

Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council Fostering Agency

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

This fostering service is operated by Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council's Education and Children's Services Department. It provides foster care placements for children and young people who are looked after by the local authority. The service consists of three sections: fostering recruitment, fostering support, and family and friends fostering. At the time of inspection the service has approved 337 foster carers and provided 303 places for children and young people. Short break foster care is undertaken by an external independent fostering agency.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding: a service of exceptional quality that significantly exceeds minimum requirements

Good: a service of high quality that exceeds minimum requirements

Adequate: a service that only meets minimum requirements

Inadequate: a service that does not meet minimum requirements

Overall effectiveness

The overall effectiveness is judged to be **adequate**.

The last inspection in May 2010 found the service was inadequate. The fostering service has strategically implemented action to proactively address the shortfalls.

The fostering service provides adequate outcomes for children and young people and quality of care. Children and young people form positive relationships with foster carers and their fostering household. They are achieving appropriate outcomes in relation to their health and education. Children and young people's safety through the care of foster carers is actively supported. Where they have additional needs these are being met effectively. The strength of the fostering service lies in foster carers having access to consistency of supervising social workers and consistency of practice. This in turn helps children and young people to feel positive about the care that they get. Appropriate matching and adhering to safe caring policies are well embedded in practice. Placement stability is better than the national average for children and young people in placements beyond two years.

Leadership and management of the fostering service are adequate, which is underpinned by an open and transparent approach. The management team is focused on improving and developing the fostering provision. This is ongoing and work is progressing well through monitoring, reviewing and measuring quality. Much of the work is still at the early stages. Work is underway to evaluate children and

young people's progress through to measurable outcomes.

As a result of this visit, there are five recommendations. These relate to providing more visible and accessible advocacy services; ensuring the number of children's social workers are sufficient to meet the child's needs; for all staff to improve their understanding of the fostering service; to continue to implement the self-assessment action plan; and to improve record keeping.

Areas for improvement

Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further the registered person should take account of the following recommendation(s):

- ensure children know their rights to advocacy, how to access an advocate and how to contact the Children's Rights Director (NMS 1.5)
- ensure that there are a sufficient number of suitably qualified, competent and experienced children's social workers to facilitate a good system of communication between the fostering service social worker, foster carer and children (NMS 21.12)
- ensure all social workers and other specialists are appropriately trained to work with children, their families and foster carers, and have a good understanding of foster care and the policies and purpose of the fostering service (NMS 23.4)
- ensure the local authority monitors the self-assessment action plan in order to satisfy themselves that the service is effective and is achieving good outcomes for children. This specifically relates to foster carers assessments; panel; children and young people's progress and outcomes; ensuring the stability of the work force; and staff supervision (NMS 25.7)
- ensure the fostering service complies with its written policy that clarifies purpose, format and content of information to be kept on the fostering service's files, on the child's file and on case files relating to foster carers. This is with particular reference to the quality of reports. (NMS 26.1)

Outcomes for children and young people

Outcomes for children and young people are **adequate**.

Children and young people feel safe, secure and experience positive care. The majority of children and young people are in an appropriate placement and placement disruptions are few. There is a significant drive to keep sibling groups together, even by considering external placements or reviewing of foster carers' approval status. Consequently, for the large majority, the best option for each child is sufficiently considered.

There are aspects of health and education that indicate children and young people

are achieving appropriate outcomes. For example, attendance at school is consistent. One educational professional commented, 'Foster carers are good at getting children and young people to attend school.' Children and young people are generally helped to develop and achieve their educational potential. Annual health assessments are taking place in a timely manner which promotes healthy growth and development. This is resulting in children and young people's health outcomes being monitored to help prevent health inequalities.

Children and young people are encouraged to share their views in many ways. For example, through foster carers reviews, statutory reviews and when they move placements. There has been significant investment this year in gaining the voice of the child. This has included consultative survey days, working groups and investment in the Looked After Children board. As a result, this helps children and young people to talk to foster carers and helps them to understand and meet their diverse needs.

One young person commented, 'I like living here with my foster carers and they take good care of me.' Children and young people say they genuinely feel part of the family. They experience acceptance and feel part of the family. This is underpinned by a recent development through the newly reviewed and devised leaflets and booklets to children and young people about their foster placement. This inclusive practice gives them information which is welcoming and reassuring for the child while being cared for by foster families.

Children and young people are kept fit and healthy. Children and young people and foster carers are able to directly access a range of professionals in the primary health care trust, for example, a substance misuse advisor and a range of local agencies. Children and young people with more complex health needs have their needs met effectively. This is because foster carers are properly trained and supervised by medical professionals. As a result, this promotes children and young people's healthy development.

Children and young people's independence is supported and takes into account their age and ability. Throughout their placement they are encouraged to develop social skills and key practical skills. For example, older young people are encouraged to use public transport and develop skills to manage financial matters. This develops their confidence, self-esteem and helps them mature as young people.

The merger of the placement support team has given children and young people access to individuals as well as group work. They can specifically explore separation and loss, self-esteem and life story work. The youth club, residential activities and holiday events provide children and young people with opportunities to develop and build relationships as well explore emotions and feelings. As a result, the placement support team are imaginative and innovative and are valued by children, foster carers and supervising social workers.

Quality of service

The quality of the service is **adequate**.

The recruitment and retention of foster carers are adequate. The local authority has a clear strategy to recruit and increase the number and expertise of foster carers. This includes foster carers as concurrent adoptive parents, families for young siblings and those requiring a permanent home for older young people. Overall, the recruitment and retention of foster carers shows diversity in relation to ethnicity, age, gender, gender identity, ability, faith and religion.

The preparation and assessment of foster carers are adequate. The fostering service is in the early stages of implementing a new strategy related to the preparation and assessment of foster carers. Once embedded, the aim is to improve timeliness and transparency of the process, for example, in providing new staff, training for supervising social workers and panel members. This also includes introduction of a quality assurance process to help robustly track enquires, referrals, reports presented to panel and annual reviews completed within timescale. Because these are in their infancy the outcome and impact of these measures are not yet fully realised.

The fostering panels are functioning adequately. A number of recent changes to the chair and agency decision maker have created some unsettlement. However, panel members are clear this has improved over the last few months. The internal quality assurance function of the fostering service has not always been robust. For example, the quality of the assessment report varies. Training has been given to supervising social workers and panel members. This is to ensure good quality reports, assessments and review reports to panel are improved and maintained. The newly introduced panel quality mechanism aims to track and measure this carefully.

The quality of placement matching is strong. Foster carers clearly understand children and young people's needs when being placed with them. Where gaps exist in skills, knowledge and understanding these are met through training, support and supervision. As a result, this allows children and young people to establish positive relationships.

Training for foster carers is adequate. Training for foster carers is being developed and additional funding is being identified. Foster carers in particular praised the parenting programme for 5-12 year old children in placement. Foster carers equally value accessing the e-learning programme. Overall, secure progress is being made with achieving Children's Workforce Development Council training standards for foster carers.

The quality of reports, placement plans and minutes from reviews is adequate overall. Training is scheduled to support all workers to use the local authority electronic recording system more effectively. Currently, some reports are more detailed, informative and helpful. Others, however, with the impact of changes with the child's social worker or supervising social worker are not adequate. Monitoring systems are identifying gaps and addressing these shortfalls. However, despite these shortfalls, foster carers ensure that children and young people's identified needs are being met.

Communication between departments is adequate. There is definitely an improvement in practice but this sometimes stays in isolation and is not always shared. For example, this local authority has invested time in revising policies, procedures and guidance which are effectively shared in the foster carer team and with foster carers. This, together with a more consistent team of supervising social workers, is resulting in improved partnership work. However, children's social workers are not always as knowledgeable in relationship to the fostering provision. They are not consistently familiar with the fostering process, practice and protocol. High turnover in this team has resulted in children and young people experiencing transient relationships. Young people say, 'It's hard to tell your life story again to another social worker. Sometimes I have to tell it over and over.' Another example is when issues arise in young people's lives where a discussion with someone outside the foster family may be beneficial. They do not have the access to or relationship with their social worker, to be a sounding board.

Safeguarding children and young people

The service is **adequate** at keeping children and young people safe and feeling safe.

Children and young people feel safe and are safe. Supervising social workers and foster carers fulfil their role related to safeguarding children and young people. Their safety prior to and during placement is actively promoted. This is underpinned by effective monitoring and oversight by foster carers under the guidance of supervising social workers. For example, the safe caring policy is effectively implemented in practice in the fostering household. Unannounced visits are taking place. All this promotes children and young people's safety as remaining central to the fostering service.

Relationships within fostering households are positive. Foster carers are able to set appropriate and fair boundaries. Children and young people say they do not identify bullying as an issue. Foster carers are vigilant and act appropriately to concerns raised by children and young people. One team manager commented, 'Foster carers are good at dealing with issues as they arise. We know they communicate effectively with schools, supervising social workers and the child's social worker.'

The fostering service helps to prevent children and young people running away and becoming 'missing' from home. For a small number of young people there are numerous missing from home events, although, this is related to a very small cohort. Over the past year these incidences are reducing. The fostering service is working effectively with the police and within the multi-agency partnership working agreements. The local authority has further strengthened its risk assessments, missing person interviews and formal monitoring of missing from home events. This helps promote children and young people's safety.

Children and young people know how to complain if they are unhappy. However, the advocacy service is not visible to all children and young people. For example, there are issues such as a contact arrangement with family where having access to advocacy brings benefits and support to some children and young people.

Recruitment is sound and robust for those working in and for the fostering service. Good consideration is given to achieving a balanced workforce in the fostering service and with foster carers in terms of diversity. The fostering service has an effective whistle-blowing policy which is well communicated to staff and foster carers. This additionally safeguards children and young people from abuse.

The handling of allegations is appropriate. In all cases, the fostering service follows the local authority reporting procedures. This is further strengthened because the fostering service has direct access to the organisational lead who works as part of the safeguarding and partnership team. Careful scrutiny of individual cases is taking place with clear outcomes and conclusions. In the past year, five cases were referred to the Independent Safeguarding Authority. The fostering service is learning lessons from common themes, and improving practice, policies and procedures. As a consequence, there is greater transparency.

Leadership and management

The leadership and management of the local authority fostering agency are **adequate**.

Since the last inspection, a coordinated plan of action has been implemented to address the significant shortfalls and failings of the fostering provision. All the recommendations have been fully met. Steady progress has been achieved, including a significant amount of work on training, policies, procedures, guidance and processes. This has particularly impacted positively on safeguarding systems. Foster carers' working relationships with their supervising social workers are based on an inclusive partnership and professional work ethic.

Resources are allocated to prevent placement disruptions and promote placement stability. Effective partnership working is now more established. Partnership working with health, education, youth service and police is generally well coordinated.

The fostering service is adequately managed. One senior manager commented, 'Over the past year there has been a number of interim management arrangements within the service. However, the social work team and the strategic management team have remained stable and have been able to mitigate some negative effects of the change of managers during this time.' Staffing sufficiency is adequate. A running theme has been the turnover and sickness levels. This has historically affected consistency of working. The local authority continues to work towards stability in service provision.

The fostering service's self-assessment is accurate. There is a refreshingly honest and transparent approach, with an open style management team that is approachable. Managers understand their strengths and have clearly identified areas for improvement. Work is ongoing and embedding through the range of development and strategy documents, as well as in the self-assessment action plan. Exhaustive efforts are made to collect data-rich information, although this information does not

necessarily give clear evidence of children and young people's progress and outcomes. For this local authority the percentage of children placed in foster care is slightly above the comparable authorities.

Staff are adequately supported. Supervision and appraisals are mostly taking place. Senior managers are interrogating any gaps through the quality performance unit. Overall, supervising social workers feel well supported and valued by the leadership and management team. Staff are qualified and experienced. Newly appointed staff receive appropriate induction and mentoring. As a result, this supports positive and safe care for children and young people.

Foster carers benefit from the inclusive approach adopted in practice throughout the fostering service. They are valued and respected as key people to make a difference to the child's life. Supervising social workers are supportive.

The fostering service consults with children, young people, foster carers and staff. All have contributed in their own way to improving the fostering service. One professional commented, 'I have to say overall, it is improving picture compared to about 18 months ago.'

Complaints are dealt with professionally and sensitively. In the last 12 months the fostering service has investigated 14 complaints. Three compliments were received regarding fostering staff supporting foster carers.

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 to assess the effectiveness of the service and to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards.

The report details the main strengths, any areas for improvement, including any breaches of regulation, and any failure to meet national minimum standards. The judgements included in the report are made against the inspection framework and the evaluation schedule for local authority fostering agencies.