are provided they are not always available prior to placement. This is important, especially where young people are sharing bedrooms, in order to protect young people's safety.

The service is proactive in providing support, including financial support, to enlarge carers' homes to enable fostered young people to remain with the family long-term.

This clearly improves the security of young people.

Foster carers have a good understanding of safe care issues and produce an individual plan for their household. This takes into account the vulnerabilities of everyone involved and protects young people's safety. Foster carers receive training in child protection and there are many examples recorded of foster carers raising child protection concerns with the young people's social workers. These have been dealt with appropriately. Safe care issues are a recurring item on the agenda for foster carer supervision to ensure it is constantly considered.

The complaints and allegations procedures are under review to ensure they meet the Fostering Network standards. The current procedures are robust and are well known by the foster carers and young people. Records provide evidence that issues raised are dealt with appropriately. Foster carers can access independent support from the Fostering Network during investigations. Young people are offered advocacy from the Barnardo's children's rights group.

Matching considerations are well known by the staff but matching is compromised by lack of carers. This is improving but there are still not enough carers to make choice a real possibility. Foster carers said they feel matching has improved in the past three years. This is partly due to carers being more assertive and saying 'no' when they feel they are offered a placement that appears unsuitable and partly due to an improved recruitment strategy. There is a matching form to record considerations used to reach placement decisions. This is a good way of identifying any gaps in matching.

Placement requests from children's residential units are often difficult to meet, with some young people waiting a long time. Although there is sharing of needs at a management level, there is no direct link with the social workers in the fostering team and residential units.

Clear policies and procedures regarding missing persons, permitted punishments and dealing with incidents help the service protect the welfare of the young people.

The staff recruitment processes of the council are designed to keep young people safe. Staff have been through the appropriate checks and criminal record bureau checks are repeated every three years as required by the regulations. Staff have clear job descriptions and are well suited to their role.

The fostering panel is a shared panel with the Rose Road Association fostering service. It is set up in accordance with the panel regulations. Members of the panel represent a good mix of background and experience. All take an equal part in the proceedings and are given opportunities to ask questions. Applicants attending the panel are handled sensitively. The minutes clearly reflect discussion, recommendations and reasons for these. There are good processes to follow the decision making process.

The panel receives training, some of which is done jointly with the adoption and

permanence panel.

Carers appreciate being invited to the panel, and although they find it a worrying time they feel that the system is good and that their applications are dealt with appropriately.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The service values diversity and considers young people's individual needs when matching them with carers. Foster carer training includes issues of equality and carers are encouraged to celebrate differences.

There is a particularly good Living in Britain project looking at the needs and experiences of young people from other countries who are being cared for by the service. This provides an opportunity for young people to get together, share knowledge and make new contacts. One young person spoke of the value of this project to help him share his feelings about the things that had happened to him and his family prior to coming to this country. There are pockets of good understanding of the needs of unaccompanied asylum seeking young people but there is currently no system to share this knowledge across the service.

The majority of foster carers are white British. This reflects the background of most of the young people placed through the service. The recruitment strategy includes presentations to groups from other cultures in order to raise the profile of fostering. There are some family and friends carers who reflect the background of the young people. For example, one couple from Iraq have been approved to care for a young relative who arrived unaccompanied in the area. Whilst the statutory checks were undertaken there was no apparent check on their immigration status prior to approval.

The educational achievement of young people is promoted by the service by: training of foster carers, working closely with schools and provision of education co-ordinators for children looked after by the service. Whilst examination results are lower than the general population the service has seen the improvement of attendance levels. Young people are rewarded for good efforts at education celebration evenings. These are seen as important occasions by most young people and carers.

Foster carers support the education of the young people placed by choosing the most appropriate schools, providing transport and working closely with teachers. There are examples of carers having daily contact with schools and providing support with challenging behaviour. The profile of education has been further heightened by foster carers taking up learning opportunities for themselves. The service provides good opportunities for carers to do this through their training sections.

An education allocation resource panel for children looked after looks at the

education provision available. Additional support is provided to looked after children where necessary. This can include provision of computers, extra tuition and transport costs for after-school activities. Inter-agency working continues to improve with teachers being included in training provided to staff and carers.

Short-term and respite care recognises the main carers as central to the care of the young people. Carers using respite speak positively about the arrangements. Where possible the service ensures consistency when allocating respite placements.

The service uses the Dreamwall project and Abshott Farm to provide activity based short-term breaks for young people. These facilities allow young people to work together and enjoy a range of challenges. The respite services provide benefits to the young people as well as a break for the carers. They have very positive reviews from foster carers and young people.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The service promotes contact with family and friends by ensuring that there is a contact plan in place for all young people. Foster carers are trained about the importance of contact and are encouraged to take an active role in communicating with family and friends. There are good examples of carers working closely with parents and supporting them with difficult contact situations.

The service considers distance from home when looking at appropriate matches and provides help with transport to ensure contact can be maintained.

Most young people said they are clear about the contact arrangements and feel their views have been taken into consideration. They particularly value the help they are given to continue to share time with their siblings. Continued contact helps young people to value long term relationships and have positive views about their identity. This is well understood by the service and the foster carers.

The service has developed a range of opportunities for young people's views to be heard. These include involvement in the Looked After Children reviewing system, participation in the Blueprint in Practice project that aims to identify best practice to improve placement stability and the provision of advocates.

The service commissions the Barnardo's Children's Rights Project to provide groups, fun days, individual work and activities to elicit the views of young people. The annual report lists the work of the project and the difference it has made to the lives of young people. Activities include a fostering day that answered the question 'what makes an ideal foster carer?' from the young person's perspective. The results were made into a banner for use in recruiting carers. Young people have also been involved in developing an education questionnaire, consultation feedback on the Care Matters green paper and feedback to the city regarding plans to re-organise the children's social care service.

Young people in the care of the city have also been sent newsletters and magazines giving them information and reminding them of the independent services and contacts available for looked after young people.

Presentations about young people's views have been made to the foster care association, the fostering panel, the children's and families management group and other appropriate settings to ensure those that can make a difference hear the messages. This demonstrates the service's desire to take young people's participation seriously.

Whilst these systems are very good they do not reach all looked after young people and cannot take the place of good communication with social workers. Some young people said that on a day to day basis they do not feel listened to by the service and commented that the frequent changes of social workers was the main problem. In the survey responses young people said that foster carers listen, but comments about social workers included: 'they don't come round and talk about the future', 'my old social worker saw me often - this one doesn't' and 'social workers never do what they promise'. The planned creation of a team of social workers for children looked after responds to these concerns.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is satisfactory.

Foster carers are aware of the need to help young people prepare for independence and provide opportunities such as cooking, shopping and making social contacts to assist this process. However, some concerns are expressed by foster carers, young people and fostering social workers about the way this is dealt with by the service.

Concerns include the lack of clarity about the process. Whilst it is acknowledged that there is a procedure document covering the process the majority of foster carers spoken to were unaware of it. Foster carers feel that many of the young people they care for are not emotionally ready to move to independence, or semi-independence, at the point they are expected to do so. Added to this is the likely change of social worker at a time when they are feeling vulnerable and need to trust the adults around them.

Foster carers reported feeling de-valued by the process and feel their parenting role, often over many years, is disregarded by those involved in the pathways plan. Young people are also anxious about the plans and one said 'I feel bullied into independence'.

Whilst the service is constrained by resources and legislation communication appears to be lacking in some of the arrangements currently being developed.

Where clear communication and examples of working together were shared the

outcomes for young people were better with on-going contact with past carers providing valuable support to the young people into adulthood.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

There is a clear updated statement of aims and objectives that accurately outlines the service on offer. The principles of the placement strategy recognises that children are best cared for with their own families, where possible, but sets out the expectations of the service where this is not.

All of the information required by the standards are clearly set out in the document, and are underpinned by the policies and procedures in place.

Staff in the family placement team are well organised. They are allocated work on the basis of skills, experience and availability. There is flexibility within the team to take on new projects and to follow individual interests where it fits in with the needs of the service. The manager prioritises work, for example if there are a number of foster carer assessments awaiting allocation those offering a scarce resource will be picked up first.

Where unqualified social workers are used they are supervised by a qualified social worker and decisions are closely monitored. Supervision within the team is seen as helpful and team members have confidence in the manager and senior practitioner.

Staff training opportunities are good. There is a training calendar which staff can choose courses from. There are also opportunities to go on one day conferences and specific training to meet individual needs.

The team is preparing to move office very shortly. They are currently in an office shared with children and families teams. This has improved communication with colleagues. The team will be sharing with colleagues from the adoption and permanence team when they move and are positive about the likely benefits of the arrangement.

All workers have job descriptions and are clear about their role. The morale in the team is good and there is openness and good humoured sharing. The team is busy and has lots of things they would like to do if they had more time, but shortage of staff is not currently an issue.

There is a very clear strategy for providing support to carers. This is set out in the foster care agreement and in the information given during assessment. Each foster carer has a supervising social worker who contacts frequently and visits at least every other month. The supervision given at these visits follows an agenda that includes information about how the needs of the young people are being met and provides an opportunity to discuss any issues affecting the fostering task.

Foster carers experience of support varies. Comments include: 'support could be better - they tell you one thing in training but the reality is different' and 'I have always felt supported'. The carers visited reflected these differing views but were mainly positive about the support offered by the fostering team.

There is a dedicated duty team available during working hours, and out-of-hours cover 24 hours a day. Carers feel they are always able to get hold of someone from the duty team and can get messages to their support workers. Support also includes respite care, training and a variety of support groups for carers. The foster care association meets regularly to which all carers are invited. There is a mentoring system for new carers and those experiencing difficulties. Foster carers say that some of their greatest support comes from informal links with other carers who they can talk freely with.

Foster carers feel valued by the fostering team.

The differing roles of the fostering team social workers and the children's workers are clear. The fostering team supports children's social workers in communicating with foster carers and helps them to understand the pressures each are under in order to work well in the interests of the young people placed.

The service keeps appropriate records about young people. The majority of this information is kept with the child's social worker but is available on the shared computer system. This enables fostering workers to access updated information where necessary. Referral information is kept in the family placement team to aid good matching and to assist in the supervision and support of the carers.

Foster carers say that they struggle to gain enough information about the young people placed as an emergency, and most can quote examples of where they were asked to care for a child without a vital piece of information. This has improved since fostering social workers have been more pro-active in chasing important information. The service makes it clear that their intention is that foster carers are given all information known by them so that carers can provide safe and appropriate care. Foster carers are aware of their responsibility to keep information safe and confidential.

The service has the necessary administrative records and these are kept securely. Separate records are kept of carers, young people, complaints and allegations. There are clear recording systems in place and these are monitored by the manager.

The service has recently allocated a dedicated worker to family and friends fostering. This supports the carers and provides the assessment of arrangements to the fostering panel. Carers approved through Regulation 38 of the fostering regulations are paid the fostering allowance and are invited to the general foster carer training.

The service values the contribution made by family and friends carers and this option is checked out at the point of referral for a placement. There are currently 27 family

and friends carers approved by the service, four of whom were recruited in the last year.

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 a risk assessment is undertaken prior to the placement of young people required to share bedrooms (NMS 6.5)
- provide opportunities for young people in residential care to be involved in finding carers to match their needs (NMS 8.3)
- ensure that foster carers provide care which respects and preserves each child's ethnic, cultural and linguistic background. (NMS 7.4)
- ensure checks regarding suitability of foster carers include checks with immigration services, where appropriate (Reg 27 (4a))
- ensure the arrangements for contact, including transport, meets the needs of the young people (NMS 10.9)
- ensure that each young person preparing to move to independent living, or semi-independent living, is consulted about their future and is clear about the pathway plan. (NMS 14.5)