

# 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 the assessed needs and personal preferences of children looked after by the authority who need foster carers. The service provides mainstream carers and enhanced carers who have completed more training and gained more experience. Shared care foster placements for children with disabilities are arranged through the authority's children with disabilities service which works closely with the main fostering team.

### Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This was an announced inspection of Bolton Metropolitan Borough Council's fostering service. The purpose of the inspection was to assess the service's compliance with the fostering National Minimum Standards and regulations. All the key standards were inspected under the five outcome areas of being healthy, staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution and economic wellbeing. The effectiveness of the service's organisation was also inspected. Being healthy, staying safe, making a positive contribution, economic wellbeing and organisation were rated as good while enjoying and achieving was judged as outstanding.

Bolton's fostering service is a well managed service that provides good outcomes for children. It is good at promoting their health and keeping them safe. It is also good at consulting with children and involving them in the way the service operates. The service provides children with outstanding support to help them achieve and enjoy. It is excellent at promoting equality and diversity and provides very strong support for children's education.

There are some areas in which the service needs to improve. Foster carers' reviews do not take into account the views of children placed with the carers enough and first reviews of the shared care foster carers are not referred to the fostering panel as they should be. Some areas of the checking the suitability of applicants to foster and their homes are not robust enough and unannounced visits to foster carers' homes by fostering social workers do not always happen as frequently as they should.

### Improvements since the last inspection

Since the last inspection the service has improved the robustness of its recruitment procedure for members of fostering panel. It has developed a process for ensuring that staff members have Criminal Records Bureau checks updated every three years.

It has also ensured that foster carers receive as full information as possible about children when they are placed and that they are provided with good quality equipment needed to care for children.

### **Helping children to be healthy**

The provision is good.

Children's health is promoted well. The authority's carers receive first aid training on a mandatory basis and other training is provided relating to children's general or specific health needs. For example, training in substance misuse, autism, tube feeding and epilepsy rescue medication is provided for carers with children who need care in these areas. The authority provides foster carers with training and advice about healthy eating and healthy lifestyles as part of their preparation to foster training and on an ongoing basis.

Arrangements regarding who is the person with the authority to consent to children's routine and emergency medical treatment are identified, agreed and made plain to foster carers. This ensures that children are able to receive any treatment they need promptly. Children are registered with the primary health care services they need and they receive very good support for any specialist health needs they have. The authority provides support for children as needed in areas such as healthy lifestyles, drug and alcohol and sexual health through a range of recourses including the authority's Looked after Children Education Services (LACES) and the advocacy and other support services provided. Children's health is well monitored with effective arrangements in place for them to have annual medical checks as children 'looked after' by the local authority.

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

The provision is good.

The authority's fostering agency visits foster carer's homes regularly and ensures that they are appropriate and homely places for children to live. It has a range of health and safety checklists that it uses to monitor the physical safety of foster carers' homes. However, only one of these is sufficiently wide ranging to ensure that homes are checked for all eventualities.

The authority has effective arrangements for placing children with foster carers who are well matched to their needs. It ensures that children are placed locally wherever possible and has good information sharing systems that support the making of planned placements. Where emergency placements are made the authority usually ensures that the information it knows about children is passed onto their new carers quickly. The authority matches children and carers effectively to ensure that carers are able to meet children's needs. Exemptions from the usual fostering limit are used rarely and, if they are agreed, these are well monitored. Placement stability is good with high levels of support being provided to foster carers and children from the fostering team, LACES, children's mental health services and other avenues. The

authority uses an additional sheet to record signatures agreeing to the foster placement agreement to supplement the electronic record used as this has no section for signatures.

The authority provides children with safe foster placements that are, generally, well monitored and risk assessed. The fostering service provides mandatory training in safe caring, child protection and behaviour management to its foster carers so they are able to care for children safely. Foster carers develop safe caring policies relevant to the children they are caring for and these are generally appropriately detailed. Children know how to complain and the authority has a clear procedure for responding to any complaints, allegations or significant events and for notifying the relevant people.

The authority is robust in its assessment of foster carers. It checks their backgrounds carefully to ensure they are suitable to care for children. Staff recruitment is, similarly, rigorous with new staff members being fully checked before they commence their duties.

The authority's fostering panel is thorough in its consideration of cases presented to it. It makes sure that it receives full information on which to base its deliberations and makes clear recommendations to the agency decision maker. Panel is correctly comprised in line with the National Minimum Standards. However, as the fostering manager is a panel member this could lead to a potential need to declare an interest in cases that the manager may have supervised. The records of panel meetings do not make these situations clear and as a consequence the manager's objectivity is not clearly identified for each case discussed.

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

The provision is outstanding.

The authority's fostering service is focussed and proactive in providing a service that meets children's individual needs. As such children and their families receive a service that is outstanding in the way it values them and supports their diverse needs. The authority is successful in recruiting foster carers from a range of different ethnic backgrounds and, as such, provides culturally appropriate placements for children. It provides carers with training in equality and diversity and cultural awareness and gives foster carers from minority ethnic backgrounds very good support. The fostering team reflects the ethnically diverse community of the authority. Children with disabilities are well served by the authority's disability service of which the shared care fostering service is a part. This provides children with disabilities and their families with holistic support packages based on their individual needs.

The authority also provides children with extremely good support for their education. It monitors educational achievement closely and uses the information to direct the services provided. The authority's educational data demonstrates good and improving levels of fostered children's educational achievement.

The authority's LACES team includes an educational psychologist, three learning mentors and a specialist assessing teacher. This team works directly with children both in and out of school on an individual basis and also works to identify, support and monitor school placements for children. Personal Education Plans (PEP) are developed promptly for all children looked after by the authority. These are then updated regularly as necessary. In reality this can lead to some children having their PEPs reviewed every few months based on the close work being carried out to support them. This team works hard to promote and support school attendance and reduce the number of changes of school experienced by foster children. Significantly, no child has had to change school in the last twelve months because of a change of foster replacement. This stability helps improve children's education.

The authority provides a range of more informal services to children either directly or in conjunction with other agencies. These help promote children's wider education and development. A children's rights service, commissioned from an independent organisation, undertakes a lot of direct work to support and empower children and activities and mentoring are arranged from other organisations locally. Very good and accessible information is provided to children about how they can access free educational resources. This information helps signpost children and their carers to service that will support them. Grants are available for children to use to purchase more expensive educational equipment. A range of leisure activities take place for children on an evening, weekend and over school holidays.

The shared care fostering service that is part of the authority's disability service provides good and flexible support to children and families based on their individual needs. This allows them to experience a positive lifestyle whilst promoting the involvement of families as the people central to their children's lives.

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

The provision is good.

The service supports and promotes contact between children and their families. These arrangements are taken into account when matching children with carers and the authority ensures that, wherever possible children are placed with foster carers locally. The authority has a team of workers employed to support contact between children and families. This team provides transport and supervises contact where necessary. Contact support workers provide good written reports for social workers about events, behaviour and relationships during contact and keep foster carers informed of any issues. Social workers also supervise contact while waiting for referrals to the contact team to be allocated and other sources of support are also available.

Children are well consulted by the authority about their care. Foster carers listen to children and take notice of their views and effective arrangements are in place to consult children prior to their Looked After Children (LAC) reviews and to involve them in considering their own care plan and how things are going for them. The

responsibility for seeking children's views for the reviews of their foster carers lies with children's social workers. Children's views are not sought and reported for these reviews in enough detail and as such children views of their foster carers are not given sufficient importance.

The authority makes great effort to involve children and encourage wider participation in the authority's provision of services. A children's rights service, commissioned from an independent organisation, is very active and has undertaken a lot of work with the fostering service. For example, fostered children are involved in the interview process for staff applying to work within the fostering team. They have also developed the authority's excellent new children's guide. Children also take part in elements of foster care training. For example, a child with disabilities speaks about how disability is viewed and feels as part of training for shared care foster carers. The authority's LACES team works closely with young people supporting education and activities and consult with children in this way. Mentors are provided for children through the Bolton Lads and Girls club and the children's rights service provides advocacy services for children. The authority has a website aimed at children giving lots of information useful to children who are looked after by the authority.

### **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is good.

The authority is continuing to work to ensure that the planning to assist children to leave care starts when it should and supports children's moves into independence. This planning has not been started as promptly as it should in all cases but the situation is improving now as staffing issues in children's social work teams are resolved. Similarly, transition planning for the move into adult services for children with disabilities is becoming more effective. Procedures are in place for children to remain with foster carers past their eighteenth birthday under supported lodging arrangements and the take up of this is increasing. The disabilities service has plans to develop a young adults' scheme by which shared care foster placements can continue into adulthood as adult placements.

The authority provides its carers with training in helping prepare children for independence. Matters relating to this are covered in foster carers' supervision and support sessions where appropriate. Foster carers work with children to help them learn some of the skills they will need to live independently, such as cooking, washing and handling money.

### **Organisation**

The organisation is good.

The fostering service has a clear statement of purpose that accurately sets out its approach to working with foster carers and the service it provides. This is updated and agreed by the council at least annually. The children's guide is outstanding. This has been produced recently by children fostered by the authority. It is a highly



attractive, child friendly and professionally printed document that gives children very useful information about being fostered and points them to additional help if they need it.

The fostering service is effectively controlled and monitored by its managers and senior managers in the authority. Clear performance information is produced and managers monitor the work carried out to ensure its quality. Case recording is in a stage of transition between paper and electronic recording and as such not all recording is consistent or easy to locate. The service is aware of this and reviewing its arrangements as the transition continues.

The fostering service is managed effectively with clear lines of communication between the fostering team, foster carers and children's social workers. Staff members are appropriately trained, supervised and supported and workload management systems are in place to ensure they can do their jobs effectively.

Foster carer recruitment is effective with the authority being successful in attracting people interested in fostering. The service is generally robust and careful in the way it recruits, assesses and checks prospective foster carers. It undertakes assessments that consider people's competence to foster as well as considering their background and experiences of child care. The fostering team check on applicants' backgrounds and suitability carefully and provide very good preparation to foster training. Shared carer foster carers are approved initially to provide a day-care and sitting service prior to being assessed as foster carers with information about their experiences of providing day-care being included in the fostering assessment. The process for deciding on the suitability of applicants to foster when Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks disclose previous offences is not robust enough. The procedure is not sufficiently formalised or well recorded and does not demonstrate the same level of rigour that the authority's procedure for staff would require.

The fostering service provides its carers with effective support and supervision. Supervising social workers visit and supervise foster carers regularly and work effectively to ensure that support is always available to carers. Foster carers appreciate and speak very highly of the support provided to them. For example, one carer said that she was 'impressed and pleased with the service that Bolton has offered us'. Regular support groups are provided for foster carers based on the type of care they provide or their specific needs. For example, there are groups for carers of young children, teenagers, Asian carers and those providing shared care for children with disabilities. Supervising social workers carry out unannounced visits to monitor the work of foster carers. Often these take place several times a year but this is not always the case and in some situations these do not take place sufficiently frequently. This means that the monitoring of children's wellbeing is not as good as it should be.

The foster care agreement used by the service does not fully meet the requirements of the regulations. It does not set out the terms of foster carers' approval. Additionally, it does not require foster carers to comply with the services' policies in respect of child protection, behaviour management and unauthorised absence and is

not specific enough about the training required of foster carers.

Foster carers' reviews are considered by a special review panel comprised of senior professionals within the authority. This means that reviews are given thorough consideration by people with some independence from the fostering service. This provides a robust scrutiny of carers' suitability to continue fostering. After it has been considered by the review panel, the first review of a foster carer approved for the mainstream fostering service is referred to fostering panel for consideration as is required by regulations. However, this is not the case for the first reviews of shared care foster carers. This deprives panel of the opportunity to monitor carers' progress since their approval and to consider and learn from any matters arising. As stated earlier, it is the responsibility of children's social workers to seek children's views for their foster carers' reviews. However, these views are not recorded well enough or in sufficient detail for these reviews. This means that children's views cannot be given enough importance when considering the continued suitability of their carers.

The authority provides its carers with good mandatory and developmental training. Training is provided generally but also specific training can be provided based on carers individual needs or the circumstances of the children they are looking after. Training is provided at evenings and weekends as well as during the day to facilitate attendance. The authority's arrangements to train people to the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) National Occupational Standards for foster carers are well developed.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. The service is successful in recruiting carers from a range of minority ethnic backgrounds that reflect the make-up of the community. Children are effectively matched with carers who are culturally appropriate and the authority has been able to provide carers from minority ethnic backgrounds for children from adjoining authorities. Very good support is provided to Asian carers and all carers receive training in cultural awareness. Children with disabilities are valued highly by the organisation and provided with a service that is inclusive and aims to promote their opportunities. Children looked after by the authority are valued and encouraged to participate in the way the authority operates.

Children's records are generally well maintained despite the transition from paper to electronic recording systems. The authority retains good records about children that assist planning and act as a reference for children in future should they wish to look back at their history.

Arrangements to assess and support family and friends carers are effective with additional resources being allocated to this work to ensure it is timely and of good quality.

## **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
22	ensure that the foster carer agreement covers all the matters specified in Schedule 5 of the regulations (Regulation 28(5)(b) of the Fostering Services Regulations 2002)	21/08/2009
21	the fostering service must on the occasion of a foster carer's first review, refer its report to the fostering panel for consideration (Regulation 29(5) of the Fostering Services Regulations 2002).	07/08/2009

## Recommendations

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

- ensure that health and safety checklists are sufficiently wide ranging to check foster carer's homes for all eventualities (NMS 6.6)
- consider the manager's role and activity on panel to ensure that any conflicts of interest are identified and recorded (NMS 30.1)
- develop a formalised procedure of decision making at a sufficiently senior level to consider any concerns identified in CRB checks undertaken on foster carers during their assessments (NMS 17)
- ensure that unannounced visits to foster carers take place at least annually and are recorded and monitored for all foster carers (NMS 22)
- ensure that children's views are sought and reflected more thoroughly in the reviews of their foster carers (NMS 21).