

Select Committee on Children's Services – 13 November 2008

Report of the Director of Children's Services

Update on Progress of the Fostering Service Action Plan in response to an OfSTED Inspection

Purpose of Report

1. To report to the Select Committee on Children's Services on progress of actions taken in response to an OfSTED Inspection in respect of Dudley Local Authority Fostering Service.

Background

2. The inspection of Dudley Local Authority Fostering Service was undertaken in February 2008 and was an announced inspection. The inspection focused on the National Minimum Standards relating to the five Every Child Matters outcomes, being healthy, staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution, economic well-being. In addition, the inspection considered payment to carers, the organisation and management of the service and premises and support to foster carers. The inspection also looked at progress made in meeting the recommendations of the previous inspection.
3. 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, two Senior Practitioners, 11 FTE social work staff and two administrative staff.
4. The Inspectors rated the service against the outcomes as follows:
 - Being healthy - satisfactory
 - Staying safe - inadequate
 - Enjoying and achieving - satisfactory
 - Making a positive contribution - good
 - Achieving economic well-being - inadequate
 - Organisation - inadequate.

The overall quality rating was inadequate with a notice of action to improve.

5. Specific areas of concern related to
 - The assessment and approval of family and friends carers
 - Insufficient carers to allow placement choice and matching.
 - Risk assessments, placement plans and health information not being consistently undertaken and communicated to carers.

- Inconsistent practice.
 - Insufficient foster carers resulting in placements over numbers and children sharing rooms.
 - Insufficient staff to support carers
 - Insufficient budget to support carers at higher payment levels.
6. The report sets out actions which the authority should take in order to comply with the requirements of the Care Standards Act 2000, Fostering Service Regulations 2002 and National Minimum Standards within the given timescale. In addition the report made a number of recommendations to improve the quality and standards of care further.
 7. In response to the inspection robust actions have been taken which are detailed at **Appendix 1**. Monitoring of the plan is taking place at regular intervals to ensure progress is made and additional support is made available if required.
 8. It is important to note that the fostering inspection is one aspect of the overall provision to children who are looked after and needs to be set in the context of a steady increase in the numbers of children in care, competition from the private sector and recruitment and retention difficulties within the social care workforce.
 9. A proposal for a strategic response from the Children's Trust to develop early intervention, and prevention services to reduce the numbers of children who require care and to ensure that resources are available for redirection to further improve the quality of care services was presented to the Children's Trust Executive Board.

Finance

10. 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. A report was presented to Select Committee in March 2008 outlining the issues relating to foster care payments following a review in January 2007. Some redirection of funding has been already achieved within existing resources to enable carers to be remunerated for higher skill levels.
11. Benchmarking against neighbouring authorities shows that Dudley is under resourced regarding staffing ratios to carers .A full service review has been undertaken to ensure that current resources are deployed to maximum effect.

Law

12. 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 a 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).
13. 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 National Minimum Standards we are required to review fees and allowances annually.

Equality Impact

14. 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

15. It is recommended that the Select Committee receive and note the contents of the report and actions taken to meet the requirements of the inspection and in particular the future investment required to maintain and develop the service provision.
16. A further report will be presented to Select Committee to advise on the outcome of the re-inspection.

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List of Background Papers