

# Milton Keynes Fostering Service

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

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<b>Setting address</b>	Milton Keynes Council, Saxon Court, 502 Avebury Boulevard, MILTON KEYNES, MK9 3HS
<b>Telephone number</b>	01908 691691
<b>Email</b>	
<b>Registered person</b>	Milton Keynes Council
<b>Registered manager</b>	Pat Callear
<b>Responsible individual</b>	Pat Callear
<b>Date of last inspection</b>	13/11/2006

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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 is run by Milton Keynes Council, which is a unitary authority covering the town of Milton Keynes and its immediate environs. The service currently supports approximately 96 foster carer households covering a range of specific fostering functions. These include short, longer term and permanent fostering placements and short break respite fostering schemes for children with disabilities and for families experiencing temporary difficulties. A number of the fostering placements are kinship placements, where children are placed with members of their extended family. The fostering manager and staff team is centrally located in Milton Keynes, sharing office space with the main social services teams of the local authority.

### Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This was an announced inspection that took place over three days with verbal feedback provided to the service on the fourth day. The inspection was carried out by one Ofsted inspector. The judgements in this report have been made using new Ofsted benchmarking guidance that was implemented on 1st April 2008. Information about this guidance can be found on the Ofsted website. The new basis for making judgments is not directly comparable with that used previously.

Milton Keynes Fostering Service provides consistently high quality placements that meet the needs of placed children well. The service has particular strengths in the areas of physical and mental health care support to carers and young people and in the excellent and effective day to day management of the service.

Improved attention is being paid to monitoring key aspects of the service's operations to ensure their quality and consistency. The service demonstrates an ability to be reflective and self critical of its practice and is keen to explore new practice initiatives, for example in its new Tier 3 scheme for more challenging placements and its Support Care scheme for more preventative levels of family support. Good attention is paid to ensuring fostering placements are safe and appropriate through thorough assessment and approval processes and effective scrutiny by the fostering panel. Young people confirm they feel safe and very well looked after by their carers. This is reflected in comments from young people such as 'my carer is great, helps me with everything, and never lets me down' and 'my foster carers are great, they have changed my life'. Support and training for foster carers is comprehensive and much appreciated with comments made such as 'the fostering service offers a very high standard of training which enables us to feel confident to undertake the role of a foster carer', 'my family placement officer gets the things done that I ask for, is friendly and very approachable' and 'always someone on duty

to help'. The fostering team has undergone significant changes since the last inspection and while this led to a period of instability, carer feedback now reflects a view that the service is significantly improving.

This inspection has not identified any major shortfalls in practice that place the welfare of placed young people at risk. A small number of recommendations have been made. These relate to clarification of the monitoring of additional safeguarding processes recommended by panel, clarification of documentation used for placement agreements, provision of more specific routes for getting young people's feedback on the overall fostering service and consideration of more structured support for birth children of fostering families. A further recommendation has been made around the making of notifications to Ofsted, in line with the expectations applied to independent fostering agencies.

### **Improvements since the last inspection**

The last inspection of this service was carried out by the Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI) in November 2006. That inspection made two requirements and five recommendations, all of which have been either fully or partly addressed. One requirement related to full completion of placement planning documentation. New systems have been introduced to ensure this process runs more smoothly and that carers are provided with relevant information at the start of placements. Some minor issues remain with regard to clarity around foster placement agreements, which are addressed in this inspection report. The second requirement related to the holding of relevant information on children's files. These files are not directly maintained by the fostering service however some improvement in the quality and range of information held was noted at this inspection.

A recommendation was made regarding continuing to improve the range of choice of placements for young people to support best matching wherever possible. The service has developed two new schemes, Tier 3, aimed at more challenging placements, and Support Care, aimed at early supportive intervention with families. Alongside the continuing emphasis on extended family placements and continuing general recruitment of carers, these developments are improving the range of placement options available. A further recommendation was made regarding recording of matching considerations when placements are made. New systems and recording formats are achieving this. The introduction of safe caring guidelines for each carer household was recommended. This has now been addressed by the service. A recommendation was made regarding staffing levels in the fostering team. Increases in the staffing establishment have taken place and the team is now fully recruited to and staffing resources are sufficient to cover current service needs. A final recommendation was made regarding the location for fostering panel meetings. A suitable consistent interim location has been introduced pending council office refurbishments.

## **Helping children to be healthy**

The provision is outstanding.

The fostering service provides excellent support for carers and placements to help ensure that children's physical and mental health care needs are properly identified and met. Excellent attention is paid to the carrying out of initial health assessments and monitoring any actions required as a result. The specialist nurse for looked after children is fully integrated into the fostering service structure and provides a valuable resource for monitoring and developing health care needs management, as well as offering training and direct advice to carers and placed children. A similar very positive development is the recent appointment of an attached primary mental health care worker as part of the fostering service. This postholder provides training, support and guidance for carers and direct work with placed children where appropriate. This builds on established fast track routes for looked after young people to access local mental health services.

On a day to day basis carers ensure placed children are promptly registered with local health services and that known and emerging health care concerns are addressed promptly and fully. While the provision of information on health care needs at the point of placement is felt by some carers to sometimes still be patchy, improved systems for placement planning and information sharing introduced by the service are addressing this. Excellent attention is paid to identification of health care needs, and carers' ability to meet them, in the placement of children with disabilities. Young people themselves confirm that their carers pay attention to making sure they eat a healthy diet and take exercise so as to maintain a healthy lifestyle. Older young people are also provided with written advice and information on key health and developmental issues in their personal 'HealthFax' document.

The service provides good guidance, support and training for carers on health care matters including first aid, health and hygiene, sexual health and more targeted training in specialist areas for those caring for children with disabilities. The service has revised its policies on smoking in carer households and is now very rigorous in its expectations of carers ensuring smoke free environments for placed children.

## **Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe**

The provision is good.

The service works hard to ensure the safety of placed young people is consistently promoted and monitored. The persons running the service are suitable to do so, having undergone relevant checking as part of recruitment procedures and ongoing renewal of Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks. They hold relevant qualifications and experience.

Effective procedures are in place to ensure the physical safety and appropriateness of carer households as part of initial assessments and then ongoing annual household reviews. Carers are provided with relevant training and advice on health,

safety and hygiene matters. The service also carries out regular unannounced visits to households as an additional safeguard. There is however a lack of clarity over the follow-up and monitoring by managers of situations where additional unannounced visits might have been recommended by the fostering panel. Clear systems and risk assessments are in place to consider the appropriateness of bedroom sharing by children in the households and the service is working towards ensuring all placed children in future will have their own bedroom as a matter of course.

Excellent attention is paid to the matching of children for longer-term and permanent fostering placements with full consideration paid to the ability of carers to meet children's needs so that the likelihood of long-term stability is enhanced. Such matches are also subject to formal fostering panel presentation and approval. Equally good attention is paid to matching the placement of children with disabilities who might have more complex care needs.

The service has introduced new systems and monitoring processes for matching placements on a short-term and emergency basis as this was an area of concern at the last key inspection. This is helping to ensure more rigorous consideration of the matching process between children and carers through new matching documentation and by stricter adherence to completing planning meetings either before or within three days of placement. Due in part to a continuing shortage of approved carers who can meet the needs of older young people, carers are, on occasion, being approached to take children outside of their approval category. This is however managed in a safe and appropriate way and is subject to monitoring by the fostering panel. Carers also confirm they do not feel pressured to take such placements and are given appropriate time to consider such decisions. The service is currently recruiting carers specifically to meet the needs of more challenging older young people to minimise the need for placement out of approval range in the future.

There are some inconsistencies in the completion and signing of foster placement agreements by all relevant parties. A combination of Looked After Children (LAC) documentation and the service's own placement forms is being used. This arrangement does not consistently cover the areas required by the relevant regulation aimed at ensuring roles and responsibilities within placements are clearly defined and agreed.

The service has appropriate policies, procedures and guidance in place which ensure that when any concerns about the welfare of children in placement arise they are addressed promptly and investigated thoroughly. The service does not currently notify Ofsted of serious incidents and concerns relating to fostering placements and carers. While this is not currently a legal requirement of local authority fostering services it is regarded as good practice so that Ofsted remains able to monitor the safety and appropriateness of the service. Young people consistently report feeling safe and well looked after in their placements.

Carers have individual safe caring guidelines in place to ensure they provide care to placed young people in as safe a way as possible and these are updated in relation to new placements. The service provides a good range of training on areas of safe

care and child protection for carers to help ensure they are best able to keep young people safe in placement. Clear policies and guidance are in place for carers around areas of behaviour management, bullying and actions to take if young people go missing and these are followed consistently.

Recruitment procedures for staff employed by the service are robust and help ensure only appropriate persons are appointed to work on behalf of the service.

The service's fostering panel is appropriately constituted, well run and has excellent administrative support. A number of panel members, including the chair have reached, or will shortly reach, the end of their period of tenure on the panel, however the process of replacement is being managed smoothly and efficiently. The panel carries out its approval responsibilities with regard to foster carer assessments and household reviews conscientiously and provides appropriate challenge to practice where necessary. The panel provides effective regular feedback to the local authority on the quality of practice and general developments in the fostering service.

### **Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do**

The provision is good.

The service has a strong commitment to meeting the diversity needs of placed children. Considerable effort is put into ensuring appropriate placement matches in terms of ethnicity and culture wherever possible, and the service continues to encourage carer recruitment from minority ethnic communities in Milton Keynes. Where such matches are not possible the service provides relevant advice and guidance for carers on how to meet care needs they may not be familiar with. Carers' understanding of diversity issues is fully explored in their assessments and subsequent household reviews and supported by access to relevant training and guidance materials. The particular needs of children with disabilities in placements are well met through good matching and provision of relevant training, support and equipment for carers. The service also works hard to ensure that the differing capabilities and achievements of young people placed in the service are recognised and rewarded through events such as its annual 'Celebrate' awards event for looked after young people.

The fostering service, and the local authority as a whole, provides good support for educational achievement for placed young people. Young people's attendance levels at school are very good and systems are in place to ensure appropriate school or alternative education placements are provided for those young people without education at the point of placement. Carers are diligent in their attention to educational matters and are strong advocates on behalf of the young people placed with them around education issues. They consistently attend school parents' evenings and educational planning meetings. The fostering service is particularly mindful of the need to promote continuity of education arrangements and carefully considers the location and timing of placement moves to avoid undue disruption of school or college placements. Relevant training is provided for carers on promoting



achievement for young people and they have access to advice and support from a specialist education team in the local authority. The local authority is planning a restructuring of educational support systems for looked after children with a view to providing a more consistent and cohesive framework of planning, support and monitoring to boost their achievement.

The fostering service provides short break care for families with children with disabilities through its Family Link service and, more recently, on a preventative basis through its Support Care scheme. This supports families who may be under particular pressure and whose children may be at risk of reception into care. In both these services the ongoing key role of parents is appropriately recognised and supported in the planning, delivery and review of the respite packages.

### **Helping children make a positive contribution**

The provision is good.

The fostering service has good arrangements in place to ensure that, where appropriate, young people's links with their families, friends and home communities are supported. As a matter of principle the local authority also seeks to place young people locally within Milton Keynes so that such links are more easily maintained. Carer assessment and training reinforces the importance of maintaining family contacts and carers work hard to support these arrangements in placements. The local authority provides good access to more formal contact support services where contact arrangements cannot safely be managed by carers themselves. Carers are also diligent in ensuring that the views of placed young people on contact arrangements are put forward so that contact remains based, as far as possible, on children's needs and wishes.

The fostering service provides a number of formal routes through which placed young people are able to express their views about their placements. This includes their LAC reviews, annual carer household reviews and, on an ongoing basis, through contact with their placing social workers when they visit. The local authority also has a number of more general forums and groups for looked after children of different ages which fostered children can attend if they wish. The more formal forum of a Children in Care Council is in the process of being set up in Milton Keynes and will offer opportunities for direct input by young people into policy making and development for looked after young people. The service currently lacks a specific mechanism for consulting placed young people on the running of the fostering service, which is reflected in feedback from carers and young people. On a more practical and day to day basis young people in placement consistently report they feel well listened to by their carers and are suitably consulted over how they are looked after. A range of written information is provided for fostered young people about fostering and being looked after in general. This is in the process of being reviewed and updated to make it more accessible and child-friendly, particularly to young people with disabilities.

## **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is good.

The fostering service provides a good level of basic fostering allowance for carers that is above the minimum guidelines suggested by central government and most carers receive additional specialist fees on top. Fees and allowances are subject to regular review to ensure they remain sufficient and competitive. A new scheme for more challenging placements offers significant levels of fees to reflect the high level of carer presence and input expected to sustain such placements. In addition to basic allowances and fees the service also provides additional one-off financial support, for example for supporting purchase of larger vehicles or, in certain circumstances, for home extensions. Additional funds are also made available to support activities or purchases for young people where these cannot reasonably be met from basic allowances and fees. Carers report that systems for payment of allowances, fees and one-off expenditure re-imbusement work smoothly and efficiently.

## **Organisation**

The organisation is outstanding.

The fostering service has a detailed and up to date Statement of Purpose in place that provides an accurate picture of the range and type of services provided.

The fostering service has and continues to be managed very well over a period of considerable change in team personnel since the last inspection. Management structures are effective and there are clear lines of accountability and decision making in place. Work allocations for staff team members are sensibly balanced and there are good opportunities to develop skills and specialisms in the different areas of service provided. The staff team is fully recruited to and the recent addition of a dedicated duty worker post has been of great benefit in ensuring better continuity in the management of duty issues, alongside release of valuable social work time. There are sufficient staff to carry out the various functions of the service effectively and consistently and there is very good administrative support provided. More effective systems have been introduced to monitor and evaluate key areas of work such as the handling of enquiries and referrals and the effectiveness of placement planning processes. Good systems are in place to both commission and monitor the quality of external fostering placements when these are used. Further development in the application and use of new IT systems is underway to facilitate better management and use of key information on carers and placements to support and inform the future development of the service

Staff feel well supported and managed and enjoy working in the team. All staff have relevant qualifications and experience for the roles they are undertaking and, where unqualified staff undertake social work tasks, they are directly supervised by qualified staff. There are good opportunities for further professional development and training. There is good access to sources of professional advice both within and outside of the

local authority structure. Policies and procedures are regularly monitored and reviewed to ensure they still remain useful and relevant for staff.

The service continues to work hard to recruit carers in an increasingly competitive market and is successfully achieving small but sustained growth in carer numbers. As noted earlier in this report there remain shortfalls in carer numbers for older and more challenging placements and a new scheme (Tier 3) is now in place to recruit for this specific task and offers higher levels of fee and higher levels of structured support. The service has been particularly successful recently in securing permanent placements for children from within its local resources. The service is not losing carers to other local authorities or agencies which is indicative of the quality of service provided to carers.

There are clear, and now streamlined, systems in place for managing the processes of carer recruitment, assessment and approval and these are subject to formal monitoring of timescales to ensure they are completed in a timely fashion. Assessments are thorough and cover all the areas expected under the relevant standards and regulations. A small number of assessments are undertaken by independent social workers and these are overseen by the fostering team manager to ensure their quality.

The service has an excellent structure of support in place for carers that is reflected in the positive view carers have of the range and depth of support offered to them. Carers receive regular formal supervision visits alongside regular telephone contact and additional visits where considered necessary. Good systems are in place for response by the duty worker in office hours and by the local authority emergency duty team out of hours. Advice and support is on offer from dedicated health and mental health staff and there is good access to more formal consultation and advice. More informal advice and support is offered via carer forums, the newly introduced coffee mornings and a new carer mentoring scheme. A detailed carer handbook is in place and the recently introduced carer newsletter is an effective tool for keeping carers up to date with key developments that is much appreciated by carers. Respite care breaks are also available on a planned basis where it is deemed to be in the placed child's interests although there is some inconsistency in how this approach is being applied to approved permanency placements. The service does not currently offer any regular formal support to birth children of foster families.

Carers are provided with access to a good range of training, some of which is compulsory, and they are encouraged to consider undertaking relevant National Vocational Qualifications. Carer numbers attending training have significantly improved over the last year. The service is aware of the imminent introduction of the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) training framework for foster carers and has plans in place for its implementation.

Case records for placed children are maintained by children's placing social workers. These are generally in good order although case file audits indicate ongoing omissions or delays with the completion of LAC documentation and lengthy delays in the turnaround of review minutes following LAC reviews. Measures are in hand to

address the latter problem and full implementation of the new Integrated Children's System (ICS) documentation should help address the LAC documentation issue.

Carer files are maintained by the fostering service and are kept in good order, holding all relevant information and documentation with the exception of the minor issue relating to fostering placement agreements noted earlier in this report. Other administrative records such as staff records and the carer register, are well maintained.

The fostering service places a strong and appropriate emphasis on seeking to place young people, wherever possible, within their existing family network on either an emergency or planned basis. This is reflective of overall local authority policy, which makes effective use of family group conferencing wherever possible to seek family based solutions to child care concerns. Clear systems are in place to carry out both initial and subsequent full assessments of such placements as shared work between referral and assessment and fostering team staff. Assessments and subsequent support of these kinship placements take due account of the differences and particular complexities of such arrangements while ensuring appropriate standards of care and protection are offered. The actual number of kinship placements supported by the local authority is currently in decline however this is at least in part reflective of the success of earlier intervention and family support packages initiated via family group conferencing and also of the growth in the use of Special Guardianship Orders (SGOs) and residence orders as alternatives to reception into care. The new Support Care service, which works closely in partnership with families at early stages of concern to avoid the need for reception into care, is also reflective of the service's commitment to development of family based solutions.

## **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 there are systems in place to monitor the implementation of additional safeguarding checks that might be recommended by the fostering panel. (NMS 9)
- review the use of documentation currently employed to constitute foster placement agreements to ensure all areas required by the relevant regulations are consistently addressed. (NMS 8).
- notify Ofsted of events listed in Schedule 8 of the Fostering Services Regulations 2002. (NMS 9).
- develop more specific means of consulting with young people over the running of the fostering service. (NMS 11).
- consider the introduction of more consistent programmes of support for birth children of fostering families. (NMS 21).