

West Berkshire District 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

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| 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

West Berkshire Family Placement Team is part of the Children and Families Services provided by West Berkshire Council. The team also undertakes an adoption service, private fostering services, supported accommodation (lodgings) and the identification and oversight of placements with independent fostering providers. The fostering service exists to provide high quality locally based substitute family care on either a short or long term basis; to meet the needs of looked after children and young people who are unable to live with their birth parents. The fostering service currently offers: planned and emergency foster care for individual children and sibling groups of all ages, including specialist care for disabled children, relief care when necessary for established placements, family based day and overnight short break care to support children and young people and their families including specialist care to meet the needs of disabled children, supported accommodation for young people aged 16 plus who are looked after and mother and baby placements.

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 period of three and a half days. It was conducted by one inspector. The main purpose of this inspection was to assess the performance of the service against all of the key National Minimum Standards for fostering services. The inspection included a pre-inspection meeting, liaison with the inspection coordinator, interviews with managers and staff, observation of the fostering panel, interviews with the panel administrator and panel chair person, inspection of a selection of records (electronic and manual), visits to four foster homes, an evaluation of all completed surveys received from young people, foster carers and social workers from the locality teams and an evaluation of the pre-inspection documents which were completed by the fostering service prior to this inspection. Overall, the fostering service continues to provide excellent outcomes for children and young people. This is achieved in a number of ways. For example, young people are matched with foster carers who have the skills and experience to meet their needs. This outcome is supported by the positive comments young people made about their experiences of being in foster care. The work of the Life Chances Team is one of the key successes of the fostering service. Foster carers are confident that matters raised with the fostering service are addressed without delay.

Improvements since the last inspection

One recommendation was made at the previous inspection to improve the use of the form for foster placement agreements by including signatures of those in attendance.

This recommendation has been implemented. The form now includes all relevant signatures when foster placements are agreed.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

There are robust systems in place to ensure that young people's health needs are met. The Designated Nurse for Looked After Children is instrumental in ensuring that health assessments and reviews of these assessments are carried out in a timely fashion. The accessibility of health care professionals and resources are unquestionable. Foster carers say that the service is prompt in making referrals for young people to see relevant professionals. Young people and foster carers have direct access to the Life Chances Team which is made up of different professionals.

The fostering service is dynamic in its approach towards the implementation of national initiatives. For example, work is undertaken with foster carers to implement the smoking policy as directed by Fostering Network.

Young people's health is monitored through effective record keeping and excellent communication with foster carers and significant others. This includes the monitoring of records which are completed by foster carers. Young people benefit from a good range of health promotion resources available within the borough. For example, all young people in foster placements and their foster families have free entry to the council's leisure facilities. Where possible and practicable, young people are encouraged to take part in sporting events. Young people have access to the council's website which provides information on health related topics. All young people who completed surveys were complimentary of the support they receive from their foster carers to maintain healthy lifestyles.

Foster carers have access to a good range of health related information and literature. This is included in the foster carers handbook and available from the foster carers library. Foster carers are responsive to the health needs of young people and ensure that young people have access to primary health care services such as a GP, dentist and optician.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

The fostering service is led by a manager who is suitably qualified and experienced. Recruitment procedures are extremely thorough with very clear evidence of all checks undertaken and the outcomes.

There are stringent processes in place for ensuring that children and young people are placed in foster homes which are safe and suitable. For example, the service has dedicated staff who are responsible for conducting health and safety checks. These checks are thorough and take into account all different types of health and safety

issues. Annual health and safety assessments are conducted to ensure on going suitability of each foster placement. Extensive training is provided for foster carers on health and safety topics such as fire safety and moving and handling. Foster homes visited were pleasantly decorated, homely and maintained to a very high standard.

The matching of children and young people with suitable foster carers is a top priority. This process is evidenced through excellent record keeping. The holistic needs of a young person are carefully considered as part of the matching process. This takes into account the make up of the fostering household identified. There are strong communication systems between the fostering service and locality teams for ensuring that children and young people are matched to a suitable foster placement within a timely fashion. All foster homes visited indicated that the matching criteria is within the best interest of the young person. Feedback from young people via surveys about their experience of living with their foster families was outstanding. For instance, young people referred their foster families as being 'the best' and 'couldn't ask for better'. Young people made extremely positive comments about their placements during visits to foster homes.

Children and young people's safety and welfare are protected through extensive monitoring and effective communication systems. Evidence of any involvement with external professionals such as the police is very clearly recorded. Training and support for foster carers on safe caring and protection is significant. For example, in addition to in-house training, external facilitators are commissioned to provide enhanced training. The service is proactive and resourceful to prevent placement breakdown. This may include direct work with young people through relevant members of the Life Chances Team, additional support for the foster carers or a combination of both. Safe caring strategies are extensive and meticulously monitored. For example, safe caring assessments and individual risk assessments are comprehensive and reviewed regularly. All cases presented to the fostering panel are assessed and evaluated thoroughly. The service works extremely well with other departments and professionals to ensure consistency and prompt action is taken to address safeguarding issues as and when they occur. Procedures for the management of allegations against foster carers is robust. Procedural guidance is very clearly set out and known to all foster carers. All young people who completed surveys indicated that they feel safe in their foster placements. Young people say that they feel well cared for and were not being bullied or hurt in anyway.

Young people's safety is enhanced through sound recruitment procedures. The outcomes of recruitment and selection procedures are clearly evidenced. The quality of staff files examined were consistent in accordance with the recruitment policy and procedures. Although the same standard of checks apply when recruiting foster carers, positive proof of identity in the form of a recent photograph is not retained on foster carers' files. There are very clear guidelines in place for ensuring that only qualified staff undertake the assessment and approval of prospective foster carers. The supervision of unqualified staff is effective and well managed. Foster carers summarised their experience of working with the social workers and the fostering service as being 'excellent' and 'very supportive'.

The fostering panel is well established. An observation of the panel held on 13 March 2008 indicated that it is properly constituted and the meetings are quorate. The management and conduct of the panel is effective. The panel chairperson is suitably qualified and experienced and exercises good leadership skills. The panel membership includes a good range of skills and related experience. All members of the panel are encouraged to contribute their views and opinions. The panel is transparent. It scrutinises the quality of all cases presented in a professional and sensitive manner. Panel membership is monitored and satisfactory checks are carried out to ensure the suitability of members. The panel minutes are written to a very high standard.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The population of the demographic area in which the service operates is largely white. However, there is a strong sense of inclusion. The service is proactive in promoting equality and diversity. For example, the Recruitment and Publicity Officer is instrumental in making positive links with ethnic groups based in the local community. Staff are active in promoting equality and diversity strategies as set out by the fostering service and the council. Foster carers indicate that they are highly respected and valued. Young people's assessed needs are met by foster carers who are skilled and keen to broaden their knowledge and understanding of individualised needs.

Young people's educational attainments are exceedingly high. The dynamics of the Life Chances Team enables young people to achieve well at school. This includes experienced staff within the team who lead on Personal Education Planning (PEP) meetings, the team's response towards crisis intervention and work undertaken with schools and foster carers to resolve issues. Young people have the full support of the councillor portfolio holder who is committed to their learning and education. Foster carers are also committed to young people's education and learning. This includes close liaison with schools, ensuring that school placements are appropriate and attending school meetings. Young people are encouraged to participate in community based activities.

There are currently 10 foster carers providing foster care to 15 children with disabilities. Short break carers are managed, supervised and supported in the same way as for main stream foster carers. This includes good communication with locality teams and professionals, excellent record keeping and provisions to ensure that necessary adaptations are provided.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

The fostering service ensures that contact arrangements are agreed, recorded and monitored. A high degree of support is in place to ensure that contact is a positive

experience for the young person and their families. Where this is not always the case, the service acts swiftly to address any issues. Young people benefit from foster carers' commitment to ensuring that they are appropriately supported before, during and after contact meetings. The fostering service is very proactive in seeking the views of young people about contact in a meaningful way. Individualised support is provided to help young people through difficulties such as emotional trauma and separation from their birth families. Young people are supported in a sensitive manner when alternate forms of contact such as the 'letter box' facility is identified as a safer way for young people to remain in touch with their birth families.

Young people indicated through surveys and on visits to foster homes that they are listened to and their views are respected. Opportunities for consulting with young people are consistent and creative. This includes strategies for involving young people in their reviews and their foster carers' reviews. Young people are encouraged to attend corporate parent meetings. One of the successes of young people's achievements was the launch of a video made by young people about their experiences of being in foster care. Young people hosted the launch to members at a corporate parent meeting and at a Life Chances conference. Social events are hosted by the council to acknowledge and celebrate young people's achievements. An information pack is given to young people at the start of their foster placement. This includes contact details should a young person wish to raise a complaint or concern. The fostering service is forward thinking in its approach to consulting with young people. As a result, a number of new schemes are being piloted. For example, the introduction of foster carer profiles are being piloted for new placements, new consultation forms have been introduced, versions of the children's guide and Statement of Purpose are being revised in a format which is suitable for children and young people with learning difficulties. This is being done with assistance from the Disabled Children's Team. The fostering service recognises the importance of consulting with foster carers' own children. For example, foster carers own children are invited to attend aspects of the pre-approval training. They are also invited to complete surveys.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

The foster carer handbook clearly sets out the expectations of foster carers supporting young people for semi or independent living. Support strategies are clearly identified and recorded. Young people can depend on foster carers with the relevant skills to support them as they prepare for independence. For example, within the last twelve months, a course was provided for foster carers on promoting independence skills with young people. Foster carers are proactive in ensuring that the planning such as Pathway Planning is within the best interest of the young person. A recent strategy has been introduced to ensure that all pathway plans are implemented and reviewed regularly. The views of foster carers and professionals regarding the availability of suitable housing for young people moving on is mixed. The fostering service is also reviewing its involvement with the other departments such as housing to improve the outcomes for young people moving on to

independence. The Foster Carer Association is instrumental in addressing individual cases with the fostering service. Negotiations are in place to set up a team of professionals who would be dedicated to supporting young people moving on from full time care.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

The contents of the Statement of Purpose reflects the work of the fostering service. This document has been revised within the last year. It was also presented to the corporate board and Executive committee for approval. The information given to young people at the start of their foster placement is substantial . This includes a local guide and national publications such as the BAAF leaflet titled 'Fostering - What it is and what it means'.

The fostering service is lead by a strong management team who have established effective support systems for staff, foster carers and young people. Since the previous inspection, a new Family Placement Team Manager has been appointed. There are excellent communication systems within the team and with other teams such as the Life Chances Team. This is acknowledged by foster carers and demonstrated through young people's achievements. Staff are empowered to exercise their skills and experiences. In doing so, the lines of accountability are very clear. Foster carers describe members of the fostering team as 'approachable' and 'helpful'. The quality of work produced by the fostering team is consistent and impressive.

The procedures for the recruitment and assessment of prospective foster carers are robust. Recruitment campaigns are creative. These are coordinated by the Recruitment and Publicity Officer. The work undertaken to date has seen an increase in the number of people expressing an interest in fostering. The course content for pre-approval training is clearly evidenced. This is evaluated through feedback from prospective foster carers attending the training.

The strategies for working with and supporting foster carers are extraordinary. Foster carers are visited regularly for formal supervision. Reports for these visits are very well written. The Life Chances Team provides a service which is well received by foster carers. This team is spontaneous in its approach to providing holistic support to everyone involved in the care of a young person. Foster carers are complimentary about the response they receive from the out of hours service provided by the Family Placement Team. The views are not the same about the service provided by the Emergency Duty Team. The work of the foster carers association is dynamic, productive and resourceful. The foster carers association is managed by foster carers who are experienced and professional in their approach. The association is fully supported by the fostering service and the council. This includes opportunities to have direct communication with relevant professionals and financial assistance. Foster carers have access to a library which is successfully managed by the chair of the association, a telephone support service, opportunities for informal meetings

such as coffee mornings and the benefits of a regular newsletter. The association is supportive of any issues or concerns foster carers may have. Foster carers are represented by the association in the form of an advocacy service. When deemed appropriate, the association will take matters directly to external professionals such as the local MP to achieve the best outcomes for young people.

The work of the fostering service is evidenced through excellent record keeping. Statutory and organisational records required for regulatory purposes are in place. Records are maintained to a very high standard. Quality audit systems are effective. The service is prompt in addressing any shortfalls in the quality of records. The council is in the process of implementing the Integrated Children's Systems. Therefore, records are now being stored electronically. There is good back up support to assist with the implementation of this system.

There are robust procedures in place for assessing and improving family and friends as carers, who are also known as 'kinship' carers. This includes the completion of assessment forms, arrangements for supervision, decision making for placement suitability and input from the fostering panel. Currently, there are 15 kinship carers actively providing care for children and young people. Five prospective carers are being assessed. The quality of records for kinship carers and types of support offered to kinship carers are of the same high standard as offered to mainstream carers. Processes are in place for reviewing work undertaken with kinship carers. For example, the Family Resource Service is currently exploring options for strengthening consultation processes with kinship 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 |
|------|--|------------|
| 15 | ensure that positive proof of identity in the form of a recent photograph is retained on foster carers' files. Regulation 20. Schedule 1 (1) | 30/06/2008 |