

Merton Fostering Services

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

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Inspector	Cheryl Carter / Diane Thackrah
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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

Merton Fostering Service is a local authority service that provides short and long-term foster placements for children and young people aged from birth to 18 years old.

The service is based in Worsfold House, Mitcham, Surrey. Other services such as health, education, and the 16 plus Team are also based at the same address, which is good for promoting effective communication and multi-agency working.

The day-to-day management of the service is the responsibility of the Fostering Manager. In addition to the fostering team, children/young people are well supported by key professionals and other departments such as the Nurse, Education Specialists and the 16 plus Team.

The Aims and Objectives of the service are included in the Statement Of Purpose. Further details about this service may be obtained directly from the Fostering Service.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This was an announced inspection of Merton Fostering Service. The Fostering Service provide an effective service to looked after children and is committed to ensuring the best outcomes for children, young people and Foster Carers.

The Operations Manager and Fostering Manager are well established in their posts. There are clear lines of accountability and staff receive monthly supervision. The fostering service ensure that the children and young people are placed in safe, healthy and nurturing homes. Observations from visits to foster homes indicated that overall, the service does well in retaining highly skilled and well-motivated Foster Carers.

Improvements since the last inspection

The previous inspection report required for the service to include proof of identity including a recent photograph of all foster carers on file. All files seen contained a recent photograph.

Since the last inspection all children's files have been stored electronically. There is now a good working relationship between the fostering service and the 16 plus team

which helps to ensure a smooth transition for young people from the Looked After Team to the 16 plus team.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Information is held on file regarding the health needs of young people. This ensures that social workers and foster carers have the information they need to care for, and promote young people's health. Records are well kept and reviewed appropriately in order to monitor young people's health needs.

Young people's physical, emotional and social development is promoted and protected. Foster carers hold relevant information about the young people's health as each young person has their own personal health record at the beginning of any placement.

Young people are registered with local general practitioners, opticians and dentists. They also undergo health screening by a Looked After Children's Nurse. Access to specialist health services is obtained as necessary. Young people and foster carers also have access to a designated Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) worker who is attached to the fostering service. CAMHS promote the mental health and psychological wellbeing of children and young people. They work with, and provide training to foster carers on a needs led basis.

The fostering service provides training to supervising social workers and foster carers about a range of health related issues. Some carers say that they have not had an opportunity to attend these training sessions due to work commitments. The fostering service has creatively tried to address this issue recently by running training courses on evenings and weekends and developing on-line training.

Training around health and safety is provided to foster carers during their initial training and assessment period. A large amount of information about health and safety, such as conducting risk assessments and healthy eating, is provided to foster carers in the foster carers' handbook and other documents when they initially become approved as foster carers. The fostering service has good systems in place for monitoring health and safety in foster carers' homes. Records are maintained of such checks of foster carers' homes by supervising social workers. Significant accidents, incidents and illnesses are required to be reported to the fostering service by foster carers.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The fostering service manager has a social work and a management qualification. All supervising social workers also hold a social work qualification.

All relevant checks are carried out, and suitable documentation obtained in regard of all fostering service employees in order to promote the safety and wellbeing of the young people using the service.

The fostering service makes every effort to ensure that young people are placed in safe, healthy and nurturing homes. All feedback received from young people was that they were happy in their placements. Supervising social workers carry out regular visits to foster carers' homes. Some visits are unannounced and health and safety checks are carried out. The fostering service makes sure that where foster carers provide transport to young people, it is safe. Some foster carers think that the fostering agency has not made suitable provisions for young people's specific needs resulting from disability.

There is a careful matching system that aims to ensure that each young person is carefully matched with a carer capable of meeting his/her needs. Each child has a written care plan and needs assessment that is taken into account during the matching process. There is information sharing between placing social workers and the fostering team. It is reported that this process is supported by placing social worker working in close proximity to the fostering team.

Placement decisions consider the young people's racial, ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic needs. Gaps in the matching process are addressed by provisions such as foster carer training and the use of specialist services. Foster carers are encouraged to help young people develop a positive understanding of their heritage where there are trans-racial placements.

In order to protect young people from abuse, foster carers and the fostering team staff members undertake training in child protection. There are policies and procedures regarding abuse that are made available to staff members and foster carers. Clear messages are given to foster carers about the types of behaviour management that are acceptable, and unacceptable. This is set out in written information provided to foster carers. Feedback from young people was that they felt that they were fairly treated by their foster carers.

Bullying is taken seriously and there are clear guidelines around how it should be dealt with.

The fostering panel provides a good quality assurance role. It has a diverse membership that encompasses a broad range of skills and experiences amongst the independent members. All panel members are required to go through robust recruitment procedures. Panel members are able to be well prepared as they are provided with foster panel meeting minutes, review reports and fostering assessment in advance of all panels.

Foster carers go through a thorough assessment process prior to approval by the foster panel. A variety of checks are made on foster carers which follow good practice in safeguarding young people. All staff members carrying out such checks and assessments have social work qualifications.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The fostering service values diversity and promotes equality. Diversity issues are taken into account during the assessment and care planning process and are considered during the matching process in order to ensure that young people's assessed needs are met.

Training is offered to foster carers to enable them to provide care which respects and preserves each young person's ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic backgrounds. A foster carer's support group is facilitated regularly where these issues are discussed. Foster carers, in general, feel that they are supported to access specific services and equipment to help young people maximise their full potential. However, some foster carers feel that more support could be given in this area.

The fostering service has anti-discriminatory policies and procedures which it follows.

The educational needs of young people are considered throughout their placements. Young people have Personal Education Plans that foster carers and the fostering service contribute to. The educational needs of young people are reviewed on a regular basis. The fostering service has recently developed a 'virtual school'. The aim of this school is to provide support and guidance to young people and their foster carers around educational issues. Not all foster carers are aware of the support available from the agency regarding education. Young people's achievements are acknowledged and celebrated.

The fostering service provides short-term breaks for young people and there are suitable policies and procedures in place regarding these breaks.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

There are clear procedures, confirmed by carers, setting out contact arrangements for each child. Generally carers assist children to maintain family contacts. The fostering service assist carers to deal with difficult contact situations by being available for carers and by arranging contact away from the foster carer's home. The fostering service expect foster carers to keep a record of any contact carried out in their home. In this way any pattern of behaviour by children after seeing their family members will be evident.

Through its training carers are encouraged to listen to children's opinions and views on all matters concerned with their everyday lives. The fostering department ensures that children know how to make a complaint if they are unhappy with aspects of their care.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

Foster carers receive support and guidance from their Supervising Social workers. Children are referred to the Leaving care team at 16 where each child has a Pathway plan put in place in order to prepare them to begin the process of planning for independent living. Children are encouraged to attend groups to assist them in developing skills such as budgeting, filling in application forms, cooking, and the importance of keeping themselves safe. The support groups helps to provide appropriate advice and assistance to young people who are old enough to move on to more independent or semi-independent living situations.

The fostering service has a written statement of its fee structure, made available to Ofsted. Generally foster carers are paid on time. However there have been circumstances where foster carers felt that they had not been paid according to Merton's fee structure.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The Statement of Purpose contains clear aims and objectives of the fostering service, and includes information required under this standard. There is also a children's guide available and this is child friendly. The guide is accessible for younger children and done in different formats that appeals to a wide age range.

There is a clear management structure in place that oversees the effective running of the fostering service. The leadership ensures management and delegation of responsibilities that are clearly defined. Managers have the relevant expertise and knowledge to manage the service. The team is structured to ensure assessments, approvals and reviews of carers are managed and implemented effectively. There is administrative support for the service. The roles of fostering social workers and children's social workers are clearly understood however they do not always work collaboratively and effectively together.

The service provides good quality supervision for foster carers and a process is in place to support and develop their skills. The Children's Workforce Development Council's (CWDC) new standards are in the process of being implemented and workshops for foster carers are planned. All new foster carers receive induction training. All carers receive a foster care handbook and each approved carer is supervised by a named and appropriately qualified social worker. Supervision meetings address issues arising under the Every Child Matters outcomes and the views of the carer and the child are recorded, signed and dated. All carers' files seen contained evidence of an unannounced visit having taken place within the last twelve months.

The managers and staff of the fostering service are organised effectively and have

the necessary skills, knowledge and experience to provide a good professional service. All social work staff involved in assessing and approving foster carers are qualified social workers. There is an induction programme in place and staff receive a half day training in equality and diversity as part of their induction.

The process for assessing potential foster carers is underpinned by appropriate policies and procedures. The recruitment, assessment and initial training of all new foster carers are the responsibility of the fostering service. The team manager and the fostering panel monitor the quality of assessment reports. There is preparation training for perspective foster carers. Managers are clear about the groups of children for whom the fostering service needs to be able to provide more placement choice, such as black and ethnic minority children, and unaccompanied minors. The service continues to take effective steps to ensure that it recruits an appropriate range of foster carers with the right skills.

Carers' comments about the fostering service are mainly very positive and indicate that the majority of carers feel well supported. A small number of carers said that they would like more support, mainly in relation to the availability of children's social workers to undertake direct work and to ensure that the children in their care are seen regularly by the placing social worker. Some carers feel that they are not given enough information about the young people's needs to fully meet these needs.

The service provides foster carers with an appropriate range of written policies and guidance and has arrangements in place to review and update this information. There is a support group for foster carers which meet monthly.

Reviews of foster carers' approval are carried out annually. The content of review reports is now clearly linked to the framework of competencies that is used for the initial assessment process. Separate case files are maintained for children and foster carers and these are generally well organised. Foster carers' files contain the required details, including signed copies of Foster Care Agreements, setting out clear expectations of the carers. Children's case records are held electronically and contain the necessary placement planning information.

The records held by the fostering service contain all significant information relevant to the running of the service and as required by regulations. Appropriate records are kept for carers, children, staff, complaints and allegations. Records are stored confidentially and a clear policy is in place addressing how confidential information is managed. Recording is of a good standard being clear, legible, and accurate.

The fostering service has relevant policies and procedures in place, which are clear and support long term, short term, respite and kinship fostering arrangements.

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 all carers have information on how to support all the children in their care (NMS13)
- ensure that all carers are being paid according to Merton's fee structure. (NMS29)
- ensure that foster carers have all the necessary information to fully meet the needs of young people (NMS24)