

Birmingham City Council, Young People and Families Directorate

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

Unique reference number	SC054435
Inspection date	29/01/2010
Inspector	David Morgan / Martha Nethaway
Type of inspection	Key

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Date of last inspection	14/07/2008

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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 has seven team managers who are responsible for the day-to-day running of this local authority fostering service. The team managers are responsible for managing the wide-ranging functions provided by the service to the 536 foster carers and approximately 900 children. The recruitment and fostering panel teams provide services for both the fostering and adoption teams. Link worker teams have recently been reorganised to combine short- and long-term teams into geographical patches.

This inspection contacted short-term carers in particular and the children they are looking after, a small percentage of whom responded. Children and young people also contributed to this inspection during the visits undertaken to six foster care households.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This full inspection identifies that the service is now at a good standard overall and that several areas are outstanding. Inspections of the service since 2006 have shown steady improvements in the overall quality of the service. All key standards were considered during this visit.

Leadership and monitoring are strong and clear strategies are implemented to address shortfalls, for example, regarding recruitment of staff and carers. Effective systems are also in place to address day-to-day problems identified by carers or other people. Equality and diversity issues are addressed particularly well with the service being particularly successful in representing the diversity of the community amongst its workforce and its foster carers. Previous actions and recommendations have been addressed appropriately. Where difficulties are encountered, for example, in meeting carer approval timescales, suitable measures are implemented to minimize the impact and keep the situation under review. This inspection recommends closer attention to accommodation prior to placement of children and young people, and also that family contact in carers' own homes be carefully assessed to avoid any difficulties arising.

Improvements since the last inspection

The last inspection raised six actions and four recommendations, all of which have been addressed. The approval ranges of carers are updated where appropriate and good practice is maintained by ensuring such ranges are within the capacity of carers. Applications for reviews and of exemptions are carefully monitored. There is a

comprehensive range of training available to carers, including training to prepare young people for independence. Also, there is an increase in the proportion of eligible young people who have written plans that help them prepare for independence. There is a significantly improved system for ensuring that new carers are approved in a timely way, which includes better monitoring and written reminders.

Administrative matters have also been improved. For example, an up-to-date foster placement agreement is now in use and the register of carers conforms to the regulation. Safe care documents are in place in all households and are kept under review to ensure they effectively address children's individual needs. An amended foster care agreement is in use and now clarifies the payment of any school costs. The service has an effective system of monitoring that ensures any notifiable events are reported promptly.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

The fostering service promotes the health and development of children well. There are good systems in place to address individual concerns, for example regarding emotional difficulties, as well as routine issues, such as dental and other appointments. The fostering service has particularly close links with mental health services. Carers help children and young people pursue healthy lifestyles and can consult the designated medical and nursing practitioners provided by the organisation when necessary. A clear position is taken to discourage smoking and limit exposure to smoke.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

There is excellent leadership of the service. The fostering task is increasingly challenging and demanding due to the varied and complex needs of children and young people and the demands on carers from the courts and others. Despite these pressures there has been sustained improvement in the service thanks in large part to effective management.

The fostering service provides carers who offer safe and nurturing homes for children and young people. Individual attention is paid to ensuring homes are safe and relevant assessments are kept up-to-date, for example, by reviewing the vehicles that children and young people are transported in. One child commented, 'I love living here; it is safe and I am very well cared for by my foster carer; we do things together as a family.' A small number of cases indicate that the suitability of bunk-beds is not always addressed as thoroughly as possible at the time of matching. This has led to the use of extra beds in rooms that are too small. However, in other respects, there are good arrangements in place to ensure that matches between households and children and young people are as suitable as possible. A strategy is

in place to obtain more carers but independent agencies are used if necessary. It is to the credit of the service that it is able to attract a particularly diverse range of applicants to become foster carers. Trans-racial placements are given a high priority and practitioners have clear written guidance to follow. Exemptions to carers usual terms of approval are agreed from time-to-time and some continue for extended periods, but they are carefully monitored in light of the needs of the individuals involved. Any disruptions in placements are managed by a designated worker, which is good practice and gives better outcomes for children and their carers.

The fostering service protects every child and young person from abuse through detailed policies that are implemented well in practice. The service has managed and implemented a number of strategies to address the concerns raised regarding the whole organisation. For example, managers have received additional training and they are clear about how to proceed if there are concerns about carers. There are few children and young people who are absent without authority and complaints against carers are addressed thoroughly. In line with this, the organisation follows good recruitment procedures to ensure the welfare of children and young people is protected. Unqualified staff who have previously undertaken tasks required of qualified staff are being redeployed and this process is almost complete.

Fostering panels too are particularly well organised and effective. Clear policies are followed rigorously while the five panels address large quantities of work. It is clear that the panels challenge poor assessments and failed timescales and make an important contribution to the high standards in the service.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The fostering service pays outstanding attention to diversity. Recruitment, training and ongoing supervision highlight issues of equality and diversity so that the needs of children and young people are met as well as possible. Discriminatory practices are challenged and carers are selected from all social groups, including single carers, couples, same sex couples, and those from minority ethnic backgrounds; attention is also being paid to increase the number of carers who have disabilities.

Similarly, excellent work is undertaken to promote educational achievement. Carers support and encourage education and are themselves encouraged to undertake ongoing training. The organisation has its own service overseeing education that can be used by all households and provides a substantial number of services, including direct teaching, a wide range of summer activities, and careers advice. One consequence is that there has been an impressive improvement in examination results, which is indicative of success at all levels. One carer said, 'Our foster child has improved so much in maths and reading. She always does her homework and we hear her read – she's very keen and we encourage her.'

When foster care is provided as a short-term break for a child, appropriate arrangements are put in place. Clear policies are followed by specific staff.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

The fostering service promotes contact arrangements for each child and young person well. Contact is treated positively throughout the organisation. There is a dedicated contact and escort service that is used to support family contact arrangements. This service is currently under review to ensure it has sufficient capacity to support family contact. In many situations arrangements are made by carers but this has led to some contact being in carers own homes, which compromises confidentiality and potentially creates safeguarding issues.

The fostering service promotes consultation particularly thoroughly. There is an excellent range of methods for consultation with children and young people and issues raised are treated seriously. There is a corporate parenting board and children and young people's engagement and participation unit, which includes those in foster care. The complaints process is publicised well and staff are taught how to effectively engage with children and young people. Documents are in different formats to appeal to different ages. Support groups are available where views can be expressed by unaccompanied children and young people, those requiring support regarding sexual matters, and there is also a children's rights group. Children's views are sought formally for their statutory reviews and for carer's annual reviews. Young people are involved in developing relevant forms. Their views are also sought face-to-face, in writing or through the foster carer's intranet, which they can access privately through hardware provided by the service.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. Individual needs are met and the diversity of the community at large is reflected in the service. Shortfalls are identified and addressed. For example, any racist incidents are monitored and people with disabilities are encouraged to foster. The positive approach of the service towards equal opportunities is described in a clear and up-to-date statement about the aims and objectives of the fostering service. Children and young people also have the benefit of documents written specifically for them about the service. Individual case records for children are well presented and comprehensive. There is regular auditing of file content and foster carers share details of children and young people's histories with them when it is agreed.

The entire fostering service is extensively monitored both by its own staff and also by the larger organisation. There is excellent practice in this area and it is a key part of the improvements. For example, the service has a workload management spreadsheet to monitor key tasks related to the support of foster carers and a spreadsheet that monitors the involvement of children and young people in statutory reviews. Other issues specifically relating to children and young people are also checked, such as their annual medical assessments and dental checks. Files are routinely monitored and timescales are kept under review, for example by the fostering panel chairpersons monitoring exemptions. Specific auditing is also undertaken independently, which is good practice. Effective monitoring is reflected in the clear organisation of resources and clear lines of accountability and supervision, which are all kept under review.

The fostering service has an adequate number of carers. Recruitment is always a high priority in order to reduce the number of placements made with independent fostering agencies. There are also sufficient experienced and qualified staff, including senior practitioners who undertake more specialised tasks. Steps are underway to increase the number of permanent staff and most posts are adequately covered. A small number of carers report insufficient link worker visits following the recent reorganisation but steps are in place to address this. Most carers feel they receive good assistance. One said, 'As a foster carer I feel well supported by my link worker.' Carers also have access to a wide range of other sources of support, for example from other carers and the foster carer association. Carers receive a number of newsletters and have access to a wide range of written advice. Monitoring of all carers includes unannounced visits at least once a year.

Staff and carers benefit from substantial training opportunities. Part of the support to carers is the training they receive pre- and post-approval. This is of a particularly high standard and is exceptional in its scope. Training is kept under review and all carers are expected to undertake additional relevant training every year, given the various limitations created by their role. National Vocational Qualifications, higher courses and other opportunities are also available from the department, which is one benefit of being part of a large organisation. The budget specifically for foster carer training was doubled last year and has been further increased this year in acknowledgement of this important part of the service.

Foster care by family and friends is given a high priority when children and young people need accommodation away from their immediate families and a designated team is in place. Procedures reflect this specialist area of fostering and training courses are adapted to meet their needs, which is good practice. During assessments of carers, several long-term options are often considered at the same time in order to obtain security for the child or young person as soon as possible.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Recommendations

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

- ensure that each foster home can comfortably accommodate all who live there, with regard to bedroom space (NMS 6.2)
- ensure there are clear procedures setting out how appropriate contact arrangements for each child are to be established and maintained, with regard to contact in foster carer's own homes. (NMS 10.2)