

Oxfordshire County Council Fostering Service

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

Unique reference number	SC048223
Inspection date	13/03/2012
Inspector	Suzanne Young / Martha Nethaway
Type of inspection	Social Care Inspection

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Date of last inspection	20/08/2007

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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 part of a local authority. It assesses, approves and supports a range of emergency, short term, long term and family and friends fostering placements for children and young people. In addition it provides more specialist respite and long term placements for children with disabilities and multi-dimensional treatment fostering programme for children and young people with complex needs.

The fostering service manager provides the operational management of the service. The service consists of three fostering teams who assess and provide support to foster carers. The service has a recruitment team which is responsible for dealing with enquiries from the public and the first stages of the application process for foster carers. It also operates a placement duty team for those children and young people requiring a placement. The service is able to access support from a team consisting of clinical psychologists and a specialist senior practitioner to provide help for children and foster carers if therapeutic intervention is required. The fostering service has 300 fostering households and provides placements for 231 children and young people.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

The fostering service promotes the health, safety and well-being of children with good and outstanding outcomes for children and young people being achieved.

Children and young people's social and emotional needs are actively promoted by foster carers and staff. Foster carers have excellent access to a range of professional help and advice, including health and education, which supports children and young people's placement in foster care very effectively. There is also excellent training and support to foster carers which reinforce best practice in relation to managing challenging behaviour. Training is diverse and comprehensive. Carers are positive about the training they receive and feel it helps them to carry out their role effectively.

Children and young people enjoy strong relationships with their foster families and interact positively with them. The authority has a highly active Child in Care Council (CICC) to represent the views and opinions of children and young people which has a good representation of backgrounds and culture. Children, young people and foster carers are largely positive about the service they receive.

Young people are well prepared and supported into adulthood so that they can reach their potential and achieve economic wellbeing. The service supports young people to help them make the transition to independence very well by ensuring foster carers

support young people to develop age appropriate independence skills.

The service ensures equality and diversity is well promoted. The service works closely with children and young people to ensure they receive a good level of personalised care that meets their needs.

The fostering service is managed and staffed by those who are suitable and qualified to work with children and young people. There is a strong management team that are experienced and supportive and supervising social workers who are committed to achieving good outcomes for children and young people. Robust systems are in place to monitor and review the performance of the service.

Three shortfalls were noted leading to recommendations. These relate to the timeliness of foster carer reviews, placements made outside of foster carers' terms of approval and foster carer records.

Improvements since the last inspection

At the last inspection eight recommendations were made. All have been addressed. These were in respect of foster carer training, notifications, recording and record keeping, unannounced visits, foster carer agreements and procedures and expectations governing arrangements for foster children to spend short periods away from the foster carer households.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Children and young people's health care needs are effectively identified, supported and met. Their health is promoted in accordance with their care plans and they have good access to health care resources.

Strong links are established between health professionals who provide effective health care support to looked after children and young people which helps to improve their health and well-being. One health professional commented: 'I notice significant improvement in children's development, behaviour and access to health services after they come in care.' The service has access to skilled specialist child health advice provided through health clinics run by the designated nurse and doctor for looked after children. Children and young people also have good access to therapeutic support via the authority's attachment team, sexual health nurse and the Children and Adolescent Mental Health Service. This improves outcomes for young people by ensuring that they receive appropriate health interventions which address their health needs.

Foster carers receive training in medication, health and first aid and receive comprehensive guidance to enable them to care for children with complex health needs. The service has recently developed a health passport in consultation with

children and young people, their carers and social workers. This is currently being implemented and ensures that all looked after children and young people have full knowledge of their medical and health care needs.

Children and young people live in foster homes that provide a healthy environment and have the space they need. Foster carers provide children and young people with good advice, support and guidance on leading healthy lifestyles. They have the opportunity to participate in a wide range of physical activities in line with their interests. Foster carers' homes are regularly monitored by supervising social workers on visits and unannounced inspections to ensure that the environment is clean, safe and well maintained.

Foster carers are given the necessary equipment and physical adaptations to enable them to provide a high level of care to children with disabilities and complex health needs. For children and young people receiving short-break care, effective partnership-working ensures any ongoing treatment or emergency treatment is consistent throughout a stay. Short-break carers are able to meet the needs of disabled children and young people as they receive direct support from specialist services including, doctors, paediatricians, speech and language therapists, school nurses and the designated nurse for looked after children.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The safety and welfare of children and young people are actively promoted by the service through clear and comprehensive systems which help ensure their protection. Children and young people are protected through effective partnership working with other agencies for example, the police. Systems are developed which ensure scrutiny, expertise and multi-agency accountability at all levels. The authority operates a panel which monitors all allegations and concerns regarding standards of care. There is also regular reporting to the corporate parenting panel on safeguarding issues. The authority has developed a multi-agency risk assessment tool and operates a complex case panel to identify and monitor high risk cases. These systems ensure that any allegation made by a child or young person is taken seriously and investigated in line with the authority's safeguarding procedures.

Children and young people feel safe in their foster homes. One young people commented that 'the foster home feels like a safe place to be'. Foster carers receive safeguarding training as part of their core training and appropriate training to keep them up to date with social media. These ensure they are aware of their roles and responsibilities in supporting and safeguarding children and young people. Children and young people are also given guidance on the use of the internet to help keep them safe.

Children and young people who go missing from foster carers are safeguarded and supported to change their high-risk behaviours by good multi-agency protocols. Numbers of children missing from home are relatively low and there is robust

monitoring of such events. Independent return-home interviews are conducted. An interagency missing person's panel has been established ensuring all children and young people and their families and carers receive the help they need.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Children and young people enjoy strong relationships with their foster families and interact positively with them. Foster carers are able to provide an environment where consistent boundaries, fairness and the best possible care is provided to vulnerable children and young people. One young person commented: 'I have been in care for 12 years with the same foster carers. I have been well looked after, loved.'

There is a cohesive approach to positive care and control. This is seen through excellent training and support to foster carers through the authority's specific behaviour management programme (KEEP) and through the fostering attachment's training programme. These reinforce best practice in relation to managing challenging behaviour. The development of multi dimensional treatment foster care has also delivered some excellent outcomes for children and is being expanded to include adolescents.

Children and young people are able to enjoy their interests and are supported and encouraged to engage in leisure activities. Many children and young people have access to leisure cards which allow entry to the local community resources for example swimming pools and gyms.

There are no permanent exclusions in the education arena for looked after children. This is largely due to the outstanding vision and practice that supports children and young people's rights to education. Carers, teachers and social workers work together with a clear focus on the child to support change and prevent exclusion.

Children and young people's attainment and progression is robustly monitored and tracked. Each year there is an ever improving trend. The virtual school is highly effective in supporting children and young people's educational outcomes. There is a rapid admissions protocol for unaccompanied asylum seekers. This prevents delay to accessing education and supports successful admission into school or college. Extended school activities are well resourced and offer excellent wrap-around support. These are used to excellent effect by children and young people.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

Children and young people's social and emotional needs are actively promoted by foster carers and staff. They receive excellent individual and personalised care from carers that is meeting their needs and which helps them to develop emotional resilience and a positive self-view. This is supported and promoted by supervising

social workers and through the multi dimensional treatment foster care programme. This helps children and young people to develop in confidence and self-esteem which lead to greater stability in placement.

Children and young people feel part of the family, feel included and participate in their foster home. Young people's comments include, 'I feel loved and happy' and 'even though we are kids in care she and her family treat us like family and feel like you belong'.

The fostering service adopts differing methods of gaining children and young people's views in line with their age, understanding, first language and communication method. There are many opportunities available for children and young people to express their views. Children and young people have access to an independent advocacy resource. They say that they are listened to and their views are sought.

The authority has a highly active Child in Care Council (CICC) to represent the views and opinions of children and young people which has a good representation of backgrounds and culture. One young person commented: 'Being a member of the CICC has enabled me to make an influence on decisions made by the local authority on young people. Personally, I have attended Associated Parliamentary Group meetings in London and the SE regional meetings.... I was honoured to attend the launch of the Munro report and have an input.'

Young people are also involved in staff recruitment. As a direct result of the CICC, improvements have been made in several areas. The foster carer charter called 'Two way respect' has been improved, the children's welcome guide is bigger and easier to read and children and young people with special needs benefit from mentors when using mainstream youth activities.

Foster carers' actively support and facilitate positive and constructive contact arrangements with family and friends. Carers express that they feel the fostering service provides excellent support to them in maintaining and promoting contact with birth family and friends.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is outstanding.

Young people are well prepared and supported into adulthood so that they can reach their potential and achieve economic wellbeing. The service supports young people to help them make the transition to independence very well by ensuring foster carers support young people to develop age-appropriate independence skills. Foster carers are providing a supportive environment that naturally leads to increasing young people's ability to begin to understand and manage their finances. From an early point young people are encouraged to participate in developing good practical skills cooking, completing chores in the home and taking increased personal responsibility.

There is dedicated leaving care team working closely with the housing department to provide comprehensive arrangements for preparing and supporting young people to make the successful transition to independence. This ensures young people's access to housing is well planned, coordinated and fully supported by the fostering service.

The overwhelming majority of young people are succeeding in education, employment and training. This is leading to increased self-esteem and self-confidence. The fostering service has a well developed 'Staying Put' policy which is implemented effectively and which delivers outstanding outcomes for young people. The authority has been awarded a quality mark for work experience, apprenticeship and positive recruitment offered to young people who are looked after and leaving care.

Children and young people's new care and pathway planning ensures that their needs are properly assessed and met. There is a seamless process which places a strong emphasis on participation and exercising choice. This is demonstrated through the high levels of active participation in statutory reviews.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The service works closely with children and young people to ensure they receive a high level of personalised care that meets their needs. Children and young people's individual needs are considered during the matching process. Attitudes to diversity are explored in the assessment process and good support is offered to carers and young people to promote their individual needs.

The fostering service is managed and staffed by those who are suitable and qualified to work with children and young people. It is managed ethically, effectively and efficiently, delivering a good service which meets the needs of its users. Robust systems are in place to monitor and review the performance of the service. This ensures the management team has a very clear view of the strengths of the service and areas for improvement. Allegations and complaints are handled in a way that provides effective protection and support for children.

The fostering service meets its aims set out in the fostering service's Statement of Purpose. The children's guide is available in several age appropriate formats; this enables children and young people of all ages to have an understanding of the service provided to them. Records are generally well maintained and are completed to varying degrees. They are clear and contribute to child's understanding of their life. Records, however, pertaining to foster carers do not include details of all their placements as required by legislation. Since the last inspection, a new electronic system has been introduced.

The service ensures a good range of prospective foster carers are recruited and assessed to ensure they meet the needs of children and young people they provide

care for. Assessments are comprehensive and identify the strengths they have or need to develop. Staff are fully trained in the assessment process. Not all foster carer reviews, however, are taking place in a timely manner. This may compromise the fostering service's overview of the foster carers' performance and continued quality of the foster placement.

The fostering panel and decision-maker make timely, quality and appropriate recommendations and decisions in order to promote the welfare of children and young people in foster care. The fostering panel is made up of people from a central list and who have a good mix of skills, knowledge and experience. The panel provides a good quality assurance function by scrutinising reports sent to panel and by feeding back on the quality of reports being presented.

The service undertakes careful and effective matching of children and young people with carers which helps to ensure placement stability and which leads to more successful outcomes for children and young people. Children's needs are carefully matched to carers' skills and where extra support is needed this is identified. Children have, however, been placed outside of foster carers' terms of approval which has the potential to compromise their welfare.

Foster carers receive a good level of support and supervision in order to care properly for children placed with them. Almost all feel that the training and support given by the service is very good and a diverse range of training is available to staff and carers. The majority of foster carers have completed or are in the process of completing the Children's Workforce Development Council induction programme. A rolling programme is in place to ensure this is completed by all carers. The service has also developed online training which is available to staff and foster carers. It is evident that the service has developed and improved its training programme plus the integration of training and therapeutic support to staff and carers considerably since the last inspection. This is clearly now a strength of the service.

Friends and family fostering is well supported within the fostering service. Family and friends carers have equal access to training and support and in addition have their own support groups and newsletters.

Staff receive regular support, supervision and appraisals. Staff feel very well supported by the management team. Robust recruitment procedures are in place which ensures that all appropriate checks and references are undertaken and appropriately ratified.

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 a review of foster carer suitability takes place not more than a year after

approval, and thereafter whenever the fostering service provider consider it necessary, but at intervals of not more than a year (Regulation 28.2)

- ensure a case record is maintained for each approved foster parent which includes a record of each placement made including the name, age, sex of each child placed, the dates on which each placement began and terminated and the circumstances of the termination (Regulation 30(3))
- ensure that, other than in an emergency, a child must only be placed with foster carers whose terms of approval match the child's circumstances. (The Children Act 1989, Guidance and Regulations Volume 4 Fostering Services 3.3)