

Blackburn with Darwen Fostering Service

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

This is a local authority fostering service. It's main functions are to: recruit, train and assess foster carers; carefully match children with approved carers which meet their individual needs; and provide on-going training and support to carers to develop their skills and maintain placements.

At the time of this inspection there were 137 fostering households offering a range of placements to 213 children and young people. Of these, 52 are living with family and friends.

A further 56 children and young people are placed with independent fostering agencies. 31 of these are in long term, stable placements.

There are also 16 foster carers who provide short break placements. There are currently 18 children accessing this service of which 13 have complex needs arising from disability.

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**.

This fostering service is very effective. Thorough assessments of carers, robust matching processes and strong partnership working with all relevant agencies is firmly established. Consequently, children and young people are kept safe and feel safe. A particular strength is the high proportion of children and young people living in stable placements with their siblings.

Carers are genuinely dedicated to their role. They confirm high satisfaction with the support and supervision provided to them from the service to successfully maintain placements. They also confirm on-going, relevant and good quality training.

Children and young people are making very good progress in all aspects of their development, especially given their starting points. They genuinely feel listened to

and are actively involved in care planning and service development.

Children and young people benefit from excellent relationships with their carers. They are very happy and settled in their current placements and want to remain until they feel ready to move on to independence.

Managers provide strong leadership, clear direction and excellent support to the staff team. They ensure good supervision and timely annual appraisals.

Managers are very clear about the many strengths of this service and the key areas for improvement. Appropriate development plans are in place to address the latter. Consequently, there are no breaches of regulation arising from this inspection. Five recommendations are made.

In short, some of the documentation does not adequately reflect the established good practices in place and in particular: robust assessments; and, the albeit relatively few, exemptions and missing from care incidents. The children's guide is also not produced in a sufficient range of appropriate formats to meet the needs of all the children and young people in placements.

Moreover, there is limited evidence of stringent monitoring of some key records to ensure they are always maintained to a high standard and to identify and analyse any patterns and trends. This would provide more evaluative information for the three monthly reports presented to the executive side of the council. In turn, this enables them to satisfy themselves that the service remains very effective and continues to achieve very good outcomes for all fostered children and 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):

- strengthen the assessment process to clearly demonstrate the capacity of carers to provide individualised care and promote all aspects of individual identity; with particular regard, to sexual orientation (NMS 2.1)
- demonstrate a robust exemption process and in particular that: the home can comfortably accommodate all who live there; and the views of, birth children, other fostered children living in the home, their social workers and independent reviewing officers are always ascertained (NMS 10.1 and 1.4)
- provide clear documentary evidence that young people who return from being missing are responded to positively (Children's Act 1989, Guidance and Regulations, Volume 4, Fostering services, paragraph 3.88)
- ensure that where a child requires it, the guide is available through suitable alternative formats (NMS 16.6)

- regularly monitor all records kept by the service to ensure compliance with the service's policies, address any concerns about specific incidents and to identify and analyse any patterns and trends. (NMS 25.2)

Outcomes for children and young people

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

Unplanned endings are rare. Indeed, 72% of fostered children and young people enjoy the security of long term stable placements with at least one of their siblings. Consequently, they have a strong sense of belonging. This is poignantly reflected in the fact that some young people have chosen to change their surnames to that of their fostering family. Comments from children and young people include, 'I have been living here for two years and I am really enjoying living with them. I am happy at school and my attendance is 100%. Everyday my confidence builds up and I am improving my behaviour', 'I have lived with my carer for 8 years now. She supports me and I love her. I am happy here' and, 'My placement is excellent. I have been here for 8 years with my brother and I love it. Everything is great and the food is top notch.'

Children and young people also enjoy constructive and regular contact with their family and friends thereby ensuring a positive view of their unique backgrounds and identity.

Some risk-taking behaviours have ceased in children and young people's current placements and others have significantly decreased. Examples include going missing and smoking.

Children and young people say they are listened to and involved in decisions about their day-to-day lives and their futures. Some are particularly complex, for example contact arrangements and future placements. This makes them feel valued. 96% attend and actively contribute to their own statutory reviews. Some young people have also built up sufficient confidence to successfully challenge care planning decisions and have, for example, remained in their current placements beyond the age of 18.

Children and young people's opinions are also central to the continued development of the service. Indeed this service has achieved a nationally recognised award for participation. Examples include: very active and respected participants on the corporate parenting board; involvement in the recruitment and selection of staff and in the preparation training for carers. Some young people are now trained to lead sessions.

There are very good opportunities in place for all children and young people to reach their potential and to achieve economic wellbeing. School attendance is excellent and children and young people are making substantial progress, both academically and behaviourally, especially given their starting points. Children are achieving above the national average at key stage 2. Those eligible to take general certificates in

secondary education last year, all achieved or exceeded their predicted grades. One young person who missed a lot of schooling prior to placement is now in the 'gifted and talented set' and is rightly proud of his achievements.

Children and young people enjoy taking part in a wide range of interesting and constructive leisure activities including musicals, museums and farms. They also join clubs and organisations within the local communities and have made and sustained positive friendships. This further increases their genuine sense of belonging. Many also benefit from exciting holidays abroad where they experience new foods and different cultures. One child wrote, 'I loved playing on the beach and helping myself to the buffet in the hotel and I had lots of fun at the mini disco. We went to a theme park and some caves and went on a cable car and had a ride on a train.' Moreover, individual interests and talents are actively encouraged and supported which further develops their skills and confidence. Examples include, athletics, key board playing, football, street dance, gardening, horse riding and drama. One young person who initially struggled with social interactions now has the skills and confidence to sing in public performances. Another has gained the qualifications to teach karate to other children.

Children and young people enjoy good health and take pride in their appearance. They benefit from: clean and spacious homes; varied and nutritious meals which meet their dietary needs and individual preferences; and, taking part in regular physical exercise. Consequently, for many, their health has significantly improved in their current placements and for some this has increased life expectancy. Children and young people have improved eating and sleeping patterns and personal hygiene. For others, their sight and communication has also greatly improved, including a child who was previously mute. One carer said, 'there are countless examples of children who have come on in leaps and bounds and exceeded developmental milestones. It is so rewarding to see their progress.'

Young people are very well supported to gain the practical and emotional skills needed for successful future independent living. They describe the leaving care team as 'brilliant.' Some have chosen to stay in their current placement until they feel ready to move on. Others have successfully made this major transition with the full assurance of continued support from their carers and the wider service.

Quality of service

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

All assessments are undertaken by qualified and competent staff and presented to a suitably constituted and robust panel who stringently exercise their quality assurance function. It is independently chaired by a well qualified and experienced individual who ensures full participation in reaching timely, appropriate and child-centred recommendations. The documentation is further closely scrutinised by an extremely child focussed agency decision maker. They confirm a marked improvement in the quality of reports presented. In particular they are more evaluative. However, there is still not always sufficiently thorough consideration of carers ability to meet children

and young people's needs who have markedly different beliefs and values to their own. This is most notably in respect to sexual orientation.

This service benefits from a significant number of very experienced and competent carers. Indeed, one has recently been awarded a Most Excellent Order From the British Empire for 40 years as a carer. Many have established particularly good relationships with parents and are highly skilled at ensuring birth parents feel valued and respected. Trust has been established and parents are, therefore, supportive of the placements.

Social workers, independent reviewing officers and guardians are highly complementary about the quality of care provided. Comments include, 'This is a perfect match and the carers are awesome. I am so impressed with their ability to stabilise the young person and to deal with complex family issues and build positive working relationships. They have enabled the young person to talk about his past and he is learning to put his needs before his mum's and, 'the children benefit from the consistent high quality care afforded to them by excellent and devoted carers.'

Carers are strong advocates in ensuring contact arrangements are in the child's best interest and actively support constructive contact in line with any legal directions and personal preferences. This includes transporting children and young people significant distances several times a week and providing contact in their own home.

Sensitive and gradual introductions give children and young people the opportunity to visit and ask questions about their new placement. This enables them to make an informed choice, settle quickly and feel a valued member of the family. Another key strength is the ability of some carers to ensure the smooth transitions to adoptive placements. There are also excellent on-going support arrangements when young people leave care so they continue to feel valued. One adopter confirmed, 'The introductions were very positive. We were given lots of information about the child's developments, likes and dislikes and the carers happily answered all our questions. They are fantastic and a true asset to the fostering team. They have wonderful parenting skills and are professional, thoughtful and caring.'

Carers demonstrate outstanding commitment to the children and young people in placement, despite experiencing some extremely challenging behaviour. They are particularly strong advocates. For example, they ensure all the children and young people receive the best education to meet their needs and receive timely, specialist support to improve their self-esteem and increase their emotional resilience. A health professional spoke of the dedication of a carer which, 'went above and beyond' and enabled a baby with highly complex health needs to be discharged from hospital much earlier than anticipated.

This fostering service gives a high priority to meeting the educational needs of each child or young person in foster care. Robust systems are in place to track and monitor individual progress and timely and appropriate additional support is provided when needed. Carers are committed to enabling children to remain at their original school if this is in their interests. A significant number are studying for a degree at

university with high aspirations for their future careers. They have settled well in the knowledge that they can return to their carers in the holidays.

Carers are highly satisfied with the wide range of support and training they receive to meet the unique needs and personal preferences of the children and young people placed. They feel part of a strong professional team and are actively involved in care planning. Communication is good and they get all the information they need prior to placement to appropriately care for each individual child and to safeguard all members of the fostering family. Feedback is actively sought after every training course and appropriate changes made to constantly improve the programme. Carers confirmed that they are able to fully explore their attitudes and appreciate the potential impact on their own family during training events and particularly highlighted the value of carers and fostered children being involved.

This service ensures good matches for children and young people in line with their unique needs and individual wishes and feelings. Comprehensive placement and support plans provide clarity for children and young people and their carers about how their needs will be met and the specialist services available to address any gaps. Consequently, the majority benefit from long term stable placements. Memories are captured in life story books of exceptional quality and memory boxes demonstrating a wide range of positive experiences during their time in foster care.

There are relatively few exemptions. However, the paperwork is not always sufficiently robust to demonstrate that there is sufficient space to comfortably accommodate all the fostering family and that the views of birth children and other fostered children in placement, their social workers and independent reviewing officers are sought.

Safeguarding children and young people

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

Children and young people say they are very happy, well looked after and feel safe and secure in their current placements. There is a robust and supportive response to the rare incidents of bullying which are then closely monitored to prevent re-occurrence.

There are also very few incidents of children and young people going missing. The few individuals who do are protected by the highly effective joint protocols in place with the local police and the support of a nationally recognised specialist team. Moreover, social workers visit them on their safe return, actively listen to their reasons for going missing and take any appropriate action necessary to prevent further incidences. However, the corresponding paperwork does not clearly demonstrate that young people are positively welcomed back on their safe return.

Children and young people enjoy excellent relationships with their carers which has a marked positive effect on their self esteem and confidence. They have established a culture of openness and trust, so children feel comfortable to express any concerns,

knowing they will be listened to. They also know how to make a formal complaint should the need arise. All complaints are taken seriously, fully investigated and positive outcomes are reached in a timely manner. Currently 34 looked after children are exercising their right to access the independent advocacy service and 12 have got a personal mentor.

Many children and young people specifically benefit from clear and consistent boundaries and are actively praised and rewarded for good behaviour and effort which is having the desired effect. Carers are also highly competent at diffusing situations. Consequently, restraints are rare. Moreover, some highly complex and extremely challenging behaviours have greatly improved in their current placements. A social worker said, 'they do a fabulous job and provide excellent stability.'

All the staff and carers have access to the robust child protection protocols and are trained in safeguarding and promoting the welfare of looked after children to ensure an appropriate response to any disclosures. Allegations are responded to quickly, and the service works very effectively with other relevant agencies to ensure good protection to the individual. Good, independent advice and support is also provided to the person subject to the allegation. One carer wrote, 'Three young people have disclosed to us and the fostering team have given all of us the support we needed.'

Stringent recruitment and selection processes are in place to ensure a safe and competent workforce.

Leadership and management

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

Very effective working relationships are firmly established with partner agencies including health, police and schools to safeguard and promote the welfare of looked after children.

A recent safeguarding and looked after children inspection concluded, 'Elected members are committed to, and clearly share in, the vision to improve services for looked after children, young people and care leavers.' The chair of the foster care association said, 'Carers do feel listened to. We are looked after very well and have a good ambassador on the council.'

The fostering service is sufficiently resourced. It benefits from appropriately qualified and experienced staff, highly competent and efficient administrators and a strong, pro-active management team. Staff are very well supported, supervised and trained to competently undertake their respective roles. Moreover, they are all actively encouraged to play their part in continually developing and improving the service to children and young people and their carers. Consequently, there is a genuine sense of ownership and pride in their work. Their realistic workloads enable them to provide excellent support to carers. They benefit from regular team meetings with open and honest debates, and good quality supervision. Annual appraisals are timely, detailed and reflective.

The Statement of Purpose is regularly updated to ensure it is always an accurate reflection of the services provided and it remains child focussed. However, the children's guide is not produced in a sufficient range of different formats to meet the needs of all the children and young people currently in placements.

This service has made significant improvements since the last inspection and clearly demonstrates a capacity for continued development. The two requirements and six recommendations made at the last inspection on 13 July 2009 have all been satisfactorily addressed. In particular, the service has significantly improved upon the range of consultation opportunities for children and young people. A full audit was also undertaken to ensure all children and young people have the space and equipment to support their homework and promote educational achievement. Moreover, the continued development of the looked after children education team provides excellent specialist support to enable all children and young people to maximise their full potentials.

There are now more effective systems in place to ensure: carers complete their mandatory training within required timescales; and receive: timely health checks; medical consent and the provision of specialist services and equipment, to meet the identified needs of the children and young people they foster. The service has also introduced 'health passports' which carers keep up to date ensuring there is a comprehensive health record for each child.

Carers and the foster care association are actively involved in the annual review of fostering allowances. These are well publicised on the website and are consistently above the national recognised levels.

Recently, for example, it was agreed to reduce uniform allowances for primary school children and increasing them for teenagers so they can have labelled clothes like their peers.

Complaints records are now in good order and action plans are put in place to address any lessons learned. An on-going, highly creative and successful recruitment strategy is now firmly established to ensure a diverse range of carers at all times to meet the unique needs and personal preferences of all fostered children and young people.

In addition to the above there has also been a number of significant developments since the last inspection. Most notably, despite a climate of budget cuts, the council have invested in the fostering service. Two new manager posts were created to specifically drive improvements, which has had the desired effect. Examples include, panel processes, short break services to children with disabilities and family and friends carers. They also now provide a specialist service to meet the needs of highly challenging young people and thereby actively prevent incarceration. Children and young people now benefit from dedicated independent reviewing officers who know them and their extended families very well. They are actively involved in placement and matching decisions, ensuring children and young people's views are fully represented. Moreover, there is now a support group for birth children and

experienced carers now run a welcome group and provide mentoring for new carers.

However, there are no systematic means to rigorously monitor records to ensure legal compliance and to identify and analyse trends and patterns. Examples include, smoking, drugs, alcohol, offending and learning from allegations, incidents of missing and bullying to inform the continued development of the service. Moreover, there is an effective system in place to monitor the quality of care provided to children and young people living in commissioned independent fostering services. However, this qualitative information is not currently included in the quarterly reports presented to the executive side of the council.

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.