

Bracknell Forest Borough Council Fostering Services

Inspection report for local authority 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

The fostering service within Bracknell Forest Council is provided by the Bracknell Forest Council Family Placement Team. The team is part of Children's Social Care branch of the Children, Young people and Learning department of Bracknell Forest Council. The Family Placement Team provides the full range of family placement services, including fostering, adoption, relief care, supported lodgings and the short break scheme for disabled children.

At the time of this inspection the service had 48 approved fostering households for 82 placements and currently 49 children are placed with them.

The fostering service's office is based in a council building on Market Street, which is shared by other services. The premises are easily accessible by bus and rail links. The service also makes use of other local community based premises to facilitate fostering events, training and support groups.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This is a good service with some aspects judged as 'outstanding'. The general organisation around working practices is good and the fostering service is functioning well. There are excellent arrangements in place for consulting with children and young people in foster care. The service is proactive in ensuring children and young people's educational attainments. Children and young people are looked after by competent and committed foster carers and a staff team who clearly enjoy working with them.

Children and young people's individual needs are recognised and plans are in place to address them. Children and young people live in healthy and safe environments. Good training opportunities are available to foster carers in areas such as safeguarding and the Children's Workforce Development Council programmes. Staff and foster carers are well supported by the Registered Manager who is committed to promoting the welfare of children and young people and focusing on improvement.

Improvements since the last inspection

The fostering service was required to ensure that the foster placement agreement includes specific reference to: elements of matching, verbal verification of staff references are carried out, foster carers' annual reviews taking place on time, and that their medical checks are easily accessible.

The service was also asked to ensure that: annual health checks of fostering households are carried out, 'safe caring guidelines' are issued to each fostering

household, and conduct at least one annual unannounced visit to foster carers.

The service has acted upon these. These steps help to promote the safeguarding and welfare of children and young people in foster care.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Children and young people benefit from a well-established provision for promoting their health care needs. There is a good system in place to assess and meet the health needs of children and young people in care. Children and young people's files provide good information about their health care needs. The fostering service has various policies and procedures in place to promote the health needs of children and young people. The service works in partnership with a specialist health team, looked after children's nurse and children and adolescent mental health services in order to meet children and young people's complex health care needs. In addition to this the fostering service commissions CAMHS to employ specialist mental health workers specifically to meet the needs of Bracknell Forest's looked after children.

Foster carers are well supported and encouraged through the provision of various specialist health care training and support provided by the service. This helps to develop their knowledge and skills to meet children and young people's individual health care needs.

Foster carers encourage and support children and young people to eat healthily. They are encouraged to take part in various activities to keep them physically fit and active.

Children and young people live in child friendly environments and they are provided with age appropriate toys. The foster service ensures that all safety measures are in place. Foster carers' homes are warm, well furnished, decorated and maintained to a good level of cleanliness and hygiene. Young people have their own bedroom which affords them a level of privacy in which they can decorate to reflect their individual personality.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

Foster carers provide nurturing, stable and safe environments for children and young people. Children and young people spoken to and surveyed by Ofsted said that they feel safe in their fostering placements. The foster carers' hand book includes guidance on safe caring. Foster carers are provided with child protection and safe caring training in order to protect children and young people in their care. The service ensures that safer caring and risk assessments are reviewed at the beginning of each placement and also reviewed annually. The local authority designated officer for safeguarding children informed the lead inspector that there were no

safeguarding concerns about any in-house foster carers. The fostering services have good relationships with the local safeguarding children's board and works in partnership to promote safeguarding. The service has recently conducted an e-safety conference to educate carers and staff about the threat posed by the use of social networking websites.

There are clear policies and procedures for dealing with children who go missing from care. This includes a response proportionate to the identified risk. However, the record shows that the missing from care incidents is very low. The improved matching of children with foster carers, supports placement stability and reduces the risk of children being missing from care.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Children and young people enjoy sound relationships in their placements. The fostering service ensures that foster carers put emphasis on the promotion of positive behaviour. Foster carers are provided with training on managing challenging behaviour. In addition to this, strategies are in place for dealing with individual behavioural issues. As a result, foster carers develop knowledge and skills in order to provide an environment and culture to promote positive behaviour.

The fostering service actively promotes educational attainments of children and young people in care. The excellent links to the looked after education service (LACES) team bring together a range of skilled professionals who work collectively to support the educational attainment of children and young people. All children and young people have personal education plans which are reviewed twice a year. Foster carers attend these review meetings and contribute to young people's education plans. Foster carers value education and promote a learning environment at home by providing books and other learning aids. As a result an improved number of young people have achieved GCSEs or General National Vocational Qualifications.

Foster carers ensure that children and young people are engaged in hobbies and interests which boost self-esteem, learning and development. The child participation development officer arranges various social activities for children and young people. Practical support is offered to individual young people. They are helped with their driving theory test and driving lessons. Celebratory events for looked after children and care leavers take place annually. Young people are recognised for a whole range of achievements at these events which are both academic and vocational.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

There are excellent arrangements for consulting with children, young people and others involved in their care. For instance, the fostering service consults with children and young people through: care reviews, foster carers' supervision, placement

supervision visits, and meetings with the children. The child participation development officer carries out children's surveys and the outcomes of these are reported to the corporate parenting panel. The independent reviewing officers are very effective in their roles in engaging children and their parents in care reviews. Children and young people have access to independent visitors should they have any concerns.

Children and young people in foster care receive individualised care that meets their holistic needs. Foster carers receive children and young people's placement plans prior to their admissions. Children and young people develop attachment with their foster carers. They support children and young people for the promotion of their social and emotional development. Friends and family carers support children and young people to develop positive images of their parents.

Good processes are in place to match children and carers and where possible introduce them carefully and in an age appropriate way. This include a brief meeting with foster carer then the opportunity is given for a tea visit, foster carers ask about the child's expectations of the placement and also discuss the house rules.

Contact is strongly promoted for looked after children. The fostering service makes sure that children and young people in foster care are encouraged to maintain and develop contacts as set out in their placement plans. Skilled foster carers demonstrate creative ways of keeping communication channels open to enable children and young people to develop contact at their own pace. Contact meetings take place under supervision at various local places and also at foster carers' homes. This ensures that meetings are comfortable and a successful experience for all relevant parties.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

The fostering service has a sound policy on young people preparing and planning for adulthood. All young people over 16 years old have pathway plans. The leaving care team works closely with foster carers in the planning and preparation for young people leaving care. Foster carers encourage and support young people to develop various living skills. For example, carrying out household tasks, travel training and opening savings accounts. All care leavers are allocated a personal advisor and provided with suitable accommodation.

Bracknell Forest has commissioned Connexions Berkshire to provide a part time worker specifically to meet the needs of looked after children and care leavers over the age of 16. This worker has developed links with the local college. This worker supports foster carers to prepare fostered young people to take up opportunities for college and employment.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The general organisation around working practices is good and the fostering service is functioning well. Overall, good arrangements for supporting staff, foster carers, children and young people are in place. Since the last inspection a number of new staff have been recruited including the new family placement team manager and assistant team manager. This contributes towards the development and progression of the fostering service.

The fostering service has updated its Statement of Purpose which states the aims and objectives of the service. The fostering service has also developed a children's guide that is in a child friendly format. The guide provides information for young people about how to contact an independent reviewing officer, the child participation development office and Ofsted should they wish to.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Evidence supports a consistent commitment to improving equality and diversity in practice. Children and young people receive an individualised service which is designed to meet their personal needs. Fostering service staff and carers have a good understanding of children and young people's dietary, religious, social and cultural needs. Staff support children and young people to make personal choices and to access community resources.

The fostering service has a clear management and staffing structure that ensures there are clear lines of accountability throughout the service. Staff receive regular supervision and ongoing support from the Registered Manager who is available on a formal and informal basis. Caseloads are monitored and the service currently employs seven qualified social workers in addition to one family support worker and two part-time publicity and recruitment workers. The staff team and fostering panel are well supported by the administrative staff.

The fostering service steadily recruits foster carers through various advertising methods. As a result approved fostering household numbers have increased from 42 to 48. However, the number of children placed with Bracknell Forest Carers over the past three years has been increased from 26 to 48. This is due to the improvement in the support provided to the foster carers not just to the recruitment process. The fostering service carries out comprehensive assessments of prospective foster carers that cover all areas of competency needed to ascertain if an individual is suitable to become a foster carer. Foster carers understand the reasons behind the statutory checks and the depth of the assessment. Foster carers appreciate that this process helps them to reflect on their past experiences and how this may impact on them caring for a looked after child.

Good systems are in place for working with and supporting foster carers. A foster carers' handbook is in place. five of the sections have been updated and one section remains to be updated and in line with new regulations and national minimum standards. Foster carers have access to regular support groups. All foster carers

receive annual reviews and reports are prepared and presented to the fostering panel as required. The service provides 24 hour support for foster carers and foster carers feel they can approach the agency any time they have a query or concern. Foster carers receive regular visits from their supervising social workers and written records of these visits are maintained so that any issues are followed up.

Complaints and allegations against foster carers are low. Any complaints or allegations made are dealt with promptly and sensitively. This ensures that foster carers are supported and the appropriate outcome is reached to safeguard children and young people in placement.

An ongoing training programme is in place for foster carers which helps ensure they are well equipped to meet the needs of the children and young people in their care. Foster carers take part in pre-approval training that informs them about what fostering entails and helps them explore their views and attitudes. Training needs are identified during monthly visits to foster carers and discussed during the annual review process.

Matching children with foster carers has significantly improved. However, the service recognises that recruiting a broader range of foster carers is needed. All information about a child is shared with a foster carer prior to the match and placement. This is then followed up in the planning meeting which is held within five working days of the placement.

The fostering service shares the panel with other two agencies. This is well managed and effective, and its members understand the needs of children and young people. Foster carers and social work staff understand the function of the panel and panel members attend regular training to ensure that they can effectively fulfil their role. Detailed minutes are kept for the panel meetings held. The panel consists of individuals with a wide range of knowledge and experience including a foster carer.

A detailed secure electronic record is maintained of each child and young person. Foster carers are clear about the expectations regarding record keeping. Foster carers demonstrate how they are recording 'memorabilia' as a part of life story work for children and young people. This includes taking photographs and keeping souvenirs from trips and activities.

Each foster carer has a named supervising social worker. Each carer has a foster care agreement in place and has membership of the Fostering Network. Foster carers hold records of activities, incidents and achievements. The team manager hold records of allegations and complaints against carers and if necessary, the procedures for termination of approval are in place.

The fostering service has clear procedures for monitoring and controlling to ensure the quality of service. This is achieved by having in place: clear lines of communications, sound financial standing, robust financial procedures, and an agreed charge for fostering services. The management team advised that the fostering service is financially viable.

The fostering service has developed a tracking system which helps to ensure that statutory reviews are held at the appropriate times. Other monitoring systems are in place to ensure that statutory checks such as: Criminal Records Bureau checks, medical, local authority checks and health and safety checks are also completed within the required timescales.

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):

- complete the final section of the foster carers' handbook as scheduled for September and in accordance with the new regulations and national minimum standards. (NMS 25)