

Brighton and Hove 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 and adoption service has a highly experienced professional as head of service. There is a service manager for fostering, a fostering team, an intensive placement team, concurrency and family and friends team and an adoption and permanence team. The fostering panel is responsible for making recommendations about the approval of foster carers and family and friend's carers. The permanence panel is responsible for recommendations about the approval of foster carers, concurrency carers and prospective adopters. A professional advisor has been supporting both panels and provides a quality assurance and policy development role.

A range of placements are provided for children and young people. These include emergency, short term, long term and parent and child placements. Carers are assessed, approved and supported by experienced staff. The service has a diverse workforce with a wealth of experience and skills, as well as a highly experienced and strong leadership team. The fostering service benefits from collaborative working relationships with education and health colleagues.

Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

This was an announced inspection which was carried out by two inspectors. The outcome areas of Being Healthy, Staying Safe, Enjoying and Achieving, Positive Contribution, Economic Wellbeing and Organisation were examined. The purpose of this inspection was to focus on assessing the service against the key National Minimum Standards and to check the requirements and recommendations from the last inspection had been met. The two requirements and three recommendations from the last inspection in 2006 have indeed been addressed. This inspection identified that the statement of purpose does not contain all the required information and there are some young people without pathway plans.

Excellent systems are in place for the monitoring and evaluation of practice and the development of new initiatives. The head of service, senior managers and staff are all dedicated professionals who work hard to achieve the best possible outcomes for children in care. Staff are very well guided and supported by the management team.

The service provides good quality placements that offer consistent care for children. There are excellent systems in place for listening and responding to the views of children and young people. Children are placed if possible with their own families, with good support provided to all carers. A robust and pro-active approach toward child protection ensures young people are kept safe from the risk of harm, neglect or

abuse.

Children and young people are involved in shaping aspects of the service. They are particularly complimentary about their carers who make them feel valued, listened to and well cared for. Foster carers greatly appreciate the support they receive from the service.

This is a dynamic service with strong management and staff teams who provide children with safe, stable placements.

Improvements since the last inspection

This inspection identified that the requirements and recommendations from the November 2006 inspection have been followed through appropriately. Child protection enquiries are notified to Ofsted and staff have Criminal Records Bureau checks completed prior to commencing work. Foster carers have a prepared description and a photograph of young people placed that can be used should they go missing. Investigations of child protection, standards of care and complaints are evaluated separately for audit and thematic trends. All foster carers receive at least one unannounced visit per year.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

The health needs of all children and young people in foster care are promoted well by the service. Any health needs of children are looked at when making placements, with health assessments, care plans and reviews being consistently carried out. Consents are held for the emergency and routine medical treatment of children and young people. The fostering service ensures children and young people participate in decisions about their health. Foster carers are provided with sufficient health information to meet the needs of the children they care for. Foster carers understand cultural issues in respect of health and personal care and the importance of meeting dietary and cultural needs. The fostering service has clear systems in place to support foster carers in the promotion of the health, development and well being of children and young people. Carers are given a written health record for each child in their care which is updated regularly and moves with the child. The experienced nurse consultant for looked after children works closely with children, young people and their carers. The nurse consultant contributes in the preparation groups for prospective carers and facilitates additional workshops for carers and staff. The team of nurses for children in care provide support and advice to staff and carers as required. The medical advisor leads strategic planning with the nurse consultant in developing audit, policy and guidance to support effective health care planning. There are plans within the service to focus on the increasing numbers of children with foetal alcohol spectrum disorder within the care system. The medical advisor has already provided training to the adoption and permanence panel and to key staff. Further training and work on developing awareness of foetal alcohol spectrum disorder is planned. The service is involved in multi agency pre-birth planning

meetings to ensure there is minimal delay in planning for permanence.

Young people are supported to make informed decisions about their health needs. Carers are expected to register a child with a doctor and dentist, and assist the child to attend any health appointments that are needed. Carers supply information about the child's health needs for the planning and review process. Carers have been supported by the nurse consultant to complete the new Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire. This is part of the national requirement to report on the emotional wellbeing of children in care. As at 31 March 2008, 94% of children in care were up to date with their immunisations and 100% of children in care under the age of five received their developmental assessments at the recommended milestone ages.

The Child and Mental Health Service (CAMHS) has a team of professionals focusing on meeting the emotional needs of fostered children. The close liaison of the fostering service and CAMHS enables effective joint working. The team meets monthly to discuss referrals and practice issues. CAMHS offers a flexible, and where necessary, speedy service to meet the complex needs of young people. A fortnightly art therapy group is run jointly by CAMHS and a worker from the fostering and adoption service. There is also an intensive art therapy group run over the school summer holidays.

Training is promoted to carers, who have a mandatory first aid course as well as other specialised optional courses to attend. Such courses include teenage psychology, promoting good mental and physical health for looked after children, attachment training and sexual health, teenage pregnancy and looked after young people. The nurses for children in care provide input to the support group for parent and baby foster carers and have provided additional information on caring for babies. The fostering and adoption service day in October 2008 focused on supporting children with attachment difficulties. This training was open to all carers, adopters, panel members and staff. Carers are able to attend a therapeutic group which promotes greater understanding of attachment issues and enables them to reflect on attachment issues relating to the children they are caring for.

The handbook is a valuable resource and is updated annually. Health information is provided in the handbook and other resource packs have been made, such as on substance misuse. The service is thorough at evaluating what it provides and what is needed. For example a resource pack for parent and baby placements has been developed and a focus on foetal alcohol syndrome will ensure the needs of these children are at the forefront of practice.

The Intensive Placement Team (IPT) undertakes activities with children and young people. A garden project has been developed, which encourages children to be active, grow produce, cook and eat healthily. A grant from the Creativity for Health organisation will be used to further develop the therapy arts group in partnership with CAMHS, as well as build on the garden project and develop an arts nature trail.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

The service prioritises keeping children and young people safe. Dedicated managers with committed social workers, social work resource officers and administrative staff are suitably experienced, qualified and skilled in their roles. Good quality foster placements and staff who are suitably qualified and experienced for their roles help to ensure children and young people are safe in foster care. The service has a dedicated fostering agency advisor who has a quality assurance role and provides advice on fostering issues to staff within the service. There is an audit strategy for the service with senior managers undertaking quarterly file audits. A major strength of the service is the high standard of monitoring and evaluation that takes place. Such evaluation has enabled the service to put a targeted recruitment strategy into place to recruit carers for teenagers, minority ethnic children and mother and baby placements.

Carers go through a rigorous recruitment procedure and checks are undertaken before children and young people are placed. New carers are expected to complete courses on safe caring and child protection within the first two years of fostering. Each fostering household has a safe caring agreement which is reviewed regularly. Supervising social workers are experienced and ensure children are provided with good, safe fostering placements. Foster carers' homes are inspected at least annually as part of the annual review process. Homes are checked to ensure their suitability for children and young people, with each child's needs taken into account when making placements. Fostering staff undertake unannounced visits to foster carers on an annual basis as a safeguard on the care provided to children. The service has child protection and safeguarding procedures in place, which are supported by training opportunities for carers and staff. Carers are able to access an efficient out of hours telephone service. Good advice, training and guidance is provided to help carers understand and manage children's behaviour in safe and appropriate ways. There is a procedure in place for convening multi professional placement stability meetings in relation to placements that may need additional support. Multi disciplinary meetings prioritise the needs of the children and ensure a holistic view of each child and young person's needs is taken. Risk assessments and safe caring documents are completed to a high standard. All staff demonstrate in-depth knowledge of the cases they manage.

All complaints, allegations and standards of care issues are dealt with thoroughly and appropriate notifications are made. The handbook is a valuable resource and is updated annually. There is a sound level of supervision provided to staff and carers. The IPT provides a high level of support and contributes to placement stability and keeping children safe. The service has a contract with an independent service to provide support and advice to carers who are subject to serious allegations and complaints. Child protection and safeguarding is given high priority in the service. All the children and young people who returned surveys said they know how to complain. The service has a complaints policy in place which involves thorough investigations and clear records made. Children and young people commented on

their questionnaires that bullying is not a concern. Carers are knowledgeable on the vulnerability of looked after children to being bullied and of the procedure to follow if a foster child goes missing.

Rigorous recruitment checks of staff and carers contributes to the safeguarding of children. The fostering panels are set up according to regulation. All references and appropriate checks are in place. The panels are organised effectively and perform well in providing a high level of quality assurance. Reports compiled by the independent chair of the panels comment on the high quality of assessment work. Panel minutes provide a clear record of the considerations and recommendations made. The decision making process is clear and foster carers are kept informed. The agency decision maker uses a high level of scrutiny and professionalism when making the final decisions about the approval of carers.

A new duty system has been established which ensures consistent information is requested at point of referral. There is transparency about the availability of placements and an emphasis on keeping young people in their local area. Matching is done carefully to ensure the best possible arrangements for children and young people. The duty workers complete all necessary paperwork including risk assessments to assist in the matching process. The service has worked alongside neighbouring authorities to look at the most effective way of commissioning placements with independent providers. Working in partnership with West Sussex County Council, a framework has been established to work with selected providers in developing services that will meet the children's' needs.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Equality and diversity is fully embraced as part of the culture of the service. Written documentation and training for carers and staff reflects this commitment and it is transferred into practice in all areas. An equalities and inclusion policy has been published and the head of service sits on the equalities group which has oversight and scrutinises equalities work. The fostering and adoption service plans to undertake an equalities impact assessment in 2009-10.

The agency promotes diversity in an excellent fashion. The individual cultural and ethnic needs of children and young people are considered at the earliest stage. Wherever possible children and young people are matched with culturally and ethnically similar carers. However, as with the current national situation the number of minority ethnic carers approved in Brighton and Hove falls short of the number of placements needed. The agency has an agreed list of preferred independent fostering agencies (IFA's) which children and young people can be placed with; thus allowing for greater chance of matching.

Managers are clear about the responsibilities of the service in relation to valuing diversity and how this translates into practice. This has been effectively communicated to foster carers, both in how the agency deals with them as

individuals and the expectations the agency has of foster carers in valuing diversity. There is good training provided to underpin and promote these expectations. All carers are provided with initial training in diversity and equality and caring for children and young people with different cultural needs. Training is also provided which considers sexuality and gender. Recent training has been provided for carers and staff on the needs of unaccompanied asylum seeking young people by the Refugee Council. Supervising social workers and carers display considerable insight and knowledge into the individual cultural, ethnic and diverse needs of children and young people and how these should be met.

A dedicated recruitment officer is in place to address the recruitment of carers from ethnically diverse backgrounds. The officer is extremely experienced having a dual role across the fostering and adoption teams. Close links have been made with local community groups and associations leading to a more focused recruitment strategy, whilst national forums are attended to consider the wider context. Newly updated leaflets and posters have been published with the aim to raise greater awareness of the need for carers. The service has website pages for prospective minority ethnic carers and gay and lesbian carers. A well prepared carers pack is given to these carers. The recruitment officer also provides support, guidance and advice to supervising social workers and directly to carers; such as to transracial carers who have children or young people in placement. Such a role has assisted carers to offer more culturally similar care including supporting children and young people to follow their religion or faith and to promote the positive aspects of their communities, cultures and histories. Where it is thought children or young people would benefit from an adult mentor or independent visitor from their own culture, appropriate persons and services are accessed. When children and young people are not able to be matched with carers of a similar cultural or ethnic background, appropriate transracial placements are sought. The individual needs of the child or young person are paramount with all key aspects being considered before placements occur. This includes limiting the distance away from the child or young person's existing local community networks, family members, friends, clubs and educational programmes.

The educational needs of children and young people are clearly promoted and supported by the service and its carers. The service provides training and support for foster carers to ensure education is promoted and so that carers support young people to maximise their opportunities. The 2008 Ofsted Annual Performance Assessment highlighted looked after children and young people made good progress; attending and achieving well at school. Children and young people have their learning needs suitably assessed, planned for and reviewed. Personal education plans are compiled with all learning needs considered including any special educational needs. Carers play an active role in encouraging children and young people to participate in their education fully. Carers are expected to attend consultation evenings and events as well as education and looked after child reviews. Carers see supporting children and young people in education as a crucial part of their tasks and responsibilities. Where young people struggle to engage in their education, close liaison is kept between the agency, fieldwork staff and local education providers. Additional support is provided by the IPT and can include providing children and young people with the opportunity to attend activity and

practical based morning sessions at the main office location. Although not providing an alternative to education, the morning sessions allow for children and young people to take respite from educational settings where they may be experiencing particular difficulties. The morning sessions are limited to just a few places and are closely monitored to ensure they are only used by the same children and young people on an infrequent basis. Such sessions also support carers to maintain their own commitments which occur in school hours. A memorable achievement event for young people in year 10 and above was held, which celebrated their educational achievements and other successes undertaken. Young people were actively involved in the working group to plan the event. The IPT has provided music taster days on school holiday activity programmes due to a successful bid to Youth Music to improve musical services for children in care. The IPT has also facilitated weekly music workshops with the music and performing arts service.

Brighton and Hove is one of the first councils in the government's 'Aiming High for Disabled Children' strategy to get extra funding to improve short break services in the city. Short breaks are not provided by the fostering service and Barnardo's is commissioned to provide short break placements for children with disabilities.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

Children and young people are fully supported to maintain contact with their family and friends. All placements take into consideration the location and distance of the child or young person from their parents, family and friends. Carers are committed to ensuring all children and young people in their care attend agreed contact visits with parents and family members in line with care plans. Where necessary carers take responsibility for transporting and collecting children and young people and liaise directly with parents when appropriate. Carers and their supervising social workers communicate regularly with field social workers to ensure all contact visits are properly planned and monitored. Where there are known risks or concerns assessments are completed with guidance and support being readily available. Carers also promote existing and new friendships which children and young people may have or gain during their stay. The concurrency team oversees the intensive contact and parenting support arrangements for parents of children in concurrent placements. Community family workers provide parenting skills work and contribute to the assessment of parents through the supervision of contact sessions. There is good face to face working with children, carers and parents. Young people are supported with the process and clear records are maintained.

The service adopts different methods of gaining young people's views in line with their age, understanding, first language and communication methods. The 2008 Ofsted Annual Performance Assessment identified participation by looked after children and young people in using and evaluating the effectiveness of the services provided a major strength. Young people can chair their own intensive placement scheme reviews and are encouraged to provide input into the plans for the morning unit. They assist IPT staff to undertake risk assessments in relation to planned

activities. Children and young people are consulted as part of their carers annual reviews and as part of their own looked after child reviews. All young people are provided with a guide when they move into a placement which clearly explains their rights and choices. The guide includes clear and easy to understand information on how to make complaints about the care they receive and who they can contact should they wish to talk to independent persons and organisations. The fostering service ensures that children in foster care know how to raise any concerns or complaints, and that they receive prompt feedback on any concerns or complaints raised. The service is working with the local youth advocacy and participation service to develop a Children in Care Council, which will enable regular dialogue and involvement in delivering services.

The service provides children and young people with a multitude of activity opportunities during school holiday periods. This includes trips to adventure parks, places of interest, camping and outdoor pursuits. There are also more localised events such as painting and art, den building and cooking. Following requests from some children and young people a garden project was developed, which has clearly been a success. The service has developed business cards for use with young people on the activity programme to record key numbers, in response to suggestions from young people. The activity programme has been adapted in line with suggestions and in liaison with young people. The service provides the children of carers with a number of opportunities to provide them with opportunities to meet their peers, have fun and support each other. A course is also run for children and young people whose parents have recently started fostering or who are going through the assessment process.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

The service is supportive to carers in assisting young people prepare for adulthood. The 16 plus team takes over key work responsibility for young people in care when they are 16 years old, but a gradual transition process and introduction to a new worker takes place prior to this. Foster carers are supported to provide all young people with creative opportunities to learn independent skills which are appropriate to their age and development. Young parents with babies are being supported to develop living and independent skills. The service provides specific training for foster carers to assist them in helping young people prepare for adulthood.

There is close working with the 16 plus team to achieve the best possible outcomes for young people approaching independence. There are regular meetings between 16 plus staff and the fostering staff to look at practice issues. The 16 plus support team provides valuable support, advice and assistance to young people. There are clear systems, written guidance and training for example, to support foster carers in assisting young people to make the transition to adult living. Not all young people who are eligible for a pathway plan have one in place.

Foster carers are supported to care for children and young people placed with them through the payment of a specified allowance and agreed expenses.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

The statement of purpose clearly sets out the aims and objectives of the service. It does not specify the numbers, relevant qualifications and experience of staff, numbers of carers, numbers of children placed and numbers of complaints and their outcomes. The annual fostering service reports does however, provide much of this information.

The young person's guide is a colourful and child friendly book, which the IPT developed in line with young people. The guide can be translated, made available in large print, Braille or on audio tape. The service uses a story book for younger children to help them to understand about foster care.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. The service is organised effectively with clear lines of accountability throughout. There are clear procedures in place for monitoring the service. A particular strength of the service is the robust monitoring and evaluation systems which contribute to the high standard of care provided to children and young people. The systems in place fully consider equality and diversity issues. All senior managers have the experience, dedication, qualifications and knowledge required, which means the service is managed extremely well. The teams benefit from experienced managers, who show an interest in the children, young people and carers. The IPT works to enhance placement stability and provides an increased level of support to intensive fostering placements. Support workers can be allocated to provide direct work on an individual basis or to run groups. The team actively seeks feedback from the children and young people, their carers and social workers to further develop and improve services.

The head of service chairs a quarterly meeting with senior managers, the medical advisor and the consultant nurse to discuss practice issues in relation to fostering and adoption and services for children in care. She also chairs a monthly pre-birth assessment panel to maintain an overview of all the pre-birth referrals of children at risk of care proceedings or a child protection plan at birth. This is to minimise delay in achieving permanence for babies, to reduce the number of babies coming into care through the planning of multi agency support services and to enable the fostering duty staff to have some advance notice of the likely need for parent and baby foster placements. The service manager attends the quarterly meetings of the South East Local Authority Regional Foster Carer Group which meets to share practice and policy issues.

Staff are well supported in their respective roles, through individual supervision and team meetings. There are opportunities for development which encourage staff to stay with the service. Foster carers and placing social workers are very complimentary about the role of the supervising social work staff. Good use is made

of the individual skills and interests of staff in the fostering service. There are a number of specific responsibilities allocated to individual workers, which works well and encourages job satisfaction. The role of children's social workers is clearly defined as different from the supervising social workers. Staff have access to a large range of policies and procedures to provide guidance to all aspects of their work. High profile recruitment events are held which include advertisements in the local newspapers plus celebratory stories featuring carers. There is a realistic recruitment strategy which is based on the needs of children and young people.

A wide range of training opportunities are offered including input from education and health representatives and young people. Information kept in foster homes is clearly defined and foster carers are given guidance about their responsibilities for recording and keeping records safe. Confidential records are stored securely. There is a system for keeping records about allegations and complaints.

Robust systems are in place to determine, prioritise and monitor workloads. The service benefits from a stable and reliable staff team. Ongoing professional training is provided and staff are listened to and valued. Personal development plans reflect upon performance, objectives and training undertaken as well as future training needs. The commitment to good practice and keeping up to date with legislative changes is inherent in the service.

Working in partnership with West Sussex, the service has established framework agreements with selected providers. The framework allows the councils to work in partnership with selected providers to develop services that meet the needs of local children. Clear systems are in place to ensure that the quality of care provided by agency placements is appropriate and ongoing monitoring arrangements are in place.

An independent fostering consultant has run groups for carers on attachment issues and she is also able to offer some individual input to carers alongside supervising social workers as part of the work to support the emotional well being of children in care and enhance placement stability. The Foster Care Association runs a buddy scheme for new carers and a quarterly newsletter for all carers. A number of events have also been organised such as an Easter egg hunt and summer picnics. Association members are consulted with in relation to new developments within the service.

Carers are very well supported by the service. All carers have a comprehensive handbook to refer to, which is updated every year. Additionally, the IPT handbook and the minority ethnic pack are good resources. The role of the supervising social worker is clear and there is good communication all round. Carers have access to excellent training opportunities. Various support groups are available to carers, for example the parent and baby group which also has a training element attached. The service supports foster carers to attain the National Vocational Qualification at level 3. Carers are very positive about the quality and benefits of training received. A working group involving staff and foster carer representatives provides input into the development of the training programme. Work has taken place to commence the

implementation of the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) training standards for foster carers. A workshop event was held to launch the new standards to the carers. There is a support group for the first group of newly approved carers and experienced carers who are piloting the CWDC standards.

The service emphasises the importance of sons and daughters of foster carers and provides them with good support. There are specific activity days within the school holidays for these children. There is also a session co-facilitated by the children of experienced foster carers for newly approved carers' children or carers who are going through the assessment process.

The fostering service is sensitive to pre-existing relationships in assessing and approving family and friends as foster carers. The assessment process is robust and assessments are presented to a panel for consideration. Family and friends carers are very well supported by the service. These carers have a dedicated newsletter and are able to access training as well as benefit from being able to attend specific support groups. The service is sensitive in assessing and approving family and friends carers, to ensure the needs of the children and young people are promoted by family and friends wherever possible.

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 the statement of purpose contains the specified information (NMS 1.4)
- ensure all eligible young people have a pathway plan (NMS 14.5)