

Wolverhampton City Council Fostering Service

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

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Setting address	Department of Social Services, 66 Mount Pleasant, BILSTON, West Midlands, WV14 7PR
Telephone number	01902 553070
Email	Emma.Bennett@wolverhampton.gov.uk
Registered person	Wolverhampton City Council
Registered manager	
Responsible individual	Emma Bennett
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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

This local authority fostering service provides a range of foster care to looked after children and young people aged between birth and 17 years of age. The service includes temporary and long term foster care, shared care for children with disabilities, short-break care for non-disabled children, and friends and family (connected persons) placements. Some parts of the service are provided by independent agencies.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This full, announced inspection finds that the quality of service provided to carers and children and young people has been improved and is good in all areas. This is achieved despite severe challenges due to increasing numbers of children and young people requiring accommodation and pressures on budgets.

Highlights of practice are evident in the focus on meeting individual children and young people's needs, a range of monitoring systems that lead to improvements, independent reviews of foster carers, the high standard of presentation of households and the specialisation of staff within the team. There are also good partnerships with neighbouring authorities and independent agencies. Challenges include providing sufficient carers, especially for children and young people with complex needs and those who need shared care. There are also shortfalls in some aspects of support for both carers and staff.

Improvements since the last inspection

The previous inspection resulted in three recommendations which have all been addressed. In particular, substantial work has been undertaken to improve the family and friends service so the carers receive the support necessary to provide stable placements for children and young people. Carers also benefit from clear safe-caring guidelines and these are regularly reviewed. Additional information is now available so carers can contribute effectively to the arrangement and management of contact meetings.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Children and young people receive particularly good support for their health.

Individuals can attend appointments in their foster placements, if required, for example with the looked after children's nurse and dieticians. This helps to ensure a high level of engagement in health-related services. Excellent attention is paid to the mental and emotional health of foster children; this contributes to their welfare and future success. All children and young people are assessed regularly and services are provided promptly.

Children and young people feel their health is supported well. At meetings between foster carers and their social workers, regular attention is paid to progress in this area. The service ensures that foster carers receive additional training in any specialist areas of care, for example, to help children who have eating disorders.

The accommodation provided to children and young people is of a high standard and is routinely checked. Improvements have resulted in fewer children and young people are now sharing bedrooms. This means they have greater privacy and feel more valued, which, in turn, contributes to the success of the placements. Children and young people say that they are made to feel part of their foster families.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The overwhelming majority of children and young people report feeling safe, know how to complain and do not experience any bullying in their placements. The safety of those who go missing is monitored closely and incidents are minimized. The service is particularly good at learning from incidents, for example, complaints and allegations, and then making improvements to the service. Of particular note is the year-on-year improvement in placement stability. Substantial resources are committed to supporting placements so that children and young people have as much continuity as possible. One complaint led to significant improvements to the duty system; this has subsequently led to an improvement in the matching of children and young people to foster carers.

Children and young people benefit from close attention to any risks. Clear procedures mean that significant hazards are addressed but that reasonable social and recreational opportunities are allowed. High standards of training are in place to ensure that carers identify any new concerns as soon as possible, including to children and young people who have disabilities. There is also close collaboration with other agencies, for example schools and the police, regarding the protection of children and young people who go missing.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Educational outcomes for looked after children and young people are steadily rising, for example, in terms of examination results. Specialist staff ensure there are close links between schools and carers and that obstacles to effective learning are

removed. Carers themselves are fully committed to children and young people achieving and attaining in education. Learning is emphasised and encouraged for all age groups to the extent that a significant proportion of young adults are supported at university. As a corporate parent providing substantial local employment, the authority is also facilitating access to job interviews for young people in foster care.

As well as receiving external support to maintain placements, foster carers are also helped to use more effective parenting skills themselves. For example, they have direct access to psychological services which help sustain their relationships with children and young people. Focussed training programmes improve their parenting skills, for example regarding managing behaviour difficulties. This results in a large majority of children and young people feeling comfortable and cared for in their placements and as a result they are more able to benefit from their education.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

All those children and young people who responded to a pre-inspection survey said their views are always listened to by their carers. A particularly high level of consultation is undertaken by the organisation which confirms these findings. Children and young people are routinely consulted by independent adults before their own reviews and those of their foster carers. Children and young people willingly use the complaints service and know how to obtain advocates if needed. The views of all looked after children and young people are now systematically sought. This includes a strong effort to consult those with poor communication skills or who are reluctant to engage.

A vibrant Children in Care Council is in operation and is having a direct effect on council policies. Recently it has improved the policies regarding sleepovers and dress codes to make them more proportionate. The Council arranges a wide range of events during the school holidays and to celebrate achievements. These are supplemented by recreational and sporting activities for each child and young person. One young person has developed their interest in horses to the extent that it may now provide a career opportunity.

The individual identity of children and young people is clearly respected throughout the service at every stage and is reflected clearly in decision-making processes. The cultural and racial consistency of the service positively reflects the backgrounds of children and young people. Clear and timely placement planning occurs and long-term permanency is achieved as soon as possible. When children and young people have to be placed with external services, the authority is extremely successful in placing them nearby. These factors contribute significantly to helping children and young people remain connected to their backgrounds and feel valued. Any gaps in the service's ability to meet needs are identified and addressed, for example by the Placement Care Support Team or the Black Identity Group co-ordinator regarding suitable diets in trans-racial placements. Children and young people obtain positive self-esteem and a clear identity because of the excellent direct work they receive. A

similarly high standard of work is undertaken to support them with family contact arrangements and their feelings about their families. These measures contribute substantially to placement stability.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

The vast majority of children and young people say they receive good support to plan their futures. This is supported well by foster carers who receive a high level of relevant training. As a result, all care leavers are appropriately accommodated and almost all are in employment, education or training. Young people also receive good ongoing support after they leave foster care so their start in adulthood is as positive as possible.

As in other areas of care, the service is continuing to effectively improve the support it provides in line with local demands and government initiatives. Examples include improvements to staffing arrangements, the development of further supported lodgings and links with adult services so that the transitions for young people with disabilities are as smooth as possible.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. One foster carer said: 'The service is very clued-up about equality and diversity.' It is a strong thread running through the service that leads to close attention to individual needs and the promotion of social diversity. Training is ongoing to increase the number of foster carers who can use sign language with those children and young people who have hearing difficulties. Such outcomes are a result of clear planning and effective management.

There is particularly strong monitoring of the service with clear and prompt attention to any shortfalls. Monitoring includes reviews of files and checks of foster carer's medicals and is well supported by a rigorous panel. Managers ensure that processes occur in a timely way so that work is effective and individuals remain engaged. Recent improvements have occurred following a review of national minimum standards and regulations which involved all staff and carers.

There are satisfactory systems in place for the recruitment, training and assessment of new carers. It is recognised that there is a shortage of carers, particularly of those who can care for children and young people with special or complex needs, including those who require short breaks. However, the success of recruitment measures has been significantly reduced by factors outside the service's direct control. On the other hand, there are clear and effective processes to ensure that children and young people are placed in appropriate placements, that suitability assessments are thorough and that training is comprehensive.

The training provided to carers is of a particularly high standard and there is an excellent range of courses, both compulsory and optional. However, there is insufficient clarity about how the competencies of partners of main carers is maintained. Carers are productively involved in presenting training or contributing to it; this is particularly well received by new carers, providing them with valuable opportunities for professional development.

Carers are supported extremely well by their supervising social workers and also the foster care centre, operated by the local foster care association. The latter is staffed on a 24-hour basis and is a highlight of the service. It provides a well-regarded training venue, a crèche and advice and support, as well as other services of value to carers. Improvements have been made to the support of carers during their supervision meetings so they more accurately address how carers meets the specific needs of their foster children. This directly improves outcomes for children and young people. However, the rate of unannounced visits is lower than recommended.

Matching is as effective as possible because of a managerial decision to have dedicated officers for duty, family and friends carers and also the shared care service. It is also efficient because there are very few unoccupied placements. In addition, there is good and improved control of the total number of children any carer has at one time. Local authority social workers separate to the fostering team undertake the annual review of carers. This is an extremely thorough process that includes input from children and young people in placement as well as the sons and daughters of carers. These are important contributions towards placement stability and children and young people are not moved for financial reasons.

The recruitment and support of staff is good although there is a half time senior post that is filled with temporary staff. The overall continuity of staff has improved and most staff are in permanent posts, which is a benefit to staff and carers. Staff as well as carers benefit from excellent training programmes which address their individual personal development plans. Although the appraisal process is not used as often as recommended, this shortfall has a relatively low impact on staff training or outcomes for children and young people.

Family and friends carers receive good support. There have been significant improvements to their service, including additional staff, more timely assessments and clear policies and procedures. Training is provided that meets their specific needs and additional support is available from the Foster Care Centre. Specific support groups are currently under review as are those for mainstream foster carers. The changes have led to these carers being suitably integrated into the service and supported well.

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):

- continue to implement an effective strategy to ensure sufficient foster carers to be responsive to current and predicated future demands on the service. Planning for future demand covers the need for short breaks for disabled children (NMS 13.1)
- ensure foster carers maintain an ongoing training and development portfolio which demonstrates how they are meeting the skills required of them, with regard to each foster carer in every household (NMS 20.4)
- undertake at least one unannounced visit a year to each foster carer (NMS 21.8)
- ensure all staff have their performance individually and formally appraised at least annually and, where they are working with children, this appraisal takes into account any views of children the service is providing for. (NMS 24.6)