

Swindon Borough Council Family Placement Team

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

Unique reference number	SC048053
Inspection date	20/08/2008
Inspector	Diana Waters
Type of inspection	Key

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Date of last inspection	06/11/2006

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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

Swindon Borough Council's Fostering Service currently supports 127 registered foster carers, covering a range of functions. These include: long term; short term; respite; family link short breaks for children with disabilities; and kinship and relative care. The Family Placement team has recently relocated with the Health and Education team for children in care to a new office.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This was an announced inspection and took place over a two week period of five days. The inspection was carried out by one Ofsted inspector. The judgements in this report have been made using new benchmarking guidance that was implemented on 01.04.08. Information about this guidance can be found on the Ofsted website. The new basis for making these judgements is not directly comparable with that used previously.

Swindon provides an overall good fostering service with strengths in promoting the health of young people; supporting young people with education; working together with other agencies, good support to carers; matching procedures; mentoring by elected members; promoting contact for children; accessible and supportive managers.

Areas identified for improvement are the one action reported, ensuring all recruitment information is held on files. Five recommendations are made which cover: all carers must have signed placement agreements and medical consent for the children in their care; the system that extends extensions to exemptions and variation should be reviewed; undertake regular supervision of staff, including clerical staff; improve the distribution of children's guides and ensure all young people know how to complain; and review the provision for young people not in school placements.

Improvements since the last inspection

The last inspection was carried out in October 2006 by the Commission for Social Care Inspection. That inspection made three requirements/actions and eight good practice recommendations which have been fully or partly addressed. Carers are reviewed at least yearly; foster carer case records have improved and foster placement agreements are now on files.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

The systems in place to promote the health of children and young people are very good. The health liaison worker is proactive and rigorously monitors young people's health plans. The worker is easily accessible and liaises well with the family placement team; they facilitate and pursue appropriate referrals to other healthcare professionals, with sensitivity to the needs of individual young people. A Strength and Difficulties (SDQ) Questionnaire is completed by carers on each child aged over four years old in placement. These are effectively used to highlight difficulties children are experiencing. Early intervention and close working with Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) ensures a responsive service for children in care. All young people are registered with a GP and other health professionals. Not all carers have received signed written consent for children to have medical treatment. Written health care records were available for younger children and health visitors are proactive in providing replacement records and supporting carers. Recording by carers was variable; from excellent child focused recording, written information exchanges with a child's family, to basic recording of significant health care events. Events are held to promote health care and are reported to be fun and educational; these are supported well by the family placement team.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The team manager has been in post since 1999 and continues to be fit and suitable to carry out this role.

Checks for carers are part of the recruitment and assessment process, and rigorous annual reviews are on file. Risk assessments are often undertaken by the duty worker, and these include room sharing considerations prior to placement. Consultation with social workers of other children in placement is routinely undertaken, however, in one case tracked this was absent. One example was found where applicants' adult children had not been fully consulted prior to approval, but the service have already remedied this gap in their provision.

Matching procedures and practice are very good, ensuring wherever possible, that referral information includes detailed information about the young person. Written placement agreements were seen, and carers seek to understand the heritage of each child and provide culturally appropriate care. Young people are introduced, wherever possible, to carers and this is both welcomed and expected by carers. Applications for exemptions and variations, to extend carers' approval status, are carefully considered by a senior manager. Extensions of these exemptions are undertaken, but these are not consistently reviewed.

Safe care training is provided and all households have clear written safe care guidelines. However, these are not always individualised for specific young people in

placement. Risk assessments are undertaken on every placement made and concerns identified. Senior managers sign off placements that are potentially risky. Management systems are in place to collate and evaluate information about complaints and allegations; these are monitored and updated regularly.

Minor breaches in staff recruitment practice were found and no internal guidelines, specifying the staff transfer policy from within the council were available. Capita's recruitment practice for clerical staff is not sufficiently robust.

The foster care panel has clear policies and procedures. Panel membership is in accordance with the regulations. Applicants are invited to panel when their assessment is presented. The panel provides appropriate levels of scrutiny and challenges to carers' assessments and reviews, and feedback practice issues for the team to address. Similarly, the panel decision maker provides a quality assurance role. The elected member is reported to provide excellent facilitation and mentoring assistance.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The service provides a range of carers, and whilst matching cannot always be achieved, there are good processes in place and any shortfalls are addressed. Carers were both aware and proactive in ensuring they understand different cultures and also work hard to enhance children's confidence and self worth.

The agency works hard to support children's educational achievement and progress. Recent data provided indicates permanent exclusions have reduced, however, fixed term exclusions have increased. The service celebrate and reward achievement and/or effort and annual award ceremonies are popular. A Looked After Children's Education Service (LACES) provides support to young people and 96% of Personal Education Plans (PEPs) are completed. Access to Personal Education Allowances (PEAs) are via the completion of a PEP. The service provides excellent support to field social workers to help complete this process. The PEP's seen were colourful and eye catching and easy for children to complete. The arrangement for supporting young people out of school is not sufficiently robust. Educational placements and achievements are monitored effectively. One young person said 'Carers encourage me in education. I want to go to university, they listen and take notice of my opinions, they worry about me and encourage me to do better'.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Contact with significant people was excellent. Both the plans and the monitoring of the contact for children was clear. Carers showed considerable commitment in supporting children and young people to maintain contact, together with good awareness of the issues involved and the impact on the children, with both the

benefits and the challenges understood. The service liaise regularly with the field work team to manage contact effectively. Parents are kept updated and information exchanged about very young children in placement. Quotes from young people's questionnaires include, 'my carers are amazing, they have brought me up, and everyone else that has lived there, like we are their own, they have played the part of parents perfectly over many years and even now support me after leaving them'.

All Looked After young people are provided with a children's or young people's guide produced in attractive formats. The focus group has previously been a successful forum for consultation with young people. The service has reviewed this provision and VOICE, a consultation, complaints, advocacy and participation service for young people, is scheduled to replace it from September 2006. The service has a previously fostered young person on their foster care panel with a mentoring provision in place for them from an elected councillor. One carer's file included a colourful and easy to complete consultation form to enable young people to comment about their placement which is included in the carer's annual review. This is seen as excellent practice.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is satisfactory.

At this inspection there were no young people tracked who were leaving care. However, there was evidence that young people develop age appropriate skills and knowledge to prepare them for adult living and young people confirm they are consulted about everyday decisions. Pathway plans were reported to be in place for 100% of eligible young people. Allowances are above the Fostering Network minimum recommended rates.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The fostering service has a Statement of Purpose which clearly sets out its responsibilities, aims and objectives and the range of services provided. This was updated in March 2008. The guide for children and young people is in two comprehensive and attractive formats. However, not all young people had received one.

The roles for managers and social work staff are clear, and communication and accountability within the management team is clear. The team manager in the service is considered to be accessible and approachable, providing excellent support and guidance to the team. Staff shortages at deputy team manager level have impacted on the frequency of staff supervision, but these posts have now all been successfully filled. Interim arrangements were made for peer supervision during these staff shortages. Administrative staff are line managed by an external employer, and the communication between the two employers lacks clarity. Staff within the fostering service include both qualified social workers and staff with other

qualifications and experience, whose enthusiasm and skills are well utilised.

Assessments, approvals and reviews of carers are undertaken in good time. Additionally the service use a range of preferred providers commissioned by the authority to increase provision. Assessments seen were of good quality with appropriate checks completed. One recent omission in consulting adult children was picked up by the service and the policy on this is now clear.

A range of pre and post approval training courses and workshops are in place. In total, 21 carers have achieved NVQ Level 3 in Caring for Children and Young people; six others were working towards this qualification, which is linked to the payment for skills scheme. One carer is piloting an on line course in advanced skills in foster care provided by the AKAMAS training organisation. Carers responses to questionnaires were very positive. For example, 'people who work in the fostering service are caring and dedicated to helping children; our link worker is outstanding, has helped with very difficult placements, and is very approachable and professional, I have nothing but good things to say; they are a very committed and dedicated team who provide an excellent service'. The field work teams also commented on the service positively saying "There are some outstanding foster carers who are doing an excellent job" and "There are good links between professionals and good multi-agency working".

Case records are of satisfactory quality. The service are currently transferring records from paper to an electronic system and experiencing some teething problems with this. Carers' recording varies from very good to sparse. Good examples include records written for a very young child to read as a personal record of their placement, including their emotions as well as facts. Recording procedures are not always followed and carers recording is not always found on individual young people's case files. Carers confirmed that the service share known information about the young person prior to placement. The council have clear procedures in place for assessing, approving, supporting and training friends and family carers.

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 clear procedures for the recruitment and selection of all staff. Ensure that all information required in Schedule 1 is held on every staff file, including gaps in c.v's and why employment with vulnerable adults/children ended.	31/10/2008

Recommendations

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

- ensure all foster carers have signed placement agreements and medical consent for the children and young people in their care (NMS 12)
- review the system that agrees extensions to exemptions and variations (NMS 8)
- review the provision for young people not in school placements and the arrangements which will be put in place for them, including structured occupation during school hours (NMS 13)
- continue to review and improve the system for the distribution of children's and young people's guides to ensure all young people know how to access an independent advocate and how to complain (NMS 1)
- undertake supervision of staff, as specified in the service's Statement of Purpose. This should include the arrangements for clerical staff supervision (NMS 16)