

Bournemouth Borough Council Fostering and Placements Team

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

The fostering service provides a key role in Bournemouth Borough Council's Children's Social Care provision. A range of foster placements are provided for children and young people including emergency, short-term, long-term and parent and child. Education, health and social work staff work alongside each other in the delivery of this service.

The fostering service has, in recent times, faced an unprecedented demand for placements. Currently 80% of the Borough's looked after children are placed with foster carers and 50% of these children are placed with in-house carers.

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 **good**.

Following the last inspection the service carried out a comprehensive review of its policies, procedures and working practices. As a consequence new monitoring and quality assurance systems have been introduced to ensure that all aspects of the service are operating effectively and all regulatory obligations are being met within agreed timescales. These changes have had an extremely positive impact on the way the service operates. Staff can now identify areas of potential slippage and address them.

The service has, since the last inspection, experienced a period of unprecedented demand for placements. Although the service has successfully recruited new carers, a number of existing carers have retired and as a result the number of available carers has not significantly increased. As a consequence the service still relies heavily on local fostering agencies to meet demand. While there is no evidence to indicate that a reliance on independent agencies disadvantages children and young people, a lack of suitable in-house carers has inhibited the service's development.

Outcomes for individual children and young people continue to improve. Greater

placement stability indicates that young people are receiving individualised care and support that meets their physical, social and emotional needs effectively. Participation levels in education and training are good and the majority of children and young people are making significant progress. Young people are being kept safe while living full and active lives. Children and young people were positive about their placements and indicated they had become part of their fostering families and were receiving good quality care from carers who have a genuine interest in their well-being and future development.

The service is well managed and benefits from having an extremely motivated staff team and pool of dedicated carers. The service is clearly striving to develop a service that exceeds national minimum standards and regulations.

Areas for improvement

Recommendations

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

- implement an effective strategy to ensure there are sufficient foster carers to be responsive to current and predicted future demands of the service. (NMS13.1)

Outcomes for children and young people

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

Carers and service staff have established an aspirational service and there is an expectation that children and young people entering foster care will be able to access a range of opportunities that will aid their growth and development. Children and young people are making progress in many areas of their lives such as education, behaviour and the acquisition of social and life-skills. Children and young people reported they are living full and active lives and participating in a wide range of educational, social and recreational activities within the local community. While such opportunities allow children and young people to increase their knowledge and skills, they also allow them to extend their social horizons and develop new social relationships. It is evident that such experiences contribute positively to each young person's self-confidence.

The increase in placement stability since the last inspection indicates that young people are being appropriately placed with carers who can meet their needs. Careful consideration is always given to the possible impact a new placement could have on existing residents. Placement disruptions have decreased and children young people now leave their placements as part of a planned move.

Children and young people indicated they feel safe within their placements and have developed trusting relationships with their carers that allow them to discuss personal issues and concerns. Children and young people contribute to the development of

safe care plans to keep them safe. Comments indicated they were welcomed into their new homes and were made to feel part of their foster families. Positive comments were also made about their accommodation and the environment in which they were living.

Children and young people are regularly consulted about the care they receive, individually through the reviewing process and collectively through bodies such as the children in care council, and the total and junior respect groups. Children and young people contribute to the development of the service by participating in the skills to foster programme for new carers and in helping in the recruitment of senior staff.

The health needs of each child and young person are identified on entering the service and arrangements are made to ensure they are appropriately addressed. Children and young people indicated they have adopted healthy lifestyles by eating wisely and taking regular exercise. All are registered with dentists and doctors and are subject to regular health checks. Specialist help is sought to address specific areas of concern such as mental health. Young people in their teens are helped to assume responsibility for monitoring their own health and are provided with advice and guidance on issues such as the use of alcohol and drugs and in ensuring their sexual health. It is evident that such advice is carefully considered and young people observed undertaking a discussion on smoking were all clear about its health risks; all were adamant they would not smoke.

Children and young people are supported in furthering their education and in maximising their educational potential. Children and young people have their learning needs suitably assessed and addressed through the development of personal educational plans that are subject to regular review. The virtual head and her team monitor the progress of each child and young person and liaise with teachers, foster care staff and carers to address any issues or problems that could be inhibiting a young person's progress. A letterbox project provides regular educational material for children and carers reported they often sat and read with them. Although children in pre-school and primary school placements show significant progress in their educational attainment in both numeracy and literacy, the progress of young people in secondary education is less impressive and GCSE results are improving at a slower rate. All educational achievements are recognised and celebrated.

Many children and young people enter foster care having experienced uncertainty and insecurity in their families. In many instances they have not benefitted from consistently applied behavioural boundaries. Many find it difficult to adhere to such boundaries. Children and young people are helped to adhere to a set of behavioural boundaries based on respect. Carers are clearly aware of the difficulties many children and young people experience in linking their behaviour with possible consequences and regularly discuss behavioural issues with them. Positive behaviour is reinforced with praise and rewards and sanctions are only used for serious misdemeanours. Although children and young people do not always comply with behavioural boundaries, they do respond positively to the service's approach and

incidents of anti-social and inappropriate behaviour decrease over time.

Children and young people are supported in maintaining contact with members of their families and are helped, in an age appropriate fashion, to understand the circumstances that brought them into care.

Quality of service

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

Although the service is continually recruiting new carers it has, in recent times, experienced difficulty in keeping up with the demand for places. The service would greatly benefit from having a larger pool of carers. The service strives to recruit carers from all sections of the community and is currently engaged in a recruitment drive to identify potential carers from within minority communities. This has included a number of new initiatives including the placing of advertisements in local foreign language publications. In-house provision is supplemented by placements sourced from a number of independent fostering agencies operating in the Bournemouth area.

The fostering service has developed robust policies, procedures and working practices to ensure that prospective carers are appropriately vetted and trained. All prospective carers have to successfully complete a skills to foster programme before attending the fostering panel for approval. There is a culture of training and development within the service and expectation that carers will, during their fostering careers, continually update their knowledge and skills. Foster carers and staff undertake joint training. The overwhelming majority of carers have successfully completed CWDC training and a number have continued on to complete training at NVQ level 3. Once approved the further knowledge and skills of carers are developed through participation in training which includes inputs by a range of allied professionals. Carers confirmed that the service provides good quality training that is both stimulating and relevant. A number talked enthusiastically about recent training on attachment and felt it provided a good insight into the difficulties many young people in care experience in both forming and sustaining relationships. Although participation levels in training events are good a number of carers felt that evening sessions would attract a large number of carers who have commitments during the day.

The service is extremely 'child focused' and each young person is treated as a unique individual with their own specific care needs. Placement decisions are made on a 'best fit' basis and the service strives to match young people with foster carers who can appropriately meet their assessed physical, social, emotional and cultural needs. While the majority of foster carers are well equipped to meet the care needs of the young people placed with them there are occasions when additional training is required to address specific needs associated with an individual's health or behaviour. Potential placements are, when appropriate, sought within their existing communities and established social networks. The service is successful in identifying placements amongst family and friends. Such carers are assessed sensitively and

receive suitable induction, support and training. Every effort is made to minimise disruption in the lives of children and young people and they are supported in maintaining their existing educational placements.

Carers felt that an improvement in the way young people's needs are assessed and better communication between staff and carers has contributed significantly to more effective matching. Matching forms now provide carers with detailed information on the specific care needs of each child and young person and make clear how they should be met. These forms, coupled with individual placement contracts, provide an effective mechanism for sharing information and clarifying expectations.

All placement plans are subject to regular review and are updated appropriately in response to changing circumstances and significant events. Child-friendly carer profiles, that include photographs and a brief description of their family, ensure young people do not enter placements without any prior knowledge of the families they are going to live with.

Carers spoken with talked in positive terms about the support they receive and said they enjoyed meeting up with staff and other carers at the regular forums. All felt their role within the service was recognised and that their views and opinions about the progress of the children and young people in their care are valued. They clearly share responsibility with other key professionals in the young people's lives. Many carers are recognised formally in an annual awards ceremony, when the vital part they play in achieving positive outcomes for children and young people are celebrated. All confirmed they received monthly home visits from their supervising social workers and appreciated the opportunities such visits offered to reflect on their practice. Carers confirmed that staff are extremely quick to intervene and provide additional support if they are experiencing difficulties. Out of office hours support was deemed to be appropriate. Other support includes an activities based group which offers the birth children of carers opportunities to meet other children and young people in a similar position. While acknowledging issues relating to respite, prompt payments and delegated authority are still being discussed there was a general consensus amongst carers that they are part of a developing service that has already made significant improvements since the last inspection.

The service benefits from the expert scrutiny of an appropriately constituted fostering panel. Decisions are made on good quality and rigorous assessments. Panel members provide expertise from within childcare and related fields including education and health. The central list provides enough members to ensure panels can meet regularly and remain quorate. The panel, advisors and decision maker provide an effective quality assurance function that ensures that young people are only cared for by appropriately trained and vetted foster carers. Panel members provide advice to supervising social workers on the quality of their assessments and review reports. This feedback helps drive up the quality of both assessments and the on-going support of carers.

Safeguarding children and young people

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

The primary aim of the service is to keep children and young people safe. Safeguarding underpins all policies, procedures and working practices. Risk assessments are extensively used to identify areas of potential concern. For example, aware of the vulnerabilities of the children and young people in their care robust systems have been developed to ensure they are protected from contact with inappropriate adults. Recruitment processes for both staff and carers are rigorous and include employment and Criminal Record Bureau checks.

Carers spoke positively about the safeguarding training they received and felt it provided a good insight into the impact abuse can have on the development of children and young people and how it can manifest itself in behaviours such as bullying and self-harm. All said they were made aware of the need to ensure all family members develop good safe caring practices.

Although the service operates within a 'safe caring' framework, it is not risk averse. There is an expectation that children and young people will live full and active lives by participating in social and recreational activities both within the home and in the local community. Children and young people reported that they feel safe in their placements. None reported being bullied and all indicated they had an adult to whom they could report any worries or concerns. Questionnaire responses indicated they are aware of how to make a complaint and how to access independent advocacy services.

Carers are successful in breaking established patterns of anti-social and destructive behaviours. For example, it is now extremely rare for a young person to go missing from their placement. Such developments contribute significantly to their safety. Carers work alongside young people and help them develop effective strategies and practices to keep themselves safe.

There is an expectation that all carers will provide nurturing, stable and safe environments. The performance of each carer is subject to regular review and the findings are shared with the panel. Each carer's home is subject to an annual household review to ensure it meets accepted standards. Supervising social workers meet with their carers in their homes on a monthly basis. Such visits provide an opportunity for carers to discuss the progress each child and young person is making and to raise any safeguarding issues or concerns. At least one annual unannounced visit is also undertaken. The views of children and young people are regularly sought by their social workers about all aspects of their lives within their placements. There are extremely good lines of communication between supervising and children's social workers and any concerns raised are normally dealt with immediately.

Leadership and management

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

The majority of recommendations from the last inspection arose as a consequence of

ineffective monitoring. This resulted in, amongst other things, regulatory tasks not being completed within accepted timescales. The service acknowledged the identified shortcomings and initiated a review of policies, procedures and working practices. As a result of the review a number of rigorous monitoring and quality assurance systems have been introduced. Monitoring systems now provide staff with up to date information that helps them identify any shortfalls which need addressing. For example, a tracking system has been developed to ensure all carers receive their monthly supervision on time. These systems have had positive impact on the efficiency and effectiveness of the service. Although different systems are used to monitor different aspects of the service, staff are clearly aware that their function is to contribute to better outcomes for children and young people. The focus on children and young people remains paramount and weekly monitoring meetings track the progress of each young person including those placed in independent agencies.

There is a clear commitment on the part of staff and carers to continue to develop the service. Service staff now consult widely on existing provision and future developments. Staff glean information from a range of sources including surveys and focus groups. One important contribution is supplied by young people who carry out an annual audit amongst looked after children. Findings arising from the audit have informed policy development. For example, a recent audit identified that not all young people possessed their own luggage. In response managers ensured that all children currently placed had their own suitcase and all new children placed were provided with a new holdall. Carers were expected to provide a suitcase at the earliest opportunity. Focus groups are now regularly formed to consider developments relating to specific aspects of the service. For example, a recent group met to discuss carer profiles. Their recommendations resulted in the creation of a standard template that allows carers to create a more 'child friendly' overview of their home and family circumstances. Carers confirmed they are regularly consulted and feel their views contribute to planning for individual young people and in service development. Carers are encouraged to raise concerns and are responded to appropriately. Outcomes from investigated complaints contribute to the service's robust approach to improvement. It is evident that greater monitoring and wider consultation with interested parties has led to an increase in both the quantity and quality of information available for managers. The availability of such evidence is contributing to more informed decision making.

Managers are clearly aware of the need for the service to remain responsive to changing needs within the local community. Demographic trends are carefully followed and regular consultations are held with fostering managers from similar local authorities. For example, staff have noted an increase in demand for parent and child placements. Staff are investigating the possibility of developing a more integrated multi-disciplinary service that would better meet care and health needs. Staff have already consulted with allied health professionals and visited a number of specialist projects in order to identify best practice and there are currently 2 sets of carers who are about to be presented to fostering panel for approval.

The service benefits from having a highly motivated staff team who are clearly focused on improving outcomes for children and young people in foster care. There

is a culture of training and professional development within the team and staff keep abreast of developments within the child care field by regularly access training opportunities and consulting current research. Staff confirmed managers are always accessible and they receive good quality and regular supervision. All felt the team manager had made a significant contribution to recent improvements and felt her 'child focused' approach had, as one member of staff commented, 'put the service back on the right track.'

There was a general consensus amongst staff that the service is effectively managed. Staff were satisfied that placement decisions are always based on the needs of children and young people rather than finance. The authority's commissioning service was universally appreciated by staff who felt that it was an extremely efficient way of both accessing and utilising resources. Staff felt the authority's commitment to seeking out multi-agency responses to addressing need was having a positive impact on outcomes for children and young people. Staff confirmed that they had regular liaison with their colleagues in education and health.

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.