

Buckinghamshire County 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

Buckinghamshire County Council's fostering service provides a range of placements for children and young people. The service is subdivided into four teams. The fostering team supports and supervises the foster carers who provide short term, long term, and emergency care including parent and child placements. This team also includes the Fostering Xtra scheme which provides placements for young people with more complex behaviours. The recruitment team covers the recruitment and assessment of new carers and now has the responsibility for delivering the training programme for all carers. The Take-A-Break scheme manages a range of support services, including overnight respite care, for children with disabilities. The Friends and Families team carries out the assessment, supervision and support of friends and families carers and private foster carers. Each team has its own manager, who reports to the Operations Manager of the fostering service. The teams are located in various offices in Aylesbury, Wycombe and Amersham.

The service also includes a fostering advisor, who provides a quality assurance function in contributing to the development of the service, a fostering panel and a clinical psychologist. As of 31 March 2008, the service was supervising 131 carers.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

At this announced full inspection, all key standards were inspected. This is a good service in most respects. Children and young people live with foster carers who provide a safe, healthy and nurturing environment. Foster carers are trained, supported and supervised well to ensure that they provide good outcomes for children and young people in relation to their health, social and educational needs. The service actively encourages best practice, and monitors and evaluates all parts of its practice to inform future work. Some shortfalls have arisen due to staff shortages, and this has affected the frequency of annual reviews, and addressing low level concerns with carers.

Improvements since the last inspection

The provider was asked to address a number of good practice recommendations following the previous inspection. The majority of these have been met in full, with two being partly met.

Low level concerns about a carer's practice are now recorded in more detail and maintained appropriately in a specific section on the foster carer's files. This ensures workers have accessible information about foster carers, to facilitate monitoring.

However, the way these concerns are managed continues to lack focus and direction. There is sometimes a significant delay in addressing the concerns with the carer. This has resulted in a young person being placed with a carer where unaddressed concerns about the care remain.

Older children and young people are given a health fax to record their medical and dental appointments. The health fax allows for all health information to be recorded, and this can move with the child to ensure continuity of care and knowledge. However, foster carers and supervising social workers continue not to actively or routinely ensure that these are filled in for all children, which makes monitoring and tracking difficult, especially if children move placements. These two recommendations are carried forward in this report.

Overall, all other recommendations have been met appropriately. Foster carers are given advice about contact issues, and kept updated with any recent changes. Foster carers are reimbursed for expenditure where appropriate, although there continue to be some delays. The Family and Friends team is now well established, and effectively addresses the referrals and assessments of these carers and offers a quality service. File auditing is comprehensive and thorough, not only examining whether files are organised but also evaluating the quality of casework. Respite care and Take-A-Break assessments follow statutory guidelines and are further monitored by the fostering advisor and fostering panel. The Fostering Xtra scheme has developed guidelines in relation to the required skill and competencies required of the carers, which helps to ensure placements appropriately meet the needs of the young people. A multi-professional team continues to oversee and monitor this scheme.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Children and young people's health needs are well met. Assessments of prospective foster carers focus on whether the carer would promote a healthy lifestyle, and their ability to meet the emotional health needs of looked after children. The service aims to have foster carers that are skilled in meeting the physical and emotional health needs of children, and good training is provided to help achieve this. Supervising social workers support carers with ensuring children and young people lead healthy lifestyles, including specific advice on healthy eating and meeting the personal care needs of black children and children from ethnic minorities. The service is good at assessing and monitoring the health needs of all the children and young people looked after. The specialist nurse for children in care oversees the initial review and annual health assessments and plans for all children. Furthermore, Griffiths developmental checks are completed on the under fives, Strengths and Difficulties questionnaires are initiated with all children, and lifestyle, sex and drug assessments are undertaken with young people aged 14 plus. The outcomes of all assessments are shared with the foster carers and social workers, unless a young person requests that these remain confidential. Although the systems are good at ensuring that foster carers receive and maintain appropriate health records for children, in practice there are some shortfalls. Overall, foster carers receive satisfactory information regarding

the child's health needs shortly after placement, but there are occasions when this information is not passed to the foster carer within a sufficient timescale. Consent for medical treatment is obtained promptly for each child when they are received into care, but some foster carers do not have a copy of this written consent for them to use in an emergency.

Children and young people benefit from a service which keeps up to date with good practice. The fostering team manager and a foster carer are members of the Healthy Care Partnership, which meets six times a year to consider the healthy care programme. A health and safety working party coordinated by the fostering team has recently developed a range of policies, including the new smoking policy, and a further working party has researched and promoted the leisure activities available across the county for looked after children. The fostering advisor and team managers are knowledgeable about promoting the emotional wellbeing of children and young people. A clinical psychologist has recently been appointed to the team, to assist carers in working with children who are presenting with particular emotional issues.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

Children and young people's welfare is safeguarded and promoted by the fostering service. The majority of assessments of foster carers are thorough and detailed, ensuring that only good quality foster carers are presented to panel for approval. However, evidence of a check on a childminder's registration and a local authority check was not seen on two files, although it is unlikely this would happen again as panel members now have a check list to ensure that the cases presented to them include all of the safeguarding checks. Children and young people are placed in homes that are safe from hazards, and are clean and comfortable. Health and safety assessments are comprehensive and updated yearly. Safer caring guidelines are also developed for each fostering household, outlining how the foster carers will ensure any risks are minimised. However, some often lack specific detail about the children living in the home, and are therefore not always a useful assessment or plan for the carers on how to keep the children safe in the home. Annual reviews of foster carers are appropriately detailed, and aim to include feedback from young people, social workers and independent reviewing officers on the quality of the placement, although views of young people continue to be missing at times. The panel is very effective and thorough when considering the first reviews of foster carers and recommending whether their approval should continue. Where information is lacking, the fostering advisor passes this to the fostering manager to address.

The Family and Friends team are very committed to ensuring good practice when assessing and approving family and friends carers. Most often, children are already placed with these carers, and the team promptly and competently carry out the assessment and safeguarding checks to ensure the children are safe and well cared for. The systems are very good in relation to the procedures for ensuring these carers are assessed quickly and presented to panel. Serious complaints and allegations against foster carers are investigated thoroughly and by experienced and

independent officers. Although the service manager is very aware of all the complaints made about the service, the central records maintained of complaints and allegations are not fully accurate or up to date. There is sometimes a delay in addressing low level concerns about carers, which affects the consistency of young people receiving high quality care. The fostering panel is presented with all cases involving a complaint or allegation, and where appropriate the service refers de-registered foster carers to the Secretary of State for consideration of inclusion in the Protection of Children Act (PoCA) List. All staff are aware of the correct child protection procedures to follow. Foster carers receive training in child protection and recognising the signs of abuse. The procedures for managing allegations and concerns have been updated to include the latest good practice guidance from Fostering Network. The service actively reviews and evaluates its practice in relation to de-registrations and allegations against carers, to inform and improve their future practice. The service is also very proactive at considering and implementing good practice recommendations made from national research or special case reviews.

The majority of children and young people are matched appropriately with carers and the service is aware of the importance of this. The initial approval category of carers is very well considered and this supports good matching. Although written evidence of good matching was often missing from files, foster carers, supervising social workers and placing social workers consider that children are appropriately matched with suitable carers, but that it is limited at times due to the lack of available placements. Some very good matching was evidenced, as well as some less considered matching that also meant that carers had children placed with them that put them either over their approved numbers, or who were out of their approved age range. The manager, fostering advisor and fostering panel monitor these exemptions closely and are actively trying to reduce the number. Foster carers' profiles are available for placing social workers to share with children and families so that their wishes and feelings are taken into account, although these profiles were not in a suitable format for young children.

The fostering team requests full referral information and risk assessment prior to considering a placement for a child, including respite placements. The forms used adequately detail the known needs of the child. If the service does not have any suitable foster carers available for a child needing a placement, the fostering team will contact independent agencies, but only after funding has been agreed by senior managers, which can often delay the referral and lead to more unplanned admissions. Placements with independent agencies are checked and monitored to ensure they continue to deliver good quality and safe placements. Foster carers receive variable information about the children and young people placed with them. Mostly, the information about a child is given promptly, to ensure the carers are well able to keep the child, and the other children in placement, safe. There are occasions, however, when the information has not been forthcoming, which has the potential to affect the wellbeing of the child. Out of the questionnaires received from foster carers, three stated the information they received about a child was 'outstanding', eleven stated it was 'good', eight said it was 'satisfactory', and six said it was 'inadequate'. The fostering team has attempted to address this shortfall recently, by taking more of a role in ensuring placement planning meetings are held

and that the placement information record is given promptly to foster carers.

The fostering service has good recruitment and selection procedures to ensure children are protected from potential abusers. All social work staff are appropriately appointed, with suitable checks and references obtained, although there were some shortfalls in ensuring that all agency administration staff have a suitable Criminal Records Bureau check.

Children and young people benefit from an effective panel. Panel members have a range of experience and knowledge and are competent in their role. The fostering service provides the panel with excellent management information, training and guidance. The panel is good at ensuring it provides an efficient quality assurance role.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The fostering service values diversity. All applicants are considered for assessment, irrespective of their backgrounds, ethnic minority, religion or disability. The service has recruited carers from ethnic minority backgrounds in order to meet the needs of children accommodated. If a child is placed with carers from a different ethnic, cultural or religious background the service is proactive at ensuring other services are put in place, for example, funding a translator, or signposting to an African mentoring service. The service has an ethnic minority development worker, whose role includes giving diversity training to carers, linking with local ethnic minority communities and facilitating cultural evenings to promote specific religions or minority groups. The fostering team has developed an excellent resource pack 'Exploring and Promoting the Importance of Race, Culture, Language and Religion for Children Who Are Looked After'. The Take-A-Break team is proactive and committed to ensuring that children with disabilities can be as independent as possible, and have equal access to services and facilities. An independent occupational therapist is funded to undertake assessments of foster carers' homes, to ensure they are suitable to the needs of the disabled child and to recommend where improvements are needed. All foster carers are advised and supported to ensure that children and young people access leisure services and develop hobbies.

The Take-A-Break scheme is well managed, providing a number of children with a good short breaks service. The service has a specific Take-A-Break handbook for carers, setting out a range of appropriate policies and procedures. The carers receive training in disabilities, and where necessary receive training and monitoring from community nurses for more invasive procedures, such as gastrostomy feeding and rectal diazepam. Parents continue to be central to the decision making and planning of placements, and the Take-A-Break workers maintain good links with the families, fieldwork social workers and carers.

Children and young people benefit from a service that is committed to improving the educational outcomes for looked after children. However, the educational attainment

levels of the young people in foster placements remain slightly low, with 66% of children who left care aged 16+ achieving at least one A*-G grade at GCSE, and 11% achieving five A*-C grades. These statistics are just below the government targets. The fostering service does link closely with the Education of Children and Young People in Public Care (ECPC) team. The ECPC team monitors the educational placements and attainment of children, as well as providing practical support to children in school, after school and to those who are out of school. Foster carers appropriately attend and participate fully in the Personal Education Plan (PEP) meetings. After school activities are now included in the PEP meetings, which ensures that looked after children are assisted and encouraged to access after school and leisure activities. Foster carers have a good understanding of the educational needs of the young people, and training in the educational needs of children forms part of their mandatory training. Supervising social workers cover the educational needs of children at each monthly supervision session, assessing and supporting how the carer is meeting these needs. There is a commitment and enthusiasm to support looked after young people to go on to further education. A recent initiative included organising a university taster (three day residential course) in the summer holidays as part of the package to encourage this. Foster carers are provided with an education handbook which includes any new initiatives as well as the statutory responsibilities of the local authority and schools.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Overall, children and young people are helped and supported well to maintain contact with friends and family. Supervising social workers stress the importance of foster carers helping a child to develop family contacts and friendships, and that appropriate records are kept of the outcome of contact visits. Children and young people benefit from carers who have a clear understanding of the agreed contact arrangements and some foster carers are good advocates ensuring that these are adhered to.

The fostering service is committed to ensuring that young people's voices are heard and that they are consulted with. The welcome pack for young people who are accommodated is being developed further to include a range of information about their rights, what they can expect from the service, and how they can complain. The information is provided in a format suitable for young children. Children are further encouraged to participate by the attractive and child-friendly consultation papers. Children and young people have access to a children's rights, advocacy and independent visitor project. Children's complaints are listened to well, and the service responds effectively to these. The service is putting a greater emphasis on the need to gain the views of children and young people for foster carer annual reviews, to ensure children remain happy with the carers.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is satisfactory.

Children and young people are adequately helped to develop the skills necessary for adult living. Foster carers are provided with satisfactory support and guidance from the fostering service, enabling them to prepare young people for more independent living. There is a commitment from the fostering service to encourage young people to remain in foster care until they are ready for more independent living. The fostering team link appropriately with the 14+ social work team, advocating for young people to receive the appropriate allowances. The service is aware that foster carers need some specific training on leaving care and promoting independence which will be provided over the next year.

Foster carers receive an allowance and agreed expenses which cover the cost of caring for each child or young person placed with them. Foster carer allowances have just been revised, and they exceed the government's recommended national minimum allowance rates for foster carers. These have been publicised and discussed with carers. The service has adequately addressed concerns raised by carers about the new expenses rates.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

Children and young people are provided with an effective and well managed fostering service. Senior staff are enthusiastic and committed to ensuring they deliver a good quality service. Children and young people benefit from the managers' and staff's focus on developing new knowledge and developing best practice. The fostering advisor provides an excellent quality assurance role, ensuring that all matters relating to fostering adhere to standards and statutory requirements. Although there are clear lines of accountability and a clear management structure within the team, other social work teams have less understanding and knowledge of the managers and of the roles of the fostering team. Each team has good monitoring systems, and a high level of expertise and knowledge in its specialised area. Workloads are manageable, and allow for close supervision of foster carers. Foster carer training is organised, focused and keeps carers' skills and knowledge up to date. Staff are also given the opportunity to update their skills, attending a variety of external and in house training events. Staff are supervised well, which includes case discussions on each foster carer on their case load.

Some annual reviews of foster carers are overdue. Although not a large number, children and young people remain in the placements which have not had a comprehensive review of the quality or safety. This shortfall has mainly arisen from the staffing shortages experienced this year, which the service is actively addressing through advertising and using agency and sessional staff. Overall, foster carers are supported well. Out of the 31 foster carers who replied to the question 'How well does the fostering service support you in caring for the children you look after?', six

stated it was 'outstanding', twelve said it was 'good', twelve said it was 'satisfactory', and two considered it was 'inadequate'. There is an out of hours service run by the fostering team. Foster carers are able to attend support groups in their locality. They have been supported to set up self-support groups, and a foster carer forum offers regular opportunities for carers to raise issues with a senior manager. Supervision of carers is now more regular, and focuses well on how the foster carer is meeting the outcomes for children and young people. The appointment of the clinical psychologist to the team will also allow foster carers to receive clinical supervision to help support them with particular emotional issues from a placement.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. There are clear management systems and procedures to monitor practice, in particular to ensure that children from ethnic minority backgrounds are placed with suitable carers. Staff and carers attend training in diversity, and the team has some well researched and experienced knowledge of different religions, cultures and ethnicities.

The fostering service has good record keeping and systems to ensure important information is kept accessible. Each carer has a foster care agreement and a detailed handbook giving them details of their roles, responsibilities and what they can expect from the service. Supervising social workers keep detailed notes of the supervision sessions and these are discussed with carers. Case files are organised and kept relatively up to date, although details of complaints and placements are not always easily accessible on the working file. Children have an up-to-date and comprehensive case record. Foster carers are also encouraged to keep a detailed diary, and to collect and maintain important memorabilia for the children living with them.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Statutory Requirements

This section sets out the actions, which must be taken so that the registered person/s meets the Care Standards Act 2000, Fostering Services Regulations 2002 and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider(s) must comply with the given timescales.

Std.	Action	Due date
15	obtain the information specified in Schedule 3 relating to the prospective foster parent and other members of his household and family (Regulation 27.2)	23/02/2009
25	carry out a review of the approval of the foster parent not more than a year after approval and thereafter whenever it is considered necessary, but at intervals of not more than a year (Regulation 29.2).	30/03/2009

Recommendations

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

- provide the carer with a written health record for each child placed in their care which is updated during the placement and moves with the child (NMS 12.4)
- ensure that safer caring plans for each fostering household are updated for each new placement (NMS 9.3)
- ensure that low level concerns about carers are addressed promptly, including consultation with the child or young person, placing social worker and carer. Complaints should be accurately recorded and held centrally (NMS 9)
- ensure that all agency administration staff have a suitable Criminal Records Bureau check (NMS 15).