

Bury Children's Services - Fostering

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

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Inspector	Jeffrey Banham
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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

Bury fostering service recruits, assesses, trains and supports carers to provide a wide range of services to looked after children and their families. There are currently 138 approved households providing time limited interventions, respite, short term and permanent placements for 210 children and young people whilst 53 are living with family and friends carers.

There is a short break scheme specifically developed to keep young people out of the care system and a home from home scheme that provides regular and planned short breaks to disabled children and young people. Both of these work in partnership with families to ensure they meet identified needs.

Summary

The overall quality rating is inadequate - notice of action to improve.

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

The main weakness for the service is its procedures and practice in relation to approving and supporting family and friends as carers. The lack of a systematic and organisationally robust approach to this area of work has resulted in insufficient attention being given to significant aspects of approving carers, safeguarding children and supporting foster carers. However, the service is aware of the need for improvement and is able to demonstrate its commitment to improving this area of its work. Foster carers are well supported by the family placement team. The team works well with other parts of the children's service to achieve good outcomes for children and young people.

Improvements since the last inspection

Five actions were identified at the last inspection. Two have been satisfactorily addressed.

Training and support is provided to foster carers to ensure they are competent to administer medication to children safely. Carers are given sufficient information about children who are placed or who are about to be placed to enable them to provide care that meets children's needs. Four recommendations were also made and two have been acted upon. A new payment system for foster carers has eradicated delays in the payment of allowances. Certificates of social care registration are placed on personnel files.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is satisfactory.

Foster carers are supported by the family placement team and other professionals such as the named nurse for looked after children to ensure children's health needs are identified and met. Routine and specialist health care is provided for children and young people as required. Foster carers are aware of their responsibilities and ensure healthy lifestyles are promoted through the provision of appropriate nutrition, exercise and hobbies. The supervision of placements provided by family placement workers and the statutory reviewing process ensures that children's progress is adequately monitored. Foster carers have the training and skills to ensure children's health care is given sufficient priority at all times.

Specialist services, such as a substance misuse worker and Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) support foster carers when these services are identified as being needed.

The system for ensuring that children's health care is regularly assessed has been affected by a temporary shortfall in staff resources. This has resulted in a reduction in the number of annual health care assessments being undertaken. The service is aware of this issue and is taking steps to improve the rate of provision of assessments so that the health care needs of all children can be accurately identified. The service is supported by one specialist nurse for looked after children. She is responsible for aspects of both service development and clinical provision. The service is aware of the potential impact on support for children's health care, should the nurse not be available.

The delegation of consent to foster carers for the medical treatment of children in their care is not always clear. This compromises the ability of the foster carer to provide health care when it is required. For example, in one case records stated that the authority had delegated to a foster carer the ability to consent to medical treatment, even though the authority did not have parental responsibility.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is inadequate.

Overall, the service has a range of systems and procedures that are designed to ensure that children are cared for safely and that their welfare is promoted. Staff are appropriately checked and all are subject to the authority's recruitment procedures to ensure they are safe to work with children. Foster carers are supported and trained to provide safe care and are aware of their responsibilities to children missing from home, to appropriate management of behaviour and to children who are bullied. Systems in place include policies on foster carer assessments and checks on carers, matching of children with foster carers who can meet their needs and the application of safe care policies for individual children.

The organisation and practice by the children and families service to its recruitment

and support of family and friends foster carers has significant deficiencies that have led to risks to the safe care of children in these placements being increased. Responsibility for the assessment and initial support of carers rests outside the fostering service. This has resulted in some cases of children being placed with foster carers not approved to take them. For example, in one case a child on a care order was placed with relatives in 2005. The service has not yet completed the approval of the relatives as foster carers. Children are placed without foster care agreements or foster placement agreements that set out the care to be provided. The health and safety assessments of foster carers' homes is not always completed in a timely fashion.

Case records do not always provide clear information, such as the date of placement and checks from the Criminal Record Bureau are not always obtained in good time. This compromises the ability of the service to satisfy itself that carers are safe to care for children.

The system for approving emergency placement under Regulation 38 of the Fostering Services Regulations 2002 is not clear or robust and leads to placements lasting longer than the regulations allow. The fostering service has a policy of re-assessing the health of foster carers only if specific health issues come to light or the foster carer applies to change their fostering status. This can lead to carers' state of health not being sufficiently monitored. For example, one foster carer has been caring for children for 19 years without any health re-assessment. In addition, the service does not always implement its own policy of reassessing the health of carers who change their status.

The fostering panel is independently chaired and the membership provides a wide range of expertise to support the work of the family placement service. The chair of the panel is able to raise any issues of concern with the managers of the family placement service and provides an effective quality assurance service. Some aspects of the panel process do not enhance its ability to provide an effective assessment of the items for consideration. Information on the health of applicants and the health and safety checks on carers' homes is not always provided in advance as part of the panel papers. The views of children in placement are not always clearly set out as part of the annual review of foster carers. There is no clear policy on the definition of two individuals who constitute a couple living at the same address providing separate references for a foster carer. It is not clear from the panel minutes as to what the written decision of the agency decision maker is referring.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The fostering service gives a high priority to meeting the educational needs of children and young people. Foster carers are supported to have high aspirations for the young people in their care and to work with them to develop their potential. Foster carers are aware of their responsibilities and can access training to promote educational achievement. Young people are given practical support in the form of computers, learning mentors and workers from Connexions to support planning for

education and employment. Good arrangements are in place to provide financial support to young people in higher and further education. There are good opportunities for children to pursue individual interests and foster carers actively promote and support hobbies and interests.

The service ensures that carers respect children's ethnic, cultural and linguistic background. Foster carers are supported from initial recruitment to full approval and placement to recognise the importance of promoting and recognising individual ethnic and cultural diversity.

The home from home service and the short break service provide flexible care for young children people with disabilities. Parents are confident about the care their children receive and maintain close relationships with carers to promote consistency of care.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Foster carers actively support children and young in maintaining and promoting their contacts with significant family and friends. The importance of contact is recognised by carers and developed through their initial assessments, training, supervision and support. Care plans set out contact arrangements and describe the responsibilities of those involved in caring for children. Foster carers are flexible and innovative in supporting contacts. The work undertaken by them and the family placement service as a whole is recognised throughout the department as a crucial element in the meeting of the needs of the children for whom they care. Foster carers are themselves supported by the family placement service in dealing with difficult or complex contact issues that may arise.

There are a range of opportunities available to ensure children and young people are consulted and involved in the decisions affecting their care according to their needs and abilities. The statutory review process ensures children's views are taken into account. Groups such as 'the voice' and 'madhouse' focus on young people and enable them to develop and communicate their wishes and feelings on issues affecting their care. The advocacy scheme offers young people to have people independent of the service with whom they can talk and who can ensure that their voice is heard over matters of importance to them.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is satisfactory.

The fostering service makes good use of a range of resources to support foster carers in preparing young people for adulthood. Foster carers have access to training that develops their skills in helping young people learn how to cook, budget and gain work experience and employment. Specialist assistance is provided by services such as 'connexions' and the leaving care team. Foster carers have high aspirations for young people and work flexibly to develop appropriate skills. Young people are

encouraged to remain in placement in order to have a stable base from which to move into independence. Transition plans set out the financial support available to carers in supporting young people. Pathway plans set out the needs of individual young people and provide the framework of support and the tasks others must undertake to promote security and develop skills as young people move into independence. Young people are fully involved in drawing up the plans.

Foster carers receive allowances that are revised each year and which enable them to support the children and young people in their care. The new payment process to foster carers has provided them with a more efficient and effective way of ensuring payments are made in full and on time.

Organisation

The organisation is inadequate.

The fostering service is clear about its objectives and its primary purpose to recruit, train and support foster carers. Foster carers are supported to provide safe and effective care by a range of activities including formal supervision, out of hours support and unannounced visits. A detailed training programme ensures that carers and staff have opportunities to develop and enhance the skills to meet the needs of the children and young people in their care. Family placement workers are well supported by managers who provide advice and supervision to staff as required. The family placement service works well with other parts of the children's services to provide good outcomes for children. The promotion of equality and diversity is good, with children being placed with foster carers who understand and can meet their specific needs in relation to religion, race and ethnicity.

Some parts of the practices and organisation of the service do not provide a sufficiently robust response to approving and supporting foster carers and the children in their care. Assessments of family and friends as carers are not always analytical and assessment reports are not routinely shared with carers so they are aware of the contents and what will be discussed at the fostering panel. Foster carers are subject to annual review but there is no independent scrutiny of foster carers' practice as part of the reviewing process. Foster carers files do not always contain sufficient and accessible basic details of their status and history. Foster carers are not always clear about the practice of keeping records on children in their care and some carers and children do not receive regular visits from social workers. The way in which the service to family and friends as carers is organised has resulted in significant deficiencies in the application of fostering service regulations and the national minimum standards. The safety of children in these placements is compromised by the lack of rigorous and consistent implementation of good practice.

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
12	ensure each foster carer is provided with appropriate information regarding the arrangements for giving consent to the child's medical or dental examination or treatment (Regulation 17 (3)(b))	31/01/2009
6	ensure that assessments of any person whom it is considered may be suitable to become a foster carer include particulars of the accommodation (Regulation 27, Schedule 3)	31/01/2009
8	ensure the service has entered into a written foster placement agreement with all foster carers relating to the child (Regulation 34, Schedule 6)	31/01/2009
22	ensure the service has entered into a written foster care agreement with the foster carer (Regulation 28, Schedule 5)	31/01/2009
8	ensure that children are placed with foster parents who are approved by the authority (Regulation 34 (1)).	31/01/2009

Recommendations

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

- review the policies and procedures of the fostering panel and ensure they are implemented in practice (NMS 30)
- review the management of the systems and structure for approving, supporting and training family and friends as carers (NMS 32)
- review the policy of obtaining and reviewing information about the health of foster carers (NMS 17)
- review the policy and procedures for obtaining the views of children placed with foster carers as part of the annual review of foster carers (NMS 21)
- review the practice of foster carers understanding and writing of case records on children in their care (NMS 25)
- ensure foster carers' files contain all significant information relevant to the running of the foster carer service (NMS 25).