

Poole Fostering and Placements 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 Borough of Poole's fostering service is managed within the borough's children and families services structure. There is a principal manager and a team manager responsible for the mainstream fostering team. The shared care scheme is located within the children's health and disability team, which is staffed separately. The two teams have responsibility for the recruitment, assessment, training and support to all of the borough's foster carers and shared care families.

The range of services set out in the Statement of Purpose are as follows:
Short term care to support families through crisis, family breakdown or in an emergency to protect a child from harm.
Permanent substitute family care through adoption or long term fostering, for children who cannot return to their birth family.
A shared care service providing respite day and overnight care for children with disabilities.

The fostering service is supported with input from professionals such as the designated nurse for looked after children, clinical psychologists, the intensive support team for children and young people and the education support team.

Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

This was an announced key inspection of the service that assessed its performance against all key national minimum standards for fostering services.

The foster service provides outstanding outcomes for children and young people. The key strengths identified are strong leadership and management providing clarity of roles and responsibilities at all levels. This also enables excellent communication and close liaison and partnership working with other key agencies and professionals ensuring good outcomes for children in all areas, for example, health and education. The service benefits from an experienced, well qualified and stable staff team who are well supported inspiring excellent staff morale. The team are able to think innovatively and creatively which has enabled some more complex placements to be positively sustained. A large proportion of Poole's looked after children are placed in well matched placements within the in-house fostering service. Highly developed quality assurance systems demonstrate reflective practice and this is used effectively to identify areas for future development and improvement.

A significant amount of foster carers praised the support and training they received and spoke of the service's good reputation. One carer commented, 'they are very

professional, well resourced and the team is dedicated.'

Young people were consulted as part of this inspection and had the opportunity to complete surveys, meet the inspector as a group and speak individually to inspectors during a small sample of home visits made during the inspection. Young people are positive about the services they receive, particularly about their placements and the relationships they had with their foster carers.

Improvements since the last inspection

There were two recommendations made at last inspection involving clarifying proposals for a local support scheme and out of hours provision. These have been appropriately addressed.

A foster carer buddy system has been put in place, with experienced foster carers identified who are willing for other carers to contact them out of office hours if they need to off load or discuss practice issues. Information about this service is given to new carers as well as clarity between the use of this service and when the out of office hours service (OOHS) should be contacted.

The fostering team manager has regularly linked with the OOHS manager to ensure his staff are sensitive and informed about the specific support needs of foster carers. A feedback form has been introduced for foster carers who have contact with this service to ensure their needs are being met.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

Foster carers receive good information about health services and are clear about their role and the expectations to promote children's health and well-being. There are excellent examples of multi-agency work, especially for children with complex health needs, with evidence that outstanding progress exceeding all initial expectations has been made in some cases. Strength and difficulties questionnaires are used to form part of a screening process for children to help inform if further interventions may be needed for their well-being, for example, input from the children and adolescent mental health service.

Foster carers receive mandatory training in health matters and have access to an extensive range of courses to increase their knowledge and expertise. This includes an intensive programme about the attachment needs of children and other workshops run by a clinical psychologist on current topics such as self harm. The specialist nurse for children in care works very closely alongside the fostering team and provides a valuable resource in ensuring initial health assessments are undertaken promptly as well as being available to provide training and support for foster carers and young people. Additional hours have recently been added to this role which will give more scope for development, for example, monitoring in more depth how health care plans are being implemented by foster carers.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

Staff recruitment practices are well established and generally robust in order to promote the safeguarding of children. In the main, records comply with the requirements of schedule 1 of the fostering service regulations 2002, although some of the older files have some omissions in proof of identity and full employment history details. The people who work for the fostering service are suitable to work with children and they are managed, trained and supported in such a way to ensure the best possible outcomes for children in foster care. The number of qualified staff is sufficient to achieve the purpose and functions of the organisation and there is good use of unqualified workers who provide valuable support to the work of the team.

Children's safety is promoted by robust monitoring of foster carers' homes to ensure high standards are maintained. In addition, home safety checks are carried out by Dorset fire and rescue service to provide external verification for assessments and reviews. A sample of visits to foster carers carried out during the inspection evidenced accommodation was comfortable, well furnished and maintained to good standards of cleanliness. Children placed in foster care do not share beds and accommodation reflects the child's assessed needs for privacy. Foster carers are given training and written guidelines to ensure they are aware of their responsibilities to maintain good standards of health and safety.

Children placed in foster care are carefully matched with foster carers who have the skills to meet the child's assessed needs. Detailed information is sought prior to considering a placement including giving appropriate consideration to any risk identified. This enables the fostering team to complete a thorough assessment of the capacity of the carers to meet identified needs and an analysis of how the carers will promote positive outcomes for the child. Priority is given to ensuring the placement meets the needs of the child including racial, ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic needs. Additional training, support and information is available to foster carers if exact matches cannot be made. There is a strong commitment to placing children in-house enabling them to benefit from a stronger team around the child approach, using the already known and established multi-agency resource network.

Children are protected by rigorous safeguarding procedures, including a prominent emphasis on safe caring within fostering households. Comprehensive training ensures foster carers are able to promote children's welfare by being aware of a range of issues such as safe care, recognising signs of abuse, behaviour management and internet safety. There are excellent systems in place to monitor any allegations and this information is scrutinised and evaluated to inform future training needs or policy developments to promote a continued vigilance to child protection.

The fostering panel is well organised and highly effective in ensuring good quality

decisions are made about the approval of foster carers. The panel is independently chaired and membership includes expertise in education, health and a person with care experience providing good diversity of opinion. The panel takes its role of providing a quality assurance function seriously. For example, the panel routinely scrutinises any placements made outside the terms of approval and details of any allegations made against foster carers.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Children receive a service which values diversity and promotes equality. Children's needs are recognised in terms of gender, religion, ethnic origin, language, culture, disability and sexuality and placements are made wherever possible to meet these needs. Foster carers attend mandatory training to ensure they provide care that respects children's backgrounds and counteracts all forms of discrimination. Children with disabilities are given specific support including provision of equipment and adaptations where necessary. Foster carers are encouraged to help children access leisure activities and hobbies and there are schemes such as 'access to leisure' cards which give discounts to various facilities and a beach hut that is available for foster carers to book throughout the year.

Children are encouraged to attend school or alternative provisions and educational results are good. There is effective partnership working between the fostering team and the education support team, particularly as the head of the virtual school sits on the fostering panel. This enables good monitoring of educational outcomes for children and work has been done on raising the quality of personal education plans to ensure they are effective. Training is available to foster carers to increase their awareness of school systems and enable them to become confident advocates for children's education needs. Additional support, such as enrolment to the letterbox club that provides children with a monthly package to promote the enjoyment of books and numeracy games; a homework club for children in care; and creative use of personal educational allowance funding, has further promoted educational outcomes. Children's achievements are recognised and celebrated at an annual award ceremony for children in care.

The service provides a highly valued and professionally run shared care scheme, which is designed to give children a positive experience and encourage independence. Carers are recruited and approved in the same way as other foster carers but receive specialist training to meet the physical and behavioural needs of the children they care for. Excellent links are made with parents who appreciate the support carers give them. The Poole shared care service has received additional funding as part of the aiming high for disabled children pathfinder project and is currently working closely with neighbouring authorities in recruitment and development of services to increase the range of opportunities for activities and short breaks for disabled children.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Children are encouraged to maintain and develop family contacts and friendships as set out in their care plan. This includes some examples of carers supporting complex family arrangements and enabling siblings in different placements to have ongoing and meaningful contact. The importance of appropriate contact is stressed during the assessment of foster carers and discussed regularly during supervisory visits to ensure contact is appropriately recorded by the carer and any perceived impact fed back to the child's social worker.

Children indicated through survey responses and visits to foster homes that they felt listened to by their foster carers and that their opinions were respected. Children felt confident in raising any concerns and felt these would be addressed appropriately. Children are encouraged to participate in their reviews and independent reviewing officers have effective procedures for seeking children's views. Children also contribute to foster carer reviews via their social worker. An external advocacy organisation is commissioned and they have attended foster carer sessions to raise awareness of their service. More general consultation processes are established such as group meetings, events and a shadow board that includes care experienced representatives to involve young people in the running of the service. A participation worker has recently been appointed and it is hoped this will provide young people with more varied opportunities for participation.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is outstanding.

Young people have an excellent range of options available to them to support their transition to adulthood. Foster carers are given comprehensive information and training to ensure they are able to promote the skills necessary for adult living. There is regular liaison between the fostering team manager and pathways team manager to ensure a joined up approach in looking at issues that relate to planning for independence. A training flat is available to young people to try out whether they are sufficiently prepared for the challenge of independent living and their foster placement is retained during this trial period so young people can return to their respective placement if they wish. There are also a number of young people who have been able to stay on with their foster carers who have been assessed as supported lodgings, in order to enable the placement to continue demonstrating a strong commitment to young people's welfare beyond their eighteenth birthdays. There are good training and employment opportunities for young people leaving care such as the 'Care2work' programme.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

The aims and objectives of the fostering service are clearly set out in a Statement of Purpose which is subject to periodic review. The children's guide is available for all children and foster carers have copies which they can give out at the beginning of a placement.

The fostering service benefits from strong management and leadership. There are highly developed procedures for monitoring activities which ensure performance is of a high quality and continues to improve. Staff and managers roles are clear and transparent with well established lines of communication contributing to the effective running of the service. The fostering team is made up of stable, experienced and well qualified staff who provide a broad knowledge base and confidence in accomplishing all the tasks assigned to the fostering service. The team is highly supportive of each others work that enables strong systems of delegation both formally and informally to ensure all work is appropriately covered. Strong administrative back-up contributes to the overall efficiency of the service.

Placements of children with external providers are actively monitored to ensure any quality issues are promptly identified and addressed to ensure good outcomes for children are achieved.

Children benefit from a service that provides a high calibre of foster carers. Recruitment processes are robust with good systems for weeding out unsuitable applicants at various stages of the assessment process to ensure foster carers who are approved have the right qualities, competences and aptitudes for fostering. Commissioning strategies are reviewed to ensure continued improvement in the range of placements to meet the needs of young people, including those who are more difficult to place.

Foster carers are overwhelmingly positive about the support and training they receive from the fostering service. All foster carers receive regular visits and are confident about contacting the service for advice or support. One carer commented, 'Poole always responds positively to any suggestions and requests we make for support and equipment and we are treated as valued members of a very dedicated multi-disciplinary team.' Creative packages of support have been used effectively to maintain more challenging placements and achieve stability for the child. A high priority is afforded to ensuring foster carers access comprehensive training, this includes pre-approval training and ongoing training for their professional development. There is a commitment to enabling foster carers to pursue relevant qualifications and workshops to support carers through the children's workforce development council standards which have been very valuable. There is a strong recognition of the professionalism of the service's foster carers who are increasingly acknowledged as having a key role to play in contributing to core assessments for children.

All appropriate records are kept and are accessible in relation to the fostering service. Records are now stored electronically which enables the fostering team to have access to child care case records assisting in making sure full information is available. Foster carers have clear guidelines about record keeping and recognise the importance in recording significant life events for the child and passing relevant information onto the fostering service. Administrative records contain all significant information as required by regulations and are audited to ensure any themes are identified and brought to the senior management team's attention.

Family and friends who are approved as foster carers are assessed and supported sensitively. There is more consistent use of viability assessments to ensure sufficient preliminary evaluation prior to undertaking full assessments. There is a commitment to promoting care of children within their own family network. Family and friends carers are offered the same training and support by the fostering service as mainstream carers.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. There are inclusive policies for recruitment and assessment of carers and carers from different ethnic backgrounds and same sex couples have been approved. Preparation groups include a session on equalities and core training for foster carers includes diversity to ensure that they value children's different backgrounds. Foster carers are given sexual health training that highlights issues of sexuality and challenges homophobia. Placement matching considerations include information about children's racial, ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic needs and the capacity of the carer to meet them. Specific advice, support and training is given to foster carers to ensure they can meet children's individual needs. There have been opportunities for men in foster care to have separate meetings and there is a focus on ensuring male carers are given the appropriate levels of support. There are high quality specialist services for children with disabilities and good examples of multi-disciplinary work was seen during the inspection. The service has access to translators and interpreters and an interpreter was used during the inspection to enable children to contribute their views.

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 staff files contain all the information required by Schedule 1 of the Fostering Services Regulations 2002. (NMS 3)