

Halton Borough Council Fostering Service

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

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Inspector	Sue Winson / Marian Denny
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Date of last inspection	06/10/2009

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Halton Borough Council Fostering Service provides a range of placements for children in care, including short and long term and family and friends. It is responsible for the recruitment, assessment, approval, supervision and support of foster carers. Where placements are not available in house the service uses independent fostering agency placements. The service had 127 approved foster placements and 97 children placed as at 31st March 2012.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding: a service that significantly exceeds minimum requirements

Good: a service that exceeds minimum requirements

Adequate: a service that only meets minimum requirements

Inadequate: a service that does not meet minimum requirements

Overall effectiveness

The overall effectiveness is judged to be **good**.

The fostering service is effective in placing children and young people without avoidable delay with foster carers who can meet their needs. A large majority of children in care are placed with foster carers or connected people. Good quality support sustains their placements and ensures that they are safe. Unplanned placement changes are minimised as far as is possible. Children and young people are actively engaged in their plans and understand what is happening to them. They have a range of opportunities to influence how the fostering service operates, and changes have been made as a result. They say they are listened to.

Children and young people make good progress across all aspects of their welfare and development. They have positive views about their lives and their relationships with their foster carers. Individualised care planning, effective links and communication with other agencies and workers enhance children's progress. Accurate and thorough assessments of foster carers allow for effective matching to achieve positive outcomes.

Leaders and managers understand the strengths of the fostering service. They have development plans to address any areas for improvement that are identified through a range of auditing and monitoring activities. They and the fostering team are ambitious and committed to continuous improvement to maximise children's progress. There are no failures to meet national minimum standards that impact negatively on the welfare or safety of children and young people.

Areas for improvement

Recommendations

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

- ensure that the views of the child's family are sought regularly on the child's care (NMS 1.4)
- continue to implement an effective strategy to ensure sufficient foster carers to be responsive to current and predicted future demands on the service (NMS 13.1).

Outcomes for children and young people

Outcomes for children and young people are **good**.

Almost all children and young people who are looked after by the local authority live with foster carers, where this is the placement of choice and is the best option for each child. They benefit from stable, appropriate placements. A large majority are placed with siblings, if this is in their best interests. Where placements of siblings together are not possible, flexible contact arrangements allow them to meet regularly and maintain relationships. A small minority experience of children unplanned placement endings.

Children and young people actively participate in day-to-day and more complex decisions about their lives, as appropriate. They attend statutory reviews and meetings and are given reasonable choices in the foster home. They are given choice about where they wish their education support and health assessments to take place, so that they do not feel different from others in their schools. Examples were given where children's views have influenced their care or service provision. For example, contact arrangements have been changed at their request. Bank accounts have been set up for all children in foster care and they have been involved in revision of the Children's guide to fostering and the policy on overnight stays. A very large majority of children who met with the inspectors or completed surveys said that their views are listened to.

Children and young people are positive about their foster placements and are treated as part of the family. They understand their situation and where appropriate, have the opportunity to engage in life story work. Where appropriate and safe, they enjoy contact with their family and friends and maintain ongoing relationships.

Children and young people live with foster carers who can meet their global needs and they make good progress. They are healthy and well informed about healthy living. Children say that they are encouraged to eat a balanced diet and take exercise. Their emotional health needs are well met.

Young children enjoy a range of early learning and play opportunities to enhance their pre-school skills. Good attendance at school or other educational provision ensures that they make progress and their achievements are celebrated. For many, their achievement is exceptional, taking into account their attainment and progress from their starting points. The local authority ensures that they have the same life chances as others, in terms of aids to reading and learning and involvement in school trips.

Children and young people participate in a wide range of leisure activities which support their development and social skills, according to individual wishes and aptitudes. They also have opportunities to broaden their outlook and enjoy events such as holidays, outings and overnight stays with friends. They expressed satisfaction with the activities available to them.

Young people gain practical and life skills and are also prepared emotionally for adult life. Examples were given where young people successfully gained appropriate housing. They have the opportunity to remain in foster care after 18 years of age supported by the local authority. Many continue to visit and receive support from their foster carers after leaving.

Quality of service

The quality of the service is **good**.

The fostering service recruits a range of skilled foster carers through a strategy which is focussed on meeting the needs and projected needs of children and young people in Halton. The strategy ensures that enquirers are responded to in a timely manner. Reminder cards are sent to encourage people to attend information days. Foster carer retention is a priority. Whilst children and young people's need for foster care is met, increasing the number of foster carers would increase placement choice. The fostering service uses independent fostering agencies where necessary to meet specific needs of children and young people. The quality of placements and their progress is monitored effectively.

The recruitment, preparation and assessment of foster carers is well focussed on children's needs. Leaflets, information meetings and preparation training provide applicants with a realistic and clear view of fostering. Information provided is effective in making clear the authority's high expectations of foster carers in relation to meeting children's needs.

Assessments address the applicants' competence for the role. They are in depth and focus on how well people can meet children and young people's needs. Foster carers are positive about the quality and range of the training they receive. A large majority said that training helps them to meet the needs of children placed with them. They have a range of opportunities to increase their skills through ongoing training, including bespoke training to assist them with children in their care. For example, specific training is provided in relation to children on autistic spectrum, independence

work and behaviour management.

The fostering panel makes timely, appropriate and child-centred recommendations. Members have a breadth of experience and skills which ensure that safe, secure and stable placements are promoted, which are in children's best interests. Clear minutes demonstrate considered and rigorous discussion and the reasons for recommendations made. The quality assurance functions of the panel contribute to service improvement. The agency decision maker makes timely and robust decisions, taking into account the panel's recommendations.

Placement decision is informed by a good understanding of the assessed needs of children and young people and of foster carers' skills and individual situations. The service has worked with placing social workers to improve the quality and range of information provided at the matching stage. In addition, they are empowered to question or challenge where there are gaps in the information. Robust matching practice results in extra support (often multi-disciplinary) being provided early in placements, to meet individual need or compensate for any gaps in matching.

Foster carers are well supported and supervised effectively to ensure that children and young people are cared for in line with their individual placement plans and that they have access to services to meet their needs. New foster carers and those experiencing new situations (for example, moving children on to adoption) receive extra levels of support, including mentoring and post-approval support packages. Foster carers value the focussed, high quality supervision and support that they receive. In addition to individual support, they have access to a range of support groups and events.

Children and young people benefit from their foster carers' active involvement in the planning process. Foster carers are respected as part of the team working in the best interests of children. In addition, children and young people gain from the fostering service working in effective partnership with their parents and families, other services and professionals. Education, health, early years workers and therapists are available to assist in foster carer training. These professionals also provide advice or direct services to children and their foster carers. Close working relationships amongst professionals ensure that any barriers to progress can be addressed and solutions found in a timely and flexible manner.

Safeguarding children and young people

The service is **good** at keeping children and young people safe and feeling safe.

Children and young people feel safe and are protected both inside and outside the foster home. Examples were given where children had felt confident in talking to foster carers about bullying, to ensure that it did not continue. They know how to complain and they are able to do so. Children receive information in the Children's Guide to fostering. They have access to children's rights workers, advocates and independent visitors. Children rarely go missing from care and if this does happen, foster carers are aware of the correct procedures to follow.

Recruitment, assessment, supervision and training of foster carers have a strong focus on safeguarding and protection. Unannounced visits are carried out at least twice a year and more often in response to any concerns. Placing social workers and independent reviewing officers expressed confidence in foster carers' abilities to safeguard children and young people.

The fostering service handles complaints, allegations and concerns promptly. The prime consideration is the needs and safety of any children and young people involved. Examples were given where, in response to individual concerns, effective action had been put in place across the service to increase children's safety.

Leadership and management

The leadership and management of the local authority fostering agency are **good**.

Leaders and managers routinely and rigorously monitor and evaluate the service to drive improvement and ensure children and young people make progress. Regular reports are compiled to assist this process and highlight any areas for improvement. The service has increased the number of foster carers through robust recruitment; however, there remain some gaps in provision for children with complex needs, large sibling groups and older children. The role of family and friends carers is well promoted and understood. Where appropriate, in the interests of children in long term placements, the service is successful in promoting the use of other legislative routes to permanence.

A strong continuous improvement agenda is shared by all staff. Foster carers are valued and feel valued as part of the team. The local authority has adopted the Foster Carer Charter and is meeting its commitments. Foster carers are involved in service development through a variety of means, including the foster carer forum, the local foster carer association and a range of range of support groups. Changes have been made as a result of listening to foster carers and these include changing forms so that they are more user-friendly. In response to suggestions, amendments have been made to the foster carer handbook and contributions made to the cost of mobile phones. The views of parents of children placed are not routinely sought. The service acknowledges that this is an area for development.

The managers and staff are appropriately qualified, experienced and skilled to enable them to supervise and support foster carers. This ensures they provide good quality safe care for children and young people. Staff are well managed and effectively supported and supervised. Annual appraisals address development needs. Staff are positive about management and leadership, training and professional development. Action has been taken in relation to recommendations from previous inspections.

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 to assess the effectiveness of the service and to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards.

The report details the main strengths, any areas for improvement, including any breaches of regulation, and any failure to meet national minimum standards. The judgements included in the report are made against the inspection framework and the evaluation schedule for local authority fostering agencies.