

Wokingham Borough Council Central Placements Team

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 Central Placements and Fostering Service provides substitute family care to meet the needs of Wokingham children and young people who are unable to live within their families of origin on a temporary, short term, respite or longer-term basis. This team takes the lead on finding placements and all short-term fostering. The Adoption and Permanency Service have responsibility for private fostering and support to long-term carers as well as family finding for all young people under 15 years and Special Guardianship. The short-break scheme for disabled children and supported lodgings are managed separately.

At the time of this inspection there are 29 foster carers looking after 16 fostered young people. This figure does not include the young people placed with independent fostering providers.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This was an announced inspection which took place over four days at which all the key standards were assessed. There have been major and significant improvements made to the fostering service since the last inspection. Much work has been undertaken by the new manager in reviewing procedures and practice. This has led to clearer expectations being given to both staff and foster carers. A good number of new foster carers have been recruited and the service is more proactive. It provides good outcomes to the young people in its care.

Improvements since the last inspection

At the last inspection the fostering service was asked to provide each foster carer with appropriate information regarding medical consent for the young people in their care, which they have done. More individualised matching has been able to take place with the increase in the number of foster carers and safe caring guidelines are all in place. Work has been carried out regarding the commissioning and contracting of independent providers and the administrative systems to monitor events have improved. The annual reviews of foster carers are all taking place on an annual basis.

The foster carers' files are well maintained and are audited on a regular basis. Improvements have been made to the training of foster carers with clear records maintained. Changes have been made to the recording policy for foster carers which has resulted in clear guidelines being given. The allowance scheme has been reviewed and is a better, more transparent system as a result.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

The health needs of young people in foster care are well met. The Children in Care (CIC) nurse undertakes annual health assessments and personally meets all of the young people in foster care as well as the majority of foster carers. Both the young people and foster carers are able to directly contact the CIC nurse for health advice and support. There is close contact with the local family centre and the Children and Adolescent Mental Health Service regarding the emotional and mental health needs of the young people in foster care. A health care plan is drawn up and monitored on a regular basis. The health needs of the young person in placement are discussed at every supervisory visit to foster carers made by their supervising social workers.

Since the last inspection, some changes have been made to the recording systems used by foster carers and now all health care appointments are recorded in one place which allows a clearer overview and ensures that this information is easily transferred if a new placement is made. Information providing details regarding medical consent are given to foster carers when a placement is made.

The health records maintained by foster carers are checked by their supervising social workers and the annual review forms for foster carers include specific questions in the skills of foster carers to meet the health needs of fostered young people.

There are a variety of training courses available to foster carers concerning health matters including paediatric first aid. Since the last inspection, there is now a subsidised leisure centre membership for foster carers and their households, including the young people in their care.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

No new permanent staff, apart from the manager and a part time administrative support worker, have been recruited since the last inspection. The recruitment record seen for the manager does not evidence that all the required checks had taken place. The CRB (Criminal Records Bureau) check was not obtained until four months after the member of staff had started employment. Other required checks were undertaken and two written references were obtained but these had not been verbally verified. Qualifications were checked but there is no system in place to confirm that new social workers are on the General Social Care Council register. Since the appointment of a new manager, there has been an audit of the recruitment files undertaken to ensure that the CRB checks have been renewed every three years and safer recruitment training has been undertaken.

There are rigorous systems in place to ensure that the foster carers provide a safe

and healthy environment for young people. There continue to be comprehensive health and safety checks of each foster carer's home undertaken annually and this includes vehicle and insurance checks. There are additional forms completed for dog owners but no risk assessment is undertaken or an assessment on outdoor play equipment, such as trampolines. These additions would ensure all risk areas are included and evaluated.

Wokingham has recruited a number of new carers in the past year which include foster carers from a range of cultural and ethnic backgrounds. This has enabled more detailed matching to take place. There were examples during the inspection where foster placements were made and those visited clearly show that careful and considered matching is taking place. The foster placement agreements do not always include all the details of matching, although it is evident that this has taken place. Some details are in the referral form and clearer procedures where the information is recorded would better evidence the matching process.

Training in safeguarding is a key area for both staff and foster carers. Training has taken place in the last year and future training is planned for 2009. Issues around safe caring are included in the preparation, training and assessment of new foster carers and a family safe caring policy is drawn up as part of the assessment. More individualised safe caring policies are written and agreed at the start of every new placement. This system works well.

Allegations made against foster carers are fully recorded and are appropriately investigated. Allegations training for foster carers has taken place in the last year and all allegations are reported to the fostering panel. Chronologies have been introduced on foster carers' files to record concerns and allegations and allow a quick overview to be taken.

The fostering panel has undergone some changes in membership but is busier than ever. It continues to meet monthly and now all the annual reviews for every foster carer go back to panel for approval. Since the last inspection, there has been a change of venue for the panel which is working well and there has been positive feedback from applicants and social workers about attending panel. Panel training took place in October 2008 and there are clear written terms of reference in place regarding its role and function.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The fostering service and their carers value diversity and promote equality. There is regular training provided covering these issues and an expectation that both staff and foster carers will attend. Equality and diversity is also included in the assessment of new carers. There have been more foster carers recruited in the past year and an increase in the number of foster carers from minority ethnic groups. This has been a clear recruitment strategy and is providing a more diverse range of foster carers for young people. Some placements are made which are trans-racial and the racial and

cultural gaps are clearly addressed. The fostering service has made initial visits to foster carers with disabilities and there is a commitment to ensure that they have a diverse group of carers.

There is a separate short break scheme for disabled children which is managed within a different team. There have been some changes to the staffing of this scheme with a new member of staff taking the lead in this scheme and an additional social worker has been employed. The short break scheme currently has 12 carers, only one of whom cares for young people overnight. There are plans to review and to develop this service and to work in close liaison with the main fostering team.

The fostering service gives a high priority to meeting the educational needs of each young person in foster care. There are clear expectations given to foster carers about supporting the young people's education and meetings at school are attended by them. There is also an expectation that they will transport the young people to and from school. There is now a head teacher for children in care in post to monitor and improve the educational attainments of young people in care. There is also a dedicated teacher for children in care as well as a curriculum development adviser. Foster carers and the young people have most contact with the teacher for children in care who attends personal education plan meetings and provides some additional tuition. The 'team about the child' approach includes workers from social care and health as well as education.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Each young person in foster care is encouraged to maintain and to develop family contacts and friendships. Foster carers are clear that issues around contact are viewed as an important element and are discussed at supervisory visits. Training for foster carers around contact with young people's family took place in 2008. The arrangements for contact are recorded in the foster placement agreement and there is good liaison and joint working in this area with the young person's social worker. The foster carers are often directly involved with the young person's family in making the arrangements and transporting the young people to contact visits. They feel prepared and supported in this role.

Wokingham continues to have a children's rights service which offers advice, information, support and advocacy to young people in its care. Two participation groups meet on a regular basis and issues are taken forward to the corporate parenting group. Exit interviews have been taking place with care leavers to seek their views. Each young person now has an achievements book as well as a memory box. The young people in foster care can contact the children's rights service directly and training in children's rights has recently been provided to foster carers. An achievements evening has been held to celebrate children in care achievements.

The young people in foster care feel listened to by their foster carers and they know how to complain.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is satisfactory.

Young people who are near to leaving care have a pathway plan which outlines their future needs in terms of placement, training and employment. Some young people are able to remain with their foster carers post 18-years-of-age and the allowance scheme clearly outlines expectations regarding providing older young people with money. Some preparation for independence work is undertaken by foster carers but there are not currently close working relationships with the young people's resource service and no training has been provided to foster carers in this area.

There is a supported lodgings scheme in operation which specialises in providing placements for older young people. At present, this scheme is managed by a separate team with no real dovetailing of fostering policies and procedures. The fostering service has identified the need to review and develop the supported lodgings scheme as well as to develop closer working relationships with the young people's resource service and youth offending service to develop resources and to improve independence skills for young people and their carers.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The fostering service has an up to date Statement of Purpose which is reviewed on an annual basis. There is a children's guide in place and there are plans to revise this and the handbook for foster carers in the next 12 months.

At the time of the last inspection, in November 2007, the fostering service was undergoing significant change to its structure, operation and staffing. This change has now been concluded and the service is now situated in the main council offices in Wokingham. A new manager has been appointed and a number of changes and improvements have been made to the operation of the service as a result. The Central Placements and Fostering Service continues to be responsible for short term fostering placements and the Adoption and Permanency Service holds responsibility for the family finding, private fostering, support to long term foster carers, special guardianship and kinship care arrangements. There are plans to move long-term fostering and kinship care back to the Central Placements and Fostering Service, which would have all foster carers in the same team.

There is more stability in the management of the service although there are currently some vacancies at a more senior management level. The service is well managed and there are clear lines of communication and accountability between the managers and staff. There is no assistant manager post within the team which would ensure that more development and strategic work can be undertaken as well as more effective monitoring on a day to day basis.

There are two social work vacancies within the staff team at present and this is being covered by the use of agency staff. Staff have been recruited to the vacant posts but have not been able to take them up. Further interviews are taking place shortly. There continues to be limited diversity within the staff team in terms of race or gender, although a male social student is currently on placement in the team. The staff team feel well supported and more settled than they did at the last inspection. Team meetings take place on a fortnightly basis and the staff feel that clearer, more consistent expectations are being placed on them.

At the time of the last inspection, an independent agency had been engaged to carry out assessments in order to quickly increase the number of foster carers. This use of the independent agency has now stopped. There is a recruitment strategy in place and a sustained programme of recruitment activity has resulted in an increased number of foster carers. There have been 13 new approvals since April 2008, including foster carers from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds. This is a good achievement and means better matching for young people seeking placements.

There continues to be a number of young people in independent fostering placements. The work to develop framework agreements and contracts with these providers has continued and there are now a number of preferred providers and contracts have been written for individual placements. The monitoring arrangements for these placements and contracts have still to be put in place.

There are clearer guidelines in place for the management and support of foster carers. All foster carers are supervised by a qualified social worker and supervisory agreements are now in place. Regular visits and telephone calls are made to foster carers who feel well supported by individual workers and by the team. The supervising social workers continue the telephone support line that operates during the evening and weekends as well as the out of hours service. There are plans to set up a support group and to introduce a 'buddy' system for new carers. The reviews of foster carers used to be carried out by an independent reviewing officer. This has changed and the paperwork completed by the supervising social worker, foster carers, young person in placement and their social worker, now goes to panel for their consideration. This system is used for all reviews and is working well.

There has been a change made to the structure of children's services since the last inspection and the implementation of three multi-disciplinary neighbourhood teams which include children's social workers. The Central Placements and Fostering Service and the Adoption and Permanency Service are now located in the main council offices. Despite, the different location of these services, there is good communication between the child's social worker and the fostering service and regular joint visits to foster carers take place. The managers of the services meet together on a regular basis.

A more comprehensive training programme has been developed for foster carers which is now managed by the learning and development team who will maintain the records of training for foster carers. There are clear expectations set out that foster carers attend training and some courses are mandatory. There is a clear link

between training and the allowance scheme which has recently been reviewed. Few foster carers have achieved National Vocational Qualifications as yet but some are part way through the training and the Children's Workforce Development Council standards have been introduced. The training courses attended by foster carers are clearly recorded in their files.

The foster carers files are well organised and maintained. There are regular audit checks of the files undertaken and all the required information is in place. Changes have been made to the recording policy for foster carers which has resulted in clear guidelines being given. There are systems in place to record allegations and complaints with good information recorded as to the outcomes. In addition, there are improved administrative systems in place to monitor the renewal of checks for foster carers and other such matters.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Although the Central Placements and Fostering Service is not diverse in its staff team, it recognises the need for diversity among its foster carers and on the fostering panel. More black foster carers have been recruited and the needs of disabled young people are at the forefront of the review of the short break scheme. There is a regular training programme for staff and foster carers in this area and it is included in the preparation and training of new foster 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 all the required recruitment checks as set out in Schedule 1 and NMS 15 are carried out before employment (Regulation 20 Schedule 1)	12/03/2009
14	review the operation of the supported lodgings scheme and provide training and support for foster carers on the preparation of young people for Independent Living (Regulation 16(5), 17)	12/03/2009
16	review the management structure within the team to ensure that there is capacity to strategically develop the service as well as the day to day monitoring of practice (Regulation 19)	12/03/2009

Recommendations

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

- review the health and safety checklist to ensure that the risks of animal ownership and outdoor play equipment are adequately assessed (NMS 6)
- ensure that there is clear written evidence on the foster carer's file of the matching process (NMS 8)
- ensure that the work is completed regarding the monitoring of placements made with independent fostering providers (NMS 16)