

# Bolton Children's Services - Fostering

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

Bolton local authority fostering service assesses, supports, trains and reviews a range of carers to ensure placements meet children's assessed needs and personal preferences.

Their stated aim is to 'safeguard, support and promote the best interests of children, young people and their families through the provision of fostering services which ensure stable, secure, safe and effective care for all children'.

### Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This judgement is reached following a six day inspection, when children and young people were visited in their carer's homes and spoken to during various activities organised by the service. Discussions also took place with carers at support groups, panels and training sessions were observed, records and files examined and meetings held with staff and managers.

This quality rating best reflects the fact that this fostering service provides a good range of carers to meet the diverse needs of fostered children, many of whom are very happy, settled and feel safe in long term placements. They also have lots of opportunities to enjoy and achieve.

It is well managed by a dedicated child focused team who provide clear direction and regular supervision to a suitably qualified and experienced staff team. In turn, they provide appropriate support to carers. There is a good range of courses on offer to all those working for the service.

The service is committed to positive change and fostered children and young people are actively involved in this ongoing process.

When the fostering and adoption team split into two teams approximately two years ago, it was a difficult time especially because it resulted in a shortage of staff in the fostering team, but this is now resolved and clear progress is being made. Very experienced carers say, 'Bolton is such a good organisation that when difficulties arose we felt marooned, but it's fine again now' and, 'it is much better. There is not the same unrest. We rely on the fostering service and because they are more settled, we are too. Everything is fitting into place again'.

## **Improvements since the last inspection**

This service has provided a consistently good service since it was first inspected and the managers are dedicated to constant improvement and development. Any requirements and recommendations made are efficiently addressed.

Despite a significant increase in looked after children in the last 12 months, the majority have been placed in Bolton, thereby ensuring important relationships can be maintained. They also benefit from the continuity of school and healthcare arrangements. Moreover, since the last inspection there are more stringent monitoring of outside placements to ensure children remain safe and happy.

A significant improvement has been made with the establishment of three additional support groups and the marked increase of kinship carers attending and enjoying training.

## **Helping children to be healthy**

The provision is good.

There are good arrangements in place to help ensure that children and young people in foster care remain fit and healthy. Most say they 'always' get support and advice about being healthy and they enjoy a variety of homemade meals, lots of vegetables, salad and fresh fruit. They are actively encouraged to get plenty of fresh air and to experience a variety of exercise including running, cycling, cheerleading, swimming, gym, ballet and football. All children under five are no longer placed with carers who smoke in line with the British Association for Fostering and Adoption.

Carers say they receive the information they need prior to placement to ensure they meet individual assessed health needs. They also confirm that children and young people are registered with a doctor and a dentist and receive any treatment they need. The service has introduced innovative measures to address the national problem of access to a dentist and carers report a marked improvement. Children's immunisations are up to date and most have had a statutory health check within the last 12 months. Statistics show that performance in both these areas are above the national percentage. Some carers provide respite care for children with particularly complex health needs which is much appreciated by parents.

Young people are actively involved in revising the policies and procedures in place, specifically about the health needs of looked after children, and all carers have to attend core training in first aid, health and safety and promoting health needs. They can also attend more specialised training as needed including drugs and alcohol misuse, the management of epilepsy, asthma, tube feeding and tracheotomy care.

Carers and children clearly benefit from the services of a Looked After Children's Nurse, a clinical psychologist and a worker who will offer support to help to stabilise difficult placements. They can also access a multi agency substance misuse team and the Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services.

Carers are clear about their expectation to maintain health records and appointments, which are monitored by supervising social workers, and shared in statutory reviews. Social workers report increased confidence in carers to advocate on behalf of children placed with them.

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

The provision is good.

Overall, there are good arrangements in place to ensure fostered children and all members of the carer's household remain safe.

This fostering service benefits from particularly good managers. They are all well qualified, very experienced and child focused. Moreover, they are always seeking to improve upon the service provided to children, their families and carers. Staff and carers consistently appreciate their accessibility, clear direction and support.

Children and young people say they are 'very happy and settled', feel safe and well cared for in their placements and are treated 'like one of the family'. Social workers confirm 'really positive placements' and 'excellent care'. Comments include, 'carers offer consistent, warm and reliable care to the children' and 'their relationship with the children continues to be second to none'.

Carers provide clean, warm and comfortable homes which are maintained to a good standard. Children and young people like their bedrooms which are a good size. They are suitably decorated and furnished and have a full range of age appropriate toys and the most up to date equipment. Many carers however, complained about the poor quality of some of the equipment provided by the current suppliers.

Clear documentation is in place, including safe caring policies and health and safety checklists which are both updated at least annually and fully discussed at carer's reviews. Carers are suitably trained in safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children placed with them.

Despite new systems implemented since the last inspection some carers remain dissatisfied with the information they receive prior to placement which they need to safeguard everyone in the household. Comments include, 'we didn't get any reports' and 'sometimes a placement comes with hardly any information'.

Good complaints and allegation records are maintained showing they are quickly responded to, all taken seriously, fully investigated and outcomes reached. Any actions needed to improve services are efficiently put into place. This has included carers attending additional safe caring sessions and managing challenging behaviour training.

There are well established recruitment and selection procedures in place to ensure a safe workforce and staff files maintained by human resources now include all the

details as required by the regulations. They are also better organised and indexed. However, the system for the renewal of criminal record checks every three years is not sufficiently robust. Most of the panel member's files were in good order, including telephone follow ups of two written references. Not all however, include proof of identity and evidence of relevant qualifications as required by Schedule 1 of the Regulations.

Panel processes are conducted in an efficient and professional manner. Members offer a wealth of expertise across children's services, and consequently the discussions reflect all aspects of children's needs. The panel benefit from detailed minutes and receiving papers in good time to thoroughly prepare themselves. Good matches are given high priority and exemptions for the few carers over approved numbers are discussed in detail. Members continue to receive relevant training appropriate to their role. Recently for example, they looked at the specific support needs of kinship carers.

The panel has consistently exercised its quality assurance function and will defer decisions if there is not sufficient information to make a fully informed decision. Regular statistics are presented to the panel by a quality assurance officer in line with the standards.

A good system is in place to ensure timely reviews are undertaken. The established review panel ensures formal legal processes are met but in a relaxed and more informal setting. Carers appreciate the opportunity to meet with managers of the service and to share the highs and lows of the last 12 months. Carers in Bolton benefit from a loyalty bonus of £500 following a successful review which includes attending required training courses.

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

The provision is outstanding.

There are excellent opportunities for looked after children and young people to reach their potential. A priority in Bolton is to improve their educational attainments and a number of initiatives are in place including direct access to an educational psychologist.

Carers and young people were consulted in the redesign of the new user friendly personal education plans and they are increasingly attending the meetings. Carers say they are especially helpful in accessing additional support for children who are struggling, including learning mentors and private tuition. Comments include, 'the educational psychologist service intervened and it worked wonders. The child is doing really well in school now', 'the learning mentors really helped a child going through transition from primary to high school. It worked really well and the young person would not have coped without it'.

Children confirm they receive the right help so they can be successful in education. Outcomes in all three key stages are favourable with the general school population

and some young people are looking forward to University.

This fostering service values diversity and children and young people are clearly treated and respected as individuals in their own right. Policies are in place, training provided, impact assessments undertaken, as is legally required, and a good range of carers recruited from different backgrounds, skills and experiences to meet fostered children's diverse and unique needs.

All children of very different abilities enjoy a wide range of constructive leisure activities and are actively encouraged to pursue specific interests and talents. These include fishing, drawing, sculpting, horse riding, knitting, keyboard, power chair football, dancing, pottery and drama. Social workers of children with profound disabilities say, 'carers develop keen insights into each child's personality and individual characteristics and respect and value each child who visits', 'they give all the children who visit a fun and happy time' and, 'they benefit from lots of attention and positive stimulation'.

The short break service continues to provide flexible, needs led services to disabled children and their families as part of a clear, coordinated and individualised support package of care. The manager knows the carers, children and young people really well and can therefore ensure good matches. Parents are very appreciative of this respite and it has ensured many families have successfully stayed together and children and young people have not entered the looked after system. Everyone involved are clear that parents are the main carers and are responsible for the promotion of health and educational needs.

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

The provision is outstanding.

There are outstanding opportunities for fostered children to contribute to their day to day lives and to their future. These include a dedicated website which young people were involved in developing, participation in statutory reviews and personal education planning meetings and written comments ascertained for carers annual reviews.

They are also actively involved in developing and improving services in all the outcome areas including the recruitment, selection and training of staff. Recently a consultation weekend was arranged to consider with young people how services could be improved for those at risk of sexual exploitation and in the summer the safeguarding board hosted an event to seek the views of looked after children in respect to conferences.

Participation underpins the day to day work of the Bridges team in particular, who continue to develop innovative ways of improving consultation opportunities for disabled young people. They are recognised within Northern shared care meetings as forerunners and often used within the authority as an example of good practice. Comments from colleagues include, 'they have done some fantastic stuff', 'we have



learned loads from them', and, 'they amaze me. They have pushed out of their comfort zone'. Recent projects include a music group, a photography group, a football team, a drama project leading to a DVD and the production of a book written by disabled children and their siblings about living with disability. Young people also sit on the cash panel, making decisions about awards given as part of the youth opportunities fund.

Carers' birth children continue to really enjoy their own established group where they can discuss their feelings about fostering in a safe environment and experience a range of activities. They say, 'it's great to share experiences with other young people who know what it's like' and, 'the group is very welcoming and we have made new friendships'.

Contact continues to be actively promoted in line with legal directions and young people's choices. This includes travelling long distances and contact in carer's own homes. Young people confirm they are happy with current arrangements. Carers know they must record any changes in children's behaviour before and after contact and most supervising social workers are reading and signing diaries at each visit.

### **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is satisfactory.

Most young people say that they are helped to think about and prepare for their future. They are given the opportunity to engage in age appropriate activities to develop their skills including cooking, using public transport, further education, part time employment and budgeting. Disabled young people take full advantage of the weekly experiences offered to them by the shared care team and friendships, confidence, social and independence skills are clearly developing.

Many fostered young people benefit from the Looked After Supported Employment Scheme which successfully offers a good range of local employment opportunities. Young people say, 'I was at college & needed some building work experience. It really helped my course' and, 'going on the scheme got me out of bed, gave me money, IT experience which I enjoy, and contact with a lot of people which will help my future. I want to go in the police'.

There is an effective transition system in Bolton to ensure young people are allocated an after care worker and pathway plans are in place in full consultation with young people prior to reaching 16. Moreover, some placements are funded beyond 18 years if individuals do not feel ready to live independently.

Mainstream carers are satisfied with the fees and allowances they receive and no delays in payments are reported, but there is confusion about their entitlement to holiday pay. There is also some disquiet, from kinship carers about the money they receive. They say, 'we are fostering on the cheap', 'we feel like a mug' and, 'we want to be treated the same'.

Payments to all carers remain high on the political agenda with increases in the last 12 months of 18 per cent. Assurances are given that this will continue to rise incrementally until the minimum government guidelines are achieved. The recently updated procedures also allow for discretionary payments in particular circumstances which specifically promote the five outcomes for children.

## Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

The Statement of Purpose clearly sets out the aims and objectives of the fostering service and accurately reflects its policies and practices. There is also an established system in place to ensure the document is reviewed by elected members once a year and amended as required.

There are age appropriate children's guides available in different formats to meet identified needs and a DVD on young people's rights which looked after children contributed to. Young people confirm they know how to complain should the need arise and how to access independent advocacy services.

There are particularly good and well established management structures in place with clear lines of accountability. They are suitably qualified, experienced and child focused. Staff feel supported and benefit from regular, good quality supervision. They confirm manageable workloads, good administrative support and are happy with the working environment.

Bolton has a good retention record resulting in some very experienced carers of, for example, 26 and 15 years. They all have a named supervising social worker and most have had the same worker for the last 12 months so good relationships are established. Carers appreciate the fact that the service is committed to funding an agency worker until the one remaining permanent post is filled. The recruitment has been delayed to maintain a high calibre workforce.

Comments from carers include, 'we receive excellent support, no doubt about it', 'very practical support, always on the other end of a phone', 'she has been there from the beginning and we enjoy a very easy relationship', 'we feel valued & respected' and, 'we get plenty of training opportunities and support is good. I would not have been caring this long without such good support'.

The service continues to give high priority to staff and carer's personal development. There is an excellent range of courses on offer and the delivery remains at a high standard. Participants can choose a range of venues and times to fit in with the children and crèche facilities are provided if needed. An increasing number of courses are provided in Urdu.

This fostering service provides an excellent choice of carer's support groups to meet different needs which offers another arena for gaining knowledge and insight. The kinship carers, for example, had a very informative and interactive session on drugs

and alcohol misuse.

There are established systems in place to ensure assessments, approvals and reviews of carers are managed and implemented effectively. Children and carers files are in good order and robust audit systems in place. Notifiable events are well recorded and details forwarded to Ofsted as required.

Bolton continues to recognise the value of family and friends as carers, reflected in the fact that 50 per cent of approvals in the last 12 months have been from family and friends. They are offered the same training opportunities as mainstream carers and are well supported by specialist workers and their own dedicated support group. They say, 'staff are very good. We do feel listened to and changes are made', 'the training is useful, especially meeting other family and friend carers' and, 'since we have been supported within the fostering team, it is much more helpful. They ring us. Before, we used to do all the chasing'.

## 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	ensure panel members' files include all the particulars as specified in Schedule 1. (Regulation 20)	21/12/2007

### Recommendations

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

- ensure the equipment provided for fostered children is of a good quality (NMS 6.6)
- ensure all carers are provided with full information about the foster child and family to enable the carer to protect the foster child and other members of the household (NMS 9.7)
- ensure an effective system is in the place for the three yearly renewal of Criminal Record Bureau checks. (NMS 15.4)