

Coram Fostering Service

Inspection report for independent 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

This service provides concurrent planning for children who are subject to care proceedings and where in the view of the courts and past history there is a likelihood that children will need a permanent placement outside the birth family. The aim of the project is to prevent drift and delay in achieving permanence for these children and to reduce placement moves.

Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

Concurrent planning operates in partnership with local authorities to provide a specialist service to children brought to two years who are subject to care proceedings and where in the view of the courts there is a likelihood that the child will need a permanent placement outside the birth family. It is within this context that children are placed with foster carers who have been through the process of assessment as suitable foster carers and also as a prospective adoptive parent for a child. Foster carers understand that the needs of the child comes first and that the outcomes will always be what is in the best interest of the child even if it means that the child will return to their birth family.

The agency provides outstanding support, training and supervision to its staff and carers. This enables them to provide very high quality care to children. The fostering service supports the health welfare and safety of children extremely well. The children receive excellent support to maintain contact with their birth parents and family. Children are happy within their foster families and are treated as part of the family.

Foster carers comment on the excellent support and highly professional service they receive from the agency. Social workers report that children are well matched, make very good progress and are happy in their placements.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. Services are child focused and meet individual needs extremely well. The agency positively considers applicants to become foster carers irrespective of cultural, religious or sexual orientation.

The organisation is professionally managed to ensure that the functions of the agency are efficiently and effectively carried out. Carers, social workers, and independent reviewing officers are all extremely positive about the agency, foster carers and the care provided to children.

Areas for improvement include the need to prepare and implement clear procedures if a child goes missing, to ensure that staff is aware of this procedure, to ensure that

consent for a child to receive emergency medical treatment is signed by the relevant parties and to evidence that unannounced visits to foster homes are carried out annually. This will ensure that the service continues to meet the needs of foster children.

Improvements since the last inspection

There were no requirements made at the previous inspection. However, two good practice recommendations were made. These were that the agency should consider recruiting panel members whose field of expertise is education and a former looked after child, and to consider increasing the number of approved carers from black and ethnic minority communities. Both these areas have been addressed. The agency is planning a recruiting campaign that will target carers from black and ethnic minority communities.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

Outcomes for children are excellent and demonstrate very well planned care and support for children to grow up healthy. Foster carers promote the health arrangements for children in their care. The fostering service has a good track record of managing and providing guidance to carers about specialist health care issues. Foster carers are enabled to do this because the agency provides each child with a comprehensive well- documented health plan. Health records fully reflect each child's needs, for example, in respect of culture, identity and disability. However, the consent to emergency medical treatment forms on the file were not signed. Foster carers are very aware of their responsibilities to ensure that children attend all medical appointments as is necessary.

This fostering service also has experience of caring for children who are living with complex medical needs and have multiple physical disabilities. The service has access to medical expertise via the medical advisor who is also a member of the service's adoption and fostering panel. Immunisations and health visitor's checks have been carried out locally by the carers own GP surgery and there is excellent support from the health visitor. Foster carers put the holistic needs of the child first and this ensures that all appointments are attended; this ensures that children have equal access to health services that fully address their needs.

The welfare of children is effectively promoted. Diets are discussed at supervisory visits. Foster carers make it fun for children to explore and eat fruit and vegetables. Children are kept active through regular play and interaction with their carers and they are taken out to local playgroups and mother and toddler groups. Foster carers ensure that all activities are properly prepared, even trips to the local park and shop. They do this successfully because they complete a documented risk assessment in consultation with the agency.

There are clear policies, procedures and training in place for managing medication.

Each foster carer's home has effective arrangements for the safe-keeping of medication. This avoids and minimises risks within the carer's home and audit checks are periodically completed by the agency. All the children are provided with their own bedrooms and the gardens have been arranged with play equipment for children to play safely.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

Foster carers receive training and support to promote the safety and well-being of the children. All carers complete a household safe care policy at the initial stages of their approval process. This is reviewed and updated to be specific for each child in placement. Annual unannounced visits are carried out, however the annual health and safety checks of foster carers' homes are not evidenced. The safe care procedure for the household and risk assessments completed by the supervising social workers and foster carers ensure there is a focus on the individual needs of children and that any risks are identified with actions to minimise the risk. These are also kept under review and are updated as and when necessary.

The agency has a policy in place in the event of a child going missing. Staff are aware of this policy that aims to ensure that the children in their care are protected as far as possible. However the policy does not inform the staff and foster carers in a way especially given the age of the children concerned about timings, searching, contacting others at the same time as informing the police and others. Carers are aware of the out-of-hours service provided by the agency. Foster carers are provided with information and know what to do in the event of an accident or a significant event happening. Recording mechanisms ensure that reports received provide appropriate details and information. Staff have the appropriate skills, knowledge and experience to ensure that the safety and welfare of children remain paramount. Carers feel that they are provided with current information and with excellent support and training to develop their skills as foster parents.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

This service caters for children from nought to two years. The care received is of a high standard that puts the needs of the child at the centre of the service and responds to the child's individual needs. Children enjoy warm, nurturing and supportive relationships with their foster families. As a result the children thrive and are able to make excellent progress and reach milestones. Carers have training in managing children's behaviour and are effective in supportive in helping children to behave in a positive way. Any issues relating to a child's placement is discussed with the supervising social workers who visit each foster carer's home monthly, or more often if appropriate or necessary.

Foster carers ensure that the children in their care have access to a range of play

and learning materials to encourage the child's development. Children have access to a range of activities including swimming, attending play groups or just going for a walk in the park. Children, carers and their families enjoy social occasions that are organised and facilitated by the fostering agency. These activities are greatly enjoyed by staff, carers and children.

Carers say that they get the information available to the fostering agency about children's backgrounds, so that they can best understand any behaviours that a child may display. Fostering households are inclusive and actively welcome children, regarding them as members of their own family. One social worker commented: 'Children have flourished in their current placement and continue to progress.'

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

All of the children in placement are aged between nought and two-years-old and so it is the adults involved in the children's lives who are responsible for the decision making. Social workers spoken to say that they feel that the outcomes for children placed via this service are always very positive and always the best outcome for the child. Children seen appeared happy and secure with their carers and had obviously formed strong attachments to them; they were very happy, smiling, playful and sociable. Children are generally visited by supervising social workers on a regular basis and files indicate that on these occasions, substantial discussions are held.

Carers are aware of children's care plans. Carers say that they have enough information about the children they look after and that information is always forthcoming and available. Carers say that supervising social workers are good at ensuring that they have a comprehensive profile about the child from the placing authority. Children are introduced to carers on a planned basis; this is child focused and individual to the child. Children are welcomed into the carers' homes. They are highly valued, loved and considered part of the family and integrated into community life.

The agency has a complaints policy and procedure in place. The agency keeps a central record of complaints. All the complaints were investigated with outcomes and actions recorded; the complainants are informed of the outcome in writing. The service has a clear and inclusive participation strategy. It aims to ensure that all children are valued and respected. The interaction with the children so far has been very positive and the wishes, feelings and views of the significant adults in the lives of each child are used to develop and influence the service for maximum impact.

Contact arrangements for children are in line with the care plans that have been drawn up by the placing authority and/or the courts. Carers are made aware of the expectation to support and facilitate contact between children and their birth family members. These are often very frequent and complicated arrangements. Staff and carers acknowledge this practice as being a key objective of the fostering service, particularly in light of the very young age of the children in placement. Staff and

carers were very keen to point out that the child's routine fits around contact. Issues of contact are explored thoroughly with prospective carers throughout the assessment process and consistently thereafter. The initial training available to prospective carers also focuses on contact arrangements. The agency has facilities at the office which are used for supervised contact between children and their birth families. The outcomes of these sessions are well documented and are shared with relevant external professionals.

This fostering agency engages well with birth parents as plans for their children's futures are being considered. Staff and carers give serious consideration to the views and opinions of birth families and where possible follow through on their wishes. So, for example, consideration is given during the matching process to the expressed views of birth parents in relation to the religion of the prospective substitute family and the number of carers in the household.

Contact between staff, carers and birth families is carefully monitored and as a result, some birth families are significantly involved in the lives of their children, even in instances where adoption has been the outcome. The agency have a naming ceremony that involves the birth parents, the foster carers, the agency and the social workers that makes for a positive ending if the placement arrangement becomes one of permanence.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is outstanding.

This fostering agency provides a highly specialist service that combines fostering placements, supervised contacts, early permanency planning work with birth parents and assessments of potential parents or relatives for court. Concurrent planning is designed to minimise the number of placement moves a child has which can result in broken attachments.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

The manager of the agency is experienced, qualified and knowledgeable. She competently manages the operation of the service. Supervising social workers are appropriately qualified and experienced and demonstrate a clear commitment to ensuring the children are provided with outstanding care and support. The carers are provided with excellent levels of support and supervision. Carers spoken to, and those who responded to questionnaires, said the level of support, understanding and knowledge of the workers is outstanding.

The Statement of Purpose clearly identifies the aims and objectives of the service and provides a clear overview for all interested parties. The agency ensures that robust recruitment of foster carers is undertaken. Over the past four months there has been renewed interest in the service and currently a number of new prospective

carers are being assessed. Further recruitment is ongoing and the agency is proactive in the recruitment of carers from a range of backgrounds so they can meet the diverse need of the children. Assessments of foster carers are undertaken by the supervising social workers. Assessments are clear, comprehensive, analytical and evaluative. This ensures that carers' competencies and strengths are clearly identified.

An effective and competent panel has the expertise to scrutinise assessments and reviews. This enables the panel to make well-balanced recommendations to the agency's decision maker. The panel members are drawn from a range of disciplines including social care and health services and there is an experienced foster carer and some legal input.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. Carers are recruited to care for children with a range of needs. Equality and diversity training is provided to all carers and this enables them to have an excellent understanding and proactively support the needs of the children and young people placed. Equality and diversity is integrated into all aspects of the service and this ensures that diversity is valued and equality promoted. Children are provided with excellent personalised care specific to their needs. Social workers and carers have a good understanding of children backgrounds, and respect and celebrate their individuality and differences.

Foster carers receive appropriate documentation with regards to the children and young people. This means foster carers have full details of all aspects of the child's needs and enables them to provide effective care and support to them. Carers are clear about their responsibilities and what they can make decisions about. Where this has not been agreed with placing authorities, the agency actively pursues this to ensure that this does not impact on the life of the child. Comprehensive records are maintained by carers and these provide a clear overview of how the child is developing and achieving in all aspects of their daily lives; these records are checked by the supervising social worker at each visit.

There is a training and development plan in place for all foster carers. The agency is currently promoting the Children's Workforce Development Council standards for foster carers. The expected outcome is that is that all carers will work towards achieving these standards. Carers say that the training they receive enables them to develop their skills and understanding of the children's needs. The impact of this is that they feel equipped to provide a holistic level of care and support to each child in their care.

The premises of the fostering service are suitable. Confidential information is stored securely both within the office and within the foster carers' homes. Payments to carers are made in a timely manner and carers are clear about the payment structure.

The agency is managed effectively and delivers a unique service to children that has the interests and well-being of the child at the centre of the care planning. Good data collection and evaluation ensures that the activities of the service are always

monitored and controlled. Children's outcome reports collate vital information about the quality of children's placements and are monitored for any concerns and for forward planning purposes. Files for foster carers and children are clear, up to date and contribute to the staff and the carers' understanding of children's needs and increases carers' ability to support children. Appropriate safeguards are in place to ensure that confidentiality is maintained. The processing and payments of allowances is good.

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 the consent for the child to receive medical treatment is signed by the relevant parties (NMS 6)
- ensure that foster homes are inspected annually, without appointment, to ensure they continue to meet the needs of foster children (NMS 10.5)
- ensure that the service prepares and implements a clear procedure to be followed if a child goes missing and that foster carers and staff are aware of this and that the service has in place a copy of the placing authority's children missing from care policy (NMS 5)