

Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council Fostering Unit

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

Unique reference number	SC055616
Inspection date	29/09/2011
Inspector	Christy Wannop / Suzanne Young
Type of inspection	Social Care Inspection

Setting address	655 Auckland Drive, BIRMINGHAM, B36 0SN
------------------------	---

Telephone number	0121 749 8143
Email	
Registered person	Solihull MBC
Registered manager	Mike Gregory
Responsible individual	Jane Wilton
Date of last inspection	28/01/2008

© Crown copyright 2011

Website: www.ofsted.gov.uk

This document may be reproduced in whole or in part for non-commercial educational purposes, provided that the information quoted is reproduced without adaptation and the source and date of publication are stated.

You can obtain copies of The Children Act 2004, Every Child Matters and The National Minimum Standards for Children's Services from: The Stationery Office (TSO) PO Box 29, St Crispins, Duke Street, Norwich, NR3 1GN. Tel: 0870 600 5522. Online ordering: www.tso.co.uk/bookshop

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 Solihull Fostering Service is part of the range of childcare services within Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council. The Fostering Service is part of the Education and Children's Services Directorate. The Fostering Service recruits and assesses prospective foster carers and has 135 approved foster carers. They provide placements for 130 children and young people aged 0-18 years. The care provided consists of five distinct areas of provision and these are: mainstream carers; the CHESS multi-dimensional treatment fostering scheme for children and young people with complex needs; friends and family carers; family-link scheme for children with disabilities, and support carers offering day or overnight care as part of a support package to help families overcome their difficulties.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This service meets the majority of the national minimum standards. There is one regulatory shortfall: the service does not carry out annual reviews on foster carers in a timely or systematic way. Management monitoring is not embedded within a systematic quality review that demonstrates improvement and benefits for children. Carers do not routinely have training in administration of medication and not enough children get enough information about foster carers before they move in. Family and friends do not have equality of access to financial resources available to other foster carers.

The service meets children's health needs very well and keeps them safe. There are particularly good arrangements in the CHESS service to foster children who need a more therapeutic and intensive mental health service within their placement. The service makes sure that carers understand the behavioural and additional needs of vulnerable children through excellent parenting and behavioural approach training devised and delivered to be responsive to local need. Children have positive relationships with their carers. They have good opportunities to develop interests, hobbies and make good use of leisure time. They get the help they need to stay in education and to develop skills for independence. Fostering service staff value team working and are skilled and effective in their roles. Support throughout the service, to foster carers and to service staff, is good. The organisation is currently restructuring the direct leadership of the fostering service. There is continuity of management directed by a strategic plan through this process, to ensure the functions of a fostering service are carried out consistently.

Improvements since the last inspection

At the last inspection in 2008, three regulatory shortfalls and nine recommendations were made.

The service has taken action to improve all three regulatory matters: there are now clear placement plans which detail children's health needs. There are now systems in place within the local authority to ensure that children's social workers and fostering social workers make visits at the legally required intervals. The service receives regular data to ensure this is tracked. Family and friends carers now benefit from a service which is directed by specific policies and procedures and supported by a dedicated team. The fostering panel is now trained in the specific issues faced by people who foster children from within their family circle.

The service now also: tracks and updates Criminal Records Bureau checks; has local policy when children have to share a bedroom with another child; gets agreement from placing social workers about safer care policies; makes notifications to Ofsted about significant incidents; has a system for workload management, and records supervisory visits and unannounced visits to carers' homes. The panel functions have been strengthened by two-way information sharing with the service at quarterly fostering management meetings. These improvements mean that children are safer and the service is better able to deliver its functions to ensure their well-being.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

The fostering service promotes children's physical, emotional and psychological health and makes good arrangements to ensure they deliver the health services they need. The organisation has access to exceptionally skilled specialist child health advice. This is particularly so for children within the CHESSE scheme, who have access to a 'wrap around' multi-disciplinary team of therapists and support services. This support avoids more institutional care and keeps children in their community within a family setting. Children and foster carers also have creative input, training and support from the looked after children's nurse and keeping healthy is very much a shared responsibility. Foster carers have a good understanding of how to translate cultural and developmental needs into individual health and personal care and act as positive role models for healthy lifestyles. Children say they always get advice and support with their health. One young person said, 'My foster carers are always there for me,' and they make sure he goes to appointments. Carers are not routinely trained in administering medication, but do have access to paediatric first aid training and they store medication safely.

Children live in foster homes that provide a healthy environment and the space they need. One young person said his carers help him to lead 'a clean and healthy life.' Skilled carers get support from the family link service so that when children with disabilities stay away from home they have the care, privacy, equipment and safety barriers appropriate to their age, development and abilities. The fostering service makes unannounced annual inspections of each carer's home to ensure that the

environment is consistently safe, clean, secure and well maintained, and that vehicles used by carers are safe. Children over the age of three usually have their own bedroom. If they do have to share, there is proper consideration given to individual needs and factors such as bullying, history of abuse or abusive behaviour are discussed and shared through risk management documentation. So the service listens to children's wishes about the decision to share bedrooms. Foster carers' homes are adapted to be child-friendly, have gardens for play and access to a range of community activities which promote children's development.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

Children feel safe and are safe. They get the support they need to learn about self-protection and they are protected from significant harm within foster placements through regular placement monitoring and clear expectations and standards of foster care. Children and young people live with foster carers who help them to understand how to protect themselves and live safely and carers are sensitively aware of any particular risks within young people's own behaviour. One young person described how his carer teaches him about household dangers and how to look after himself and change light bulbs and be aware of the dangers of gas and electricity. All children have the opportunity to talk alone with staff and know how to contact safeguarding organisations such as ChildLine, their own social workers and the children's advocacy service. The fostering service works in partnership with other agencies to protect children. The agency promotes good safe-caring guidelines for foster carers. These include issues relating to equality and diversity, disability and personal care. Children sometimes go missing and if they do, they usually return quickly. They are protected as far as possible and responded to positively on their return in accordance with local police and safeguarding protocols for children missing from care. These arrangements keep children safe.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Children get really good support to make sound relationships with their foster family, interact positively with others and learn new ways of behaving. Staff and carers have the skills and training to communicate with young people and encourage this positive behaviour. The service encourages them to think reflexively and be creative in positive parenting and non challenging behavioural approaches and train carers intensively in this. They respect children's privacy, rights and confidentiality and have full information about a child's history so they can be sensitive to children's difficulties. Carers are aware of the impact of their own feelings towards challenging needs and training focuses on positive control and de escalation. This helps carers to understand the meaning behind children's behaviour and how issues such as bullying can relate to difference. There is commitment to avoiding criminalising children and supervision process promote good practice. This helps children feel comfortable in their placements and develop a sense of self and belonging in their foster family.

Children are able to enjoy their interests, develop confidence in their skills and are supported and encouraged to engage in leisure activities. Foster carers contribute to the placement plan which makes clear the detail, consents and financial support for children's equal access to activities and leisure pursuits. This helps children develop friendships and ordinary relationships in the community. One young person said, 'I never want for anything really, they treat me so good.'

The fostering service actively promotes the education and achievement of children as valuable in itself, and as part of their preparation for adulthood. The service trains and supports foster carers to value education and young people confirm that they feel supported to maximise their opportunities by the additional support with homework, in schools and to placements. Carers keep in touch with schools about children's progress, attainment and development and advocate when necessary to help them to re enter or stay in full-time education. This supports children to achieve their educational potential.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Children know that their views, wishes and feelings are taken into account in many aspects of their care and contribute to the placement planning process. The fostering service takes a lead in drawing up and reviewing children's placement plans with foster carers and social workers contribute to this. This means that placement plans are able to be very specific to the day to day care in each foster home. Children have good information and support to access advocacy and corporate complaints processes when there are disputes or disagreements. The authority is good at gathering children's views, individually and collectively, and they are active in asking children for contributions to carers' reviews. The authority takes its corporate parenting responsibilities seriously and fostering staff have taken on a role as Children's Champion and children feel they are consulted. This commitment within the local authority and the fostering service to identifying issues from a child's perspective is a strength.

Children stay with carers who help them to have a positive self-view; develop emotional resilience and knowledge and understanding of their background through daily care, relationships and talking. Carers promote self-esteem when they enable children to exercise choice about day to day decisions, such as the food they eat and clothes they wear, and to understand some of the complex life journeys that have led them into care. The service has developed specialist training to help foster carers meet the needs of black and minority ethnic and asylum seeking children; consequently these children say they feel well catered for. Foster carers support children's constructive contact with their parents, grandparents, siblings, half-siblings, wider family, friends and other people who play a significant role in their lives. This keeps them in touch with their family and community and promotes a sense of positive family identity. Carers go to significant lengths to maintain the child's sense of self-worth and also work sensitively with parents struggling to parent

their children. Carers sometimes keep in touch with children after they have moved on, been adopted or returned to family care, where this is part of the plan.

The fostering service plans for stable placements that meet children's needs. Children are welcomed into the foster home and leave the foster home, where possible, in a planned and sensitive manner which makes them feel loved and valued. However, children have told the authority that they want more choice of placements and more information about carers before they go to live with them. The service has begun to create foster carer profiles that are child friendly, but not all carers have these yet. Carers get a clear message from the service at the outset about the equal position of any foster child within a family. One young person described that he was treated as if he was the carers' own son.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

The fostering service makes sure that children are prepared for, and supported into adulthood so that they can reach their potential and achieve economic well-being. There is good partnership working with the 16+ team over placement plans and pathway plans. These detail the support each child can expect from foster carers, and anticipates the issues faced, particularly by those young people leaving care with uncertain citizenship. One young person said that he got plenty of support from his carer, who taught him how to take care of the practicalities of independence, to do household chores and take care of his own needs. Children with learning disabilities get specific help from carers who promote independence skills and through providing them with new experiences and opportunities.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The fostering service makes good arrangements to carry out its functions of recruitment, assessment and support for a range of foster carers. There has been recent success in increasing the number of fostering households available and the authority has drawn up a new strategy to deliver the type and range of carers needed to meet current and future demand. However, managerial systems within the fostering service do not ensure that all foster carers are reviewed within a 12-month period to ensure their continuing suitability. Only 28% of carers have had an annual review within timescales; this is a regulatory shortfall.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Policy, procedure and training for carers and staff all levels shape an enabling and inclusive service that sees each child as an individual.

The management team is stable and long standing within the borough. The responsible individual, two managers and the five assistant team managers are qualified and experienced and have the skills to deliver the fostering service. This is a

period of transition, with a review of managerial arrangements and service organisation underway. While systems for managing serious incidents, allegations and complaints are broadly satisfactory, and action is taken to address any issues on a case by case basis, routine managerial monitoring and reporting does not take an evaluative overview or identify patterns or trends. There is little qualitative evaluation by the management team in respect of the action taken to conclude incidents. For example, there have been lengthy delays in reviewing suitability and concluding some matters of concern. The service has not yet reviewed its processes in this area against the new national minimum standards but is aware of the changes needed. Valuable information about placement sufficiency and availability has recently begun to be evaluated within the team, but information about the fostering service from other stakeholders, such as the Independent Reviewing Service, is not incorporated into the overall quality review of the service.

There is clear and accurate written information for children, their parents, foster carers, staff and placing authorities about the services and facilities provided. In practice the fostering service's operation meets the aims and objectives described in the Statement of Purpose. There is an effective fostering panel; the chair, panel advisor and decision maker support the welfare of children in placement and liaise with the manager about the quality of assessment reports and reviews. They make timely, qualitative and appropriate recommendations and prioritise first reviews and those where there are concerns.

The fostering service, in conjunction with the children's services, have developed a very good referral system that gathers the right information about children needing placements, including their wishes and feelings. This means it can match the right carer for each child, ensure that foster carers are able to meet the child's needs and so maximises the likelihood of a stable placement.

The service has robust recruitment processes for staff and foster carers. There is careful selection of staff, fostering households, volunteers and the fostering panel, and there is an additional safeguard in the Criminal Records Bureau review panel which checks each positive trace. Assessments robustly consider equality and diversity. Allegations and suspicions of harm have been handled in a way that provides protection for children and the adults involved in the allegation. Whistle blowing is understood by all and foster carers are clear about the duty to report any concerns.

Foster carers receive the training and development they need to carry out their role effectively and a good proportion of carers have achieved the Children and Workforce Development Council standards. A newly devised framework of training and development is in place, though it does not yet fully incorporate the recommendations of the national minimum standards. The service is aware and improving this. Similarly the manager of the fostering service is working to update and improve the quality of information it makes available in the foster carer handbook that is currently out of date.

Fostering social workers support foster families well through regular meetings and an

annual unannounced visit to the foster home. Social workers are enthusiastic for their tasks, skilled and prioritise the needs of the child within the placement. This is reflected in the Every Child Matters focus to the foster carer review process. In practice, carers report really good levels of advice and guidance by the fostering service whether in person, electronically or by phone, and this means they can care properly for children placed with them. One said that the staff of the service, 'show respect and appreciation for the care I provide as foster carer.' Family and friends foster carers now receive the support they require to meet the needs of children placed with them. Some relatives spoke of the fantastic preparation they had for the arrival of the children and that this meant the children had a 'smooth transition' between the two households. However, family and friends do not have the same financial support to access training or for mileage and payments to them are not the same as to other carers. This means that support does not recognise their needs fairly. The service is aware of this inequality.

The fostering service provides a good service to children by supporting and guiding staff to fulfil their roles through professional supervision and appraisal. There is access to specialist advice to extend a comprehensive service to children, including legal and medical advice and a pro-active advisor to panel. Staff say they feel very well supported and they enjoy working in the service, though have struggled with unavoidable staffing shortages. The service is reviewing how best to maximise staff deployment to avoid pressure points at peak times, such as the school holidays. Records for foster carers are clear, up to date, stored securely and contribute to an understanding of the child's life. The premises and administrative systems are suitable to enable the service to meet the objectives of its Statement of Purpose. The service provides well for the children in its care. As one foster carer said, 'Solihull borough are very child focused and go to great lengths to provide all the essentials.'

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 review of foster carer suitability must take place not more than a year after approval, and thereafter whenever the fostering service provider consider it necessary, but at intervals of not more than a year (breach of Regulation 28.2)
- ensure foster carers are trained in the management and administration of medication (NMS 6.10)
- ensure children are given information about the foster carer before arrival, in a format appropriate to their age and understanding (NMS 11.3)
- ensure management monitoring identifies any concerns about specific incidents and identifies patterns and trends and evidences the action taken address any issues raised by this monitoring (NMS 25.2)
- ensure that financial and other support is provided to all foster carers according

to objective criteria that do not discriminate against foster carers that have a pre existing relationship with the child. There should be equity of provision and entitlement. (NMS 30.10)