

Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council Fostering Agency

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

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Inspector	Suzanne Young / Dawn Bennett
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Service information

Brief description of the service

This fostering service is operated by Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council. It provides foster care placements for children and young people who are looked after by the local authority. The fostering service assesses, approves and provides on-going support to foster carers, family-and-friends carers and a small number of multi-dimensional treatment foster carers. At the time of inspection the service has 256 foster carers approved and has 565 children and young people placed with foster 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 **adequate**.

The fostering service provides an adequate quality of care for children and young people. The educational achievement of children and young people, however, is a clear strength of the authority. Placement disruptions are relatively low and the children and young people are in appropriate placements.

Children and young people feel safe and most form positive relationships with foster carers. They are consulted about the plans for their future and their views are sought about the development of the service.

The fostering panel is robust. This has led to an improvement in the quality of foster carer assessments which are child focused. Processes have recently been strengthened to ensure safeguarding systems are more robust and are effectively implemented in practice. This has led to improvements in the reviewing process for foster carers and for children and young people.

Leadership and management of the fostering service are adequate. The management team is focused on improving and developing the fostering provision. They understand the strengths and weaknesses of the service and have a clear awareness of the direction of travel required to further improve the service. Work is on-going and embedding through the monitoring and reviewing of the service. Staff are

appropriately qualified and the experience and the stability of the fostering team is a strength of the service. Foster carers are generally satisfied with the fostering service, although staff sickness has led to difficulties in completing some fostering tasks. As a result some foster carers have been unhappy with the service they have received. Staff sickness within the authority has also meant that it is only recently that all looked after children and young people have been allocated a social worker.

As a result of this visit, there are five recommendations. These relate to the provision of training to foster carers and members of the fostering household, recruitment records and the children's guides.

Areas for improvement

Recommendations

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

- provide foster parents with such training, advice, information and support as appears necessary in the interest of children placed with them. This includes the completion of the children's workforce development council training standards for foster carers (Regulation 17(1))
- ensure the children's guides include the address, email address and telephone number of the Chief Inspector (Regulation 3 (c))
- ensure the children's guide includes information informing how children and young people can contact the Children's Rights Director (NMS 16.4)
- ensure all those working for the fostering service and the central list have a record of interview, employment history, qualifications and telephone checks conducted on references (NMS 19.1)
- ensure appropriate training on safer caring is provided for all members of the fostering households. (NMS 29.9)

Outcomes for children and young people

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

Children and young people receive care that is positive and generally meets all their needs. Placement disruptions are relatively low and children and young people are in appropriate placements. The authority has a high number of large sibling groups requiring foster care and attempts are made to place children and young people with their siblings whenever possible. Children and young people's individual needs arising from their ethnicity and faith are supported when they live in foster families that are not an ethnic match.

Children and young people are supported to share and express their views regarding the day-to-day decisions involving them and in decisions that influence their lives

through foster carer and statutory looked after reviews. Independent reviewing officers have recently started to visit each child and young person at home to gain their views prior to their statutory review. Young people are also encouraged to contribute to the running of the fostering service through the children in care council which enables young people to have a voice about the services they receive. They also are able to contribute to shaping policies, such as, pocket money allowance, internet safety and developing feedback to foster carer's reviews.

Children and young people participate in a singing group and in a media production drama group. The latter has produced films and drama presentations to help educate others about the experiences of children and young people in care. These help children and young people to develop in confidence and promotes a positive self-view.

Children and young people are generally happy in their foster placements. One young person commented, 'they don't treat me like I'm in foster care; they treat me like family.' Positive identity and individualised care is promoted through the development of the authority's small but effective multi-dimensional treatment foster care programme. Last year the authority also ratified and embedded the 'Pledge for Children in Care' which makes clear the intent of the council as corporate parents.

Children and young people are supported to keep healthy and are encouraged, where appropriate, to take responsibility for their own health. The success of this, however, has been variable. For instance, although the reduction of teenage pregnancies within the area has been on a downward trend for the last ten years, this trend has not occurred for looked after children and care leavers. The authority has put measures in place offering support and training to social workers, foster carers and young people to help prevent unplanned pregnancies. The authority has also developed a fast track referral system of looked after children and young people to the children and adolescent mental health service.

The educational achievement of children and young people is a clear strength of the authority. The virtual school is well established and effective and has substantially improved the attainment for looked after children. One-to-one tuition is available to all looked after children and young people and termly personal education plans are developed and discussed. This ensures all children and young people receive the support they require and staff have a good understanding of their educational needs. Over the last three years outcomes at key stages one and two exceed the standards of both national and similar authorities. The attainment levels for young people at both key stages three and four have also significantly improved over the last two years.

All young people aged 16 to 18 years access further education, training or apprenticeships. Pathway plans are completed and the authority has a leaving care team who are beginning to work with young people from the age of 14 plus rather than 16 plus. Access to services for young people to support them in independence, however, is variable; young people do not have sufficient opportunities to acquire the practical and life skills needed to successfully attain independence.

Quality of service

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

The recruitment and retention of foster carers are adequate. The authority is aware of where to target the recruitment of foster carers and is committed to increasing the numbers of carers. Foster placements among some minority ethnic communities are also limited. The authority makes significant use of independent fostering agency placements when a suitable placement and match cannot be made in-house. Currently just under 50 % of placement needs are met in the private sector, primarily within the local region. There are also a high number of family and friends carers who are approved with the local authority. This enables children and young people to benefit from placements with connected persons and commissioned agency foster carers where this is a better match for their needs.

The authority has a placements and commissioning team who handle all referrals requiring placements. The team performs a quality assurance role with regard to placements with independent fostering agencies. They work alongside the fostering service and childcare social workers in co-ordinating and monitoring the arrangements to determine whether the placements continue to meet children and young people's needs. Children and young people are generally matched appropriately to carers' skills, although, emergency placements limit the choice of foster carers who are available. Children and young people say they are given information about prospective foster carers, although they would like to have more choice in prospective placements. Foster carers usually receive adequate information to allow them to care for children and young people placed with them. Those placements which are planned enjoy relatively good stability.

The assessments of foster carers focus on their ability to meet the needs of children and young people. The authority commissions independent assessors who help with the assessment of foster carers. The robustness of the fostering panel has been strengthened and now provides a quality assurance function which has led to an improvement in the quality of foster carer assessments. Recommendations are made appropriately based on relevant information.

Training for foster carers is adequate. Management have highlighted that training for foster carers is a priority area which they plan to address. They have recently introduced a behaviour training programme which is in the process of being rolled out to all foster carers. Training in certain areas, however, such as diversity and independence are not readily available to foster carers. The completion of children's workforce development council training standards for foster carers (CWDC) is also of concern. Very few foster carers have completed the CWDC within the required timescales. To improve an informal buddy scheme has been developed where experienced carers are available to provide support and encouragement to other carers, and to help them complete the CWDC training standards.

Foster carers are receiving adequate support and supervision. The experiences of

individual foster carers are variable. Staffing shortages resulting from sickness have led to difficulties in some supervising social work tasks being completed, which has affected the frequency of supervision sessions and visits.

Safeguarding children and young people

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

Children and young people are supported to feel safe by their foster carers and relationships within fostering households are on the whole positive. Foster carers are able to set appropriate and fair boundaries. Children and young people do not identify bullying as a concern. They confirm they know how to make representations or complaints and are given help and support to do so.

The authority has systems which help ensure that children and young people are kept safe. For example, the safe caring policy is effectively implemented in practice in the fostering household and unannounced visits are taking place. Processes have recently been strengthened to ensure safeguarding systems are more robust. For example, the foster carers' review process has recently been revised to ensure health and safety checks, foster carers' vehicle checks and risk assessments are conducted and any shortfalls rectified. New processes have also been introduced looked after children reviews which give clear indicators when there are any concerns.

All foster carers including family and friends' carers are expected to attend mandatory training and refresher training on child protection and safer caring. This training, however, is not available for all members of the foster household to ensure all understand how safer caring principles should be applied in a way which meets the needs of individual children.

The authority has low instances of children and young people going missing. Where this has occurred the majority were missing for short periods of time. The fostering service is working effectively with the police and within the multi-agency partnership working agreements. Allegations are handled appropriately because the fostering service follows the local authority reporting procedures.

An established staff recruitment and vetting procedure is followed. The majority of recruitment is managed by the authority's human resources department. Panel members' recruitment and independent assessors' checks are coordinated by the fostering service manager. The appropriate CRB and employment checks, including references are taking place. However, records of interviews, employment histories and qualifications are not always being recorded and kept on the personal files of panel members and independent social workers. Similarly, telephone reference checks are taking place but details of these are not being recorded on their personal files.

Leadership and management

The leadership and management of the local authority fostering agency are

adequate.

A coordinated plan of action has been implemented to address the shortfalls of the fostering provision raised at the last inspection. All the recommendations have been fully met. Management have a clear awareness of the direction of travel required to further improve the service. Work is on-going and embedding through the range of development and strategy documents which underpin monitoring and review the service. Systems have been developed which are now beginning to give base lines to evidence quality care and outcomes for children and inform the performance and delivery of the service. The fostering service has also established effective partnership working with health, education, the youth service and the police. Complaints are dealt with professionally and sensitively. In the last 12 months the fostering service has investigated six complaints.

The percentage of children looked after who are placed in foster care is slightly higher than comparator authorities. The authority also has a relatively high number of family and friend carers who are supported by the fostering service. Alongside the mainstream foster carers the authority has developed a multi-dimensional treatment foster care programme available for a small cohort of children and young people. This is delivering some good outcomes.

The service has a foster carer handbook, a Statement of Purpose and two children's guides which are clear and accessible to all ages. This ensures everyone is clear about the aims and objectives of the service. The children's guides however do not include the correct telephone number for Ofsted or the contact details of the Children's Rights Director. This could prevent a child or young person being able to contact inspectors if they wish to make a concern.

The fostering service is adequately managed and resourced. Since the last inspection the service has appointed a new manager. Staff are appropriately qualified and the experience and stability of the fostering team is a strength of the service. Staff say they feel well supported by the fostering manager and supervision and appraisals are taking place regularly. Newly appointed staff are also well supported by management and colleagues. This helps support positive and safe care for children and young people.

Overall, foster carers are generally satisfied with the fostering service. However, responses have been variable. One foster carer commented, 'we as a family have been greatly supported by our supervising social worker... we are treated as part of the team'. Others feel they have not received good support and do not always feel as valued by the authority. Similarly not all looked after children living with foster carers have in the past had an allocated social worker. This, however, is an improving picture and management have recently ensured that all looked after children and young people now have been allocated a social worker.

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.