

Royal Borough of Windsor & Maidenhead Fostering Services

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

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Inspector	Lucy Martin
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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

The Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead operates a family placement service in relation to adoption, fostering and respite care for children with a disability. The team is known as FARS (fostering, adoption and respite).

The team is located in central Maidenhead with other local authority children's services. The team manager is responsible to the service manager for placements and permanency, who in turn reports to the Head of Safeguarding and Specialist Services for Children.

Although workers within the team may take a lead on, or have a special interest in some aspects of the work, all engage in the variety of tasks associated with the work of the team.

At the time of this inspection the number of children placed by the service is 50 and there are approximately 40 foster carers.

Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

This inspection took place over a four day period and was completed at the same time as the adoption inspection. Meetings took place with the manager, the fostering team and a number of key personnel within the local authority. Three foster carers and fostered young people were met in the foster carer's homes and a sample of case records and policies and procedures were looked at.

The fostering service provided information before the inspection and questionnaires were sent out inviting comments about the service to foster carers and young people. Completed questionnaires were received from nine foster carers (23%) and five young people (10%).

Improvements since the last inspection

A strong feature of this service continues to be its willingness to develop and improve its knowledge and practice. There is strong leadership at all levels within the service and the staff team is committed to continual development of the service. There have been a number of improvements made since the last inspection. At the last inspection there were concerns raised about the membership of the Fostering Panel and the requirement to review this has been met. The recommendation to risk assess adults left in sole charge of young people in foster placements has been met as has the recommendation to include all details of recruitment checks in the main

HR file.

Other areas of improvement include the relationships between the fostering team and the children's social workers and the increased number of joint visits, meetings and supervisions. The respite care provided for disabled children has been developed with input from the Disabled Children's Team. There is a project to look at promoting education for young people in foster care which is a positive development. The support provided to carers has been further improved with the development of a mentoring scheme for new foster carers and the range of training provided to them has further improved with the development of on-line training. Profiles of foster carers have been written which can be given to the young people before placement and there is now formal feedback sought from foster carers about the approval process. These are all good developments to improve practice.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

A holistic approach is taken to the health of young people in foster care and the fostering service has comprehensive policies and procedures in place including The Promotion of Health and Development of Children in Foster Care. All the young people in foster care have annual health assessments undertaken by a specialist nurse for looked after children. She is well known to the foster carers and the young people and is a member of the fostering panel.

There remain good links between the local authority service at a senior level concerning health matters. Since the last inspection speech and language therapy drop-in clinics have opened in two locations and have been used by foster carers.

The supervising social workers provide advice and support to foster carers and monitor attendance at health appointments. Each fostered young person has a health care plan which is regularly monitored. Details regarding medical consent are included in the Foster Placement Agreement and are given to foster carers at the start of a placement.

Foster carers feel that the fostering service supports them in helping the young people they care for to be healthy and the young people feel that their health needs are being met.

There is an excellent range of training available to foster carers in 2007 - 2008 covering all areas of health matters including first aid, food hygiene, substance misuse and an alternative therapy evening. On-line training includes self harm and ADHD. In 2005 and 2006, the fostering service organised and ran a multi-disciplinary conference on Healthy Care.

The Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead have a scheme whereby children in foster care, foster carers and their families enjoy free activities at the Borough's

leisure centres. Both foster carers and foster children continue to regularly use these facilities.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

A sample of recruitment records seen by the inspectors carrying out the inspection of the adoption service, show that robust checks are carried out before employment. Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks are routinely updated every three years. The recommendation made at the last inspection regarding evidence of required checks being kept in the main HR file, has been met.

During this inspection three homes of foster carers were visited. All are warm, comfortable, well maintained and suitable for the children who are living there. Each young person has their own bedroom and this is seen on an annual basis by the supervising social worker on the unannounced visit. A health and safety check is completed as part of the approval process and an annual update takes place. Risk assessments are an integral part of practice and are used in a number of different areas. This is an area of continual development and an example of good practice. Since the last inspection risk assessments have been used to determine whether a young person should remain in placement after an allegation has been met and following the recommendation at the last inspection there are now risk assessments undertaken on adults who have not been police checked and who are left in sole charge of young people in foster placements.

There is a comprehensive placement request form which informs and enables the matching process and a policy which has timescales for meeting particular needs. During the year ending 31st March 2007 there has been an increase of 15% in carer numbers and therefore placement choice. There is excellent placement stability.

Since the last inspection the Foster Placement Agreement has been reviewed and provides information regarding the placement. It also identifies gaps in what the carer can provide and how these can be met. A matching form is completed when identifying possible placements and is kept on the foster carer's file. Introductory visits between foster carers and young people take place whenever possible and a new development since the last inspection has been the completion of profiles of all foster carers. These provide young people with photos and information about the family before they are placed and are a positive development.

Awareness of issues around abuse are covered in the preparation training for new carers, and foster carers can attend the multi-disciplinary training in child protection which is offered by the local authority. Prospective carers are informed of the requirement to give an undertaking not to use corporal punishment and post approval, sign the foster care agreement. A rolling programme of child protection training is provided for foster carers including on-line training in safe parenting. Training on allegations against carers has been run twice in the last year.

All foster carers receive the Fostering Network booklet 'Safer Caring' and a Safer Caring Family Policy is drawn up at the time of approval. Copies of the policy are on the foster carers file and any specific issues around safer caring for an individual child in placement are recorded on the matching risk assessment. However, this form does not contain specific mention of safer caring at present.

Any child protection concerns involving foster carers are properly investigated involving other agencies as appropriate. The majority of the team members in the fostering service had not attended recent training in safeguarding despite the fact that there have been changes in this area.

The Fostering Panel is a joint panel with two other members - another local authority and an independent fostering provider. The Fostering Panel was observed in August 2007 and is operating well with an effective Chairperson who is experienced at a senior level and has attended training in how to chair foster panels. There are regular members of the panel who include experts in health and education. The requirement made at the last inspection concerning quoracy has been met. Since the last inspection a handbook has been developed for panel members which describes the functions of the panel and what paperwork is needed when different matters are brought to panel. This is a good development.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The fostering service has a diversity policy which includes matching, challenging discrimination, promoting equality, supporting carers and children and foster carer training. There are foster carers from a range of backgrounds in terms of age, gender, religion, ethnic origin, language, culture and sexual orientation. There are a small number of placements which are cross cultural and where these gaps are present, there is evidence of work being undertaken to address them. For example, the service has developed good relationships with the local mosque. Training took place on equality and diversity with specific reference to fostering and the needs of carers with cross cultural placements took place in December 2005 and will run again in 2007. In addition training will shortly be given to foster carers on unaccompanied asylum seeking minors. All staff have attended training on equality and diversity.

The fostering service and foster carers are proactive in promoting educational achievement and contact schools and attend meetings whenever necessary. All young people of school age in foster care have a Personal Education Plan which is regularly reviewed. Every young person in foster care who can use or needs a computer has access to one in the foster home and this is provided by the local authority if necessary. Where individual help is needed, individual tuition is provided.

The fostering service has taken on the promotion of education as a special project for the next 12 months. A multi-disciplinary conference is taking place for foster carers focussing on education and outcomes. A positive recent development has been that funding has been agreed from the Children's Workforce Development

Council for a practitioner led research project on education and children in care. This will involve interviewing foster carers and will hopefully lead to recommendations to improve current practice and better educational outcomes for children in foster care.

The fostering service provides two types of short-term breaks for children. Relief care is available to foster carers caring for young people on a full-time basis and respite care for disabled young people, who usually live with their parents. The service has recognised that more carers need to be recruited who can provide respite care for disabled young people. Since the last inspection a member of staff with specific experience of disabled young people has been appointed and is taking the lead on the recruitment of respite carers and the development of the service. Joint meetings have taken place with staff from the Disabled Children's Team to develop this service and to start to identify young people who would benefit. Information evenings have taken place to recruit new carers and one assessment is in progress as a result.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

The young people in foster placements are encouraged to maintain and develop family contacts. Foster carers understand the importance of maintaining these relationships and are positive about the arrangements made for contact. Training in recording skills emphasises the need to note contact arrangements and reactions. Supervising social workers support foster carers with contact plans and arrangements and the support worker from the team is available to help with practical matters such as transport and child care. The authority has worked hard to ensure that fewer agency staff are used to supervise contact when necessary.

The young people in foster care feel listened to by their foster carers and that they know how to complain. Young people are actively encouraged and enabled to attend their reviews and have been part of a consultation process re-designing forms for their contribution to their reviews. There is a Children's Consultation Officer post which is being advertised at present as well as that of Children's Rights Officer. Previously, the advocacy role had been contracted out to an external organisation. The local authority takes the views of young people in its care seriously and is continually looking at ways to ensure that their views are heard.

The views of young people in foster placements are routinely sought at foster carers reviews and there are regular events, such as the annual conference and the designing of a Christmas card, when young people in foster care and foster carer's own children, are asked about their views.

The Fostering Panel, as a result of a request from a young person to appear before them in a matching situation, are to consider how this might be possible and to look at the training needs involved. In conjunction with the Disabled Children's Team, the development of the respite care service will include work on developing specialised communication systems to enable young people to express their views on the service they receive.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

There are no key standards in this area.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

The fostering service has a clear Statement of Purpose which was last reviewed in April 2007 and approved by elected members. This is an annual process and ensures there is an accurate representation of the service. There are different guides given to children and young people according to age. All include information on how to complain. Foster carers are given comprehensive information on approval.

The fostering service is well managed and there continues to be a very solid and effective management structure in place. Staff feel well supported and there are clear lines of accountability in place. The fostering service has moved offices since the last inspection and as a result there are closer links with some of the children's social work teams. There is good communication in place between the fostering team and the children's social work teams, with good examples of joint meetings with foster carers and joint supervision taking place.

Few placements with independent fostering agencies take place. There are policies in place when making these placements but not all the details are known by staff and there are not clear monitoring arrangements in place regarding the quality of care provided.

The FARS team is fully staffed apart from one full time vacancy. There have been some changes of staff but there remains a good mix of age and experience. The competency based BAAF Form F is used to assess foster carers and these competencies are reviewed annually. The assessments are comprehensive and thorough. Since the last inspection second opinions on fostering assessments have started whereby applicants discuss the approval process. This is a good way to evaluate and improve practice.

The fostering service has a recruitment strategy which is working well and in the 12 months up to 31st March 2007 six new foster households were approved, one of which was a family or friend carer. The recruitment of new carers is considered a vital part of the teams work and activities are spread throughout the team.

There are high levels of support provided to foster carers who are positive about the support that they receive. All foster carers have regular supervision sessions with their supervising social workers which are recorded. There is good out of hours support provided and a support group meets on a monthly basis. There are plans to start a mentoring scheme for new carers in the near future. Annual reviews for foster

carers are well documented and include feedback from all parties.

There are excellent training opportunities for foster carers. In addition to their own specialised training programme, they can take part in a range of council training, there are on-line courses available and some foster carers are undertaking NVQ training.

The files and administrative records are well maintained. The foster carers files are up to date and are of good quality. Regular file audits take place.

In March 2007 there were three kinship care placements and there is recognition of the particular relationship of family and there is quality of process and service provision. Family and friends carers are assessed in the same way, receive the same allowances, the same support and are offered the same training opportunities as all other carers.

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 there is specific mention to safe care issues in the matching risk assessments undertaken (NMS 9)
- ensure that the staff team receive updated training in safeguarding (NMS 9)
- clarify the procedures to be followed when making a placement with an independent provider including the arrangements for monitoring the quality of care provided (NMS 16).