

Wigan Metropolitan Borough Council Fostering Service

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

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Inspector	Sarah Oldham
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Date of last inspection	26/10/2007
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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

Wigan family placement service provides foster care as part of a full range of accommodation for looked after children and young people. The service recruits, approves and supports a range of carers providing short- and medium- to long-term care for children of all ages. This includes babies, sibling groups and adolescents. They also have carers who can accommodate mothers and babies.

Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

Children and young people make excellent progress and enjoy successful outcomes in the care of Wigan fostering service. Good health is effectively promoted and the opportunity to achieve positive educational outcomes is supported by carers and the local authority. Children and young people say they feel safe and well cared for in their placements. Their views are actively sought and this enables them to make a difference in their day-to-day lives. It also enables them to be involved in the continuing development of the service.

Children and young people benefit from being supported by carers who are effectively assessed to ensure that they have the skills to provide supportive care. The fostering panel effectively scrutinises assessments and foster carer reviews and makes informed, balanced recommendations to the agency decision-maker.

Foster carers receive excellent levels of support and have access to a range of training to develop their skills and knowledge to continue to provide high standards of care for children and young people.

The service is committed to continue and develop positive outcomes for all young people. This is led by a strong corporate commitment, effective management of the service and the excellent skills and knowledge of the staff team. One shortfall has been identified in relation to delegated powers of authority to enable foster carers to make day-to-day decisions with regards the children and young people within their care.

Improvements since the last inspection

The four recommendations made at the last inspection on 26 October 2007 have all been satisfactorily addressed. The fostering panel membership is well subscribed and provides a range of panel members with diverse skills and backgrounds who effectively contribute to the panel meetings. The service continues to recruit and select carers with a range of life experiences, skills, knowledge and understanding of

the needs of children and young people. This enables effective matching of children and young people with appropriate foster placements to meet their individual needs.

Payment levels to carers are in line with other authorities within the area and a new payment structure is in place ensuring that all carers are paid in line with fostering network guidelines. Consultation with children and young people has been very successful. A group called 'Voices for Choices', comprising young people who receive services from the local authority, has been instrumental in reflecting the wishes and views of young people. It meets on a regular basis with senior managers and councillors. Young people have been proactive in presenting a training programme to new social work staff and developing the young people's charter.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

The service has exceptionally good systems in place to ensure that children and young people are supported to remain fit and healthy. Health care assessments clearly identify individual needs and how these are to be met. Foster carers effectively support children and young people with their health care needs. Foster carers benefit from a range of health care training, including first aid and medication training. This training is provided through the fostering team and the children-in-care nurse team. This enables foster carers to be equipped with knowledge and skills to be responsive to the health and dietary needs of the young people they care for. The nurse team have developed excellent links with a range of innovative health care schemes to ensure appropriate health care resources are accessible for all children and young people. For example, access to dental services through the D-card scheme, which enables children and young people to have an easy way to get an appointment on a priority basis with a National Health Service dentist.

Foster carers say that they feel exceptionally well supported and equipped to meet the health care needs of children and young people. One foster carer said 'the training and support provided has been comprehensive and has enabled us to continue to meet the complex needs of the young people we care for.'

Foster carers actively encourage children and young people to take part in an excellent and varied range of exercise, including football, rugby and swimming, to promote their health and continued development.

The majority of children and young people say that they receive care and support from their carers to meet their health care needs. Comments received include 'my carer always makes sure that I eat healthy meals.' Another said 'when I don't feel well my carer takes me to the doctor and looks after me to make sure that I get better.'

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

There are excellent procedures in place to promote the safety and well-being of children and young people. Children and young people feel safe and are safe. They are enabled to take appropriate risks to aid their ongoing development. They are happy within their placements and comments include 'I am really happy here' and 'my carers are awesome.' Children and young people benefit from positive, happy and secure placements. This impacts positively on their overall behaviour and promotes positive outcomes for them.

All foster carers have safe care policies in place that are specific for the children and young people in placement. These are reviewed on an annual basis or sooner if required. Social workers complete comprehensive risk assessments prior to placements and these are taken into account when the safe care policy is completed.

All foster carers and staff have access to all local child protection protocols and are trained in safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children and young people; this ensures they respond appropriately to any concerns about children and young people. Excellent working protocols with other agencies further underpin safeguarding procedures. This ensures that foster carers and the service work effectively with safeguarding agencies to protect children and young people.

Children and young people rarely go missing from their placements. The few individuals who do are protected by the robust joint protocols in place with the local police. Foster carers are fully conversant with the procedures to follow and implement these appropriately. Social workers visit young people upon their return, actively listen to their reasons for going missing and take appropriate action to prevent further incidences occurring. Children and young people confirm that they feel that they are listened to.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Overall, there are good opportunities for children and young people to enjoy and achieve and thereby realise their full potentials. This fostering service gives a high priority to meeting the educational needs of each child or young person in foster care. Clear and detailed systems are in place to track and monitor individual progress. Timely and appropriate additional support is provided when needed. Most young people have personal educational plans that outline their individual educational needs. The personal educational plan documentation has been updated following consultation with young people. The new documentation provides a clear and detailed education plan that young people contribute to and is relevant to their own educational needs. Young people say that this enables them to have a greater involvement with their ongoing education. Training for all children's social workers has been planned to ensure that there is a continuity of practice to further improve

educational outcomes for all young people. Children and young people say that they are supported with their education; one young person said 'I like my school and feel that I am doing better with my work. My carers help me if I am finding anything difficult.'

Children and young people benefit from a range of constructive leisure activities. These include swimming, football and other sports. They are also supported to join clubs and organisations within the community; for example, scouts and guides. This enables them to make friends and have a sense of belonging within the local community. Children and young people have excellent relationships with their carers. This enables them to thrive and flourish, gain confidence and assists them to achieve positive outcomes.

Most foster carers are aware of their delegated authority to make timely day-to-day decisions, including the agreement to attend school trips and outings. However, not all carers have this in place. This could mean delays in getting agreement to take part in activities and children and young people missing out. The fostering service has provided information regarding delegated authority and, where this is not in place, reviewing officers ensure that this is rectified.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

There are outstanding opportunities for children and young people to contribute to their day-to-day lives. The fostering service ensures that the wishes, views and feelings of the young people are taken into account in all aspects of their care planning. This ensures that they have influence in the decision-making process. Children and young people's individuality is actively promoted and respected by the fostering service and foster carers. This includes helping children and young people to have an understanding of their previous life experiences, to feel valued, have positive views of themselves and to be proud of their identity and heritage. Foster carer training and supervision enables them to feel confident in providing this support. Children and young people say that their carers listen to them and this makes them feel valued. Comments received from young people include 'my carers are awesome' and 'I really feel part of the family, it is great living here.'

Children and young people are encouraged and supported to share their views and opinions about the development of the fostering service. One way is through the children's participation group, 'Voices for Choices'. They have been involved in a range of participation activities, including contributing their views to the pledge for children in care, meeting with the head of service and lead officers group and contributing to the development of the new children's guide to fostering. This ensures that the local authority is inclusive and listening to the views of children and young people.

The fostering service provides information to birth parents to ensure that they are aware of how the care being provided is supporting their children's needs. One birth

parent said 'my child is doing very well and I can't fault the support that the carers have provided.' Contact arrangements are effectively supported in line with any legal directions. Foster carers are aware of their responsibilities in promoting positive contact and this is appreciated by birth parents and their families. The service has a dedicated contact team. This enables consistent support to be provided when there are high levels of contact required. The commitment to the promotion of contact ensures that young people have the opportunity to maintain relationships with people who are most significant in their lives.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

Foster carers provide support and guidance to young people to prepare them for leaving care and adulthood. This includes support with budgeting, opening bank accounts, applying for college or employment and daily life skills. Young people are supported to develop skills with cooking and having a healthy diet. Foster carers encourage and support young people to develop friendships. One young person said 'my friends come to see me and they all get on really well with my carers.'

The service also supports young people financially to move into their first home. For those young people not yet ready to live independently, the service provides additional support until they feel ready to move on.

Pathway planning for their future is in place for the majority of young people from Year 11 onwards. Any delay in this is clearly identified at statutory reviews and appropriate action taken to address this.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

The manager of the service is experienced, qualified and knowledgeable. This ensures that the operation of the service is managed competently. Supervising social workers are appropriately qualified and experienced and demonstrate a clear commitment to ensuring the children and young people are provided with outstanding levels of care and support. They provide excellent levels of support and supervision to foster carers. Carers said that the level of support, understanding and knowledge of the workers is outstanding.

Payment systems are in place to ensure that foster carers receive payments in a timely manner. Payment details are included in the foster carer information pack and reviewed on an annual basis.

The Statement of Purpose is reviewed on a regular basis. This ensures that it accurately reflects the aims and objectives of this service. The children's guide is also produced in different formats to ensure all young people are aware of the services

available to them.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. The fostering service has a range of policies and procedures in place that underpin this, as well as comprehensive training for staff and carers. The service recruits, assesses and provides comprehensive support to a diverse range of carers to meet the assessed needs of children and young people. There is an ongoing recruitment strategy in place to ensure that the service continues to recruit carers to meet future needs of children and young people.

Robust and effective matching procedures are followed. This ensures that children and young people are appropriately matched and the majority benefit from long-term stable placements.

An effective and competent fostering panel has the expertise to robustly scrutinise assessments and reviews. This means the panel makes well-balanced recommendations to the agency decision-maker. The fostering service has a central list of panel members. The diverse membership has a broad range of expertise and experience of social care services. All panel members have an annual appraisal system. This ensures that the panel remains effective and robust at all times.

Robust management and quality assurance systems ensure the delivery of an effective and efficient service. The fostering service is situated in appropriate facilities with secure storage facilities for all records. Records are audited on a regular basis to ensure that they are current and provide an accurate account. The fostering service provides assistance with the development of excellent life story work and ensures that foster carers are aware of the importance of maintaining memory boxes to enable children and young people to have comprehensive memories of experiences they had during their time with their foster carers.

There is a training and development plan in place for all foster carers, with an expectation that carers will attend core mandatory training. The fostering service has promoted the Children's Workforce Development Council standards for foster carers. The majority of carers have undertaken this training to provide them with a strong underpinning knowledge of the needs of children and young people. The fostering service requires all carers to undertake these and is supporting the remaining carers without this qualification to complete them. Carers report that the training programme is excellent and has enabled them to develop their skills and understanding of the children's needs. The impact of this is that they feel equipped to provide a holistic level of care and support to children and young people. Carers receive regular supervision that is structured and comprehensive. This enables carers to receive ongoing support to continue to meet the needs of children and young people placed with them.

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 the person with the authority to take a particular decision or give a particular consent must be clearly named on the placement plan and the delegation of authority should be regularly reviewed. (Guidance and Regulations Volume 4: Fostering Services, statutory guidance, paragraphs 3.14 & 3.15)