

# Birmingham Social Care & Health Fostering service

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

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## 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.

This report details the main strengths and any areas for improvement identified during the inspection. The judgements included in the report are made in relation to the outcomes for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and the relevant National Minimum Standards for the service.

## The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding: this aspect of the provision is of exceptionally high quality  
Good: this aspect of the provision is strong  
Satisfactory: this aspect of the provision is sound  
Inadequate: this aspect of the provision is not good enough

## Service information

### Brief description of the service

The Principal Fostering Development Manager and six team managers are responsible for the day-to-day running of the fostering service. The six team managers hold separate responsibilities for managing the service, providing a variety of foster placements to meet the needs of Birmingham's multi-cultural families and young people. The service is broken down into specialisms which include, Assessment Team, Family Finding, Long Term, Temporary under 10s, Temporary over 10s and Emergency Duty Team carers, Long-term care and Shared Care (providing respite for young people with disabilities) and the Friends and Family Team.

Three children's placement teams provide a service to placing social workers and identify available placements for young people within the fostering service and in external placements.

The service operates a competency-based assessment for foster carers, to facilitate matching young people's needs to carer skills. Carers can progress from level 2 for newly approved carers to level 4, the highest, dependent on the level of training, skills, experience and placement evaluation. A further level is being considered for the more experienced and specialist foster carers.

### Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

This is an overview of what the inspector found during the inspection.

The inspection was undertaken by four inspectors over a two week period. Inspectors found that young people and foster carers are generally well supported by the Fostering Service. Significant improvements have been made in the management and monitoring of the service, enabling young people's needs to be better met by the Service. Many of the improvements made within the Fostering Service remain fragile as staff are not implementing many of the new initiatives in a consistent way, due to a lack of training and understanding of how to implement the new procedures. A lack of foster carers, especially in the temporary teams, results in young people being placed with foster carers who are not specifically approved to meet their needs.

### Improvements since the last inspection

The Fostering Service has made significant improvements in the service provided to young people, especially in respect of ensuring that young people are kept safe and the overall management of the Fostering Service. Risk assessments and safe caring guidelines have been introduced to ensure that all parties are aware of what risks are present and how they can be minimised. Child protection procedures have been

tightened and there is clear monitoring of allegations against foster carers. There has been a substantial improvement in the number of foster carers who have had their approval reviewed, with systems being introduced to monitor reviews and other significant areas of service provision.

A plan has been developed to employ senior practitioners to support team managers and to ensure that foster carers are not supervised by unqualified workers.

### **Helping children to be healthy**

The provision is satisfactory.

Children are registered with GPs, dentists and opticians. The majority of statutory medicals were completed within the required timescales. Carers maintained good records of medical appointments. Children with specific health concerns had links with specialist medical professionals. Discussions with carers confirmed that they had a good understanding of the health care needs of the children in their care; however, there are variable recording systems in place for the administration of medication as carers do not have appropriate guidance in this area.

Medical consent forms were not always signed by the appropriate person. The matter was further confused for those young people where no one had parental consent, and clarity is required in this area. Social workers stated that they frequently received differing advice from the legal department regarding what action should be taken.

There were various health promotion initiatives to provide carers and children with information on a range of health care matters.

The medical advisers and Looked After Children's nurses have close links with other key agencies, including the Looked After Children's Education service, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services and the placing social workers to address health concerns and developments.

There continues to be a number of foster carers in need of first aid training as training organised in this area was over-subscribed.

### **Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe**

The provision is satisfactory.

There continues to be an excellent vetting system in place to ensure all prospective employees satisfy the necessary checks prior to their commencement of employment. Sixteen staff files were inspected and all were found to have confirmation of verbal and written references, Criminal Records Bureau (CRB), proof of identification, confirmation of qualifications and registration with the General Social Care Council. Plans to further develop the service were being progressed. The majority of carers and staff had up-to-date CRB checks that had been renewed

within the required timescales although there were some examples where delays had occurred. Appropriate checks had been completed for panel members and clear records were in place. There were systems in place to manage positive CRBs although there was one example where full details of action taken by a manager were not available.

Young people were being provided with a safe, warm and homely environment to live in. Whilst not all young people were able to have their own bedroom, the Service has developed a risk assessment if young people have to share a bedroom, although this had not been consistently completed in respect of all young people. Foster carers' preparation training includes health and safety components to enable them to keep young people safe. Health and Safety assessments are undertaken as part of the foster carers' initial assessment and updated as part of the annual review process. The Fostering Service has imposed additional requirements as part of the Foster Care Agreement to ensure that young people are kept safe when travelling in a foster carer's car.

The Fostering Service has made improvements to the process of matching young people with suitable foster carers. All parties acknowledged that there had been an improvement in communication and information sharing between the teams, which has facilitated the improvement. Short term placements are identified by one of three placement teams, long term placements are referred to the family finding team. If a suitable foster placement cannot be identified within the Service's own foster carers, an external placement will be sought.

Detailed referral forms are now required prior to a placement being made to ensure that young people's needs can be matched with the foster carer's skills. Evidence gained throughout the inspection indicate that whilst improvements have been made to ensuring that young people are placed with appropriate foster carers, there are still a number of young people placed with foster carers outside the foster carers' approval range, with 54 foster carers having more young people placed with them than their approval allows. Team managers continue to approve such placements rather than the agency decision maker or a senior manager.

Records show that there have been 14 occasions where an exemption to the normal fostering limit has been required. The majority of these are for respite placements whilst a young person's foster carer goes on holiday. A system is now in place for exemptions to be agreed and monitored.

Most young people are kept safe by their foster carers and the Fostering Service. The authority has clear child protection procedures, which are known to staff and foster carers. There have been 14 allegations made against foster carers in the past year. All these resulted in a child protection investigation, with two foster carers being referred to the Protection of Child Act List as a result of the concerns raised. The Fostering Service uses a suspension panel to consider cases where foster carers are subject to an allegation and ensure that the matter is resolved as quickly as possible.

Risk assessments have been introduced as part of the referral process and were seen

on all files examined. This is a significant improvement by the Service to increase the information shared with foster carers and to minimise risk to young people. In addition the Fostering Service has developed written guidelines in respect of safe caring and all foster carers are expected to produce safe caring guidelines. Whilst risk assessments and safe care guidelines were seen on all files they were of inconsistent quality as staff and foster carers have not been provided with appropriate training to enable them to complete them to a sufficiently high standard to ensure that they are accurate and meaningful. Some foster carers informed inspectors that not all risk assessments reflected young people's needs or the behaviours exhibited that may pose a risk. Safe caring guidelines have not always been signed or dated.

The panel has clear written procedures and policies that are implemented in practice. There is an experienced chairperson and effective members who understand the needs of children. Membership and tenure were found to be satisfactory. The recruitment of panel members includes the necessary checks, which were found to be robust.

Observation of one of the panels and reference to minutes of previous meetings demonstrated that the panel was thorough in its deliberations and indicated the continuation of good practice. There continues to be an excellent system of quality assuring assessments through notices of appreciation and concerns and this is fed back to individual assessing social workers. This provides a tool to ensure that standards are maintained across the fostering service.

The decision maker is actively involved in making appropriate choices for children.

A system has been electronically implemented to highlight all first reviews of foster carers and this information is passed to the relevant team manager.

## **Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do**

The provision is good.

Birmingham provides a range of foster carers that competently reflects its diverse multicultural population. The Fostering Service ensures that issues of diversity and equality are prioritised when placements are considered. Carers are assessed to ensure the best match with children's cultural, ethnic and religious needs, however, statistics provided to inspectors showed that a number of young people were trans-racially placed. Carers are offered training to develop their knowledge and understanding of diversity and disability related issues. Where appropriate, placements are commissioned with independent fostering agencies to better meet the needs of children and young people. Children living in Birmingham foster service placements can access specific groups that acknowledge the diversity of culture and ability within the looked after population and promote contact with other young people with similar needs.

Children in foster placements are provided with well supported educational

placements that understand the needs and behaviour of looked after children. Foster Carers are actively encouraged to play a significant role in supporting the child in their schooling. Those carers met were seen to be supporting young people by assisting with finding school and college placements, attending parents' evenings where appropriate and working in partnership with schools where there were particular problems. As the Fostering Service does not use a Foster Placement Agreement as required by Regulation 34 of the Fostering Services Regulations 2002, permissions for school trips were still not consistently in place.

Education for looked after children is overseen, audited and supported by a specialist team that has been instrumental in initiatives to improve opportunities for attainment, educational placement stability and relevance of educational planning for fostered children. Birmingham has positive measures in place for addressing both the possibility of and actual exclusion of young people from school.

Looked after children placed out of the City's catchment area are also provided with equitable levels of support to promote and maintain stability in their placement and education by this team.

Birmingham Fostering Service provides short term and respite placements for children with disabilities or at risk of being admitted into care. Carers providing these services in the community have a dedicated worker assigned to them and were seen to work closely and in partnership with the looked after child's parent(s).

### **Helping children make a positive contribution**

The provision is good.

The local authority makes sure that each child or young person is encouraged to maintain and develop family contacts and friendships as set out in the care plan. There are clear written details on file regarding contact arrangements and these are regularly reviewed and sometimes revised as necessary. Nonetheless, the new risk assessments do not fully address the requirement made at the last inspection in that 'risk assessments are made prior to contact and retained on file.

There are clear procedures for carers to follow in their foster carer handbooks and carers spoken to gave examples about how contact was managed to ensure it was a positive experience for the young person.

The views of the young person are sought in determining the contact arrangements.

No training has yet taken place to ensure that carers are aware of their roles in respect of contact, although training for 12 carers is scheduled to take place before April 2008; there will still be a shortfall in this area.

Foster carers and the Fostering Service encourage young people to express their views regarding their care.

Responses made in the young people's questionnaires indicated that their carers asked them about their views. Discussion with carers and link workers indicated that carers were keen to obtain the young person's views on daily living.

The Fostering Service creates many opportunities to seek the views of young people in their care through their review system, end of placement meetings, through the complaints procedures, through visits by their social workers and fostering link workers and within the various groups that are held throughout Birmingham. For example BUMP, (Birmingham Unaccompanied Minors Project) and the ROC groups (Rights of Children) giving young people a voice.

### **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is satisfactory.

Birmingham City Council has a Move On Team whose responsibility it is to assist in the preparation of Looked After young people for moving on from care. Those young people and carers spoken with identified that the interventions of this service were principally administrative. Pathway Plans were anecdotally being compiled although those case files and foster carers files accessed revealed no completed plans. Young people reported that Move On workers were not allocated prior to the young person turning 16 and did not take the time to form a relationship with them. This aspect of the service is considered unsatisfactory.

There is evidence of additional and ex gratia payments being made to carers to provide ongoing support and stability for young people, particularly with special needs, in foster placements.

Foster carers receive payments in line with Fostering Network recommended rates and above the minimum rates required by the government. Foster carers have received detailed guidance regarding the allowances and what they cover. Inspectors were informed by the Birmingham Foster Care Association that they were unhappy about planned changes in the payment of fees to foster carers. Foster carers receive payments promptly.

### **Organisation**

The organisation is satisfactory.

The Service has a Statement of Purpose, which provides information about the Service as required. It has been approved by elected members and has been circulated to relevant people. The Service has also produced a Children's Guide which gives young people brief details of what they can expect when they are in foster care, including information about how to make a complaint. Not all young people visited as part of the inspection had received a copy. Whilst there is evidence that the Guide has been updated to reflect the inspectorate's change to Ofsted, not all information is correct. The Children's Guide is not available in other languages, or accessible to younger children or those less able, but there is a commitment that this will be undertaken.

The Nominated Manager of the Service is appropriately qualified and evidence from

this inspection is that she exercises effective leadership, with evidence of shortfalls in the service provision being addressed since the last inspection in November 2006. She is supported by six team managers, all of whom are experienced, but not all have completed training in respect of the supervision of staff, however, this has been identified in personal development plans and training has been identified.

There has been a significant improvement in the monitoring of the service since the last inspection, with tools being introduced to monitor the Service; this has led to improvements in the Service to young people and foster carers. There are clear lines of communication and accountability within the Service, which are understood by staff. Communication with the area social workers have been improved to ensure that young people's needs are identified and met. Nonetheless, the Service is not always notifying Ofsted of significant events in a timely fashion.

Staff reported that they are well supported in their work. Supervision and team meetings take place on a regular basis. There have been improvements made to the communication and working relationships between the teams within the Fostering Service, with development days taking place in addition to regular management meetings. Personal development plans are being developed for all staff and time is allowed for professional development. Senior practitioners are being recruited to teams to provide additional support to managers, although at the time of the inspection, staff had not yet been recruited to these posts. The Service has been operating with a number of staff shortages due to vacancies and staff sickness. Agency staff have been used in some circumstances, however, this has not provided satisfactory support for all foster carers. One foster carer did not receive supervision or support visits for a six month period due to the worker being on sick leave, although the foster carer stated she was able to speak to the duty worker if there were any issues she needed to discuss. The Service has been using unqualified staff to supervise foster carers; this is not permitted by the Fostering Services Regulations 2002. The Service plans to use the senior practitioners to supervise carers, with unqualified staff undertaking support visits, however at the time of the inspection staff had not yet been recruited to the senior practitioner posts.

The Service has a dedicated recruitment team, who ensure that fostering has a high profile throughout the city and inspectors were informed that there has been a gain of 34 new carers in the past 12 months. As highlighted throughout the report there remains insufficient foster carers to ensure that young people can be well matched with appropriately skilled foster carers. This was confirmed in discussion with young people's social workers and with supervising social workers and managers. This situation is exacerbated by a delay in implementing a policy regarding the assessment of back up foster carers, thus resulting in young people being placed with carers they do not know when their foster carers go on holiday or require a period of respite. Action has been taken to develop closer relationships with independent providers to enable gaps in provision to be met. Inspectors were informed that the main areas where external placements are required is for sibling groups, teenagers, young people with complex needs and unaccompanied minors. The Service are currently developing a policy for recruiting foster carers.

Assessments of foster carers are undertaken by members of the assessment team. Assessments were seen to be of a good quality, with assessments being robustly monitored by the Fostering Panel.

Foster carers informed inspectors that they were generally well supported by link workers. Files demonstrated that foster carers were being supervised in line with the newly developed supervision policy, although where a worker had been on long-term sick leave there had been a six-month gap between supervision sessions. Unannounced visits had been undertaken in the majority of cases examined by inspectors, however, such visits have not been consistently undertaken to family and friends foster carers. Foster carers have recently been issued with a handbook, however, this is not yet complete and further information needs to be added.

Considerable work has been undertaken to ensure that foster carers are reviewed on an annual basis; however, not all foster carers have been reviewed, with some carers not having been reviewed over the past four years. Monitoring tools developed by the Principal Development Manager and a system developed by the Panel team who inform workers of when a foster carer's review needs to be presented to the Fostering Panel should highlight where there are slippages so that action can be taken. Inspectors remain concerned that with the exception of reviews being presented to the Fostering Panel there is no robust independence in the reviewing process. Examination of records indicates that there is a tendency to agree to foster carers taking young people above the number they are approved for without a re-assessment of their abilities. Team managers are also agreeing to foster carers taking young people outside their approval range, without assessments being undertaken and being considered by the Fostering Panel.

The Service has amended their Foster Care Agreement and has introduced information regarding health and safety checks, however, in the majority of cases foster carers have only been requested to sign the appendix regarding the health and safety checks rather than the full amended agreement.

Pre-approval training is held regularly and feedback received indicates that this is of a good standard. Nonetheless, post-approval training still remains inadequate. Whilst a budget has been identified to provide post-approval training this is insufficient to provide an adequate training programme for all foster carers.

Young people's records were generally up-to-date however, a number of documents had only recently been placed on files and had not been signed by all appropriate parties. The Service has developed a Foster Placement Agreement, however; it is agreed that this is not user friendly and that further work is required to develop a suitable agreement to ensure that young people's needs are clearly identified and how and by whom they will be met.

The Service keeps a register of young people and foster carers, which cover most of the areas required, however, the foster carers' register does not contain information regarding the dates of carers' annual reviews, thus the Service has been unable to clearly identify when reviews are outstanding.

Carers who are family or friends are assessed by a pool of independent assessors, and then supported by the family and friends link workers. Two carers were visited as part of the inspection and both spoke highly of the support they received.

The team have a new manager who is keen to further develop the service and new paperwork and guidance has been implemented to tighten up the assessment process. This has ensured that all the appropriate checks are undertaken in a timely and safe way. There is a recognition of the particular relationship of the family and there is an equality of process and service provision. Training opportunities for these carers need to be assessed and met in the same way as other carers.

A requirement was raised at the last inspection in relation to the qualifications of the support workers in that 'each approved foster carer is supervised by an appropriate qualified social worker'. Almost half of the family and friends team are not qualified and are therefore not meeting this regulation. Senior practitioners are to be appointed to fill this gap in the service.

## What must be done to secure future improvement?

### Statutory Requirements

This section sets out the actions, which must be taken so that the registered person/s meets the Care Standards Act 2000, Fostering Services Regulations 2002 and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider(s) must comply with the given timescales.

Std.	Action	Due date
12	ensure that arrangements for the consent to treatment and delegation of consent are clearly and accurately recorded in respect of all young people. Timescale of 20 March 2007 not met. Regulation 17 (3)	24/11/2007
12	ensure that foster carers' training includes health, hygiene, first aid and safety. Regulation 17 (1)	24/12/2007
15	ensure that there is a robust system for renewing Criminal Records Bureau checks for all staff, foster carers and adults within a foster carer's home. Timescale of 20 March 2007 not met. Regulations 20 and 27	24/11/2007
6	ensure that where a child has been abused or has abused another child, a recorded risk assessment is carried out before any decision is made to allow sharing of bedrooms. Timescale of 20 March 2007 not met. Regulation 12(1)(a)	24/10/2007
8	make placements that are clearly within a foster carer's approval range and for which they have the appropriate skills. Timescale of 20 February 2007 not met. Regulations 33 and 34	24/10/2007
13	develop and implement a Foster Placement Agreement, which	24/11/2007

	fulfils the requirements of Schedule 6 and covers who can give permission for school trips. Timescale of 20 April 2007 not met. Regulation 34	
10	develop an action plan to indicate how they are going to provide training to ensure all foster carers are aware of their roles in respect of contact. Timescale of 21 July 2003 not met. Regulation 17	24/12/2007
10	ensure that risk assessments are made prior to commencement of contact and retained on file. Timescale of 20 April 2007. Regulation 14	24/12/2007
14	provide training and support for foster carers on the preparation of young people for Independent Living. Timescale of 20 March 2007 not met. Regulation 17	24/12/2007
14	ensure that all young people who require a Pathway Plan are actively involved in the development of such a plan and monitoring its implementation. Timescale of 20 April 2007 not met. Regulation 16(5)	24/12/2007
1	ensure that all young people are provided with a copy of the Children's Guide. Timescale of 30 June 2006 not met. Regulation 3	24/11/2007
4	inform the appropriate agencies of any significant incidents as listed in Schedule 8 without delay. This must be confirmed in writing. Regulation 43 (1)	24/10/2007
21	review all foster carer's approval at least annually. Timescale of 31 March 2006 not met. Regulation 29 (2)	24/12/2007
22	ensure that all foster carers including friends and family foster carers are supervised by an appropriately qualified social worker. Timescale of 20 April 2007 not met. Regulation 19	24/12/2007
22	provide all foster carers with a handbook covering all policies, procedures and guidance. Regulation 17	24/12/2007
23	provide an ongoing programme of training and development for all foster carers, including for friends and family foster carers. Timescale of 30 June 2006 not met. Regulation 17	24/12/2007
24	ensure that all young people have a Foster Placement Agreement, which covers all matters identified in Schedule 6. Timescale of 20 April 2007 not met. Regulation 34	24/11/2007
25	ensure that an accurate register of foster carers is maintained, which includes all information identified in this regulation. Timescale of 20 April 2006 not met. Regulations 31 (2)	24/11/2007

## Recommendations

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

- provide foster carers with guidance on the recording of the administration of medication. National Minimum Standard 12

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- provide social workers with accurate and consistent advice as to what action should be taken for delegating consent for medical treatment when no one has parental responsibility. National Minimum Standard 12
  - provide training for staff and foster carers in the completion of risk assessments and safe caring guidelines. National Minimum Standard 9
  - identify a senior manager who is responsible for agreeing and monitoring extensions to foster carers' approval category. National Minimum Standard 8
  - ensure that safe caring guidelines are signed and dated, cleared with the child's social worker and explained clearly and appropriately to the child. National Minimum Standard 9
  - ensure that all foster carers who have a young person placed from a different racial or ethnic background receive appropriate training and guidance to meet the young person's needs. National Minimum Standard 7
  - ensure that the Children's Guide is circulated to all young people and that it contains correct details about contacting Ofsted. National Minimum Standard 1
  - ensure that the Children's Guide is accessible to younger children and those young people who are less able and that it is available in other community languages. National Minimum Standard 1
  - supply to the inspectorate the report of the review conducted for the purposes of Regulation 42 (1) b and (3). National Minimum Standard 4
  - implement a format for the assessment of respite foster carers as a matter of urgency. National Minimum Standard 17
  - ensure that at least one unannounced visit per year is undertaken to all foster carers, including family and friends foster carers. National Minimum Standard 22
  - consider how an element of independence can be introduced into the reviewing of foster carers' approval. National Minimum Standard 21
  - ensure that all foster carers receive and sign a copy of the updated Foster Care Agreement. National Minimum Standard 22
  - encourage friends and family foster carers to undertake pre-approval training. National Minimum Standard 32