

Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council 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 fostering service of Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council is based in Birkenhead and provides a range of services to children and young people looked after by the local authority (LA). The primary responsibility of the service is to recruit, assess, train and support foster carers who can provide short term, long term and respite care placements throughout the borough. The manager of the fostering service leads the family placement team, consisting of team leaders, supervising social workers, support workers and administrative staff. The service works with other social work and education teams of the LA's Children and Young Person's Department to provide foster care placements and support foster carers in meeting the needs of children.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

The inspection was announced and examined all of the key National Minimum Standards (NMS) relevant to a fostering service.

Children are well cared for by the fostering service. Significant changes have been made to a number of aspects of practice and procedure. The role of the supervising social worker has become clearer and more robust, and the quality and quantity of information provided to foster carers on children placed with them has improved. This, together with an increase in placement choice available has resulted in better matching of children with carers. Outcomes for children are demonstrably good, and children in a range of placements are able to develop with security and in accordance with their identified care plans. Carers are well supported by the family placement team and are aware of their responsibilities to work on behalf of the children for whom they care.

The service does not yet ensure that it collects the information carers have on children who move out of placement.

Improvements since the last inspection

The service has made significant improvements to a range of issues identified at the last inspection. Foster carers now have all the available information on children placed with them, and procedures for ensuring that this practice becomes consistently applied are in place. As a result children are more effectively matched with carers who are better able to meet their needs.

Carers now also have clear and effective delegated consent to medical treatment. Children are cared for more effectively by being placed with carers who are approved

to meet their needs and the approval status of each carer is made apparent through the foster care agreement.

The information held on staff through the staff selection and recruitment procedures has been strengthened and as a result the service is able to demonstrate that all staff are suitable to work with children.

The role of the supervising social worker has become clearer and more robust both in relation to the monitoring of foster carers' practice and in representing the family placement service within children's services as a whole.

Foster carers are clearer about what and how to record information on children placed with them so that children's progress can be monitored more effectively. Systems for approving and supporting family and friends as carers ensure that practice conforms to the NMS and children are cared for safely and effectively.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

The service provides foster carers who help each young person to receive health care which meets his or her needs for physical, emotional and social development. Foster carers receive information, training and support to enable children and young people make informed decisions about their own health needs in so far as their needs and abilities allow. The quality of information on children in placement has improved significantly since the last inspection. The new and improved letter setting out the terms of delegated consent to medical treatment gives clear guidance to foster carers about the limits of their responsibilities.

Carers have clear health plans for each child. These plans set out tasks and responsibilities for carers and other relevant professionals so that children receive health care appropriate to their identified needs. The development of a child's health care is monitored by foster carers themselves, social workers and the independent reviewing system. These processes ensure that outcomes for children and young people are demonstrably good and demonstrate individual care and support which accurately reflect a child's needs.

There is a well developed understanding of issues to do with equality and diversity both for young people from different cultures and for children and young with special needs such as autism.

The support provided by foster carers ensures that a high priority is given to meeting children's health care needs. The concept of a 'team approach' is appreciated by foster carers who are clear about their role in supporting children and who give a high level of commitment to ensuring they are healthy.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

Children are cared for safely by the fostering service. Over the past 12 months there have been changes to the strategic management and leadership of the service due to better designation of roles and a greater emphasis on performance management. The service continues to be managed by suitably qualified staff with experience and practice of management within children's services. There is a clearer sense of direction, and an improved ability to identify and prioritise areas where improvement is needed in the framework of practice within which children are to be cared for. The people who work in the service are suitable to work with children and young people.

The placement of children with carers who can meet their needs is a strength of the service. A rigorous system of risk assessment means that children's behaviour and needs are taken fully into account when placements with foster carers are being considered. Matching has been strengthened to ensure no children are placed outside the carer's registration. All foster care agreements have been checked and where appropriate updated. Children are placed with foster carers who are assessed, approved, trained and supported to meet their needs. Placement choice has improved over the past 12 months following the recruitment drive and an increased number of new foster carer assessments being completed. The service has greatly improved the amount and quality of the information on children available to foster carers. Foster carers' homes are able to care securely and safely for children and are inspected regularly, through the visits of the supervising social workers and the annual health and safety review.

Children are protected from all forms of abuse, neglect exploitation and deprivation. Safe caring practices are robust and implemented consistently throughout the service. Management systems are in place to collate and evaluate allegations of neglect or abuse of a child in foster care.

The fostering panel is organised efficiently and effectively. It is able to make good quality decisions about approvals of foster carers in order that placements promote and safeguard the welfare of children in foster care.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The service demonstrates that diversity is valued by ensuring that foster carers provide care which respects and promotes each child's ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic background. One set of carers has, for example, gained a wide range of expertise with children and young people who are asylum seekers. These carers are able to demonstrate how their care has improved outcomes for children from a number of backgrounds.

The education and development of children is given a high priority within the service.

Foster carers are clear about their responsibilities and are able to act assertively and on their own initiative to support children in school. The progress made by children in foster care placements is evident from assessments and reviews, and confirmed by foster carers and children themselves. Resources from professionals in the education service, the Looked After Children Education Service (LACES) are available and used effectively to provide individual support for children in accordance with their care plans and reviews of progress. Children confirm they are given good support with their schooling and education and that carers talk to them and involve them in their educational development. Where appropriate birth parents are involved in their child's education and foster carers develop positive relationships with parents that help in supporting the child in placement.

A wide range of leisure activities is available from the interests and actions of the foster carers and the resources of the Council. These provide children with the opportunities to develop skills and experiences that promote self confidence and develop self-esteem.

A range of short term placements is provided particularly for children with disabilities. These arrangements recognise that parents remain the main carers for the child. Relationships between carers and parents are developed to provide as much continuity and consistency of care for the child as possible.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The service recognises the crucial importance to children of maintaining and promoting their relationships and contacts with families and friends. Carers are trained and supported to recognise and implement their role in working with families of children placed. There are a number of examples of foster carers who have formed appropriate and positive relationships with the parents of a number of children who have been placed with them. A child's needs for contact are set out in placement plans and assessments and carers are aware of their responsibilities to ensure these contacts are safe and in the child's interests. The progress of contacts with families is monitored regularly by supervising social workers and by the reviewing process. This scrutiny ensures contact plans are implemented and are in line with a child's identified needs.

Systems for encouraging children's participation in discussions and decision-making about their future are fully developed into service policy and planning. The opinions of children are obtained regularly and their views are taken into account in so far as is compatible with their level of understanding and safety. For example, children are asked for contributions to a foster carer's annual review and are helped to provide their comments in a range of written and pictorial formats that are available on file.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is satisfactory.

Young people receive assistance and support to help them prepare for leaving care and adult life. Pathway plans set out the assistance they need and the responsibilities of staff to work with them. Foster carers are able to access training in preparing young people for adulthood and all young people over fifteen and a half are supported by a worker from the Leaving Care Team. Foster carers are aware of their responsibilities and work with a range of other relevant staff such as the Immigration and Advisory Service and the NSPCC Child Trafficking Advice and Information service to provide opportunities for young people to acquire the skills and experience needed for the transition into independence that are related to their particular needs.

One young person for example has a number of pathway plans depending on the outcome of the application to remain in this country. Carers are able to access available resources relevant to the diverse cultural and ethnic needs of young people. The service can demonstrate how it has supported young people to develop and mature and how a variety of staff work together to ensure positive outcomes for them.

Financial support is available to foster carers to enable them to support the children for whom they care. The rates of payments and allowances are set out in the foster carers' handbook. The efficiency of the payment system ensures that carers obtain the amounts to which they are entitled at the right time. Some family and friends carers believe that the financial support available to them needs to improve. The department has not yet implemented the National Minimum Allowances of payments to foster carers.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The fostering service is well managed. A significant number of improvements have been made to ensure that children are placed appropriately with capable carers who are able to meet their identified needs in secure placements. Managers have identified and prioritised a range of areas relevant to the operation of the family placement service in order to improve outcomes for children. An improvement plan has been successfully implemented and built in to future and ongoing practice.

Foster carers are well supported by supervising social workers who are clear of their role in supporting foster carers and monitoring their practice. The concept of a 'team approach' is clearly evident in the work of the fostering service. Foster carers have full and clear information on children placed with them, provided when it is needed. Matching is a strength of the service, and children are placed with carers who are able to meet their needs.

The fostering service provides training, supervision and support to both its staff and

its carers to ensure they have the skills and knowledge to care effectively for children. There is a range of systems in place, such as the regular supervision sessions and foster carer annual review, to monitor practice and initiate change where required.

Children's progress is monitored through case records and foster carers record significant issues to ensure that children are developing in line with their assessed needs and the agreed care plan. Some carers hold on to information on children for whom they no longer care. This compromises the confidentiality of information about children and young people, some of whom may have left the care system.

Carers who are family and friends have effective support in line with the requirements of each placement and there are good systems in place to ensure the needs of children in these placements are identified and met.

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 carers understand what information they are expected to keep and what information needs to be passed on to the fostering service (NMS 24).