

Manchester City Council; Fostering Service

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

Unique reference number	SC045099
Inspection date	20/02/2013
Inspector	Michael McCleave / Stella Henderson
Type of inspection	Full

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Date of last inspection	30/11/2009

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Service information

Brief description of the service

This fostering service is managed by Manchester City Council. It has approximately 371 approved foster placements and 379 children placed in these foster homes. There are a further 534 children who are placed with independent fostering agencies.

The fostering service offers emergency out of hour placements, short-term, long-term and permanent placements for children and young people who are looked after by the local authority. There is also a disabled children's family placement team that provides short-term placements via the short break and multi-link service for families where there is a child with a disability. The service also provides for family and friend 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**.

The management team provide effective leadership and direction of the service. There is a clear commitment to continual improvement that embraces the challenge of change in fostering.

Children and young people are placed with foster carers by the service as a first choice where appropriate. This provides them with a family environment where their social, emotional and care needs are met. Children and young people have a positive view about their experience in foster care.

This is a listening service and young people are actively encouraged to be involved in the development of the service. Their views are important and they can have an impact on the way the service operates. The input of young people in the operations of key aspects of the fostering service is embedded into the overall culture of the service. For example, their active participation in the recruitment of foster carers and their training. The involvement of young people is a particular strength of the service.

Children and young people overall do well educationally. For example, the academic achievements for young people is good and indicates an improving trend for those in foster care. This service positively strives to support them to achieve within their capabilities. Children and Young people achieve particularly well educationally in foster care. They benefit from the strong support provided by the fostering and education services to meet their academic potential.

Safeguarding of the children and young people is of paramount importance and there is a shared responsibility among all professionals and foster carers to keep them safe.

The service supports foster carers to have a good understanding of their responsibilities. There is a comprehensive training programme available to foster carers. The service has a very flexible approach to ensuring the participation of carers through the provision of transport, crèche and home support resources. This support ensures that foster carers are able to take full advantage of the opportunities to improve their skills and competences.

Some areas of service delivery are not as robust as required. For example, consideration needs to be given to improving some aspects of communication systems for those children and young people with learning disabilities. There are some areas of management monitoring that require more robust oversight of the operational systems. This relates to ensuring that timescales are met to ensure approval of some family carers.

Nevertheless, the fostering service is positively committed to change and it is evident that there has been a marked improvement in the management and delivery of the service since the appointment of the current management team. This is a positive and forward thinking service that is open to change.

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 where a family and friends foster carer is temporarily approved as a foster carer under regulation 24 of the Care Planning Placement and Case review (England) Regulations 2010, a full assessment is completed as soon as practicable, where the intention is for the child to stay with the carer, and stays within the statutory timeframe set out in the Regulations (NMS 30.14)
- ensure the manager regularly monitors all records kept by the service to ensure compliance with the service's policies, to identify any concerns about specific incidents and to identify patterns and trends. Immediate action is taken to

address any issues raised by this monitoring (NMS 25.2)

- ensure oral and written communications are made available in a format which is appropriate to children's physical, sensory and learning needs. (NMS 25.12)

Outcomes for children and young people

Outcomes for young people are **good**.

Children and young people who are looked after, live as far as possible, in family placements. The service demonstrates a positive commitment to ensuring that fostering is a well thought out choice for children and young people. For example, 71.3% of children and young people looked after by the service are in foster care. This means that a significant number of children are experiencing a family environment. The service works proactively and creatively with other services to provide flexible, effective and well managed support, based on the individually assessed needs of the young people. The service has developed a flexible approach to the provision of foster families through in house and through a wide range of contracts with independent fostering agencies. There is additionally, a well-established programme to approve family and friends known as connected people and a specialist treatment fostering service. This provides intensive support for children and young people and impacts positively on their behaviour and long term development.

The fostering service engages closely with health, educational professionals and social workers to meet the care and emotional needs of those young people who are fostered. Children and young people in foster care make very good progress and achieve measurable outcomes socially, emotionally and educationally. A positive strength of the service is the way the young people are actively supported and encouraged to participate fully in decisions that affect them. They are confident that the service provides them with a safe nurturing homely environment where they are fully integrated into family life. The calibre and commitment of foster carers has made a positive difference to the lives of these young people. This means that children and young people are provided with stable homes that support them to be happy and to prepare for their future adult life.

The health care of the young people is met through a dedicated team of nurses responsible for all looked after children. The team can access as required, the child and adolescent mental health service (CAMHS) where therapeutic support is provided to those who need a more intensive input relating to emotional or behavioural issues. These services positively support foster carers and young people to form secure attachments and to develop sound relationships. Young people are able to access information, advice and guidance on any health related or personal matter. This promotes their understanding of health related risks such as smoking, sexual health and substance misuse.

Children and young people who are in foster care do well in educational attainments. The intensive support provided by the looked after children education support service

indicate they are making good progress compared to their starting points when initially placed into foster care. Staff from this service are on hand to offer advice and guidance to foster carers, young people and to schools. Additional tuition is available to assist young people who require extra support in subject key areas. This range of support gives them the opportunity to achieve their educational potential. The fostering service has developed close links with the local universities and colleges to encourage young people who have the potential for higher education.

A strong feature is the active participation of young people in the operations of the service. The Change 2 Care Council and Supersonics are key forums where young people are consulted about various aspects of service delivery and improvements. For example, a representative from the Change 2 Care Council going to the House of Parliament to meet senior government officials to discuss fostering. Young people are additionally involved in training for new foster carers. They have additionally been active in the development of the Foster Carer's Charter. Young people are supported to take responsibility for decisions about their lives. They attend their reviews and are encouraged to make their views known. This promotes their understanding of decisions made on their behalf and increases their self-confidence and broadens their outlook on life.

Children and young people who use the short breaks service gain in self-confidence and learn how to socialise with their peers. This is a valued service. Those parents using the short breaks service have a high regard for the support received. One birth parent stated, 'This is a good service, I am a single mum, and the service is a godsend enabling me to charge up my batteries.' A young person who uses the short breaks service regularly said, 'I love going to my foster carers for short stays. I have a lot of fun and we do lots of nice things.'

The annual awards ceremony is an affirmation of the commitment of the organisation to positively celebrate achievements of the young people.

Quality of service

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

The fostering service has an active recruitment programme that is on-going throughout the year. Extensive use is made of the various media resources to promote fostering. This includes radio, bus advertising and poster information. In addition the service has set up contracts with a wide range of independent fostering agencies (IFA) to help meet the rising need for foster placements to provide long term and short breaks fostering. The preparation, training and assessment of prospective foster carers is robust. This detailed process is intended to ensure they are properly prepared to meet the social and emotional needs of children placed with them. Assessment reports are of a good quality. These provide the foster panel with the necessary information on which to make recommendations to the agency decision maker. The training programme for foster carers is thorough and provides a sound base for their development. The service ensures that foster carers are supported to attend training events by providing child minding facilities.

This is an inclusive service and foster carers are recruited from any social background, culture, race and gender to meet the complex needs of children who need a family based placement. Assessments of prospective foster carers is thorough and considers applicants' abilities to respect and promote diversity. There is a high level of satisfaction among foster carers about their work. For example, one carer said 'No one can prepare you for fostering but this service did their best and it has been the most interesting and rewarding challenge we have undertaken,' and 'After 30 years of fostering we wish we could start all over again.' Some young people commenting about their foster experience said, 'Thanks to all my foster carers I love you lots,' and 'Fostering has changed my life in the best possible way.'

The service actively works to ensure that children are assessed and matched with foster carers through a centralised family placement team. The aim is to match children with carers who are able to meet their needs and where possible reflect their background and heritage. Every effort is made by the service to identify the most appropriate foster carers for each individual child and young person. The impact for children and young people is a low disruption rate.

The fostering panel is well managed and provides a robust quality assurance function for all applications before submitting to the agency decision maker. A feature of the panel is that all applicants are required to attend the panel otherwise the recommendation is deferred. This ensures that both the panel members and applicants have the opportunity to fully discuss any issues or concerns openly. This is a good example of equality and diversity. Foster carers are valued by the service and they are treated as fully integrated members of the fostering service. They take part in all decisions made about the children and young people in their care. This approach promotes an inclusive ethos that encourages a shared responsibility for the good quality of care for children and young people. However, the timescales for the presentation of some applications from connected people to the panel is not always met. This causes delay in placements required for children and young people who are assessed as needing to remain within their family circle. This aspect of management monitoring of records requires attention as any delay could put children at risk.

Safeguarding children and young people

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

Young people are cared for in safe caring foster households. They are aware of how to make a complaint and have a clear understanding of their rights to feel safe. Any concerns about the safety of the young people is appropriately addressed by the service in line with safeguarding procedures.

The service ensures that foster carers are properly trained in their safeguarding responsibilities. These measures provide the foster carers with the competence and skills, to enable them to effectively care for children and young people who have experienced abuse. Foster carers are confident in their skills and ability to recognise

situations involving children and young people that may constitute areas for concern.

There is a strong emphasis on very thorough assessments of prospective foster carers. They have been appropriately assessed for their suitability to provide safe care. The service operates a robust recruitment and selection process to ensure that only appropriate adults are chosen for this challenging role. The suitability of prospective foster carers is considered on an inclusive basis, based on the needs of children and young people, irrespective of applicants' race, sexuality, disability or marital status.

The safety of the young people is additionally enhanced through unannounced visits to foster homes.

Leadership and management

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

The management of the fostering service is efficient. Effective leadership is provided by the head and deputy head of service. For example, at the last inspection a significant number of recommendations were made relating to the operations of the service. These highlighted a number of weaknesses. The management team have addressed these and ensured that all recommendations from the last inspection have been fully complied with. The day-to-day operations and processes of the fostering service are now better monitored and managed. This is a good demonstration of a capacity to change.

The management team are committed to driving up standards in order to ensure that children and young people are provided with high level care. The majority of all children looked after by the local authority are in foster care. This demonstrates the commitment of the service to providing children and young people with stable and caring families.

There is a positive commitment to the involvement of young people in the development of the fostering service. For example, their participation in the recruitment and training of new foster carers and development of the Foster Carer's Charter. The service actively seeks out the views of children and young people through surveys and direct consultation. This is a sound demonstration of inclusiveness and enhances the self-confidence of young people as well as enriching the fostering service. This has resulted in a reduction in the number of complaints made to the service.

Fostering staff are committed to their role and work to high professional standards. Relationships between the fostering service and other statutory and non-statutory services are good and this positively supports effective planning for children and young people. The service provides its staff with direct support through formal supervision and day-to-day contact. The management team operate an open door policy for all staff to provide advice and guidance. Staff are confident in their work. Training and development opportunities for staff are available with access to both

internal and external training courses. This promotes the knowledge and competences of staff in a challenging complex environment. Foster carers are well trained and they demonstrate a commitment to improving the life chances of the children and young people in their care.

This service does not work in isolation and has developed strong partnerships with other services to ensure that children and young people have their care needs met in the widest sense. This is demonstrated through the close working arrangements established with other statutory services within and outside of the local authority.

The management of the fostering service has a clear focus on developing an increased level of fostering resources. This means that all looked after children can enjoy a family environment and thereby increase their life opportunities as they move towards adulthood.

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 the inspection of local authority fostering agencies.