

Oxfordshire County Council Fostering Service

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

Oxfordshire County Council assesses, approves and supports a range of emergency, short term and long term fostering placements for children. In addition it provides more specialist respite and occasional long term placements for children with disabilities. The fostering services are provided primarily by three separate teams in the north, centre, and south of the county with a range of referral, support, training and organisational functions being provided more centrally. Services for children with disabilities are run on a county-wide basis by a separate team located across different county offices.

Mainstream fostering services are overseen by a centrally located fostering manager, while services for disabled children are overseen by a unit manager in a separate organisational section of the county's services for children. As of March 31st 2007 the service was providing 294 foster carer households, offering approximately 437 places for children. A significant and growing proportion of placements are those provided by members of children's own extended families.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

Oxfordshire fostering service provides good quality placements that offer safe and consistent care for placed children. The service pays good attention to keeping children safe and providing them with appropriately assessed and matched placements. Children's health, educational, developmental and recreational needs are well met and the service has very good systems in place for listening and responding to the views of children. The service puts commendable effort into trying to place children, wherever possible, within their own extended families and supports these kinship placements well. The service is well managed and staff receive good support and direction from managers. Carers are very well supported and are offered good training opportunities.

The inspection has not identified any major areas of concern and no requirements have been made. Some shortfalls exist in relation to monitoring and notification of concerns about carer practice, management of unannounced visits to carers and various areas of record-keeping. There are also some persistent shortfalls in carer take-up of key areas of training and development.

Improvements since the last inspection

There were no requirements made at the last inspection. In relation to recommendations made the service had addressed those relating to development of

case recording policies and more consistent capture of children's views as part of carer review processes. Electronic systems for holding the carer register have been made more robust and reliable and kinship carer training is now being recorded more consistently. In relation to the remaining recommendations, despite actions taken by the service, some shortfalls remain in relation to aspects of record keeping for children and carers and the take up of identified mandatory training by carers remains inconsistent.

There have been a number of service improvements made in other areas. The separation of adoption and fostering functions within the local authority has been largely completed, enabling a more consistent focus on each of those areas of service. A new central placement duty service has been established which offers a more consistent and rational approach to the management and allocation of fostering placements. Placement support services have been combined into one central provision, offering a more flexible and better integrated range of support to fostering placements.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

The fostering service ensures good, consistent attention is paid to identifying and meeting the specific health care needs of children in fostering placements to help ensure they have a healthy lifestyle. The service pays good attention to providing carers with background health information and health care plans for placed children and carers consistently ensure children are promptly registered with relevant local health agencies. The service ensures good monitoring of the meeting of placed children's health needs through child care reviews and ongoing carer supervision. Recently revised arrangements for monitoring of placements by supervising social work staff include a specific focus on health related outcomes for placed children.

The more specialist disability fostering team, in liaison where feasible with birth families, provides particularly good information, support and guidance for their carers to help meet the more complex needs they are typically working with.

The service provides a range of relevant health related training opportunities for carers, covering areas such as first aid, health and safety and healthy lifestyles to help ensure children's needs can be met consistently. More complex disability related training is provided through clearly defined routes as part of a joint protocol with local health agencies so that the direct care needs of disabled children are met safely and consistently.

The agency ensures placed children and their carers have good prompt access to mental health advice and services, both as part of the integrated placement support structure available within the local authority and, on a more long-term basis, with local child and adolescent mental health services.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The staff managing the service have not changed since the last inspection and remain suitably qualified and experienced to do so. Social work staff supervising placements are also suitably experienced and qualified to help ensure children are provided with safe, good quality fostering placements.

The service ensures the physical safety and suitability of carer households is satisfactorily maintained through initial assessments and subsequent checks, usually as part of annual household reviews. The service provides relevant training for carers in this area as well. Fostering service staff carry out unannounced visits of carer households on at least an annual basis as a further safeguard on the quality and safety of the care offered to placed children. The reports of some visits are however very brief and do not give a clear picture of what aspects of care were covered or the detail of findings.

The service has appropriate child protection procedures and guidance in place to help keep children safe, supported by relevant training opportunities for carers and staff. When incidents of any concern arise they are dealt with promptly and fully investigated by the service with a clear indication of the outcomes and any action required on the part of the service or carers. However incidents are not always being additionally recorded on the relevant separate section of carers' files to enable ongoing overview of any patterns of concern. The fostering manager maintains a good oversight and monitoring of key concerns and incidents, although the service has not been consistently notifying the regulatory body, previously the Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI) and now Ofsted, of all notifiable incidents, as local authority services are recommended to do.

Appropriate complaints processes are in place for carers and children. The service deals with any complaints arising fully and promptly and the fostering manager maintains good oversight of complaints management and of any patterns of concern.

The service is working to ensure carer households continue to develop more detailed safe caring policies, which are also now being supplemented by additional safe caring plans or risk assessments related to the needs of individual children. These processes include consideration of the appropriateness of bedroom sharing. The service has clear procedures and expectations in place for carers on how to manage any instances of unauthorised absence and these are implemented consistently by carers.

The service provides very good levels of advice, training and guidance to help ensure carers understand and children's behaviours and manage them in safe and appropriate ways. Where more specific training and development is needed, for example in how to manage physical interventions, this is made available.

The service pays appropriate attention to matching considerations when placing

children with carers. A significant percentage of placements are made on an emergency or short term basis, which may preclude considered matching for all areas of need, but the service is careful to ensure carers do not usually go outside their terms of approval. Systems are in place to manage and monitor any placements that do warrant going outside approval terms on either a short or long term basis. The authority's new central placement referral systems provide a good framework for consideration of both the threshold for placement in the looked after system, and the identification of suitably matched carers where fostering is being considered.

Where planned or long term permanent placements are anticipated, the service pays more considered attention to matching criteria and, where feasible, introductions are made between carers and children before placement to try to further ensure suitability. For planned respite care for children with disabilities good systems are in place to involve children, parents and carers in detailed matching and information sharing before placements are made.

The local authority has clear strategies, policies and procedures to identify and respond to concerns over bullying, developed in conjunction with county schools. Surveys of fostered children indicate that the majority do not experience any form of bullying. Feedback from a small number did however indicate some worries over bullying and these have been followed up promptly by the fostering service.

A senior manager oversees the process of placement in external fostering services and these services are subject to appropriate vetting and scrutiny through existing contracting arrangements, individual case reviews and social worker visiting. Plans are in place to require a greater level of feedback from such services on how children's needs are being met.

Staff recruitment procedures and recordkeeping are thorough and robust and help ensure only suitable people are appointed to work for the service.

The local authority runs two fostering panels and these are run very well, helping to ensure there is good scrutiny of the quality of assessments and of reviews of carer households, alongside more general fostering service practice. The panel chair is suitably experienced and qualified and the two panels have a very good range of representation, in line with the expectations of the standards and regulations. Panel members have opportunities to undertake training relevant to their role. The panel provides clear feedback to the local authority on practice quality and development issues.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The local authority has a clear framework of policy, guidance and strategies in place to address diversity issues across the range of local authority services, including those relating to fostering provision. The fostering service does not have a wide base

of carers from black and minority ethnic communities but recognises the need to target recruitment accordingly in the future, particularly in the central city area of Oxford. Where feasible placements are matched on the basis of race and culture, but where this is not possible the service provides additional support and guidance to ensure children's needs in these areas are able to be met by their carers. The service provides staff and carers with regular training opportunities in diversity issues relevant to fostering practice. The service provides good support, guidance and, where required, equipment, to help ensure the needs of children with disabilities are fully addressed.

The fostering service provides excellent support to carers to help ensure children in placements achieve to their educational potential. Carers are very active in their championing of children's educational needs with schools and colleges and are ably assisted, where needed, by the authority's Reach Up educational support service for looked after children. Figures provided by the local authority indicate that very few fostered children are without established school places and attendance figures are good. Children's individual educational progress is well monitored by carers and supervising social work staff, as well as through care review processes. Good support and encouragement is offered to older children moving on to higher education and university settings. The local authority has effective systems for monitoring educational achievement across the looked after children population, including children in foster placements.

The authority is also to be commended on developing opportunities such as the annual Hill End arts project for older children to broaden their experience, develop skills in other non-academic areas and achieve appropriate vocational qualifications. Considerable effort is also being put into developing other vocational and apprenticeship opportunities for looked after children.

The fostering service provides short break respite care, primarily for families with children with disabilities. This service is very well organised and works well in partnership with placed children's own families. The service is well regarded by those families using it.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

The fostering service supports carers and children very well in sustaining reliable consistent contact arrangements with their families. The service assesses risks involved for all parties and arranges suitable venues and supervising arrangements where required. These good levels of support are extended to kinship care and special guardianship placements where necessary. The service provides very good guidance for carers on the value and management of contact for children. Carers are also alert to the need to ensure children's own views on contact are clearly heard alongside those of their families.

The local authority has a range of well established and effective structures for consulting with looked after children over the development of key policies and resources for children in local authority care. The authority has also engaged a number of young people who are, or have been, in care to act as Source Workers to consult with, advise and support looked after children, including those in foster care, in a number of areas. The local authority carries out occasional surveys of the views of looked after young people, a recent example being that around bullying, which has informed current strategies being developed in liaison with county schools.

The local authority and its fostering service also regularly seek the views of children as part of care reviews and foster carer household reviews. Children in placement who returned surveys feel their carers take time to listen to their views and consult them properly about their care plans and day to day living arrangements. Children have ready access to an independent advocacy service contracted to provide advice and support to all the county's looked after children.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

There are no key standards under this outcome area and therefore this area was not fully judged during this inspection.

The service does however ensure carers receive a regular allowance that is in line with government guidance and systems for payment of regular allowances and one-off payments work smoothly. Additional allowances are paid for more complex and demanding situations and plans are in place to introduce a new 'payment for skills' scheme to reward carers with proven skills and experience.

The local authority offers good support for older children leaving care through its Leaving Care team. Figures supplied by the service indicate leaving care Pathway plans are in place for the vast majority of children in this situation, to help ensure their transitions are well managed. The local authority is developing improved links with local housing associations to provide suitable independent accommodation for care leavers.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The service has a very detailed and up to date statement of purpose, which gives a good picture of the range and type of services provided. This is supplemented by more accessible information for children themselves, so that they can be clear about what to expect whilst in foster care.

The overall management of the various aspects of the service is very good, with

clear identification of roles and responsibilities at all levels of the service and appropriate prioritisation of tasks. The newly instituted central placement service provides a good framework for more rational and efficient use of staff and foster care resources. The continuing location of the management of fostering services for children with disabilities outside of the remit of the nominated fostering manager remains an anomaly, although there is no evidence that this currently leads to any variation in the quality and consistency of fostering practices for disabled children and their families.

Managers oversee staff workloads well and pay good attention to the shifting priorities of the various aspects of the fostering service. Managers support staff well and staff are offered appropriate training and development opportunities. There are particularly good opportunities for staff to be involved in a variety of research projects being undertaken within the local authority.

Staffing resources are currently adequate to meet the majority of demands currently placed upon the service, although the additional time and resources demanded by kinship placements in particular mean that staff time is sometimes stretched. Administrative support across the service is currently adequate. The central duty referral system is being supported by newly created staffing posts to ensure it can work consistently and effectively. Staffing resources targeted at planning, developing and delivering foster carer training are however quite limited given the size of the authority, the number of carers and the need to improve current take up of training opportunities by carers.

Carer numbers have increased only slightly since the last inspection and the local authority recognises the need to continue to recruit new carers, particularly amongst minority communities, to ensure children can continue to be placed locally, where this is in their best interests. As a result of the local authority's increased focus on maintaining children within their own families the percentage of kinship carers continues to grow significantly as part of overall carer numbers.

The service ensures carer assessments are thorough and robust to help ensure, as far as possible, the appropriateness and safety of carer households. The local authority is working hard to improve the focus and structure of kinship care assessment and approvals, taking into account the particular complexities of such arrangements.

The service provides excellent levels of support to carers in a variety of ways. Supervising social workers provide regular level of visiting and telephone contact and new systems for better focused and documented supervision of carers are being introduced. Carers have access to regular support groups, input from carer co-ordinators and more formal carer forums. More direct support of individual placements is offered by the integrated central placement support service covering, for example, psychological and psychiatric consultation and input alongside more practical sessional support for more challenging placements. Ongoing support is also available from the Reach Up team on education matters. The service also provides more independent support and advice for carers through membership of the

Fostering Network. Relief or respite placement support is also offered on a limited basis where placements place particularly heavy demands upon carers. Additional specific support and guidance for carers' own children has been arranged in the past, although this has not been a particular feature of the past year. Some carers feel more support is currently required in this area.

Some carers remain unclear about the process of decision making, and related vetting expectations, for more informal arrangements for foster children to spend short periods, or occasional nights, away from their foster homes, for example when having sleepovers at friends' houses or visiting households who are part of carers' own immediate support network.

The service offers a wide and varied range of training and development opportunities for carers to cover all key aspects of their role. Carers who undertake training are very positive about the quality of training input they receive, however take up of training remains inconsistent, with some carers not having completed what the service itself regards as key mandatory initial or refresher training. The service is seeking to address this shortfall through a more specific focus on training and development expectations in carer supervision and carer reviews and by delivery of training and learning opportunities in a variety of ways including home based and distance learning packages. Records of carer training are not maintained consistently on carer files, or in central electronic records, and do not currently readily recognise or record less formal learning and development undertaken by carers. The planned payment for skills scheme should offer a clearer structure of incentives and rewards for carers to take up training and development opportunities. The service provides opportunities for carers to undertake relevant vocational training at NVQ level 3 and is in the process of introduction of the new national induction programme for foster carers.

The local authority maintains its case records for children in generally good order, providing a clear picture of their history and progress through their care placements. There are however still some occasional shortfalls in the consistent provision and full completion of all aspects of the relevant Looking After Children (LAC) documentation.

Carer records are also generally in good order, although full copies of up to date and signed foster carer agreements are still not in place on all files and the issuing of formal notices following carers' initial approval or household reviews is inconsistent. It is also unclear whether copies of such notices are consistently sent to the relevant area authority for carers who do not live within the county.

The service has appropriate processes in place for overview and monitoring of key incidents, concerns and complaints and the fostering manager maintains relevant central monitoring records. The foster carer and child registers are maintained satisfactorily.

The service keenly promotes placement of children with their extended family (kinship care) as part of the local authority's clear overall strategy for meeting the needs of children, wherever possible, within the context of their own family. The

service is putting commendable effort into refining and developing its practice for assessment and support of kinship care and is heavily involved in research projects in this area. Such developments and placements are well supported by staff with particular expertise in kinship care and, where appropriate due consideration and support is given to securing permanency in these placements through residence or special guardianship orders.

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 formal notification is made to Ofsted in relation to incidents or concerns that meet the relevant criteria of Schedule 8 (NMS 9)
- ensure that any concerns arising about the quality of care offered by carers are consistently recorded in the relevant summary section of carers' files (NMS 9)
- review the arrangements for recording the findings of unannounced visits to carer households (NMS 22)
- review the adequacy of staffing resources allocated to the development and delivery of foster carer training (NMS 17)
- ensure more consistent take up of key training by carers and review systems for recording the various training and development opportunities undertaken by carers (NMS 23)
- ensure carers are clear about procedures and expectations governing arrangements for foster children to spend short periods away from the foster carer households (NMS 22)
- ensure more consistent record-keeping on carer files in relation to foster carer agreements and formal notices of approval and to ensure copies of notices are sent to area authorities where relevant (NMS 25)
- ensure all relevant aspects of Looked After Children documentation are consistently completed and held on children's files (NMS 24)