

Select Committee on Children's Services – 17 September 2007

Report of the Director of Children's Services

Inspection Findings of the Commission for Social Care Inspection in Respect of Dudley's Fostering Service

Purpose of Report

1. To report to the Select Committee on Children's Services the inspection findings of the Commission for Social Care Inspection in respect of Dudley Local Authority Fostering service.

Background

2. Independent and Local Authority fostering services are subject to inspection, to establish if the service is meeting The National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services and the requirements of the Care Standards Act 2000, The Fostering Services Regulations 2002 and the Children Act 1989. Since this inspection was undertaken the responsibility has passed from the Commission for Social Care inspection to Ofsted
3. The Fostering Service Regulations 2002 are secondary legislation with which a service provider must comply. Service providers are expected to comply fully with the National Minimum Standards, which form the basis of judgments
4. The inspection of Dudley Local Authority Fostering Service was undertaken at short notice in October 2006 but has not been previously reported to this Committee.
5. In total there are 32 standards. However one standard which relates to short breaks/respite care does not apply to Dudley's Fostering Services as this provision is provided by Barnardos on behalf of the Local Authority under a Service Level Agreement. The report details the main strengths of the service and any areas for improvement.
6. The Inspection scored against the standards and made an overall judgement against the Every Child Matters outcomes. The Inspection judgements are as follows :

- Outstanding: This aspect of the provision is on an exceptionally high standard.
 - Good: This aspect of the provision is strong
 - Satisfactory: This aspect of the provision is good.
 - Inadequate: This aspect of the provision is not good enough.
7. The main focus of the inspection was on the work of the Fostering Team which is a dedicated team within the Children's Specialist Services and consists of a Service Manager, 2 Senior Practitioners, 7 FTE social work staff, a fostering support worker and 2 administrative staff.
 8. The aim of the service is to offer a family placement to all children looked after by Dudley MBC when this is the agreed option and the underlying principle is "to provide looked after children in foster care with an experience of family life which promotes their physical and emotional well-being and happiness throughout their childhood."
 9. Dudley currently has 525 (including respite) looked after children of which 317 are currently in foster care (60.4%).
 10. The inspection found that all of the standards assessed were met in full and in 2 instances the standard was exceeded.
 11. The Inspectors rated the service against the outcomes as follows:
 - being healthy – outstanding
 - staying safe – good
 - enjoying and achieving – good
 - making a positive contribution – good
 - achieving economic well-being – good
 - management – good
 12. The Inspectors made 3 statutory requirements against which action must be taken in order to meet the Care Standards Act 2000, Fostering Service regulations 2002 and National Minimum Standards. The Manager must
 - a) Review staffing levels
 - b) Ensure placement agreements are in place for all placements
 - c) Set up individual files for children

These recommendations have been addressed.

13. This was a very positive inspection which reflects the continuing high standards delivered by foster carers and the fostering service in Dudley.

14. Dudley has managed to maintain its carers but there is growing competition from the independent and private sector as the market has developed. The complexity of children's needs and demands on carers has increased and remuneration and reward are significant factors in attracting, recruiting and retaining foster carers. A number of carers have signalled their intention to move to independent agencies that pay rates which far exceed Local Authority rates.

Finance

15. In order to ensure that foster carers remain within their approved numbers and the service is able to offer placement choice to appropriately meet individual need, we will need to continue to enhance the skills of current carers and actively recruit new carers to the service. The service represents good value for money but will need additional investment to remain viable in a highly competitive market.
16. The current base budget for fostering within children's services will not fund this additional investment. Therefore additional base budget will need to be identified in order to deliver the outcomes of the inspections.
17. Developing the Fostering Service will assist the Directorate in enhancing placement choice and capacity and limiting placements out of the Authority which have significantly higher unit costs than internal provision.

Law

18. Local Authorities have a duty to provide accommodation for any child in need within their area who appears to require accommodation as a result of (a) there being no person who has parental responsibility; (b) being lost or abandoned; (c) the person who has been caring for him / her being prevented (whether or not permanently, and for whatever reason) from providing him / her with suitable accommodation or care (Children Act 1989).
19. Fostering Services are regulated and inspected under the Care Standards Act 2002 which introduced the Fostering Services Regulations 2002 and the National Minimum Standards. These provide the current framework for the day-to-day operation and management of fostering services. Under the NMS we are required to review fees and allowances annually.

Equality Impact

20. The provision of a fostering service contributes to the provision of stable, secure and safe care for children looked after in order that they can achieve good life chance outcomes. It assists the Council in discharging its corporate parenting responsibilities to ensure that looked after children are not disadvantaged by being in care and that they receive the support, care and security that we would wish for our own children.

Recommendation

21. It is recommended that the Select Committee receive and note the contents of the report and in particular the future investment required to maintain and develop the service provision.



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List of Background Papers