

Southampton City Council Fostering Services

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

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Inspector	David Coulter
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Setting address	Southampton City Council, Central Division, Marland House, Civic Centre Road, SOUTHAMPTON, SO14 7PQ
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Telephone number

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Registered person

Registered manager

Responsible individual

Date of last inspection

Southampton City Council

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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 service provided by Southampton City Council is part of the safeguarding division of the children's services and learning directorate of the council. The fostering team, recruits, supports and provides training to foster carers.

Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

Outcomes for young people in foster care in Southampton have improved significantly in a number of key areas since the last inspection. Young people receive a high quality individualised service from a local authority that has embraced its responsibilities as a corporate parent. In recent times the service has witnessed a recent unprecedented demand for placements. This coincided with a period of unsettled industrial relations within the council that resulted in a number of experienced social service staff resigning. The service remained effectively managed throughout this difficult time and young people entering care were matched with appropriate foster carers. Foster carers reported that levels of support were sustained in spite of staffing difficulties.

An effective health assessment process, early intervention and access to specialist services has greatly improved the health outcomes of young people. A strong safeguarding ethos permeates every aspect of the service and a comprehensive range of policies, procedures and working practices keep young people safe. Foster carers are pro-active advocates on behalf of the young people in their care and try to ensure they have access to services and appropriate resources to meet their needs.

Young people respond positively to the stability, security and support they receive in their placements and make significant progress in many aspects of their lives such as education and social development. The service provides opportunities for young people to share their views and influence the way the service is delivered. Diversity and equality are actively promoted and staff and foster carers are recruited from all sections of the local community.

Although there is one recommendation arising from this inspection it does not relate directly to the quality of foster care provided by the service which was assessed as being outstanding.

Improvements since the last inspection

Recommendations arising from the last inspection have been appropriately addressed:

Although risk assessments would be undertaken prior to the placement of any young person required to share a bedroom, there is now an expectation that most young people will be provided with their own bedrooms.

Young people currently residing in residential settings are considered for fostering placements if it is felt their care needs would be better met in a family setting.

The service actively recruits from minority communities and every effort is made to ensure that young people are appropriately matched with carers who can meet their cultural needs.

All carers are subject to the same vetting process that determines, amongst other things, their legal right to reside in the country.

Contact arrangements are now clearly established at the outset at each placement and young people are provided with transport.

All young people are now engaged in the development of pathway plans that allow them to prepare for their future and make arrangements for their transition into independent or semi-independent living.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

The health of all young people entering the service is given a high priority. An initial assessment by a consultant paediatrician determines the state of each young person's health. From the information obtained personal health plans are developed that provide guidance for foster carers about how any outstanding needs, including immunisations, should be met. Excellent integrated working between social care and health professionals make sure any identified health needs are effectively addressed within realistic time scales. Each young person is registered with a General Practitioner and dentist. Foster carers normally arrange and accompany young people to appointments. The health and well-being of young people in foster care is effectively monitored and a recent survey indicated that those receiving annual health and dental checks has risen from 85% to 92% in the last year. Immunisation rates are also well above the national average and currently stand at 93%.

Young people are encouraged to adopt healthy lifestyles by eating wisely and taking regular exercise. Many use their free passes to access the council's recreation and leisure facilities. Questionnaires from young people indicated they keep physically active and take part in a wide range of sporting and recreational activities such as swimming, cycling, horse riding, football and outdoor activities. Participation in such activities provides valuable opportunities for young people to make new friends and establish new social relationships.

Young people receive health advice and guidance from both their foster carers and the service's looked after children's nursing staff. Foster carers receive regular training on health related topics and can access specialist information via an e-learning website. Young people are provided with health education material and advice at their initial assessments and annual health checks. All are discouraged from smoking and made aware of the potential hazards associated with excessive alcohol consumption and drug use. Foster carers help young people monitor their own health and encourage them to report any worries or concerns at an early stage.

Young people whose development is being impaired by alcohol, drugs, eating disorders or psychological difficulties are referred to specialist help via a therapeutic panel. The panel ensure that individual's get the most appropriate professional help. Those individual's who experience significant social and emotional difficulties are supported by the Behaviour Resource Service team which is located within the children in care service. Intervention can either take the form of individual therapy sessions or regular advice and guidance to foster carers. Young people with more acute psychological difficulties are referred to the local child and adolescent mental health service. The availability of specialist support is greatly valued by foster carers and makes a significant contribution to placement stability.

An effective matching process ensures young people with disabilities are appropriately placed with foster carers who have the knowledge and skills to meet their needs. If required foster carers' homes are modified and specialist equipment installed to improve access for young people with mobility difficulties. Foster carers undertake specific training on intrusive medical procedures to ensure young people are kept safe. All consents for medical interventions are appropriately sought.

Young people are accommodated in homes that meet appropriate standards in relation to facilities, comfort and safety. There is an expectation that all young people are provided with their own room that they can designate as 'their space'. All foster carers homes are subject to an annual household review. The homes visited during the inspection were observed to be structurally sound and in extremely good decorative order. All appeared to be warm and homely environments. Young people spoke in positive terms about their accommodation.

The service is extremely responsive to the changing health needs of the young people in its care. For example, as the age of young people entering the service has dropped significantly in recent times the service has replaced its first aid training for foster carers with a specific paediatric qualification. Young people indicated that their health needs were being appropriately met and a number remarked how a greater awareness of health issues had changed their attitudes and behaviour.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

The service is managed by an appropriately qualified and experienced manager. She has provided exceptional leadership and much needed stability during a period of

expansion and ever increasing demands. She has a well-developed value base that ensures that the service remains child focused and that decisions are made in the best interest of young people. She liaises effectively with other team managers and has established good working relations with other agencies which have responsibilities for young people in care. This has led to the development of a number of joint initiatives with allied professionals from education, youth justice and health. The multi-disciplinary approach she has promoted has led to the development of a more integrated service and has resulted in much better outcomes for young people. She is held in high regard by both her staff and foster carers.

Foster carers are recruited from all sections of the local community via a comprehensive recruitment process that determines their suitability to provide care for vulnerable young people. Those being considered as family and friends foster carers are subject to the same assessment process and have to complete a skills to foster training programme and appear before panel. The vetting process extends to members of foster carers families. All foster carers undertake safe care training that helps them recognise signs of abuse and raises their awareness of the different forms abuse can take. Foster carers are made aware of their individual responsibilities in reporting any concerns. Safeguarding issues are always discussed during foster carers' supervision and are a standing item on staff team meeting agenda's.

Service staff are recruited via the council's comprehensive recruitment process. All prospective staff are subject to Criminal Record Bureau checks and provide suitable references. Although staff files examined indicated that they were appropriately vetted and found to be suitable to work with young people, current recruitment practice does not, as a matter of course, ensure that at least one references is obtained from their last job relating to the care of children.

The vulnerabilities and risks associated with each young person's behaviour are clearly identified prior to any placement. The service lays great emphasis on achieving appropriate matching and aims to ensure that young people are placed with foster carers with the necessary skills and experience to meet their specific care needs. If staff cannot identify a suitable placement from within the existing foster carer group they will seek assistance from a number of approved agencies. Once a placement has been identified care plans are developed to ensure that both young people and carers can be kept safe. Care plans provide clear guidance for carers on how appropriate behavioural boundaries should be maintained.

Young people are helped to assess risk and develop behaviours that will keep them safe. For example, foster carers engage young people in discussions on safety issues relating to road safety, stranger danger and the use of social network sites. There are well-established procedures to ensure that young people who go missing from care are reported. The service is successful in helping young people change their behaviour. Young people reported they feel safe and would convey any worries or concerns to their foster carers, social workers or teachers. All felt that personal issues are dealt with sensitively and their privacy and confidentiality is respected.

The multi-disciplinary approach that has been developed within the service has greatly improved the support that can be offered to young people and their foster carers. Effective monitoring of placements ensure that any difficulties can be identified at any early stage and support provided quickly by specialist staff. The effectiveness of such support is reflected in improved placement stability. Good lines of communication have been established between foster carers, social workers, educationalists and therapists. The services child-centred approach ensures that staff remain focused on the specific needs of each young person. Foster carers spoke in positive terms about the support that was available and that access to specialist support has greatly improved. Although most foster carers do not require additional support the fact it is available has a reassuring effect.

Young people are encouraged to play an active role in developing the service and their views are regularly sought, both formally and informally. Carers feel well supported and can access support and guidance out of hours via an effective out of out-of-hours service. The service has a well-established complaints process and foster carers and young people are made aware of how to register any concerns on entering the service. Staff are pro-active in addressing any concerns before they develop into significant complaints. The few complaints that have been made since the last inspection have been appropriately resolved. Any concerns about the conduct of foster carers are appropriately presented to the fostering panel for consideration.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The service aims to ensure that young people are provided with information about their carers before they enter their placement and this contributes significantly to minimising anxiety levels. Although many young people enter care in emergency situations, the service tries to ensure that foster carers are, at the point of admission, provided with key information relating to their specific health, cultural, and emotional needs. Foster carers are informed of each young person's particular circumstances so they can contextualise their behaviours and respond appropriately. Every effort is made to make young people feel safe and secure. Young people said they were welcomed into their foster carers' homes and encouraged to participate into all aspects of family life. All felt they were appropriately placed and had established good relationships with their foster carers and other family members. Young people in permanent long term placements are helped to understand their past and the particular circumstances that resulted in them entering care. By being helped to understand their personal history and cultural background they are more able to develop a clearer sense of identity.

During their placements young people are helped to develop socially acceptable behaviours. Young people are encouraged to assume responsibility for their behaviour in a way that is appropriate to their age and understanding. Although foster carers have high expectations of young people and aim to ensure they make significant progress in all aspects of their development, they are also realistic and

aware of the difficulties many looked after children experience. Through their training foster carers are made aware of the consequences of early childhood trauma and poor attachment. All are made aware of how such experiences can inhibit the ability of young people to both form and maintain social relationships. Specialist therapists are available to provide foster carers with guidance on how to manage young people who present with challenging behaviour. Foster carers help young people develop self-confidence by reinforcing positive behaviour with praise and rewards. Young people are supported by their carers, even if their actions have led them into anti-social and criminal activity. Carers work with young people and staff from youth offending teams to develop strategies to reduce such behaviours. In an effort to maintain stability in young peoples lives placements are kept open for those returning from short term custodial sentences.

Young people are encouraged to pursue their own particular interests and hobbies and are currently engaged in a wide range of leisure and recreational activities. The council provides free passes that enable young people to access a range of its leisure facilities. The service provides additional resources to help young people pursue interests and access new experiences. For example, young people are encouraged to participate in school trips and holiday activity programmes. Youth Options provide regular after school and week-end activities for those in the 10-18 year age group and are in the process of developing a new initiative for those under 10. Participation rates are high and young people spoke in extremely positive terms about their experiences. Such activities help raise individual's self-esteem, resilience and confidence. Foster carers accommodating young people with mobility difficulties are provided with specially adapted vehicles to ensure they can access activities outside of the home. Aiming High provision offers young people with disabilities opportunities to participate in exciting activities such as sailing, fishing, golf trampolining and canoeing.

The service recognises the positive impact educational achievement can have on the life chances of young people in foster care and as a consequence gives it a high priority. There is an expectation that all young people will have access to either school or college placements that will meet their needs. School place stability is being championed and funding is available to help young people to stay at their existing schools even if they move to other areas of the city. Each young person has a personal education plan that identifies any specific needs and sets achievable educational goals. All plans are subject to regular review. Young children are provided with assistance with their literacy through individual support sessions from a dedicated teacher. Foster carers are pro-active in supporting young people with their education and regularly attend parents' evenings, school events and assist with homework. Carers are provided with training on how to support young people to achieve academically. Young people who have experienced educational disruption are provided with additional support which includes access to a range of computer based educational resources. The service has been successful in improving the educational outcomes of the majority of young people in their care, however, it is still experiencing difficulty in lowering exclusion rates among a small group of young people who present with challenging behaviour.

Exam results for 2010 showed an improvement on 2009 and looked after young people in Southampton achieved grades at Key Stage two and four that are significantly above the national average for both English and Maths. The service raises the educational horizons of many young people and an increasing number of young people are now continuing in education and training beyond school. Young people receive financial support and encouragement to maximise their potential. Members of the pathways team are helping an increasing number of young people access appropriate college and university courses.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The service aims to ensure that young people have, when appropriate, regular contact with their parents, relatives and friends. The frequency and nature of contact is made clear to all parties via a contract that is drawn up at the outset of each placement. Supervised contact takes place in a number of dedicated centres with trained staff. Although every effort is made to enable large sibling groups to meet together contact arrangements are developed on the basis of the best interest of each young person. Arrangements are clear, constructive and safeguard young people. Any restrictions regarding contact are made clear to all parties and plans are developed to ensure young people are not put at risk through meeting inappropriate adults. The views of young people, their social workers and birth parents are taken into consideration when reviewing contact arrangements. Contact visits are managed sensitively by foster carers and appropriate working relationships are established with birth parents. Foster carers and service staff are sensitive when explaining to young people why their wishes can not always be met.

The service successfully involves young people in making decisions about their futures and there is high participation in the reviewing process. A team of five full-time independent reviewing officers seek the views of young people prior to their reviews. The reviewing process works well and the service is effectively meeting its statutory obligations. Foster carers, social workers and supervising social workers regularly discuss young people's futures with them. There is an effective systems to obtain the views of young people with communication difficulties. Interpreters are used for young people for whom English is not their first language. The views of young people are obtained about their experiences in their placements prior to their foster carers annual household review. Any young person wishing to make a complaint can access advocacy support from No Limits, a local voluntary sector organisation contracted to provide a range of support services to young people. No complaints have been made by young people in recent times. Young people indicated they were regularly involved in making decisions within their foster families and contributed to decisions on leisure activities, choice of food and the destination of family holidays. Young people play a significant role in the development of the service and a Children and Care Council provides a forum through which young people can influence decision making within the local authority. The views and suggestions made by young people are taken seriously and responded to by senior officers and members. Young people contribute to the training of new carers.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is outstanding.

Arrangements for helping young people move on from their fostering placements have significantly improved since the last inspection. Preparing for independence starts with the development of pathway plans. Pathway plans provide an effective mechanism for young people to plan for their futures. The development of such plans help each young person consider their training, employment and accommodation options. Discussions about the future are initiated by members of the Pathways team in advance of each young person's sixteenth birthday. If it is thought appropriate, young people are provided with the option of moving on to independent or semi-independent living. However, an increasing number are opting to remain with their existing carers until 18 and beyond under supported living arrangements. Foster carers feel the introduction of such arrangements have been extremely positive and now allow each young person to move when they feel ready.

Young people are now better prepared for moving and are provided with opportunities to acquire a range of social and life skills by their foster carers and staff from the Youth Options and the Pathways teams. The service has been extremely successful in helping young people move on to education, training and employment. Young people engaged in further and higher education are supported financially until the completion of their courses. In an effort to experience first hand what independent living is like, the service is in the process of acquiring a number of training flats. It is envisaged that short stays will enable young people to build their confidence in approaching independent living.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

A Statement of Purpose details the service's aims and objectives. On entering the service young people are provided with their own, age-appropriate guide. Foster carers and service staff subscribe to an ethos that puts young people at the centre of all provision. Staff and foster carers demonstrate a genuine commitment to promoting positive outcomes for young people in care. All aspects of the service are appropriately monitored and reflective practice ensures policies, procedures and working practices are continuously improved.

The service is successful in recruiting foster carers from within Southampton and surrounding areas. The availability of local placements helps the service minimise disruption and provides young people a degree of continuity in their lives by being able to access existing educational placements and maintain existing social networks. The service ensures that inappropriate individuals, who may present a risk to young people, do not enter the service. The service sets high standards and there is an expectation that foster carers will be capable of providing high quality care to a diverse group of vulnerable young people. Social work staff clearly recognise the

demands that can be made on foster carers and ensure that only those with the necessary attributes are invited to proceed to training and approval at panel.

Once approved foster carers are allocated a social worker who provides regular support and oversees their development as effective carers. Foster carers said they felt valued and indicated they received excellent support. Support includes regular supervisory meetings, peer mentoring, respite care, social activities and extensive professional advice and guidance. Supervising social workers make both announced and unannounced visits. The service has an effective foster carers' payment system that deposits funds directly into foster carers accounts. Prompt payment and additional allowances contribute toward placement stability. There were no concerns raised by foster carers about financial support.

There is a strong management commitment to the continuous development of foster carers and they are expected to access the many regular training opportunities on offer, including the Children's Workforce Development Council's training programme. Foster carers feel that the service provides high quality training and contributes significantly to their understanding of the many issues associated with young people in care. There is a clear pathway for those wishing to develop their foster care careers. The service operates with an extremely motivated group of foster carers who display a real commitment to the young people of Southampton.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. Policies, procedures and working practices explicitly promote diversity and equality. Staff and foster carers are recruited from all sections of the local community regardless of gender, religion, ethnic origin, disability or sexual orientation. Foster carers and service staff challenge discriminatory behaviour when it is encountered. The service has established an inclusive culture that encourages all interested parties to get involved in the development of the service.

The service benefits from having an experienced and well-qualified management team. They have a good understanding of their statutory obligations and are committed to further improving the service for young people. Managers ensure that the service's comprehensive policies and procedures are translated into effective working practices. Managers closely monitor all aspects of the service and those spoken with were knowledgeable about foster carers and the young people in their care. Staff and foster carers feel the service is being efficiently managed and resources appropriately utilised.

Although the service has effective systems for allocating and managing placements, difficulties and challenges can be caused by external factors, over which they have little control. For example, the service can be asked at short notice to find placements for large sibling groups, unaccompanied young asylum seekers and parents and children. In recent times it has had to respond to an unprecedented demand for placements. If an appropriate placement cannot be identified within the service's existing pool, the young person will be matched with foster carers from an approved external agency. Such an approach avoids the risk of making an inappropriate match and the possible disruption of an already settled placement.

While such decisions have considerable financial implications for the council, they are clearly made in the best interests of young people. High levels of placement stability indicate that matching is appropriate. The service has been especially successful in recruiting family and friends as foster carers. Family and friends foster carers receive substantial support from a number of extremely experienced support workers.

The council's robust recruitment procedures ensure that all staff are appropriately vetted and suitable to work with young people. All staff are provided with a detailed job description. The service has developed a culture of training and professional development that expects individuals to continuously increase their knowledge and skills. While the training programme is comprehensive it is felt that staff dealing with unaccompanied young asylum seekers would benefit from a better understanding of the different ways young people are being trafficked into the country. Regular supervision provides opportunities for staff to engage in reflective practice. The service has been successful in utilising the skills of allied professionals from health and education into the development of a more holistic approach to meeting the often complex care needs of young people. Decisions regarding individual young people are now arrived at jointly and reflect the thinking of more than one professional group.

The service operates with an effective fostering panel that is appropriately constituted and exercises its functions in accordance with statutory guidance. In line with new national minimum standards there is now a central list of panel members. The panel has access to medical expertise and legal advice. The panel robustly fulfils its quality assurance function. There is a strong emphasis on safeguarding and ensuring positive outcomes for young people. The panel advisor provides feedback to the service manager every three months on the quality of assessments and presentations. A number of carers indicated that although they had been apprehensive about their appearance at panel, they had been put at ease and treated with respect throughout the process.

The service has procedures for both the recording and storing of records that ensure confidentiality. The computer based information system has already proved to be an effective case management tool. It is being continuously improved to ensure information is not being unnecessarily duplicated and can be updated by more key staff. The service operates from premises that meet the service's needs. Young people's records were found to contain recent and relevant information.

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):

- obtain references for all prospective employees from their last job relating to the care of children, (NMS 19.3)

