

Bristol City Council Fostering Service

Inspection report for local authority 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

Bristol City Council's fostering service is based in a central area of Bristol. The fostering service is part of the Children, Young People and Skills Services in Bristol which links education, health and social services to form a cohesive service for children and young people.

The fostering service provides and supports: short and long-term placements; fee-paid schemes; emergency reception family placements; friends and family placements; short breaks for disabled children; remand fostering service; therapeutic fostering; private fostering; special guardianship; and family finding.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This is a good service with some aspects judged as outstanding. The general organisation around working practices is good and the fostering service is functioning well. There are excellent arrangements in place for consulting with children and young people in foster care. The promotion of educational attainments for children and young people is the real strength of the service. Children and young people have easy access to various community activities and resources. The fostering service has innovative ideas and a comprehensive policy on preparation and planning for adulthood.

Children and young people's individual needs are recognised and plans are in place to address them. Children and young people live in healthy and safe environments. Staff and foster carers are well supported by the service manager, who is committed to promoting the welfare of children and young people and focusing on improvement.

To further improve, the fostering service must ensure that foster carers' reviews are conducted at intervals of not more than a year and ensure that children's case records are correctly dated.

Improvements since the last inspection

The fostering service has acted upon the four recommendations made at the previous inspection. These steps help to promote the health and welfare of children and young people in foster care.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Children and young people in foster care live in a healthy environment and their health needs are well met. The fostering service has good systems in place to promote the development and health of children and young people. Children and young people's files provide good information about their health needs and how these are addressed. The working relationships with other agencies, such as Thinking Allowed, looked after children nurses, child and adolescent mental health services and Bristol's Collaborative Service are excellent. This helps to develop individual health plans for each child or young person and meet their holistic needs.

Foster carers are well supported and encouraged to meet young people's healthcare needs through the provision of various specialist healthcare training and support provided by the service. Bristol's Collaborative Service provides wraparound and therapeutic support, including health and well-being surgeries for foster carers. Thinking Allowed runs training packages and offers monthly appointments for foster carers, which focus on foster carers' emotions and helps to develop strategies to respond to children and young people's emotional well-being issues.

Foster carers' homes are warm, comfortably furnished and decorated. Children and young people are accommodated in single bedrooms and have a range of leisure and recreational resources available to them. Foster carers encourage children and young people to eat healthily. Young people are issued with free leisure passes and foster carers support and encourage them to attend various leisure facilities in the local community. Foster carers attend first aid training and purchase first aid kits so they can respond appropriately and promptly to emergency situations.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

Children and young people live in a family environment where competent foster carers provide them with a nurturing, stable and safe environment. Children and young people say that they live in safe placements. The fostering service has appropriate child protection and anti-bullying policies in place. Foster carers receive training on safer caring practices and safeguarding. Foster carers have knowledge and skills to protect children and young people from abuse and other forms of significant harm.

The fostering service works in partnership with the health and education services of the city council to ensure that children and young people are safeguarded in their care. The fostering service has a good relationship with the Local Safeguarding Children Board, and any allegation is investigated in a speedy fashion in line with the South West child protection procedures. Foster carers receive guidance and training for e-safety issues and protect young people from cyber bullying.

The fostering service has a procedure for children missing from care and there are guidelines in place to follow when a child goes missing from the placement. The out-of-hours support service provides advice to foster carers in reporting incidents of children who are deemed to be missing from care. The service has systems in place to monitor and evaluate these incidents so that it can improve practice and further protect children.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The fostering service provides caring and stable placements to children and young people by giving them an informed choice about their care through quality fostering services. This enables children and young people to strive towards achieving maximum outcomes. Children and young people enjoy sound relationships in their placements. Foster carers receive support from Bristol's Collaborative Service which provides focused, time-limited support to promote the long-term stability of children in care. This service aims to build resilience in the child. This helps the fostering service around the child to develop a shared understanding of their presenting behaviours in the context of their attachment history, experience of trauma, abuse and neglect. The service helps foster carers to manage their own emotional responses to looking after children and develop a shared understanding of children's needs.

The promotion of education for children in fostering placements is the real strength of the service. The excellent links with the education of children looked after services and virtual school bring together a range of skilled professionals who work collectively to support educational attainment of children and young people. They support children and young people in raising achievement, promoting attendance and lowering exclusions.

Facilities in foster carers' homes are conducive to study. Foster carers encourage and support children and young people to attend schools and help them with homework. Foster carers attend school evenings and contribute to children's personal education plans. As a result, the number of school days lost through not being on roll has decreased from 929 days to 28 days in 2011. There have been no permanent exclusions for children in care for the last five years. Improved numbers of young people have achieved 5 A-C grades in GCSE examinations in 2011. More young people are now going to college than ever before. Twenty care leavers are now attending various universities.

Children and young people have easy access to various community activities and resources. The result of the survey conducted by the children in care review shows that 85% of young people were engaged in at least one activity. Between them 70 different activities took place. The positive activities working group in the city council extends opportunities and offers advice to foster carers on resources available to children.

The fostering service awards their foster carers for their inspirational contribution to children in care in areas like education and creative arts. The service also arranges fun days and barbeques for children, their families and foster carers where children take part in various activities, such as karaoke, painting, sports and crafts. This develops young people's sense of belonging, self-esteem, confidence and skills as well as providing fun things to do.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

There are excellent arrangements for consulting children and young people and others involved with their care. The fostering service consults children and young people through care reviews, foster carer supervision, placement supervision visits and meetings with the children. Foster children have been very active participants in the Children's Rights survey. All young people are invited to take part and are told about the Children's Rights service. Bristol has been congratulated on the support given to the survey and the level of response received through the surveys. Complaints records shows that children and young people are supported to express their views. Children and young people have involvement in city-wide and national events. In addition to this, the fostering service communicates through a dedicated foster carers' website, a magazine for foster children, and the children in care council to improve its service delivery.

The agency has a number of placements of children and young people with complex contact arrangements. The fostering service provides a lot of practical support to the carers to ensure that they are enabled to support the child, offering transport and emotional support to keep to the difficult and complex contact arrangements.

Children and young people are given highly individualised and personalised care. Foster carers are familiar with placement plans for children in their care. Foster carers support children to promote social and emotional development and enable them to develop emotional resilience and positive self-esteem. Children confirm they can exercise choice and independence in the clothes and personal requisites that they buy.

The Foster Carers' Association brings families together socially, with the positive outcome that foster children get to know each other and their carers, in a supportive community where respite care can be arranged with family carers.

There is a clear policy in place to welcome children and young people into foster carers' homes and leave the homes in a planned and sensitive manner. Young people confirm that they feel loved and valued by the foster carers and their family members.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is outstanding.

The fostering service has innovative ideas and a comprehensive policy on preparation and planning for adulthood. The fostering service provides training and support to foster carers to enable them to provide effective support and guidance to young people preparing to move into independent or semi-independent living. Bristol has been a pilot area for Staying Put and has played an active part in the national development of the project and the evaluation. This has included engagement with foster carers, and young people have acted as clear mentors. The city council has made substantial financial contributions to increase the number of bedrooms in foster carers' households, for example, loft conversions in a few foster carers' houses.

Foster carers work closely with the care and after team in developing pathway plans for young people. They effectively support young people developing various independent living skills, for example, travel training, budgeting and opening saving accounts. Foster carers also support young people writing their curriculum vitae and looking for part-time work.

Young people and the care and after team have developed a supported lodging scheme by working in a partnership. Under this scheme, young people are able to rent rooms and the providers offer guidance and support to them in developing practical skills in managing their tenancies and living successful adult lives.

Young people are able to live in foster carers' homes beyond the age of 18 years in order to receive support while they are in education. As a result, the number of young people attending colleges and universities have increased recently.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The general organisation around working practices is good and the fostering service is functioning well. The fostering service has updated its Statement of Purpose which states the aims and objectives of the service. This also details the services and facilities provided by the fostering service. The fostering service has developed a young person's guide which provides information about the facilities which are available to them.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Evidence supports a consistent commitment to improving equality and diversity in practice. Children and young people receive an individualised service which is designed to meet their personal needs. The city council has a comprehensive policy on the promotion of equality and diversity. Staff and foster carers have completed equality and diversity training. Fostering service staff and carers have a good understanding of children and young people's dietary, religious, social and cultural needs. Foster carers support children

and young people to make personal choices and to access community resources.

The fostering service has a clear management and staffing structure that ensures there are clear lines of accountability throughout the service. The service manager of the family placement team is well qualified and has several years of management experience in fostering services. She supervises the newly appointed business manager. The business manager is also a qualified social worker with many years of management experience. She supervises the three team managers of the family placement team.

Fostering staff receive regular supervision and ongoing support from their team managers. Caseloads are monitored and the service employs social workers who are registered with General Social Care Council. The staff team and fostering panel are well supported by the administrative staff.

The fostering service recruits foster carers through various advertising methods according to the researched needs of children and young people. It carries out comprehensive assessments of prospective foster carers that cover all areas of competency needed to ensure children receive a good quality of care. Foster carers take part in pre-approval training; this informs them about what fostering entails and helps them explore their views and attitudes.

Good systems are in place for working with and supporting foster carers. Foster carers have access to regular support groups. The service provides 24-hour support for foster carers, and foster carers feel they can approach the agency any time they have a query or concern. Foster carers receive regular visits from their supervising social workers and written records of these visits are maintained so that any issues are followed up.

There are systems in place to conduct foster carers' annual reviews to determine whether they are suitable to continue as foster carers and their household continues to be suitable. However, a number of foster carers' reviews are outstanding. The service is addressing this matter.

Complaints and allegations against foster carers are well monitored. Any complaints or allegations made are dealt with promptly and sensitively. This ensures that foster carers are supported and the appropriate outcome is reached to safeguard children and young people in placement.

Ongoing training programmes are available for all foster carers which help ensure they are well equipped to meet the needs of the children and young people in their care. Training needs are identified during foster carers' supervision and discussed during the annual review process. The fostering service supports foster carers to achieve the Children's Workforce Development Council's training award. A number of carers have completed the National Vocational Qualification.

Bristol City Council has an established short-break service for disabled children which gives families or foster carers pre-arranged short breaks at weekends or during

school holidays. A dedicated training programme is available for short-break carers so they can provide effective care to the children they look after.

A significant number of children and young people receive support from family and friends foster carers. They have access to all training facilities. There is a kinship coffee morning support group available where family and friends carers meet together in an informal setting.

Matching children with foster carers is carefully considered to ensure that children are placed with foster carers who have the necessary skills to meet foster children's needs. Where there are gaps in the matching process, the agency supports foster carers to obtain information and take action to address these gaps.

The fostering service has recently appointed an independent chair and a vice chair to conduct the functions of the fostering panel. Foster carers and social work staff understand the function of the panel, and panel members attend regular training to ensure that they can effectively fulfil their roles. Detailed minutes are kept for the panel meetings held. The panel consists of individuals with a wide range of knowledge and experience. This enables them to give all the issues full and proper consideration to promote good outcomes for children.

A detailed electronic record is maintained of each child and young person to ensure that all records are easily updated and securely stored. However, there are some inconsistencies in the children's case recording system.

Foster carers are clear about the expectations regarding record keeping. Foster carers demonstrate how they are recording 'memorabilia' as a part of life story work for children and young people. This includes taking photographs and keeping souvenirs from trips and activities. This contributes to an understanding of the child's life.

Each carer has a foster care agreement in place and they are well supported by their supervising social workers through regular supervision in order to care properly for children in foster care. The fostering service maintains records of children's activities, incidents, achievements, allegations and abuse, for safeguarding and monitoring purposes and to improve practice.

The fostering service has clear procedures for monitoring and controlling to ensure the quality of service. This is achieved by having clear lines of communication, sound financial standing, robust financial procedures, and an agreed charge for fostering services. The management team advised that the fostering service is financially viable. Foster carers receive their weekly allowances on time, which enables them to budget for household expenditure and pay children's allowances on time. The monitoring systems ensure that statutory checks such as Criminal Records Bureau checks, medical, local authority checks and health and safety checks are also completed within the required timescales.

The fostering service sends notifications of significant events to the relevant agencies including Ofsted.

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 foster carers' reviews are conducted at intervals of not more than a year (Breach of Regulation 28 (2))
- ensure that children's case records are correctly dated. (NMS 26)