

Bury Metropolitan Borough Council - Fostering

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

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Inspector	Lynn O'Driscoll / Mandy Williams
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Setting address	Bury Social Services, Family Placement Team, Whitefield Centre, Higher Lane, Whitefield, Manchester, M45 7FX
Telephone number	0161 253 6868
Email	d.needham@bury.gov.uk
Registered person	Bury Metropolitan Borough Council
Registered manager	Debbie Needham
Responsible individual	Saul Ainsworth
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Service information

Brief description of the service

This is a relatively small local authority fostering service. Its main functions are to: recruit, train and assess foster carers; carefully match children with approved carers which meet their individual needs; and, provide ongoing training and support to carers to develop their skills and maintain placements. On the 31 March 2012 there were 158 children and young people in permanent placements and 40 in short term placements. 52 children and young people are placed with independent fostering agencies.

The service also provides a short break scheme specifically developed to keep young people out of the care system and a home from home scheme that provides regular and planned short breaks to disabled children and young people. Both of these work in close partnership with families to ensure they meet identified needs.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding: a service of exceptional quality that significantly exceeds minimum requirements

Good: a service of high quality 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 **adequate**.

This fostering service promotes improved outcomes for all children and young people. Robust matching processes and strong partnership working with all relevant agencies is firmly established. Consequently, children and young people are kept safe and feel safe. A particular strength is the high proportion of children and young people living in stable placements with their siblings.

Carers are genuinely dedicated to their role. They confirm high satisfaction with the support provided to them from the service to successfully maintain placements. They also confirm ongoing, relevant and good quality training. However, many have not completed the required training, support and development standards in a timely manner.

All the children and young people are making good progress and many are making outstanding progress, especially given their starting points, in all aspects of their development. They are actively involved in care planning and feel listened to.

However, the voice of the child is not consistently reflected in key documentation. The children's guide is also not produced in a sufficient range of appropriate formats to meet the needs of all the children and young people in placements.

The vast majority of children and young people benefit from excellent relationships with their carers. They are extremely happy and settled in their current placements and want to remain until they feel ready to move on to independence.

Managers provide clear direction and excellent support to the staff team. They ensure good supervision and timely annual appraisals. However, these do not include the views of children and young people.

Managers are also clear about the strengths of this service and the key areas for improvement. Appropriate development plans are in place to address the latter. In particular they are creating a dedicated recruitment officer post to attract more carers from a diversity of backgrounds. They are also increasing the range of resources available to young people preparing to live independently. Moreover, independent reviewing officers are improving young people's choice in the venues and attendees at their statutory reviews and actively encouraging them to write the minutes.

However, the agency does not have suitably robust systems to monitor: the quality of the documentation, including assessments, staff files and the statement of purpose; and, the effectiveness of its systems, including panel processes, training and appraisals and recruitment and selection. This has resulted in many of the recommendations arising from this inspection. Up until April 2012, three monthly written reports were also not being presented for consideration by the executive side of the local authority.

There are no breaches of regulation arising from this inspection but 13 recommendations are made.

Areas for improvement

Recommendations

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

- implement an effective strategy to ensure sufficient foster carers to be responsive to current and predicted future demands on the service (NMS 13.1)
- ensure consistently timely and good quality assessment reports are presented to the fostering panel (NMS 13.7)
- ensure the children's guide is produced in a range of formats to meet the needs of all the children and young people in placements (NMS 16.6)
- demonstrate that the views of children and young people are considered as part of the staff appraisal process (NMS 24.6)

- ensure effective systems are in place for monitoring the timeliness of panel processes and agency decisions (NMS 14.9)
- ensure each panel member's performance, including that of the chair, is reviewed annually (fostering service statutory guidance chapter 5.15)
- ensure carers attain the training, support and development standards within 12 months of approval or within 18 months for family and friends foster carers (NMS 20.3)
- revise the statement of purpose to include the services and facilities provided to family and friends foster carers and ensure it is reviewed at least annually and published on the provider's website (NMS 30.2 and fostering service statutory guidance chapter 4.1)
- ensure each person on the central list is given the opportunity of attending an annual joint training day with the fostering service's fostering staff (NMS 23.9)
- demonstrate consistently robust recruitment and selection processes (NMS 19.2)
- ensure there are effective processes in place for monitoring and controlling the activities of the fostering service (NMS 25.1)
- ensure an effective system is in place to monitor the quality and adequacy of record keeping, reflecting the voice of the child, and take action when needed (NMS 26.2)
- provide three monthly written reports to the executive side of the local authority on the management, outcomes and financial state of the fostering service. (NMS 25.7)

Outcomes for children and young people

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

Many children and young people enjoy the security of long term stable placements with their siblings. They feel part of the carer's family and have a strong sense of belonging. This is increasing their self-esteem and emotional resilience which prepares them well for the future. They also enjoy constructive and regular contact with their family and friends thereby ensuring a positive view of their unique backgrounds and identity. Comments include, 'I live with my brother and sister. I have my own bedroom which is painted in my favourite colour pink. We see our mum and dad lots, my aunty once a month and my nana and granddad every two months.'

Some risk taking behaviours have ceased in their current placements and others have significantly decreased. Examples include drug and alcohol misuse and going missing respectively.

Children and young people benefit from individualised care and the majority of their assessed and often highly complex needs and personal preferences are well met. A

good range of excellent specialist services are also provided in a timely manner to meet any specific needs. Consequently, for example, children with significant disabilities are exceeding developmental milestones. Another carer spoke of an eight year old who prior to placement had adult caring responsibilities. She said, 'It is so lovely to see her being a child. She came to us full of anxieties and now she is settled and thriving.'

Carers are well supported to ensure young people gradually develop the social, emotional and practical skills necessary for future successful independent living. Young people also feel secure in the knowledge that they can remain in placement beyond their 18th birthday until they feel fully prepared to move on. Consequently, tenancy stability rates are very good.

Children and young people say they are listened to and involved in decisions about their day to day lives and their futures, embracing a diversity of communication needs. This is reinforced by a pro-active independent children's rights service. A small proportion of fostered young people are also involved in the development of the service through the children in care council. They are currently developing a dedicated website to improve accessibility to more looked after children and are organising the next annual achievement event.

There are outstanding opportunities in place for all children and young people to reach their potential and to achieve economic wellbeing. School attendance is excellent and children and young people are making substantial progress, both academically and behaviourally, especially given their starting points. Examples include 10 general certificates in secondary education (GCSE's) at A* to C grades and singing solo in a public performance. A significant number of young people are also in higher education and have settled quickly at university knowing they can return to their carers in the holidays. A few have successfully secured apprenticeships within the local authority and others are working within their carer's businesses. One carer said, 'when she came to us she could barely read. Now she has eight A's at GCSE and is now doing A levels and visiting universities.'

Children and young people enjoy good health and take pride in their appearance. They benefit from clean and spacious homes, nutritious meals and taking part in regular physical exercise. Many have gym memberships. Consequently their health and emotional well being has significantly improved in their current placements. One kinship carer vividly described offering a permanent home to 'an unkempt child with no friends'. He persevered and got a place at a the school they wanted. Now he is proud to say, 'She is applying to be head prefect, is an active member of the children in care council, goes on the consultation activity holidays so she can put her views across about the fostering service, and has lots of friends and sleepovers.'

Children and young people enjoy taking part in a very good range of constructive leisure activities. Many also benefit from holidays abroad. Moreover, individual interests and talents are actively encouraged and supported which further develops their skills and confidence. Examples include, playing musical instruments, army cadets, horse-riding, gymnastics, dance and drama.

Quality of service

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

There is a strong commitment to permanency planning and family and friends placements. Consequently, a very large majority of children and young people benefit from stable placements with their siblings. Many are happily living with extended family members. They enjoy a genuine sense of security and belonging and do not experience placement breakdowns. They make good progress in all areas of their development increasing their feelings of self-worth.

A significant number of children and young people are placed with independent fostering agencies. This highlights the importance placed on careful matching and the commitment to offering children and young people a genuine choice of placements. However, it also reflects the fostering service's need to recruit more in house carers.

Pre-placement planning meetings thoroughly explore children's needs and the specific skills and competencies needed from carers to meet those needs. A particular strength of this service is timely access to appropriate and excellent specialist support and advice to meet any gaps in carer's knowledge. These include clinical psychologists, a designated nurse for looked after children and an educational support team.

Sensitive and gradual introductions give children and young people the opportunity to visit and ask questions about their new placement enabling them to make an informed choice. They are also visited within two to four weeks of placement by an independent children's rights worker to ensure they are fully aware of all the services available to them.

Carers demonstrate outstanding commitment to the children and young people in placement, despite some extremely challenging behaviours. They are particularly strong advocates in ensuring all the children and young people receive the best education to meet their needs and contact arrangements are in the child's best interests.

The vast majority of carers are highly satisfied with the support they receive to meet the unique needs and personal preferences of the children placed. Supervising social workers are described as 'fantastic and always available.' They confirm good communication with the fostering service and receive all the information they need prior to placement to appropriately care for each individual child. They also benefit from ongoing, relevant and good quality training courses to continue to develop their knowledge and skills. Comments include, 'If we find specific external training they will fund it, so I am going to a conference in November about autism' and, 'some of the courses have been amazing for example building on memories and behaviour management.' This is a 12 week course for carers to gain a deeper insight into children's behaviours and how to positively manage them. However, there is no

system in place to ensure all carers complete the required training, support and developments standards in a timely manner.

This service has a suitably constituted panel. Members have committed to 75% attendance, but this is not closely monitored. Until very recently they had also not received timely annual appraisals and regular joint training with the fostering service. The panel is independently chaired by a suitably qualified and experienced individual who ensures full participation in reaching appropriate and child centred recommendations. The panel also appropriately exercises its quality assurance function. However, the minutes do not always adequately reflect the detailed discussions that have taken place. Moreover, there is no effective system in place for ensuring the required panel processes and agency decisions are undertaken within the required timescales.

Safeguarding children and young people

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

The vast majority of children and young people say they are very happy and well looked after and feel safe and secure in their current placements. None report any incidents of bullying. Consequently, there are relatively few incidents of children and young people going missing. Those who do are protected by agreed protocols and effective partnership working with the local police. However, the spread sheet currently used is not sufficiently detailed to be an effective monitoring tool.

Children and young people say they feel comfortable to express any concerns to their carers and confirm their views are listened to. They also know how to make a formal complaint and a small number have exercised this right. These are taken seriously, fully investigated and positive outcomes reached in a timely manner.

All carers and staff are trained in safeguarding to ensure an appropriate response to any disclosures. Allegations are responded to quickly, working in partnership with other relevant agencies to ensure effective protection to the individual. Independent advice and support is also provided to the person subject to the allegation. However, the documentation maintained by the fostering service does not adequately reflect these good practices.

Staff files include all the required information to demonstrate a safe and competent workforce. However, some of the processes are not consistently robust, including recording telephone verification of references.

Leadership and management

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

This service is well resourced. It benefits from appropriately qualified and highly experienced staff and a recent restructure brought disability expertise into the team.

Staff say this is a good authority to work for. Consequently, they are highly motivated and staff and carer retention rates are particularly good. Supervising social workers confirm realistic workloads and 'loads of training' enabling them to provide excellent support and guidance to carers. They benefit from regular team meetings with open and honest debates, good quality supervision and timely annual appraisals. However, the corporate format used is not appropriate to the fostering service and in particular it does not include children and young people's views. The children's guide is also not produced in a sufficient range of different formats to meet the needs of all the children and young people currently in placements.

Very effective working relationships are firmly established with partner agencies including health, police, education and children's advocacy services to safeguard and promote the welfare of looked after children.

This service also demonstrates a capacity for continued improvement. The most significant development is the timely assessments, increased support and good quality training provided to family and friends carers who are now highly satisfied with the service provided. The authority has also recently invested in a new IT system to better monitor care planning, progress and outcomes. However, the impact of this is too soon to determine.

The three requirements made at the last inspection on 13 July 2009 have been satisfactorily addressed. Consequently, all the required documentation is now available on children and carer's files. There is also a system in place for ascertaining the views of children and young people to inform carer's annual reviews. However, the response is still variable.

Seven out of the nine recommendations made at the last inspection have been satisfactorily addressed. This has resulted in: improved pre-placement planning processes to ensure carers have all the required information and consent to appropriately care for each child; timely personal education plans and pathway plans; increased supervisory visits to carers and their views systematically taken into account as part of their annual reviews, which are now independently chaired; and, clear expectations of carers to record significant life events and keep important memorabilia for children. Examples include life story books and memory boxes.

However, the monitoring of records is still not sufficiently robust. This means, although files include all the required information, the quality is variable with, for example, inaccurate names and dates and lack of signatures. They also do not always suitably cross reference with other relevant paperwork to demonstrate robust audit trails. Examples include exemptions with complaints, and unplanned endings with missing from care records. In particular, the voice of the child is not consistently recorded in key documentation. This includes statutory reviews and pathway plans. Moreover, some assessments presented to panel on prospective carers still do not comprehensively demonstrate their specific competencies.

To date, only annual, rather than three monthly reports have been presented to the executive side of the authority. The statement of purpose and the website is also not

regularly updated to ensure it always accurately reflects the current organisational structure, policies, practices and services provided. In particular it does not detail the family and friends services, which is now a fundamental and very well managed part of the fostering service.

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.