

# Birmingham City Council, Children, Young People and Families Fostering Service

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

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<b>Date of last inspection</b>	16/07/2007

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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 multicultural families and young people. The service is broken down into specialisms which include, Assessment Team, Family Finding, 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. The Recruitment and Panel Teams provide services for both the Fostering and Adoption teams.

A placement team provides 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.

The fostering service has 634 fostering households (including Family and Friends) looking after 885 fostered young people.

## **Summary**

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

This was an announced inspection, but due to a reduction in the time available to inspectors, the inspection only considered progress made in meeting the actions and recommendations of the last inspection. The inspection focused on the temporary foster carer and family and friends support teams. Consequently it is not possible to fully judge outcomes for young people or change the overall judgement of the service.

Significant improvements have been made due to staff's commitment and increased understanding of the standards and regulations regarding the fostering service. This has improved their support to foster carers and the young people placed with carers. This improvement has been driven by robust monitoring and supervision by managers.

Policies and procedures governing the fostering service, implemented prior to the last inspection in July 2007, have now been embedded within the support teams, however, there still remains some inconsistency in practice.

Lack of staff and the consistency of practice within area teams impacts on the planning and implementation of tasks to meet young people's needs in a timely fashion.

### **Improvements since the last inspection**

At the previous inspection there were 18 actions and 14 recommendations, and were in relation to all outcome areas.

The service was required to improve information and training to foster carers to ensure that young people's health is promoted. New medical consents have been introduced and improvements to the training schedule enable foster carers to receive appropriate training to enable them to meet young people's health needs.

To ensure young people's safety the fostering service was required develop a robust system for renewing Criminal Record Bureau checks and undertaking a risk assessment at the time of a young person's placement. Systems have now been developed to ensure that these are implemented. In addition the service was required to only make placements within a foster carer's approval range. Whilst the fostering service does still make a considerable number of placements outside foster carers' approval, these are now closely monitored by the Principal Development Manager, Fostering.

At the last inspection concerns were raised regarding the lack of training and risk assessments in relation to contact for young people with their family and friends. The fostering service now ensures that the initial risk assessment fully covers any risk to young people in respect of contact, and foster carers are provided with training in their responsibilities in relation to contact.

Two actions were raised at the last inspection in relation to supporting young people to move into independence, however, due to a lack of available time inspectors were unable to consider any improvements made in respect of this outcome area.

The previous inspection required the service to take action in respect of eight areas of work in relation to the organisation of the service. The service has made significant improvement in meeting these requirements and six of the actions set at the last inspection have been assessed as being met. The service provides young people of all ages and abilities with a booklet informing them of what they can expect during their time in foster care. Support to foster carers has been improved by the appointment of senior practitioners, who supervise and undertake annual reviews, where the worker is unqualified, the provision of a detailed handbook, improvements in the training programme and in the reviewing of foster carers' approval.

Improvements to the clarity of the foster placement agreement were needed to ensure that all parties were aware of their roles and responsibilities. The service has taken action to amend the foster placement agreement, however, the new document only partially meets the regulation and has not yet been implemented for all young people.

The service was required to notify Ofsted of significant events, this does happen but these are not always made in a timely fashion. The service has developed a register of foster carers; this provides useful information regarding foster carers but is not fully compliant with the regulations as it does not include the date of birth of foster carers or the dates of reviews.

The fostering service has addressed many of the best practice recommendations, however, as identified in the report, there are some shortfalls, which still require further attention by the service.

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

The provision is good.

Young people's health needs are well met by the fostering service and its foster carers. The fostering service ensures that it provides foster carers with the support and knowledge to promote young people's overall health needs.

Foster carers ensure that young people are registered with relevant health care professionals and make sure that young people's health is monitored regularly. Carers keep detailed records of all medical interventions, these are regularly viewed by the supervising social worker and the information is used to inform young people's statutory reviews.

The fostering service has introduced a foster placement agreement and a medical consent form, which are completed at the time of the placement and includes information regarding a young person's health and the arrangements for consent for medical treatment. This is shared with foster carers, so that they are aware of how they are expected to meet a young person's health needs.

The fostering service has extended the support available to young people from CAMHS (Children and Adolescent Mental Health Service). The service will now take referrals regarding young people in temporary placements from area workers, supervising social workers and foster carers. This ensures that young people's psychological and emotional needs can be more effectively met.

Foster carers have improved access to training in relation to health issues, due to the increase in the fostering service's budget for training. Health issues are also regularly discussed at supervision sessions and at local support groups. This enables foster carers to have a better understanding of young people's health needs and how they can support them to lead healthy lives.

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

The provision is satisfactory.

The fostering service has in place acceptable policies and procedures to ensure that young people are kept safe, however, gaps in some areas of implementation could potentially put young people at risk.

The fostering service continues to have in place an excellent vetting system to ensure all prospective employees satisfy the necessary checks prior to their commencement of employment and are suitable to work with young people. Checks are also undertaken in respect of all foster carers and adult children in the foster home, to maintain the safety of young people within the placement.

Young people are provided with a safe, warm and homely environment to live in. Whilst not all young people were able to have their own bedroom, the fostering service has developed a risk assessment if young people have to share a bedroom. Foster carers' preparation training includes health and safety components to enable them to keep young people safe. Foster carers are seen to take positive action to maintain young people's safety. 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 needs of most young people are promoted and safeguarded because they are well matched with their foster carers. The fostering service has systems in place to ensure that children are well matched to foster carers. A detailed risk assessment is completed at the time of referral so that the service can appropriately match young people's needs to carers' skills. All parties acknowledged that there had been an improvement in communication and information sharing between the area, fostering and placement teams, which has facilitated improvement in the service's ability to appropriately match young people to the skills of foster carers.

Those young people visited as part of the inspection were well matched with their foster carers, however, foster carers in the temporary foster care teams state that due to the nature of short-term work they do not always receive all relevant information at the time of placement. Nonetheless, supervising social workers do work hard to obtain this information as soon as possible. Where it becomes evident that a foster carer cannot meet the needs of the young person a planned move is arranged.

The fostering service is still unable to appropriately match all young people who require placement; this is especially difficult for sibling groups and those young people who require a respite placement. This usually results in an exemption being made, where more than three young person are placed in the same placement. The authority has a high number of exemptions in place. Whilst these are carefully monitored to ensure that where possible the placements last no longer than

necessary, such placements may result in young people not always receiving the quality of care that they require.

The fostering service has clear policies and procedures to ensure that young people are kept safe. Risk assessments are completed at the time of placement and shared with foster carers along with all other available information. In addition foster carers have developed individual safe care plans to assist in keeping young people and others in the placement safe. However, safe caring plans had not always been signed, dated or shared with the placing social worker, which could potentially negatively impact on the young person's care as all information may not be shared.

Staff and foster carers receive regular training in respect of child protection and the foster carer's handbook contains clear guidance as to what actions foster carers should take to keep young people safe.

Due to reduced methodology, the fostering panel was not inspected. However, the last inspection found that: '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'.

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

The provision is good.

Young people placed with foster carers are encouraged to enjoy and achieve as staff and carers are aware of the importance of promoting individual needs within the foster placement.

The fostering service demonstrates a high priority in meeting the demands of diversity through relevant policies, appropriate recruitment of carers and staff, which provides a range of foster carers that reflects the authority's diverse multicultural population. Staff ensure that issues of diversity and equality are considered when placements are made and during regular supervision visits with foster carers. Foster carers encourage young people to participate in their religion and develop a positive sense of identity. Foster carers are able to help young people to develop the skills to deal with discrimination in the wider community.

Carers are offered training to develop their knowledge and understanding of diversity

and disability related issues. Young people living in Birmingham fostering 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.

Due to reduced methodology, Promoting educational achievement was not inspected. However, the last inspection found that: 'Young people 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.

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 young people. 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'.

The fostering service has now developed a Foster Placement Agreement as required by Regulation 34 of the Fostering Services Regulations 2002, which ensures that permissions for school trips are consistently in place. However, it still does not contain information regarding the role of foster carers in school contact or where financial responsibility lies for all school costs.

Due to reduced methodology, the standard relating to short term breaks was not inspected. However, the last inspection found that: 'Birmingham Fostering Service provides short term and respite placements for young people 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 young person's parent(s)'.

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

The provision is good.

Young people's emotional welfare is promoted by the fostering service through the maintenance of young people's relationships with their family and friends.

Young people are encouraged and supported to maintain contact with family and friends where this is appropriate. Young people state that they are happy with arrangements for their contact with their families and that they are consulted in respect of this contact. Arrangements for contact are clearly established and recorded at the outset of placement, and arrangements are reviewed in the course of

the placement and records revised.

The fostering service provides training for foster carers in relation to supporting and monitoring contact arrangements. Foster carers are required to record young people's reaction to contact and this is shared with the young person's social worker and at statutory reviews so that informed decisions can be made in respect to future contact arrangements.

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.

Young people reported that they were listened to by their foster carers regarding their day-to-day care and that their views are listened to at their statutory reviews and as part of their foster carer's annual review. This encourages young people to make a positive contribution to their day-to-day care and in planning for their future.

## **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is not judged.

## **Organisation**

The organisation is satisfactory.

The fostering service provides improving support to foster carers and young people placed within the service.

The service has a detailed Statement of Purpose, which was updated in June 2008 and reflects the service's ethos and practices. Young people are provided with a Children's Guide, which provides useful information as to what to expect when in foster care. The service now produces a guide for younger children to complement the Children's Guide provided to older young people. These documents ensure that young people, foster carers, parents and social workers understand the aims and objectives of the fostering service.

The service is managed effectively and efficiently. The Principal Development Manager, Fostering 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 is taking place. The Head of Service is also responsible for the Care Management teams within the authority and this has led to improved communications between the fostering service and area social workers. This assists in the sharing of information regarding young

people needing placement and during their placement, thus better ensuring that their needs are met. The fostering service has clear schemes of delegation and accountability in place, that are known by all staff.

The Principal Development Officer has introduced robust systems to monitor the effectiveness of the service. This is now accepted as a positive tool by staff, who use the monitoring tools to assist them in improving their support to foster carers. The appointment of senior practitioners has contributed to the effectiveness of the service, as they support unqualified staff and undertake the supervision of foster carers, where the allocated worker is unqualified. This has also improved the knowledge and practice within the teams.

Supervising social workers are provided with positive guidance and support from managers, they receive monthly supervision, regular team meetings and annual appraisals.

Although there have been difficulties with staff retention in recent years, there has been considerable improvements in the level of permanent staff within the service. This increased stability in staffing has enabled the fostering service to consolidate many of the improvements implemented prior to the last inspection. This positively influences the effectiveness of the service. There continue to be high levels of vacancies of qualified staff in area services and challenges retaining experienced staff. Most vacancies are covered by agency staff but this does impact on continuity of worker for the young people. Ensuring consistently good quality and timely implementation of care planning remains challenging in some cases.

The fostering service has 634 approved foster carers, who provide 885 placements for young people who require a placement. Like most local authorities Birmingham does not have sufficient foster carers to meet the need for placements, consequently they have worked with the independent sector, which provide an additional 491 placements for young people. The service has identified that it does not have sufficient foster carers who can take sibling groups and have developed a clear recruitment strategy to try and remedy this gap in provision. Nonetheless, some young people have to be separated from their siblings, or placed with foster carers where there are already other young people or placed with independent agencies.

The fostering service has a clear strategy for supporting foster carers and carers commented positively about the support they received from the service. Foster carers are clear about the fostering service's expectation of them and of the support they will receive, as this is identified in the Foster Care Agreement. However, not all foster carers have received a copy of the updated foster care agreement; this may result in them not fully understanding their responsibilities whilst caring for a young person. Foster carers receive regular supervision, are reviewed annually and are provided with a range of training opportunities. Occasional unannounced visits are undertaken.

The fostering service has introduced a training programme for foster carers, which will meet the standards introduced by the Children's Workforce Development Council.

This is designed to ensure that all foster carers achieve a minimum level of training and development to improve the quality of their work. Foster carers are aware their training is now standardised and their continued approval is dependent on completion of the required training. Improvements in training provision for foster carers enables foster carers to increase their skills and knowledge; this results in young people being cared for by foster carers who have the skills and understanding to meet their needs.

There are comprehensive up to date case records maintained for each young person in placement which clearly detail the care plans and plans for the future. This enables good, informed decision making about the young people while they are looked after. All files and records are stored securely.

Improvements have been made to the register of foster carers, which enables better monitoring of foster carers, however, the register is still not compliant with the regulation as it does not contain the dates of birth of carers or dates of their reviews, although it does record as to when the next review is due. This may limit the fostering service's ability to accurately monitor its foster carers.

The service supports 165 family and friends foster carers, who provide 258 young people with a placement. They are supported and supervised in the same way as other foster carers and have access to the foster carers' training programme, in addition to specific training for family and friends foster carers.

Carers who are family or friends are assessed by a pool of independent assessors. Inspectors found that there had been delays in the approval of some family and friends foster carers, with 61 young people being placed with family and friends foster carers who had received interim approval but had not been fully assessed. This could result in the assessment of the abilities of the carers being delayed and could potentially result in young people remaining in a placement which is not suitable.

## 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
8	make placements that are clearly within a foster carer's approval range and for which they have the appropriate skills (Regulation 34 (1) (b) )	07/11/2008

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)	04/11/2008
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) )	04/11/2008
24	provide a Foster Placement Agreement for all young people in placement, which covers all matters identified in Schedule 6. Timescale of 20 April 2007 not met (Regulation 34)	07/11/2008
25	enter in a register the particulars specified in Regulation 31 paragraphs (2) and (3) regarding all foster carers (Regulation 31)	07/11/2008
32	ensure that where an immediate placement has been made that this should not exceed six weeks before a full assessment is undertaken regarding the suitability of the placement and carers. (Regulation 38 (2) )	07/11/2008

## **Recommendations**

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

- ensure that all foster carers develop safe care plans for their own home and that it is cleared by the placing social worker (NMS 9.3)
- amend the foster placement agreement so that it contains information regarding a foster carer's role in school contact and where financial responsibility lies for all school costs (NMS 13.4 and 13.8)
- ensure there are clear procedures for monitoring and controlling the activities of the fostering service, in relation to informing Ofsted of significant events in a timely manner (NMS 4.1)
- ensure that all foster carers receive and sign a copy of the updated Foster Care Agreement. (NMS 22)