

Oldham MBC Fostering Services

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

Oldham Metropolitan Borough Council Fostering Service currently has approximately 129 approved fostering households, caring for 171 children and 17 carers who are part of the Family Link Services offering short breaks to 15 children with disabilities and their families.

The service has temporary carers offering a placement in an emergency and medium to long-term care. The service has permanent carers who provide long term care as an alternative to adoption. The Friends and Family carers provide care to children who are known to them, and this may be on a short or long-term basis. The service has some respite carers who provide short breaks to families and other carers with caring responsibilities.

The service is managed by an appointed manager and two senior practitioners, and is located within the Looked After Service managed by a Service Manager. The fostering service is managed separately to the adoption service.

Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

This was an announced inspection and covered all the key national minimum standards.

The service is good at promoting children's health. Children receive good general and specialist health care provision and support. Young people receive good support and encouragement to have an annual health check.

The service works very hard to keep children safe. It is rigorous in ensuring that foster carers' homes are safe and that children are placed with carers who can care for them safely. The service responds well to the need for foster placements and matches children with suitable carers for them. It provides very good support and training for carers to help maintain children's placements with their foster carers. The fostering panel is well chaired and there is a range of experience amongst its panel members. The panel is robust in its consideration of matters presented to it and this helps keep children safe.

Children are provided with extremely good help and support with their education and in involving themselves in community activities. Academic achievement is promoted and recognised. The authority places a real commitment on seeking the views of fostered children regarding their own care, their views of their foster carers and the running of the service. Support for children's contact with their families is good.

The service provides its foster carers with outstanding support and management. Assessments and reviews of foster carers are extremely thorough. Children benefit from living with well -rained and very well- supported carers. Very good records are kept relating to foster carers and the overall management and monitoring of the fostering service. Children's records are comprehensive, provide evidence of the work being done with them and contribute to an understanding of their life events.

This is an extremely well-managed service, which provides very good support to its carers and is providing good outcomes for children.

Improvements since the last inspection

The last full inspection was carried out in March 2008 and resulted in three recommendations being made. These related to two of the key outcome areas. The service has addressed these recommendations.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

The fostering service actively promotes the health and well-being of children and young people.

Extremely good quality preparation and training is provided for carers to enable them to meet children and young people's health needs, for example, the specially designed healthy care course, which is delivered by carers and staff. There are also courses on a variety of subjects, for example, first aid, sexual health, communicable diseases, emotional abuse and neglect. In addition, the fostering service works in collaboration with other partners to encourage children, young people and their foster carers to attend health days. These days provide an opportunity to promote health issues, as well as having fun.

The fostering service ensures full information is obtained about children and young people's health needs. This information is carefully considered during the matching process and ensures they are placed with carers, who are well able to meet their needs

Carers ensure all children or young people are registered with dentists, doctors and opticians and those with complex needs, receive specialised health services to meet them. Additional training and support can be provided, if carers are looking after a child or young person with complex needs.

Carers actively and effectively work in partnership with a variety of health professionals to promote the health of children and young people. They are also knowledgeable about health services in the area and inform young people how they can access them independently. A high percentage of young people have annual

health assessments.

Foster Carers keep good records and the service is kept up-to-date regarding children and young people's health, including any medication administered. They also provide details of serious accidents, illnesses and action taken. This information is carefully monitored to determine the quality of care being provided and to ensure the health and wellbeing of the children or young people are being promoted.

Foster carers provide extremely good quality information regarding the children or young people they are caring for in planning and review meetings. This enhances the care planning process and ensures the care plans made are appropriate.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

The service is managed by staff, who have the necessary qualifications, experience and knowledge to ensure that the service is managed effectively. The recruitment policy and procedure for all staff ensure that there are robust and effective systems in place for appropriate vetting of prospective staff. The service requests all staff provide a full employment history and where gaps in employment have been identified these are explored. References are sought and further confirmation of references is followed up with confirmation by telephone. All staff have appropriate enhanced Criminal Record Bureau (CRB) disclosures in place and these are updated every three years in line with good practice.

The recruitment and selection of foster carers follows robust systems, including CRB enhanced disclosures. There is a renewal process of these in line with staff who work for the agency. All references for carers are in place, including, where applicable, employers. All carers have a health and safety assessment and where applicable, pet assessments. These assessments are comprehensive, addresses any risks that may impact upon children and ensures children placed with carers, live in a safe environment. The agency also ensures that the views gained from prospective foster carers' own children are clearly recorded. In addition, the views from previous partners are also gathered to ensure a holistic assessment is undertaken.

Carers felt that the recruitment process was robust. They were also fully aware of why an in depth assessment and references had to be undertaken to ensure the welfare of children and young people are safeguarded.

The recruitment strategy is regularly reviewed and real efforts are made to recruit a diverse group of carers to meet the differing needs of children and young people, who need to be fostered. Extremely effective arrangements are in place to provide well matched foster placements for children. There is a robust placement procedure which ensures the appropriateness of foster placements for children and young people and assists in good care planning. The service is generally effective in ensuring that children are placed with foster carers in a planned manner, with introductions to their carers arranged. The proportion of emergency placements of

children with carers is low and this helps ensure that foster carers get good information about the children being placed with them. The service is rigorous in ensuring that placement agreement meetings happen either before or, in an emergency, very soon after the placement is made. Where children are placed in emergencies with little information available about them, the service makes sure that information is passed to carers as soon as it becomes known.

The service is effective at managing the use of exemptions from the usual fostering limit. The use of exemptions is limited and well monitored when they take place. Support to carers and children to maintain placement stability once placements have been made is very good and levels of placement breakdown are low. The authority has a clear commissioning strategy regarding the use of independent fostering agencies. Placements made with them are very carefully arranged on the basis of children's needs.

Children's safety is a high priority for the fostering service. Children feel safe and well cared for in their placements. They know how to make a complaint and who to speak to if they have a problem. Foster carers are very satisfied with the support provided to them by the service to help them care for children's welfare. Carers have safe caring policies in place that are developed during their assessment and reviewed regularly to be specific to the needs of the children placed.

Carers receive training in child protection, behaviour management and a specific parenting programme. The appointment of the local authority designated officer has provided additional support and advice to the staff and carers in dealing with allegations and other safeguarding matters. Safeguarding issues raised in the last 12 months have been dealt with appropriately. There has been an exceedingly small percentage reported missing from home, and these incidents have been reviewed by the manager. No young person said that they were being bullied.

The fostering panel is child focused and organised to ensure that good quality decisions are made about the approval of foster carers. The panel chair and members have a wide variety and range of relevant experience which contributes to the decision-making process. The panel exercises robust scrutiny of information presented and has a quality assurance function which informs the improvement agenda for the agency.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Equality and diversity for all children and young people placed with foster carers is promoted. The organisation development and equality unit works corporately to promote the equality of opportunity and social inclusion within the council. This unit provides guidance and information on policies and procedures, which are subject to a diversity and impact assessment. All staff have received training and guidance on promoting equality and diversity.

The fostering service has links with minority ethnic communities and is working hard within these communities to recruit foster carers. Advertising has been developed and is accessible in different languages.

Foster carers receive good information and training in equality and diversity. They have a very good understanding of their role in promoting equality and diversity. Carers are able to meet children and young people's religious, cultural, ethnic and disability needs well.

The education and leisure needs of children and young people are promoted. The authority places a high priority on the education of looked after children. Through the life chances team the education provision of all looked after children is monitored. Additional schemes are also in place to try to encourage all young people to attend school or some form of educational provision and to do well. The team provides help to carers on a range of educational matters, including help in avoiding exclusion, home work, changing schools and training. The team has some learning mentors, who can provide specific individual help in school and at home. Children and young people are also encouraged to develop their interests, skills and talents through involvement in various community activities. This enables them to develop self worth, and to realise their full potential.

Carers report that they are well supported, good quality training is provided, which they greatly value. Children's records contain good information about their educational achievement, leisure interests and the support provided to them.

The authority has a short break service providing short breaks to children and their families. The service is well established and carers are recruited in the same way as mainstream carers. Carers are well supported and receive additional training visits and advice. However, care is not always available when required due to the ongoing need for link foster carers. The service is addressing this and is working extremely hard to recruit additional carers.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

The service promotes contact to meet the needs of children and young people. Foster carers are extremely committed to supporting them to maintain relationships with friends and family members. Examples were given where foster carers and social workers give practical support to contact arrangements. Foster carer training includes the importance of maintaining contact and the service's expectation is that foster carers will work with parents for the benefit of the young people. Contact arrangements are taken into account when children and young people are matched with suitable carers. The service ensures that these arrangements are set out in foster placement agreements and discussed when placements are made. Foster carers are involved in maintaining complex and frequent contact arrangements and are understanding of parents' perspectives when their child is being cared for in foster care. They are supported through supervision, if contact raises difficult issues

for young people.

Children and young people are well supported to maintain contact with family and friends and the files contain clear information about these arrangements.

The local authority is excellent at consulting with looked after children about the care they receive and wider aspects of their work. It employs a corporate parent manager and a participation officer, who have developed a range of projects and events to promote consultation and participation. Fostered children have been involved in most of the projects, for example the children's guide. Their views and opinions are regularly sought regarding a variety of matters concerning them. The service provides encouragement and support so that all foster children and young people are able to express their views in their reviews. Their opinions are also sought for foster carers' reviews and are an important source of information for these reviews. Children who are, or have been looked after, present training to elected members, staff and foster carers.

Children and young people know how to complain and who to speak to if they have a problem. Information about the fostering service is provided to them in an accessible format and they have access to advocacy services.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is outstanding.

Young people are supported to develop independent living skills through the help of carers and the after care team. Pathway plans are in place for young people. Carers receive training which is jointly delivered by the after care team, the fostering team and young people. They also receive very good support to help maintain and support placements as children become older. Financial arrangements are in place so that young people can stay in placement after they reach 18.

Foster carers are paid above the recommended government rates, through the skills based payment scheme. Carers are well informed about this scheme and there is an effective system in place for making these payments. Financial support for special circumstances and the provision of any necessary specialist equipment is good. No carers complained about the payments or arrangements for allowances.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding.

The council's organisation development and equality unit works corporately to promote the equality of opportunity and social inclusion within the council. This unit provides guidance and information on policies and procedures, which are subject to a diversity and impact assessment.

The service values and promotes equality and diversity. Its policies and procedures can be produced in a variety of formats to meet the differing needs of people. Their publicity materials reflect a multicultural society. The service's practice fully supports equality and inclusion for all children, who are looked after. All staff and carers have undertaken equality and diversity training. Examples were given which demonstrate children and young people's religious, ethnic and special needs are being met. Foster carers are active in equipping themselves with relevant information through a variety of sources. Foster carers ensure that children have mementos, photographs and life story work to take with them when they move on. The views of children and young people are actively sought, which ensures they have an opportunity to voice their views and opinions. Children whose parents foster are also able to share their views and opinions through consultation with agency staff.

The fostering service's Statement of Purpose outlines the aims, objectives, services provided and is kept up-to-date. The service has its own children's guide for younger and older children. These guides were developed by young people and can be produced in a variety of formats to meet children's differing needs. These guides are attractively presented, written in a child-friendly form and contain all the required information.

The fostering service is extremely well-managed operationally and strategically. The managerial team have extensive, relevant social care experience and appropriate qualifications. They are committed to the continuous improvement of the service and outcomes for children.

The service has strong links with other teams and there is good, collaborative and effective working between them. The life chances team monitor outcomes for children and co-ordinate the additional resources available, in conjunction with the placing social workers.

Staff working in the team are suitably qualified and experienced. They are well supported and have access to regular, good quality, supervision, training and personal development. The service is sufficiently well resourced to allow them to do their jobs well. Staff know their carers, communicate effectively with them and they work well together. This ensures that children and young people are well supported in their foster homes.

The service has a recruitment officer who is also responsible for the retention of existing carers. There is an extensive recruitment strategy in place and the recruitment materials are appropriate and interesting. Successful recruitment campaigns has resulted in a steady increase of carers. This has improved the choice for carers when making matches.

There are systems in place to respond to enquiries from people thinking about fostering. Foster carers were positive about their first contact with the service and the pace of the assessment process. Thorough assessments of carers' abilities to parent looked after children are undertaken. Assessments include preparation

training provided by fostering staff and other professionals from the authority. The standard of assessments is very good and appropriate systems are in place to monitor the quality of them, prior to their presentation at panel. Foster care agreements contain the required information to ensure carers undertake their role effectively.

The fostering service provides excellent support and management to their carers. They are visited regularly by their supervising social worker and out of hours, telephone advice and support is readily accessible. Foster carer support groups take place and newsletters are produced for carers. An extensive training programme is also provided. Foster carers' supervision takes place on a monthly basis with good records being maintained and agreed with the foster carer. Discussion within supervision is child focussed and records clearly identify any actions or support needs and these are followed up at the next meeting. Unannounced visits take place appropriately. The fostering service also holds an annual event for children of parents, who foster.

The arrangements for undertaking foster carers' annual reviews are, similarly, very effective. The annual review of carers includes the collation of a range of information and the compilation of a report, which goes to the panel for initial reviews, which is appropriate. First reviews are competency based using the information from the initial year of fostering. The service places some importance on getting the views of fostered children and their social workers for the reviews of their foster carers. Reviews contain information from children and social workers and are considered alongside the foster carer's comments and those of the supervising social worker. Clear recommendations are made regarding the ongoing terms of the carer's approval and reviews identify any additional support or training needed.

The service has a comprehensive training programme in place for carers. In addition, the Children's Workforce Development Council training has been introduced and this is being undertaken by the service's current carers. Training is discussed at the carers' review and any issues identified are raised in the review. Foster carers speak positively about the quality and range of training provided.

The records held by the fostering team, for the carers, young people are well ordered, comprehensive and securely stored. The carer's files contain a range of information from the initial contact to the department through to the latest supervision and annual review report.

Similarly, the children's records are comprehensive; contain all the necessary documentation required and would help a child or a young person understand their life history. The fostering service works hard to ensure that carers receive sufficient information about the young people placed with them. Children's reviews take place as required and monitor how well foster placements continue to meet children's needs. Foster carers receive training and support about carrying out 'life-story' work with children and maintain a record of children's life events.

The fostering service has very effective administrative systems to ensure that records

of foster carers, children and miscellaneous matters are well maintained. Records are in place containing all significant information relevant to the running of the service. These are regularly monitored by the manager. The strong administrative and management information systems support and enable a qualitative fostering service to be provided.

The arrangements for friends and family carers are good. The assessments are detailed, appropriate and include a viability assessment which goes to panel. The carers are afforded the same level of support and access to training. Staff take into account the existing relationships and family structures in assessing and supporting the carers.