

Birmingham City Council, Fostering Service

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

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Inspector	Suzanne Young / David Morgan
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Setting address	1st Floor, 31 Dollman Street, Nechells, Birmingham, B7 4RP
Telephone number	0121 303 1029
Email	jacqui_c_smith@birmingham.gov.uk
Registered person	Birmingham City Council
Registered manager	Jacqueline Carol Smith
Responsible individual	Amanda Lamb
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Service information

Brief description of the service

This is a local authority managed fostering service. The service provides foster care placements for children and young people who are looked after by the local authority and provides on-going support to foster carers and connected carers.

At the time of inspection the service has 577 foster carers approved. There are 1336 children and young people placed with foster carers of which 545 are placed in external foster placements.

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 **adequate**.

The fostering service is adequately managed and resourced to meet the needs of children and young people and promote placement stability. There is good retention of staff and staff feel well supported. The authority targets the recruitment of foster carers appropriately and is committed to increasing the numbers of carers. There has been a considerable increase over the last year in the number of foster carers approved by the authority.

The fostering service provides adequate outcomes for children and young people and quality of care. Children and young people receive care that generally meets all their needs. The number of placement disruptions is low and the majority of children are in an appropriate placements. The service has developed strong partnership working with health and education professionals. Consequently, children and young people's education and their physical, emotional and psychological health are promoted.

Children and young people feel safe and most form positive relationships with foster carers. They are consulted about the plans for their future and their views are sought about the development of the service through the children in care council which enables young people to have a voice about the services they receive.

The authority operates three fostering panels which make timely and appropriate

recommendations. The robustness of the fostering panels have been strengthened and now provides a quality assurance function to ensure the quality of assessments is adequate

Overall, foster carers are generally satisfied with the support they receive from the fostering service. They are appreciative of the support they receive from their supervising social workers but feel the service has been inconsistent in its support and provision of service largely due to the recent changes and reorganisation. They play a key part in the fostering service. Foster carers are involved with the fostering service through a foster care association funded by the authority and run by foster carers for foster carers.

As a result of this visit, there are nine recommendations. These relate to the provision of training to foster carers and members of the fostering household, foster carers' annual reviews, monitoring and updating records, policies and procedures.

Areas for improvement

Recommendations

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

- prepare and implement a written policy on acceptable measures of control, restraint and discipline of children placed with foster parents (Regulation 13(1))
- ensure a foster carer's review must take place a year after approval and thereafter whenever the fostering service provider consider it necessary, but at intervals of not more than a year (Regulation 28(2))
- ensure that the reviews of foster carers' approval are sufficiently thorough to allow the fostering service to properly satisfy itself about their carers' on-going suitability to foster (NMS 13.8)
- provide foster parents with such training, advice, information and support as appears necessary in the interests of children placed with them (Regulation 17(1))
- ensure appropriate training on safer caring is provided for all members of the foster household, including young people of sufficient age and understanding (NMS 20.9)
- ensure that on approval, foster carers are given information, either a handbook or electronic resources, which cover policies and procedures and which is updated regularly (NMS 21.10)
- ensure each approved foster carer is supervised by a named, appropriately qualified social worker (NMS 21.8)
- regularly monitor all records kept by the service to ensure compliance with the services policies, to identify any concerns about incidents and to identify patterns and trends (NMS 25.2)

- ensure foster carers enter into an agreement which covers the matters specified in Schedule 5. This refers in particular to the terms of the foster parents' approval. (Regulation 27(5))

Outcomes for children and young people

Outcomes for children and young people are **adequate**.

Children and young people receive care that is positive and generally meets all their needs. The majority of children and young people are in an appropriate placements and the number of placement disruptions are low. There is a significant drive to keep sibling groups together even though a consequence of this has led to a relatively high number of exemptions being made. The authority is also proactive in considering external placements when this is required. Although the choice of short term and emergency placements are at times limited. Placements are culturally sensitive and a good effort is made to ensure children and young people are placed with foster carers who can meet their cultural and ethnic requirements. Consequently, for the large majority, the best option for each child is sufficiently considered.

Children develop a positive self-view and an understanding of their backgrounds. Foster carers support children with life story work and through positive contact with birth families. The authority has recently invested in a new contact centre to support children to have supervised contact with their birth families. One independent reviewing officer commented, 'the outcome in the short time the young person had been placed has been excellent, he is happy confident, emotionally secure and thriving'.

Children and young people's wishes and feelings influence their care and they contribute to the plans for their care. Young people are generally supported to share and express their views regarding the day-to-day decisions involving them through foster carer and statutory looked after reviews. Their experiences and level of participation in their reviews, however, have been variable. Some young people have chaired their own reviews whilst others have felt that reviews were 'intimidating' and they were not fully included in the review process. Many said that they do not like having their reviews at school as it is difficult to tell their friends where they are going during school time without giving information to them about being in care. The large majority of looked after children and young people have an allocated social worker. Some have had several changes of social workers in relatively short periods of time. Others have had a good service from their social workers and have built up a good level of trust.

Young people are encouraged to contribute to the running of the fostering service. There is an active children in care council which enables young people to have a voice about the services they receive. For example young people have become involved with projects around care issues and foster care training. They contribute to the corporate parenting plan and have also worked in partnership with the

commissioning team when considering the contracts of independent fostering agencies.

The service has developed strong partnership working with health and education professionals. Consequently, children and young people's education and their physical, emotional and psychological health are promoted. Children and young people are supported to keep healthy and are encouraged, where appropriate, to take responsibility for their own health. Good health support is provided by the looked after nurse and the children and adolescent mental health service. These are readily accessible and provide a targeted service for looked after children. The organisation has its own service overseeing education that provides a substantial number of services and a high level of support to children and young people to enable them to achieve their educational potential. This has led to significant improvements in examination results. For instance, GCSE performance over the last year has improved from 13% A*- C to 21%. One young person commented, 'I have a stable family who care and supported me through school'.

Young people are supported in their preparation for independence. Consideration is given to the longer term needs of young people. The authority has developed working partnerships with housing, careers advice and mental health services to support young people leaving care. The number of young people leaving care in education, employment or training is just under 50%. This figure, however, includes all care leavers including those leaving residential care. The figure for those leaving foster care is not available. A staying put policy is in the process of being established which will enhance stability for those leaving care.

Quality of service

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

The authority appropriately targets the recruitment of foster carers and is committed to increasing the numbers of carers. There has been a considerable increase over the last year in the number of foster carers approved by the authority. This has been achieved through various imaginative methods to recruit and assess prospective foster carers. External agencies are commissioned to support the authority in the recruitment of foster carers. All assessments of connected carers and most assessments of mainstream carers are conducted by external assessors. These are quality assured through the services assessment team. This has led to an overall improvement in the quality and robustness of assessments.

There are a number of family and friends placements approved by the authority. The fostering needs of the local authority are ethnically diverse and the ethnicity of foster carers is broadly similar to the ethnicity profile of looked after children. Overall, the recruitment and retention of foster carers shows good diversity in relation to ethnicity, faith, language and religious belief.

Children and young people are generally matched appropriately to carers' skills and abilities. Placement stability is relatively good and there is a low level of unplanned

breakdowns. This indicates that matching on the whole is appropriate. The authority makes significant use of independent fostering agency placements in cases when a suitable placement and match cannot be made in-house. The authority has both placement and commissioning teams who handle all referrals requiring placements. Currently around 40% of placement needs are met in the private sector; primarily within the local region. The level of placements made with external fostering agencies demonstrates a commitment to the service to ensure appropriate matching is made. External placements with independent fostering agencies are quality assured to ensure their on-going suitability.

The authority operates three fostering panels which make timely and appropriate recommendations. The robustness of the fostering panels has been strengthened and now provides a quality assurance function to ensure the quality of assessments is adequate. Panel members training and appraisals have been introduced. Currently foster carers' first reviews are considered by the fostering by panels. Subsequent reviews where there are no changes to the terms of approval are conducted by supervising social workers and signed off by team managers. This can compromise the level of independency regarding the decision making process and the level of scrutiny when determining foster carers on going suitability. A foster carer agreement is completed for each foster carer although these do not include the terms of their approval as required.

Training for foster carers has been a priority for the authority and a commendable effort has been made to ensure foster carers complete the children's workforce development council training standards for foster carers (CWDC). A varied training programme has been developed including the introduction of online training. The authority also delivers good pre approval training focusing on the child's journey in care in line with recent guidance. There is, however, a lack of clarity regarding the timeliness of the completion of core training by foster carers. This had led to some gaps in the completion of core training provided in a timely manner.

Foster carers are receiving adequate support and supervision. The experiences of individual foster carers are, however, variable. One connected carer commented 'link workers are fantastic...once we had a link worker it was like having a weight lifted off our shoulders. Link workers are supportive, critical friends. They are constructive and knowledgeable'. The recent reorganisation of the fostering service, however, has led to some inconsistencies in the provision of service to foster carers. There are a small number of foster carers who do not have an allocated supervising social worker and some supervising social work tasks, such as, supervisions and annual reviews are delayed. The role of connected carers is understood and on the whole is adequately supported through a specialised team of supervising social workers.

Safeguarding children and young people

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

Children and young people are supported to feel safe by their foster carers and relationships within fostering households are on the whole positive. They do not

identify bullying as an issue and are aware of how to make representations and complaints. They are supported to access the complaints procedure by an advocate. The children's rights engagement and participation service is also a less formal arena for children and young people to meet and make comments.

Staff and foster carers take safeguarding responsibilities seriously and fulfil their role related to safeguarding children and young people appropriately. Safe caring policies and risk assessments are effectively implemented in practice in the fostering household and unannounced visits are taking place. Procedures and documentation however are confusing and out of date. These do not fully support the fostering task. The fostering handbook has not been reviewed for several years and does not support the authority's stance on the use of restraint and managing challenging behaviours. This has resulted in confusion regarding managing young people's challenging behaviour and has led to inconsistency in the delivery of restraint training.

All foster carers including connected carers are expected to attend core training on child protection and safer caring. This training, however, is not available for all members of the foster household to ensure all understand how safer caring principles should be applied in a way which meets the needs of individual children.

The incidents of foster children going missing from their foster parents are very low. The fostering service is working effectively with the police and within the multi-agency partnership working agreements. There are clear systems in place to deal with complaints and allegations which are monitored by the fostering service manager. The fostering service follows the local authority reporting procedures to ensure allegations and complaints are handled appropriately.

There is an established and robust staff recruitment and vetting procedure which includes panel members and external assessors and is relevant to child protection.

Leadership and management

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

Shortfalls of the fostering provision raised at the last inspection have been addressed and all the recommendations have been fully met. The fostering service has experienced two reorganisations within the last year. This has involved changes to staffing and the allocation of foster carers between teams as well as a significant reduction in resources and budget of almost £1m. This has resulted in the restructuring of the fostering service to geographical areas in an attempt to balance teams and workloads. The percentage of children looked after over the last five years who are placed in foster care has been slightly below comparative authorities.

While senior management have endeavoured to keep disruption for children, foster carers and social work staff to a minimum this has impacted to some extent on service provision. Not all connected foster carers have an allocated social worker and

foster carer reviews have not been conducted with required timescales of a year. The fostering service, however, is adequately managed and resourced to meet the needs of children and young people and promote placement stability. Staff supervisions and appraisals are taking place regularly and staff feel they have ample training and development opportunities. There is good retention of staff and staff feel well supported. One supervising social worker commented, 'we have an excellent manager...everyone is genuinely committed to children'. This is of credit to the fostering service manager who has deflected many of the negative aspects of change and reorganisation away from staff.

Management monitor their performance and are aware of the direction in which they want the fostering service to travel. There are systems developed to monitor the strategic development of the service. Systems to monitor practice issues which: ensure compliance with the service's policies, identify patterns and trends and to give base lines which evidence quality care and outcomes for children are not sufficiently developed. For instance, systems do not clearly evidence timeliness of foster carers annual reviews or whether unannounced visits are taking place.

The fostering service has established effective partnership working with health, education and the police. Complaints are dealt with professionally and sensitively. In the last 12 months the fostering service has investigated 12 complaints.

The authority engages with foster carers to ensure they are part of the team working with children and young people and play a key part in the fostering service. Foster carers are involved with the fostering service through a foster care association funded by the authority and run by foster carers for foster carers. The association has regular contact with senior managers through various forums and is involved in the delivery of training. There is also a concerted effort by the authority to develop the delegated authority of foster carers. This will help ensure children who are looked after will experience a fulfilled childhood and feel part of the foster carers' family.

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 local authority fostering agencies.