

Halton Borough Council Fostering Service

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

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Inspector	Sue Winson
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Date of last inspection	28/08/2007

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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

Halton Borough Council Fostering Service provides a range of placements for children in care, including long term, task centred, kinship carers and short breaks for children with disabilities. It is responsible for the recruitment, assessment, approval, supervision and support of foster carers. Where placements are not available in house the service uses independent fostering agency placements. Fostering social workers identify appropriate placements in conjunction with children's social workers. The fostering service is an integral part of the Children and Young People's directorate.

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 outstanding aspects. The service is well managed in a manner which promotes innovative and flexible practice and involves staff and foster carers in the service's improvement agenda. Effective communication and joint working with a wide range of professionals and agencies is mirrored at strategic and operational levels to the benefit of children in foster care, for example in health care and education. Support to foster carers, to enable them to meet the needs of children in their care, is extensive.

The service is working to increase the number of foster carers in order to provide better placement choice. Foster carer agreements do not meet National Minimum Standards and decisions on approval are not always communicated in writing to foster carers. Foster carer reviews are all held within a year from the last review. Systems do not allow for the effective monitoring of the matters set out in Schedule 7 of the Fostering Services Regulations.

Improvements since the last inspection

No actions were made at the last inspection and the majority of recommendations have been acted upon. A system for ensuring foster carers have consents for medical treatment is in place. Foster carer agreements have been amended to meet Schedule 5. Foster carers are receiving full information about children in their care. Changes to approval status are presented to the fostering panel. Foster carer recording is regularly scrutinised. Unannounced visits are carried out within the required timescales. A recommendation has been made again in respect of foster placement agreements.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

The fostering service promotes the health and development of children and young people. Policies include guidance on how the health and wellbeing of children in care will be monitored. Foster carers have full medical information and ensure that children and young people access services to meet their physical and emotional needs. Health assessments are carried out annually. Health needs are considered at the matching stage and statutory reviews and supervisory visits monitor health care.

The well established working relationships between social care and health professionals benefits children and young people. A health and social care development group involves representatives from the permanency team, children with disability team, fostering team and the children in care nurse. It was set up to consider how to implement health developments and has been effective in improving practice. Progress is to be reported to Children in Care Partnership Board later this year. The children in care nurse has dedicated time for the fostering services and she monitors performance and progress against targets. A priority dental care scheme has been set up and each child in care now has a dental plan to inform care planning. In addition, children with dental phobias are offered appropriate care. A contract with the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service has recently ended and the service is able to spot purchase services to meet individual needs. Life story work is carried out routinely by the community support workers in the permanence team who work with foster carers.

Foster carers are provided with the appropriate consents to medical treatment and information on health promotion. They receive training on general health issues and specific training to meet the needs of individual children. Those caring for younger children are offered paediatric first aid training. Foster carers were particularly positive about a course on understanding early neglect which was led by consultant psychiatrists and mental health practitioners. They also enjoyed and learned from an informal training day which looked at healthy eating and lifestyles.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The managers and staff are suitable to run a fostering service. They are suitably qualified and experienced in fostering and in safeguarding children. Recruitment processes are robust and systems are in place to renew Criminal Record Bureau (CRB) checks every 3 years. Staff files contain all the required information and also include proof of continuing registration of social workers with the General Social Care Council. All staff involved in assessing foster carers have a social work qualification. Where people move posts internally references are taken up. Panel members files contain full information including qualifications and signed confidentiality statements.

Children in foster care are protected from abuse and neglect. Foster carers provide a

safe, healthy and nurturing environment. Health and safety checks are carried out and updated at regular intervals. Safe care family policies are compiled which are sometimes modified to meet the specific needs of individual children. Core training for foster carers includes safer care, child protection, anti-bullying and behaviour management.

Policies and procedures are provide appropriate guidance for foster carers, including missing from home and behaviour management. Effective systems are in place to address and monitor allegations and complaints and records demonstrate that they have been dealt with appropriately within reasonable timescales. Supervisory and unannounced visits focus on safeguarding and risk assessments are routinely carried out to identify strategies to minimise or reduce risks.

The service matches children to carers appropriately. The managers and staff have worked to refine and enhance matching processes. Referral forms have been revised to ensure that as much information as possible informs matching. Full information is gained from children's social workers, including risk assessments for all referrals. Social workers on the fostering team operate a duty system for unplanned placements and they are confident that foster carers are provided with all the documents they need. Foster carers contacted as part of this inspection were satisfied with the quality of information they receive. Where placements are planned, matching meetings are held and these involve health, education and other professionals who have information about the children. Where they cannot attend their views are sought. The service clearly learns from disrupted placements and changes in practice have been made in response to the outcomes of disruption meetings. Introductory visits for children are well planned and monitored.

The low numbers of foster carers and the lack of placement choice is identified by the service as a major area for improvement. Children's needs are being met through the use of independent fostering agencies where placements are appropriately monitored by the directorate. Members of the fostering team are involved in family finding and request full information from the agencies. Where possible they will visit potential foster carers with the child's social worker. Foster placement agreements meet regulations. However, they do not contain specific reference to elements of matching, nor do they outline areas where additional support is needed to compensate for any gaps in the match.

Fostering panels are well organised and effective. Recruitment systems for panel members allow them to observe a panel before taking part. Training for panel members and foster carers on equality and diversity has recently taken place. The panel is well chaired by an experienced and skilled professional who is independent of the local authority. Members bring a range of relevant experience and skills to the discussions, including medical expertise. Information is scrutinised and debated and any queries are clarified with the social workers who attend panel. Foster carers are invited to attend panel and receive photographs and brief information about members beforehand. They said that they value this opportunity and that efforts were made to put them at ease. The panel is mainly held in a family centre to provide a less formal arena for applicants.

All foster carer reviews go to panel for consideration and a recommendation in respect of their continuing approval. Where children are placed outside of foster carers' approval range, changes are submitted to panel.. Letters from the agency decision maker were not on file for all changes of approval and outcomes of reviews.

The quality assurance role of panel is clear and has been effective in improving the quality of information and reports presented. Any issues are addressed and their outcomes reported back to the panel. The chairperson meets with the divisional manager periodically. Administration of the panel is efficient and was reported to be much improved following the appointment of a dedicated administrator. Panel papers are sent out on time and minutes are well ordered and include clear reasons for the recommendations made.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The fostering service values diversity and provides training for foster carers. Equal opportunities and valuing difference runs through policies, procedures and practices. Children's needs are considered holistically in the matching and monitoring of placements. Foster carers promote self confidence and self worth and celebrate children's successes. Services for children with disabilities are well established in the authority and families are empowered to select the services which meet their needs. Play schemes are inclusive and support is provided for children with disabilities to access community activities. Foster carers collect mementos and record information for children to take with them when they move on.

Educational achievement is promoted. All of the children in care have personal education plans. Foster carers are involved in school events and meetings and support young people to attend and achieve. There has been a focus on raising the profile of social care in education and the designated teacher scheme is well founded. The integrated working practices of the education support team, fostering service and foster carers benefits children and young people. Training for foster carers includes education issues. Community involvement and activities are promoted and young people have opportunities to go on school trips.

The short term break service is within the children with disabilities team and provides a very small number of foster placements in house in addition to contracting in services from a local provider. All families who are assessed as needing short breaks are accessing them, through foster care or residential services, and all children going to short breaks have an allocated social worker and statutory reviews are undertaken.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

The fostering service promotes contact arrangements and where possible foster carers establish and maintain positive relationships with parents and family members. Contact issues are covered in preparation groups and in training and there is a clear expectation that foster carers will facilitate contact where this is in the interests of the child. Where necessary contact is facilitated and supervised by community support workers. Arrangements are clear and foster carers have written information. Contact is considered in the matching process and support is provided to foster carers appropriately. Foster carers record and feed back information to social workers following contact.

The fostering service promotes consultation. Foster carers and young people are aware of the complaints procedure and this is checked at statutory reviews. Information leaflets are provided for parents and for carers consultation for reviews. Reviewing officers meet with parents separately where necessary. Young people are encouraged and supported to attend their reviews and give their opinions. They are also asked for their opinions and comments for foster carer reviews. They have access to advocates and several young people in foster care have been involved in setting up the Children in Care Council, which gives them the opportunity to meet with senior managers and elected members.

The views of foster carers are gained in a variety of ways and they are involved in the development of the service. In addition to supervisory visits and support groups they contribute opinions and ideas to managers through the foster carer forum. Feedback is invited following attendance at panel and all training events.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

The fostering service prepares young people for adulthood. Pathway plans are in place and foster carers receive training and support to enable them to prepare young people for independent living. There is an appropriate balance maintained between allowing age appropriate independence and safety issues. At strategic and operational levels the profile of young people is being raised to enable them to access education or work, in conjunction with a range of services, including connexions and the Duke of Edinburgh awards. It is evident that the service is committed to raising life chances for young people. Young people are able to remain in foster placements after 18.

Allowances and expenses are clearly specified and arrangements for payments are made promptly. They are reviewed annually.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Many of the leaflets produced can be accessed in languages other than English and promotional materials reflect the community.

A statement of purpose is updated as necessary and states the aims and objectives of the service and the facilities and services they provide. Booklets for young people inform them about being in care and fostering. There are two versions aimed at different age groups and they contain information and contact numbers for services they can access.

There are systems for monitoring and controlling the service which largely meet the requirements of the regulations. A range of audits are carried out and reports include action planning. The service can demonstrate that action has been taken to remedy any deficits. Foster carers complete information sheets, for example, when children take medication or are missing from home, but there is no central system for collating the information for the purpose of identifying any patterns or concerns. The roles and responsibilities of managers and staff are well defined, and clear to all, as are lines of accountability. There is effective scrutiny by elected members who receive information to inform their role as corporate parents.

Staffing issues have largely been resolved and the fostering team now consists of an adequate number of people with appropriate skills and qualifications who are committed, with their managers, to improving outcomes for children and young people. Arrangements are in place to use agency workers where necessary to cover shortfall. Systems for allocations ensure that assessments are carried out in a timely manner and kinship assessments are prioritised when courts impose timescales. Staff receive regular supervision and are well supported by managers who are available, accessible and who involve them in decision making and service development. Administrative systems are effective and support is adequate. Good relationships exist between them and the children's social workers which allows for joint working where necessary.

Foster carer reviews are comprehensive and include contributions from foster carers, placing social workers and supervising social workers. They are chaired by an independent reviewing officer then presented to panel for recommendation to the agency decision maker. Due to delays between the reviews taking place and presentation to panel decisions on the continuing approval of carers are not made within a year of the last review.

There is an appropriate level of administrative support. Administrators say that they are well managed and supervised and that the fostering service managers are approachable and supportive. They have a role in quality assurance and monitor completeness of documents for panel. They work well as part of wider teams and have made suggestions about process improvements that have been implemented

and welcomed.

The service does not have an adequate number of foster carers to meet the needs of children. The service uses independent fostering agency placements to meet the deficit. Contracting and monitoring arrangements serves to protect children placed with them. The service mainly uses a small number of agencies known to individual workers. Managers and staff are working to attract local people to foster for Halton, taking into consideration the close proximity of other boroughs and independent agencies. A recruitment strategy has been developed which is well organised and aimed at raising the profile of fostering in Halton. Good quality publicity materials present a corporate image through a variety of media.

Processes are clear from the stage of first enquiry to approval as foster carers. Applicants are informed of the process and the projected timescales. Assessments are competence based and thorough and include analysis of evidence based information. There is clear guidance on contacting employers, ex-partners and adult sons and daughters living away from home. All checks are carried out prior to presentation at panel.

The service excels in multi-agency working to meet the needs of children in foster care and to support their placements. Support to foster carers is varied and wide ranging and is easily accessible. Supervisory and unannounced visits well recorded and demonstrate the focus on meeting children's needs and safeguarding. In addition to individual support from supervising social workers, there are support groups and a mentor scheme has recently been implemented which has been well received. Each young person in permanent foster care has an allocated Community Support Worker.

Training for staff and foster carers is extensive and easily accessible. The service has been successful in raising the number of foster carers attending training. A variety of venues and times of training has allowed some people to access the training more easily. There are clear expectations that foster carers complete core training and all have personal development plans and receive certificates. A resource library is available. Fostering social workers also use alternatives to formal training, for example, bringing speakers in to support groups, asking foster carers to view a DVD on attachment then discussing the content on the next visit. It is evident that their persistence in encouraging foster carers, especially kinship carers, to attend training is successful.

The service recognises the contribution made by family and friends as carers. They receive the same high levels of support and supervision as mainstream foster carers and their particular needs are recognised. A separate support group has been set up and foster carers value the opportunity to meet with other people in the same position.

Administrative records are maintained as required and files are generally well ordered and information is easily found. Confidential records are safely stored. Children's case records reflect their progress and fostering social workers monitor

recording in foster homes. Training on recording is available to foster carers.

The premises used by the fostering service are suitable. There is space, storage, good information technology equipment and communication systems. The premises are accessible and are fit for purpose.

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):

- ensure that foster placement agreements identify elements of matching and areas where foster carers need additional support (NMS 8)
- ensure that the fostering provider notifies the prospective foster carer in writing of the decision to approve as a foster carer (breach of regulation 28)
- ensure that a system for the monitoring the matters set out in Schedule 7 is established and maintained (breach of Regulation 42)
- ensure that reviews of foster carers take place at intervals of not more than a year (breach of Regulation 29)
- ensure that an adequate number of foster carers are recruited to meet the needs of children (NMS 17).