

# Wokingham Borough Council Fostering, Central Placements Team

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

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## Service information

### Brief description of the service

Wokingham Borough Council's Central Placements and Fostering Service is part of Wokingham Children's Services. The service provides planned and emergency foster care placements for individual children and sibling groups of all ages, as well as parent and child placement. The service also provides kinship care assessments, solo placements for children and young people with exceptionally complex needs, short breaks and supported lodgings.

At present there are 74 approved foster carers in 43 households and 46 children and young people placed with them.

### 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 **good**.

The fostering service is effective. The outcomes for children and young people, quality of care and safeguarding is good. In relation to the leadership and management of the service, further improvement is needed. Children and young people are placed with foster and kinship carers who can meet their needs. Good quality support is provided to carers that results in placement stability and minimal unplanned endings. Children and young people are able to make good progress in relation to their starting points across all aspects of their care and effective arrangements are in place to support this. Children and young people have positive views about their care and their relationships with foster carers.

Foster carers receive supervision and support. They were able to demonstrate a good understanding of children and young people's needs. Children and young people are actively engaged in plans that are made for them. They have been able to influence the service through the children in care council and other groups.

The fostering team is appropriately experienced and qualified. Foster carers maintain good working relationships with the service and support is provided to the whole fostering family.

The leaders and managers are committed to fostering and have moved the service forward. They have an insightful understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the service. Managers have put in measures to improve it. Areas of shortfalls identified during this inspection relate to ensuring that carers receive their payment.

## Areas for improvement

### Recommendations

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

- ensure that payments of allowances and any fees are made promptly at the agreed time and that foster carers are provided with a statement of payment at the end of each tax year (NMS 28.2)
- maintain clear and effective procedures for monitoring and controlling the activities of the service. This includes the financial viability of the service, any serious incidents, allegations or complaints about the service and ensuring the quality of the service. (NMS 25.1)

### Outcomes for children and young people

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

Children and young people are provided with good personalised care and carefully selected placements. Therefore, they benefit from placements that match and meet their various needs. This ensures that whenever possible, foster care placements constitute the best available option for individual children and young people. Children and young people confirm that they are involved in placement decisions and are given sufficient information about their foster carers at the beginning of a placement.

Children and young people make good progress and receive good support in stable and nurturing foster placements. Unplanned endings to placements are the exception. Young people report that they are happy with the care and support they receive. One young person said, 'coming into foster care was the first time I felt safe and content'.

Children and young people are positive about any preparation for independence. Young people praise the participation office for promoting and supporting their views and wishes throughout a placement and advocating effectively on their behalf. There are good systems in place that enable children and young people to be actively involved in decisions about their day-to-day care. The local authority has assisted young people to develop a young people in care council. Current members say that they feel very encouraged to contribute significantly to the running and development of the service. The local authority has developed a particularly effective structure to enable young people to be heard at the highest level of decision making. However,

this excellent level of participation does not currently extend to young people under the age of 16.

Educational outcomes for young people are good and achievement is promoted at all levels. Foster carers praise the current headteacher for looked after children for providing them with the support they need to actively and effectively promote children's learning and achievements. Young people's educational needs are identified and promoted by good planning. Personal education planning is a particular strength of the local authority. Attendance, achievements and outcomes for young people are continuously monitored and data shows that children in foster care are making good progress.

Young people's health and emotional wellbeing is well supported. They benefit from the local authority's strong focus on health issues and health promotion. Strong working relationships are maintained with a wide range of health services and a very effective looked after children's nurse service. The nurses coordinate a good range of proactive campaigns that focus on smoking cessation, drug and alcohol use, sexual health and healthy lifestyle programmes. All of this input is designed to enable young people to understand the importance of good health and take responsibility for staying healthy.

Young people are strongly supported to become independent and take advantage of the good vocational and educational opportunities they are being provided with. The service promotes a range of effective measures to provide young people with good support and care beyond the age of 18 and into early adulthood. Carers have a strong focus on planning for independence through good training and effective independence plans.

### **Quality of service**

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

All those involved with the fostering service are generally satisfied and positive about the service they receive. For example, they stated that the current senior management team is strong and communication has improved. There is now stability within the teams, along with positive partnership working with other professionals.

The fostering service recognises that the skills match has been a challenge for those children and young people who have specific needs. Updating the training programme with on-line access, along with the progression and retention policy, has given carers the opportunity to gain specialist skills. Therefore, foster carers are able to meet some of the current demands. Where the child's needs are complex and specialist care is required, a match may be met through one of the preferred providers. These placements are effectively vetted, monitored and reviewed regularly to ensure that good care practices and stability are maintained.

The fostering service has made good effort to recruit more foster carers through various marketing campaigns locally. The preparation and assessment of prospective

carers are good. Supporting and retaining existing carers has been an equal priority within the fostering service. In addition to providing a valuable fostering resource, foster carers are a key resource in the recruitment of new carers. Existing carers are encouraged to participate in recruitment events. There is an informal arrangement for new carers to have a 'buddy' for additional support and advice when needed. The fostering service recognises that this arrangement is working well. One of the strategic plans of action reported to the corporate parenting board is to formalise this system for all new carers.

Children and young people benefit from an effectively operated and quorate fostering panel that is independently chaired. The fostering panel comprises stable members with good expertise, skills and knowledge. The panel chair is fairly new and has already made an impact to the function of the panel. Training days have been set aside to enhance their knowledge and working together ethic. The agency decision-maker is well informed to make decisions based on good quality information.

Foster carers are part of the team working with children and young people. Foster carers stated that with the change of management, the support for them and their family has improved. They all agreed that the change has been spearheaded by the service manager, who has supported and enabled them to understand their roles better. A part of the service manager's agenda is to visit each carer individually to obtain an overview of where the improvements can be made. Carers stated that they welcomed these visits. They also made comments that the fostering service recognises and supports their whole family, which they find encouraging.

The fostering service ensures that children and young people are placed with carers who can meet their needs. This includes children and young people from different cultural and religious backgrounds whose needs are met with additional support. Support can be from providing specialist bedding, to advocacy support from the Children's Rights Officer. Placement stability is high on the service's agenda and when a placement ends, clear and robust processes are put in place to ensure that the move is sensitively managed.

Foster carers say they feel part of the team working with children and young people and share responsibility with other key professionals in the child's life. They say that they feel valued and have good working relationships with their link social workers. One carer said 'I have an good link worker who is always on the end of the phone if I need them.'

Foster carers confirm that they receive good support from the fostering service. They receive unannounced visits once a year. Foster carers have the opportunity to undertake a wide range of training relating to childcare issues, some of which are tailored to meet the needs of the specific children and young people for whom they provide care. Link social workers are also encouraged to participate in the same training, giving them an insight into how carers support children in their care. Carers say that they can access training through 'my e-learning' if they cannot physically attend training courses. Records of all training undertaken are maintained on-line. A

carer said 'the training has expanded my knowledge and experiences and it is a marked improvement from what we were offered in the previous years. Being a level three carer, I know what I need to achieve to maintain my status.'

22 carers have achieved approved childcare qualifications. The remaining carers are on target to complete this training, which enhances their practice.

### **Safeguarding children and young people**

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

The fostering service effectively protects children and young people from harm. This is delivered through a variety of means, such as the support and monitoring of carers and positive partnership work with health, education and other services that have safeguarding responsibilities. Children and young people say that they feel safe with their foster families. Foster carers are aware of their safeguarding responsibilities. Foster carers understand the potential impact of abuse on children and young people, they are fully aware of the procedures to protect them and the training they attend enhances this. They are visited unannounced by fostering social workers, which enables the service to protect and support carers and children more effectively.

Children and young people benefit from practices that promote their safety and welfare. Allegations, disclosures, complaints and concerns are effectively and robustly handled and monitored. Action is taken that is in the best interests of children and young people when they have made disclosures about their treatment in foster care or concerns have come to light through other means. Foster carers are aware about the allegations process. They have access to independent support and advice should they be the subject of a complaint or allegation.

The stable placements experienced by children and young people minimise the occasions that they go missing from home. There were 14 incidents where children and young people had gone missing in 2011-2012, relating to four individuals. Appropriate reporting procedures are followed in the event that children and young people are missing from home. Children and young people have good access to independent advice and support and know how to complain. The young people's children in care council group have a good access to the children's rights and advocacy service. Therefore, any concern or support needed is immediately addressed and supported. The main support the advocacy service undertakes is additional support for young people at their looked-after children's annual reviews.

The recruitment and vetting of adults working for the fostering service, foster carers, and those aged 18 or over who reside in foster homes, safeguards children and young people. Young people's involvement in the recruitment of staff influences decisions made about an individual's suitability. This has been successful.

### **Leadership and management**

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

The fostering service is managed well. The senior management team clearly understand many of the strengths and weaknesses of the fostering service. The fostering service benefits from a fairly new but effective senior management team who have a broad knowledge of the foster carers and the children and young people within the service. The team manager and fostering staff are appropriately qualified and experienced and understand their roles and responsibilities. Fostering social workers are skilled. Staff are valued, supported, supervised and have robust training opportunities. This ensures that their professional development is promoted and they continue to provide an effective service to fostering households.

There were three requirements and three recommendations from the last inspection and these have been complied with. These related to recruitment checks, the management structure, monitoring of placements made with preferred providers, matching and health and safety assessment regarding animals. With regards to training, specific training was needed for carers that were preparing young people for independent living.

The fostering service's Statement of Purpose is well written and provides information about being looked after, together with the children's guide. The children's guide presents information to children and young people about fostering, what services they can expect and how they can complain.

Surveys received by Ofsted in May 2012 were mixed. A total of 17 responses were received from foster carers and panel members. Feedback from panel members was generally positive. The main concerns raised by carers related to a lack of consistent support in areas of contact, training and the effect that the high turnaround of children's social workers was having on fostered children. The senior management team are aware of the concerns and have implemented several strategies to address these areas. The fostering service's action plan strategy is to review the carers' forums and the 'buddy system', provide training opportunities for carers and staff, revisit the recruitment and retention strategies and improve outcomes for children and young people. Although improvements are being strategically monitored and reviewed with regards to concerns raised by carers, there is no record of the numbers of complaints or concerns received. The local authority has clear and robust procedures for handling any concerns or complaints. However, this system has not been fully utilised by the fostering service to ensure the best or appropriate outcome is made. Therefore, it is unclear whether any learning derived from the concerns or complaints received have been captured by the service and to further improve children and young people.

Foster carers are clear about the fostering service's payment structures and the payments due to them. However, within the last six months, payments of allowances and any fees owed to carers have not been made promptly at the agreed time. The senior management team is aware of the technical error and are addressing this.

Kinship foster carers receive the support they require to meet the needs of children placed with them. They have a good voice amongst other carers and are supported appropriately according to their needs and the needs of the children placed with them. Some kinship carers have been instrumental in revisiting the kinship information leaflet for the service to enable, guide and support carers positively through the process of supporting their family in need.

Corporate parenting is taken seriously, by ensuring that children and young people's views are listened to throughout the council. Most carers who were spoken to reported there has been a shift within the fostering service with regards to support, improvements and challenges. The views of children and young people are listened to, valued and are influencing developments within the local authority. The fostering service is represented on the corporate parenting panel along with two representatives from the children in care council, senior managers and elected members. Young people spoken to said that 'their voices are heard throughout the council which they deemed as empowering'. Children and young people's achievements are also recognised by the Council and once a year; this is celebrated in an awards ceremony.

Children and foster carers receive a service from the senior management team, staff and panel members who have the competence to meet their needs. There is a holistic approach to working positively and together for the welfare and safety of the child.

## 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.