

# Halton Borough 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**

The Adoption and Fostering Service is part of the Children's Service Directorate of Halton Borough Council. The fostering team is based in Midwood House in Widnes. The Looked After Children's team, the Young People's Team and one of the child care teams are based in the same building.

The team has five full time supervising social worker posts two of which are currently vacant, and administrative support staff. There are two additional vacancies for assessing social workers. There are 109 children placed with 85 assessed foster carers who provide task-centred and long term care. There are six carers who provide short term breaks for children with disabilities.

### **Summary**

The overall quality rating is good.

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

The inspection was carried out over five days and included observation of the fostering panel. Three cases were tracked and three foster carers were visited in their own homes. The Specialist Nurse for Looked After Children (LAC) was interviewed. The Head of Education for LAC and the Principal Reviewing Officer were also interviewed. Carers and children's documentation, policies and procedures were seen. The manager of the permanence team and supervising social workers were spoken with.

Although the team carries four vacancies out of an establishment of seven posts and the principal manager remains in the post in an acting capacity, the impact on the support to existing carers and continued recruiting of new carers has not been affected. The team is well managed and continues to focus on review of its own practice and development. Although the staffing situation has meant that not all aspects of intended changes have been implemented, the focus on child-centred practice is maintained. The key national minimum standards are met. The service is able to manage areas for improvement where these are identified. The service manages areas for improvement where they have been highlighted.

### **Improvements since the last inspection**

The principal manager remains in an acting capacity and there are a number of vacancies. However the team is well managed and continues to focus on its own development. A new practice manager joined the team in November. Morale in the team remains high and staff are well supported by senior managers.

Information provided to foster carers about children placed has improved. Even

where information is not available, the fostering service is able to evidence the steps it takes to ensure that information is provided by placing social workers.

Payments to foster carers are made in full and on time. The fostering service ensures that in the small number of cases where errors are made foster carers are paid as soon as possible.

Staff undertaking foster carer assessments are well trained in completing competency assessments.

## **Helping children to be healthy**

The provision is good.

All children in placement have an individual health plan. Information about health needs and treatments is contained in the assessment and care planning documentation held on file. The statutory reviews of children discuss health care, set objectives and monitor progress of individual children.

Foster carers support all aspects of children's health care and good health outcomes are demonstrated for children in foster placements. Records show that children have access to all the health care resources to meet their identified health needs.

Carers are supported by the fostering team in promoting children's health care needs. They receive regular supervisory visits from social workers and health issues are discussed in these meetings.

The Children's Directorate has established a number of corporate initiatives to promote an integrated approach to the provision of health care services. The Directorate has also established a Health and Social Care Development Group to monitor practice and to improve health care.

The specialist post of nurse for LAC promotes the health of children in the looked after system. Health visitors and school nurses are directly involved in the annual health care assessments for children and young people who are looked after. A flexible approach to these assessments has been adopted, particularly in relation to older children. Over 90% of looked after children have an up-to-date health assessment. Case records contain evidence of the involvement of the nurse in the health care of individual children.

The issue of consents for medical treatments for children and young people is not always clear. Consent forms are not always signed, or are signed incorrectly.

## **Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe**

The provision is good.

The fostering service is part of Halton Borough Council, and all staff and people involved in the fostering service are employed subject to its recruitment and checking procedures.

Foster carers are assessed and approved by the fostering service. Foster carers homes are clean and comfortable. Children have their own bedrooms that are homely and well furnished. The policies and practices of the fostering team ensure that children are cared for safely.

The fostering service has an effective matching process that places children with carers who are approved as able to meet their needs. The placement of children with appropriate carers has not been compromised as a result of the relative lack of placement choice, or the need for the service to recruit more carers.

Some foster placement agreements do not contain accurate, up to date information and therefore do not always reflect the current needs of a child or describe the actions of foster carers in supporting children. Some are not signed by all parties to the placement.

The fostering panel has a new independent chair. The panel has clear written policies that are implemented in practice. The chair is clear about the role of the panel in approving carers, in maintaining a focus on child care and in providing information to the service on issues of quality assurance. The current vacancies in the family placement team mean that a social worker from the fostering service is not able to be a member of the panel, although the acting principal manager occupies that role. A social worker from the adoption service also sits as a panel member. The panel is seeking to recruit a member who has been placed with foster carers.

## **Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do**

The provision is outstanding.

Assessments, care plans and reviews describe the individual needs of children, and the actions taken to ensure care is provided to promote all aspects of a child's development. The matching process identifies issues in relation to children's background, heritage and individual support.

Children's educational needs are identified in initial assessments. The statutory review system monitors the progress of children's education, and foster carers are given support if it is felt to be necessary. Foster carers are made aware that they have the primary responsibility for supporting the young person in their education.

Carers are supported by a range of integrated resources to ensure children and young people have maximum opportunity to achieve their potential.

Children's case files provide information about the needs of a young person and the support they receive, including that from the intensive support team. Children and young people have statements of Special Educational Need and Personal Educational Plans (PEP). The introduction of an on-line system for PEPs has improved the completion rate of PEPs so that 68% of looked after children now have one.

### **Helping children make a positive contribution**

The provision is good.

Carers are aware that children have the right to see parents and other relatives unless the Court has decided that this is unsafe. Carers are supported in maintaining and promoting contact. The frequency, nature and practical arrangements for each individual child's needs for contact are identified in the care planning process, and monitored through the statutory reviews.

Foster carers are told of the need for them to be aware of and record any details that the impact of contact can have on a child. Information about contact is provided to social workers. Contact issues are raised by supervising social workers at their visits and through supervision. Contact is also discussed at the carer's annual review.

Children are given their own written guide to the fostering service. This describes the importance given to listening to children and promoting their involvement in the decision making process concerning their care. Information is provided about the complaints procedure.

Records demonstrate that children's views are obtained and that they are involved in meetings about their care.

### **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is satisfactory.

Pathway assessments and pathway plans are completed to identify any practical and emotional support and training that a young person may need to make the move into independence. The information supplied by the Directorate said that 82% of young people of 15 years and over had a pathway plan. This is a reduction from last year.

Records of statutory reviews show that the issue of moving on is raised and monitored as part of the care planning process. Support from the Connexions service is available to assist young people over the age of 13, and records show that Connexions staff are involved with young people in supporting their overall development into adulthood.

Training for carers to enable them to assist young people into independence has not yet been developed as there is no training co-ordinator in post, although it is intended that this training will be provided as soon as possible.

Foster care allowances and payments are updated annually and information given to carers in the allowances guide. The current allowances guide runs from April 2007 to March 2008. This sets out in detail the allowances paid in all circumstances relating to carers looking after children. It includes allowances for children of working age, holiday allowances, clothing allowances and discretionary payments. There is also an appendix showing the rates and criteria for enhanced allowances. Foster carers say they are aware of the allowances due to them and are supported in matters relating to finance by supervising social workers if needed.

## **Organisation**

The organisation is good.

The team has four vacancies from an establishment of seven posts. The principal manager has been in an 'acting' position for fourteen months. The post of training co-ordinator is also vacant. Despite this the team is well managed. Staff are involved in the managing of the work and morale is remains high. A restructuring of the team has enabled experienced staff to focus on supporting carers. In addition one agency worker is employed to support carers.

Sessional staff undertake approvals and assessments of carers. The team feels that they have been well supported by senior managers. The commitment to child centred practice is evident throughout the team. Despite the temporary staffing difficulties the team has been able to review its operation and develop its practices.

Matching processes remain robust and ensure that children are placed with carers who are assessed and approved to meet their needs. Carers are subject to rigorous competency-based assessments and receive a regular training programme based on their own individual development plan. The vacancy of the training co-ordinator post has meant that some training programmes, like first aid and moving young people into independence, have not been fully developed or provided.

The Children's Directorate keeps records of all allegations and complaints and the actions taken to investigate these issues. The outcome of investigations shows that where allegations are supported then appropriate actions such as re-assessment, further training and support or resignation or deregistration take place.

Foster carers receive regular supervision. Records show that carers are fully involved in the process. Carers say that they are well supported by social workers from the team.

Each carer has an annual review. This is conducted by an independent reviewing officer (IRO). There is some confusion about the ability of the review to alter or recommend minor changes to the approval status of carers without reference to the fostering panel.

Not all foster carers have accurate and up-to date foster care agreements that reflect



their current status, and contain the information identified in Schedule 5 of the Fostering Services Regulations 2002.

Foster carers are expected to receive information about children placed with them in accordance with the Directorate's procedures. Some placements are made without this information being presented, or the information being out of date or incomplete. Practice in relation to the availability of birth certificates and copies of legal documents such as care orders is unclear and variable. Information about the complete placement history is not available on the foster carer's file.

Carers files show that the fostering service works hard to obtain all the necessary information, but its power to enforce the procedures is limited.

Not all unannounced visits are recorded as having taken place. In addition the specific responsibilities of supervising social workers during unannounced visits are unclear and practice is variable.

Foster carers record significant events affecting the care of the children placed with them. The involvement of children in completing these records is unclear, as are the guidelines for ownership, location and monitoring. In addition the completion and storage of computer based records completed by some foster carers means existing procedures are not adequate.

The service has a number of carers defined as providing 'kinship' or 'family and friends' care. Support to these carers has been affected by vacancy of this post. The development of policies and practices for identifying and supporting kinship care placements has not been fully implemented, and practice has suffered as a result. The practice guidelines that define the working relationship between the child care teams and the family placement service in kinship care placements have not yet been fully implemented.

## **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):

- review the system for establishing and recording consents for medical treatments for children (NMS 12)
- ensure all placements have a written foster placement agreement that accurately reflects the needs of the child and tasks of the foster carer (NMS 8)
- ensure that every foster carer has a written foster care agreement that accurately reflects their approval status and contains all the information required by Schedule 5 of the Fostering Services Regulations 2002 (NMS 22)
- ensure that the information given to children placed with them is accurate,

completed in full and given in accordance with Directorate's practice guidelines (NMS 24)

- ensure that changes to the approval status of foster carers are authorised by the fostering panel (NMS 30)
- review the policy and practice of foster carer recording to ensure it meets the needs of children and data protection requirements and is consistently applied across the service (NMS 24)
- review the system for monitoring unannounced visits to carers (NMS 22).