

Swindon Borough Council Fostering Service

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

Unique reference number	SC048053
Inspection date	12/11/2012
Inspector	Peter Harrell / Clare Davies
Type of inspection	Full

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Date of last inspection	20/08/2008

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Swindon Borough Council's Fostering Service is part of the borough's Family Placement Service. It is a unitary local authority service based in an urban area, covering a range of fostering functions. The service currently supports 252 approved foster carers in 150 households offering up to 260 foster placements. The service also offers up to 42 'Home and Away' short-break placements for children with disabilities.

The service carries out several areas of the fostering task, recruitment, assessment, training and support of the borough's foster carers. Foster carers cover a range of functions. These include: long term; short term; respite; supported lodgings; short breaks for children with disabilities; and friends and family kinship care. The Family Placement Team has an office in the Park North area of Swindon.

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**.

The large majority of children and young people, who are looked after by this local authority, live with foster carers and benefit from stable placements. This local authority fostering service provides a good level of support for children and young people, who report that they feel safe and are looked after well, in accordance with their care plans. Foster carers receive regular training and supervision. Staff recruitment and vetting is well organised. The service is staffed by experienced and knowledgeable social workers. Foster carers are supervised and well trained to enable them to care for children and young people to a high standard. There is a strong culture of community involvement, participation and consultation in this service, combined with a strong emphasis on children and young people's well-being. This helps children and young people to make good progress and achieve good outcomes.

Safeguarding procedures and service development plans are in place and are regularly updated. The leadership and management team is a key strength of the

service with a positive and proactive approach toward consultation with young people. The fostering service welcomes and learns from regular external and internal evaluations of the service. A stable staff and management team are very committed and strongly motivated to improving the lives of looked after children.

Two recommendations are made as a result of this inspection regarding the inclusion of the reasons for recommending foster carers in panel minutes and making sure that telephone verification checks are carried out as part of vetting new staff. Managers of the service are aware of these shortfalls, which have not significantly impacted on outcomes for young people.

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 that the written minutes of panel meetings clearly cover the key issues and views expressed by panel members and record the reasons for its recommendation (NMS 14.7)
- make sure when references are checked to assess suitability of new staff, telephone enquiries are made to each referee to verify written references. (NMS 19.1)

Outcomes for children and young people

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

The vast majority of children and young people, who are looked after by the borough council, live with foster carers. All children and young people attend educational establishments and attendance is high. Young people make good progress in education, from their starting points, with active encouragement from their foster carers. They gain self-confidence and learn new social skills.

Children and young people are generally healthy; they are actively encouraged to pursue healthy lifestyles. Young people are supported to access therapeutic resources. There is an outreach service for children and young people if required, which is readily accessible, to help improve children and young people's emotional well-being.

Socially and emotionally, children and young people develop well. They benefit from stable foster placements which meet their varied needs. Foster carers receive a consistent level of support from supervising social workers, helping them to meet young people's needs. Consequently, young people are happy living in their foster homes. There is a low rate of unplanned endings to placements. Children and young people enjoy good relationships with their foster carers. Young people gain self

confidence in an environment where there is a strong culture of consultation. Young people say, 'When we ask questions about being in care, we know the answers, because we are the children who are in care.'

Young people benefit from worthwhile relationships with birth families and friends. Children and young people are involved in a range of activities in the wider community. The fostering service has active and well-attended Children in Care Council, facilitated by an active children's rights service. This group raises issues which affect looked after children and young people with the local authority,. Members of this group say that they feel valued and listened to by the service and this in turn helps them to develop increased self-confidence and a positive self-image.

The service has developed a 'staying put' policy. This has meant that several young people over the age of 18 remain with their foster carers and benefit from emotional stability, together with opportunities to acquire independent living skills. This helps them move to independence at their own pace, while they are supported to make the transition to adulthood in a more gradual way.

Quality of service

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

The service recruits foster carers to meet the diverse and complex range of needs of looked after children. Children and young people benefit from being looked after by foster carers who are carefully assessed in a child-centred manner, frequently supervised, and well trained. As a result, they are equipped to provide a very high level of care.

A wide cross-section of carers are recruited from the local community and surrounding area. Many applicants have child-care skills which they can transfer to the fostering task. Carers come from a wide range of backgrounds and life experiences.

The assessment of prospective foster carers is extensive and thorough. Preparation and post-approval training is of a high standard, varied in its subject areas and well attended. Young people in foster care also contribute to the initial training provided, ensuring that the impact of young people's views are considered at an early stage in the preparation process.

Carers commented that: 'There's lots of training and our own children get support.' Analytical assessments of carers are completed within the recommended timescales; this minimises delays, making sure that there are as many well-prepared carers as possible available to meet children's diverse needs. A large majority of approved foster carers have completed the Childcare Workforce Development Council (CWDC) training standards in foster care to further enhance their knowledge and skills.

Foster carers say that they have access to a range of health and education services

which help to meet looked after children's physical and psychological needs. As a result of a very active looked after children's education service, all children and young people are in education or training.

A wide range of carers support meetings are in place, together with regular supervision visits of a high standard. Carers are provided with free membership of the Fostering Network, an organisation which provides personal advice and guidance about fostering. Foster carers report that they are very satisfied with the level of support and guidance that they receive from the fostering service, which is described by carers as 'like having a friend on tap', 'a complete wrap-around service' and 'I am listened to, my views are valued'. The service recruits carers from several minority ethnic communities. This ensures that children will be placed in homes, wherever possible, which reflect their birth culture and identity.

The fostering panel comprises a very experienced chairperson, who has an extensive background and relevant knowledge of safeguarding and child protection. The central list of panel members provides a balance of expertise and experience, constituted in accordance with regulations. The panel carries out its quality assurance function well, which has led to improvements in assessments and carers' annual reviews.

Decisions made by the panel follow well-established procedures and policies. Members of the fostering panel are well trained and regularly supervised. Minutes of panel meetings record in clear detail the discussions raised by panel members and show that extensive consideration is given to approvals of carers. The panel chair describes the minutes as 'like holding a mirror up to the meeting'. However, the reasons for recommending carers are not specifically recorded in the panel minutes. Recommendations made to the agency decision maker are responded to in a prompt manner, which reduces the time that children have to wait for appropriate placements.

There is an out-of-hours support service run by fostering social workers; carers say this provides them with a high level of support. There is additional support from the family placement team, when children have contact with their birth families. The maintenance of these important links further enhances the help provided to carers and children.

Safeguarding children and young people

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

Children and young people are safe and say they feel safe. They know how to complain and who to talk to, in order to raise any concerns regarding their care. There are several systems in place to check the care of children and young people; unannounced visits to foster carers' homes take place at least once a year and children and young people are seen alone by placing social workers.

Young people are confident that they can report matters which worry them to either

their carers or to the active advocacy service. Any complaints made are investigated and responded to promptly, within clear timescales. This ensures that concerns are taken seriously and responded to without delay. The service takes swift action to safeguard young people from bullying should this occur. Children and young people are also supplied with information to advise them how to get help in this matter.

A detailed programme of preparation and post approval training for foster carers is in place, with a strong focus on safe caring and safeguarding. This training makes sure that carers gain a good understanding of current child protection practice and the impact of neglect and abuse on a child's behaviour and development. There is a clear process in place in order to deal with any allegations that children may raise. This ensures that any allegations will be handled in a manner which is in the best interests of looked after children and foster carers.

Staff recruitment and vetting is well organised and staff are aware of their responsibilities to prioritise the safety of looked after children in foster placements. The local authority fostering service has established policies and procedures to employ staff, which adheres to practice guidelines regarding safer recruitment. However, not all of these practices are implemented. For example, verification of references are undertaken for foster carers, but this does not routinely happen for staff recruitment. This shortfall may not directly impact on the daily foster care provided to young people, although it can potentially compromise young people's safety.

Foster carers are aware of their responsibilities to report when children go missing. There is a clear policy in place to describe necessary actions. The manager of the service has established a joint-working protocol with the police to identify necessary action to follow should a child go missing. There are regular meetings with senior police and council officials, so that the service can minimise the recurrence of incidents when young people go absent from their carers.

Leadership and management

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

A significant strength of the fostering service is its leadership and management. The quality of monitoring the service is very rigorous; there is a proactive commitment to improving standards. Close scrutiny regarding the delivery and performance is welcomed and responded to by a stable and cohesive management team. The service is regularly audited and monitored both internally and externally from numerous sources, including a recent Department of Education 'deep dive' exercise. This results in a series of actions which have resulted in a sustained improvement in the delivery of the service. Young people are regularly consulted as part of frequent evaluations.

Ambitious action plans have resulted from a series of audits and evaluation exercises, which reveal areas where the fostering service needs to develop. The reports are

always acted upon. At the same time, management is proactively responding to the recent changes and developments in foster care. Children and young people are actively encouraged to get involved in the service development and have their views heard. An example of this took place when the Children in Care Council made a presentation to the leader and deputy of the council. A 'what we need and what we want' task was given to the corporate parenting group, to demonstrate that the leaving care grant was insufficient and this directly resulted in a significant increase to this allowance.

The Statement of Purpose is written clearly, frequently reviewed and clearly details the aims and objectives of the service. A children's guide is accessible and inclusive for children of differing abilities.

Social work and administrative staff are well supported, regularly supervised and trained. There is an extensive induction process for new staff. This helps them to possess necessary skills in order to support and assess foster families and to make sure that the needs of looked after children and young people are effectively considered. Appraisals of social workers take place annually. Actively involved managers of the service are professionally qualified and registered social work practitioners with several years' experience in fostering who hold the appropriate qualifications in management.

High levels of support from the manager and the responsible individual ensure that children receive a good quality of care from well-prepared foster carers who are in turn supported by highly competent social workers. There is a high level of positive feedback from foster carers and social workers in other departments of the local authority who say, 'The fostering service gives children homes, not just a placement. The staff know the foster carers well and the fostering service works very much as a team.'

The fostering service's premises accessible and welcoming within the local community. The service benefits from sharing the site with a variety of other services for children and families. There are rooms available for meetings, training events and family contact visits. There are large displays highlighting the need to recruit a diverse range of foster carers in the office's waiting areas. This ensures that whilst also promoting fostering, there are positive images of people from a range of backgrounds and experiences. This emphasises the local authority's commitment to ensuring that there is a range of carers available. There are numerous social events for foster families, which families enjoy and look forward to attending.

Five recommendations were made at the last inspection, all of which have been addressed. This has resulted in a positive improvement to the service for young people. The manager is aware of the two areas of development highlighted at this inspection, and is highly committed to improving the quality of the service as well as the outcomes for looked after children and young people.

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.