

Bracknell Forest Borough Council 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

The fostering service within Bracknell Forest Borough is provided by the Bracknell Forest Family Placement Team. The team is part of Children's Services and provides the full range of family placement services, including fostering, adoption and respite (short break) care.

At the time of this inspection the service has approximately 40 foster carers.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

At this announced inspection all the key standards were inspected. Achieving Economic Wellbeing was not inspected. The fostering service provides a good level of service to foster carers and the young people in its care. There is stable management and there have been fewer staff changes in the past year. There has been good consultation with foster carers and there are clear plans about how to further develop and improve the service.

Foster carers feel well supported and the majority feel that the service has improved over the last 12 months. There are good links with education and positive relationships with the children's social work teams.

Improvements since the last inspection

At the last inspection the service was asked to make improvements in five areas. The required work has been carried out in four of the five areas. The fostering panel has been quorate and the complaints record held by the manager now includes the response and outcomes. Foster placement agreements are used for all placements including short break care and the foster carers agreements specify the amount of support to be given. The Criminal Records Bureau requests still do not request information relating to the Protection of Vulnerable Adults (POVA) list in addition to the Protection of Children Act (POCA) list.

The two recommendations for good practice have both been completed. Training opportunities are provided outside usual working hours and foster carers providing short break care are provided with written consent for emergency medical treatment and administration of medication.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

The fostering service has good systems in place to promote development and health. Health services for looked after children are provided through an arrangement with East Berkshire Primary Care Trust and there is a specialist nurse for looked after children who co-ordinates the health assessments and health checks. She also sits on the Fostering Panel. There are annual health checks for looked after children with 91% of all looked after children having had health and dental checks which is an improvement. Screening for substance misuse has been introduced as part of the health of looked after children assessment.

The foster carers who responded to the survey sent prior to the inspection and those spoken to during this inspection said that they receive information before placement regarding the health needs of the young people being placed. A planning meeting is held before or early after a placement is made that considers key areas including health. The foster carers are clear about details regarding medical consent and short break carers have been provided with written consent for emergency treatment and administration of medication.

The health of the young people in placement, including medical appointments, is monitored during the home visits made by the foster carers' supervising social workers and records are maintained. The foster carers know the looked after children nurse well and can contact her directly, if they wish.

There are good links with CAMHS (Community Adolescent Mental Health Service.) Two social workers with a specific CAMHS workload are in post with a focus on the under and over 11s age group and one attends initial health assessments of looked after children. One of the CAMHS social workers has delivered a 10 week parenting programme to foster carers jointly with a family placement worker. The programme focuses on managing difficult behaviour and has received positive feedback from foster carers. Other training provided for foster carers on health matters includes first aid, medication training and loss, attachment and separation.

All of the fostered young people who returned the survey prior to this inspection said that they always get support and advice about being healthy. They are given a booklet 'Information on Me' on placement. This covers health issues and follows the child. Foster carers supervising social workers check the booklet. Foster carers are financially recompensed for leisure activity costs and this scheme is due to be relaunched.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

There are generally sound procedures in place to ensure that staff working for the fostering service are suitable to work with children and appropriate checks are

carried out prior to employment. CRB (Criminal Records Bureau) checks are carried out and are renewed every three years. The recruitment files contain all the required information including a recent photograph, two written references including a reference from the person's most recent employer, and evidence of qualifications. It is the local authority's practice to only verbally verify one of the references and this is carried out by the head of service. In addition, one social worker had transferred from a neighbouring local authority and started before a new CRB check was returned. There was no evidence in the file that investigations had taken place to ensure that the existing check had been undertaken within the last three years or whether there were any convictions. At the last inspection the service was asked to ensure that the CRB check requested information relating to the Protection of Vulnerable Adults (POVA) list in addition to the Protection of Children Act (POCA) list. This has not been done. These three areas for improvement would ensure that young people are better protected.

All members of the family placement team involved in the assessment and approval of foster carers are qualified social workers. The team currently has a number of assessments that need undertaking and are intending to use staff working in other teams to undertake some of them. All of these staff have had experience of undertaking assessments or are receiving training before they start doing them.

All the foster carers' homes visited are appropriate to the needs of the young people placed there. All are warm, clean and adequately furnished and decorated. All fostered young people have their own bedroom and a risk assessment is carried out if a foster child is to share a bedroom. Health and safety checks are carried out annually and these are done at the same time as the annual review of foster carers. Since some annual reviews are late, this has had a knock on effect and has meant that some health and safety checks are carried out more than a year apart. The health and safety check includes a number of different areas including information and checks on transport. There is a limited amount of detail included around the storage and usage of shotguns and the forms are not always signed by the social worker undertaking the assessment.

There are discussions between supervising social workers and children's social workers about placements and matching the child's needs with the appropriate foster carer. In long term matches reports are written and this information goes to the fostering panel. All foster carers have a written profile which includes photographs which young people can see, and introductory visits are made by the young people being fostered whenever possible. In short term placements a written foster placement agreement is used which contains space to include specific reference to elements of matching which were taken into consideration in agreeing the placement. This information was not included in the forms seen and there was no information to indicate the matching process.

It is the local authority's policy that safe caring guidelines are completed at the time of approval and that the family policy is reviewed annually at the time of the foster carer's review. It is also reviewed at the start of each placement. This policy was not seen to be consistently carried out in practice. All the foster carers' files seen have

safe caring guidelines in place but there is no evidence that safe caring issues are cleared with the child's social worker or are explained clearly and appropriately to the young person.

Foster carers are provided with opportunities to attend training on child protection and all have been given the Fostering Network's Safer Caring Handbook. Allegations against foster carers are dealt with appropriately and the actions taken are recorded. One set of foster carers who had been the subject of a recent allegation by a young person said they had felt well supported throughout the investigation process. Foster carers have attended training in dealing with allegations in the last year and the foster carers who had been through the process commented favourably on the course and felt it was accurate in content.

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 including 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. There have been discussions between the agency decision maker and the panel chair about some issues brought to panel which are fully documented. Bracknell is changing its agency decision maker from the Head of Service to the Assistant Director which is a move to ensure better overall monitoring of the service.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The fostering service welcomes all enquiries to become foster carers irrespective of race, gender, disability, sexuality, age, religion and belief. It has recognised the need to develop the service to meet a wider range of needs by recruiting more carers who can offer placements to children with complex needs. Targeting advertising has been used throughout 2007 to attract carers from minority ethnic groups and the Short Break Scheme is currently being reviewed to increase the support that is offered to children with a disability.

Issues relating to equality and diversity are covered during the assessment of new foster carers and are included at foster carers' annual reviews. The training available to foster carers includes diversity and there is a commitment from staff and foster carers to take these issues seriously. Foster carers spoken with speak positively about the young people they look after, including those with more challenging behaviour. They feel they work hard to build young people's confidence and self-esteem.

There is high priority given to helping foster carers meet young people's educational needs. An education co-ordinator and a full time teacher are employed to work with

looked after children. They are located on the same office floor as the children's social work teams and the family placement team which makes communication and contact easy to achieve. Personal Education Plan (PEP) meetings are held a minimum of every six months and foster carers are actively involved in the process. The education support staff also attend and it is planned that they will take the lead in the PEP process to ensure quality and consistency. There has been an increase in the qualifications of young people leaving care and the attendance of children at school has increased steadily over recent years.

Foster carers feel the fostering service supports the education of the young people they care for well and they know the education co-ordinator and teacher well. The foster carers are all actively involved in attending meetings and parents' evenings if appropriate. Additional tuition is provided if needed and there is a dedicated education hotline and a leaflet giving useful website addresses.

Bracknell operates short break care which includes breaks for disabled children, breaks for families and children in need and relief care to other foster carers. The short break scheme is currently being reviewed to increase the support that is offered to children with a disability. At present there is a specific family placement worker who is allocated to the short break scheme. There are approximately nine short break carers and existing carers have been consulted about how best to develop this service.

At the last inspection it was a requirement that foster placement agreements are used for all placements including short break care. The manager confirmed that they are now being used.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Children in foster care are encouraged to maintain and develop family contacts. Arrangements for contact, including whether it is supervised, are included in the foster placement agreement. Foster carers say that they have good relationships with the young person's social worker and that the arrangements for contact generally work well. Some foster carers are involved in transporting the young people to see their family and are encouraged to maintain positive relationships with the young people's own family.

There are good mechanisms in place for consultation with the young people in foster care. The young people in foster care feel that their foster carers listen to them and take notice of their opinions. One said, "They listen to me and help sort things out for me". All the young people are aware of how to make a complaint. The young people in placement are asked to give their views before the annual reviews of foster carers.

Bracknell has a Children's Participation Development Officer (CPDO) who consults with all looked after children. Young people in foster care and foster carers' own

children are invited to attend a group and a magazine is published quarterly for young people who are looked after or leaving care. The magazine is written by young people and is distributed to all looked after children and care leavers. A Children in Care Council is being developed and young people are routinely involved in interview panels for new staff.

Looked after young people are encouraged to attend their reviews and 90% have done so since March 2007. The young people are increasingly participating in the charring of their own statutory reviews. An external organisation is contracted to offer an advocacy and independent visitor service.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The Statement of Purpose is reviewed annually and agreed by the Executive Member for Children's Services. The Children's guide to foster care has been developed in consultation with looked after young people. It is well presented and contains a good amount of useful information. It has recently been updated.

The family placement team is relatively small and comprises of a team manager, one assistant team manager, five social workers, a post adoption support worker, a publicity and recruitment officer and a family support worker and administrative support. There have been changes at more senior management level with a new Head of Services for Looked After Children. Staff are positive about the changes being introduced as a result. There is a clear management structure with clear lines of accountability. The team manager and assistant team manager support the team who are supervised on a regular basis. A workload management scheme is in place for staff and performance is monitored.

The staff team has been fairly stable since the last inspection. One member of staff has left and another is to leave shortly. These vacant posts are being filled. The team has found it to be a stressful year and there have been periods of sickness within the team. In the family placement team all staff undertake work in both adoption and fostering. The shortages in staff have meant that some new assessments are being undertaken by staff outside the team. There are good working relationships with other children's social work teams, the majority of whom work on the same office floor.

Bracknell has approximately 40 foster carers as well as supporting a number of placements in independent fostering agencies. They employ a dedicated publicity and recruitment officer and there is a targeted recruitment campaign to recruit more

foster carers, in particular for more short break carers, foster carers approved to take challenging teenagers and carers from minority ethnic groups. The service has done well to recruit 10 new foster carers in the year ending 31 March 2007 and there has been a significant increase in the number of enquiries received.

Foster carers feel well supported by the family placement team and 64% of foster carers who responded to the survey sent out before this inspection feel that the service has got better in the last 12 months. Foster carers are complimentary about individual workers and the support that they receive. One said, "Our linkworker is excellent and very supportive of all our needs". Team members are on duty each working day and they also operate an out of hours phone line during the evenings and at weekends. This is appreciated by foster carers who feel reassured by this service. There has been a good amount of consultation with foster carers about how to further develop the service. A support group meets on a regular basis but is poorly attended and this is an area identified for future development.

There is a varied training programme for foster carers and attendance is discussed at the foster carer's annual review. More training has been requested to take place out of office hours and more childcare and this is being addressed. Joint work is done with the training department to ensure that the training programme meets the fostering standards and Children's Workforce Development Council requirements.

The system for foster carers' annual reviews has changed and one staff member currently takes the lead in chairing reviews. This system is not working effectively and a number of reviews are taking place over a year since the last one. In addition, there is no clear, consistent evidence that unannounced visits are taking place occasionally, at least once a year.

The case records for children and foster carers are held electronically. Family placement workers and children's social workers have access to the system so all information is easily available to both parties. Foster carers maintain written records of events which are seen by their supervising social workers on home visits. It was found on foster carers' records that there is no clear system in place for ensuring that medical checks are renewed on a regular basis. Separate records are held by the manager that provide information on allegations and complaints.

The fostering service has a small number, approximately three, of kinship carers who are family and friends of the child. The support and training needs for family and friends carers are met in the same way as for any other carers.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Statutory Requirements

This section sets out the actions, which must be taken so that the registered person/s meets the Care Standards Act 2000, Fostering Services Regulations 2002

and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider(s) must comply with the given timescales.

Std.	Action	Due date
8	ensure that the foster placement agreement contains specific reference to elements of matching which were taken into consideration in agreeing the placement and identify any gaps (Fostering Services Regulations 2002, 34(3) Schedule 6)	06/06/2008
15	review the recruitment procedures to ensure the CRB checks include information on the POVA list as well as the POCA list, that information is recorded when existing CRB checks are used and that there is verbal verification of both written references (regulation 20, Schedule 1)	06/06/2008
21	ensure that foster carers reviews take place at intervals of not more than a year (regulation 29(2))	06/06/2008
25	ensure that details of medical checks are easily accessible and are regularly renewed (regulation 27 Schedule 3).	06/06/2008

Recommendations

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

- review the arrangements for the health and safety inspections to ensure that all relevant information is recorded and that the inspections take place annually (NMS 6)
- ensure there is consistent practice regarding the use of safe caring guidelines and there is evidence they are cleared with the child's social worker and are explained to the child if appropriate (NMS 9)
- ensure that unannounced visits take place to foster carers at least annually (NMS 21).