

Slough Borough Council Fostering Services

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Slough Borough Council fostering service provides a local authority family placement service to meet the needs of looked after children and young people in the Slough area. This includes asylum-seeking young people from countries around the world.

The service has 44 registered foster carers, currently accommodating 47 children and young people. The short break service has 18 registered carers. There are a further nine sets of carers currently undergoing assessment.

The service also supports children who continue to live within their family of origin by providing regular periods of family-based care, relief care or short breaks for disabled children and young people.

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 **good**.

The fostering service provides effective, consistent and good quality care for children and young people in Slough. Children are matched and placed, usually with any siblings, without undue delay. There is robust management tracking to ensure that children who are awaiting placements are constantly reviewed. This helps to ensure that children do not drift in care.

The service has recruited a good range of foster carers who reflect the diversity of the local community. When children's needs cannot be met in-house, the service uses independent fostering agencies to provide placements; for example, for larger sibling groups. Foster carer assessments are detailed and thorough, to help to ensure that children receive safe and effective care.

The service provides very good quality training, support and supervision for foster carers. There is still some work to be done on ensuring that all foster carers and their families feel part of the team.

Children and young people have positive views about their foster carers. They are consulted about their care and are actively engaged in plans. Children and young people have actively contributed to service development; for example, in producing an excellent children's guide, DVD and booklet.

Children and young people make very good progress in relation to their starting points in terms of their social, emotional and behavioural development, health and welfare. In particular, their progress and achievements are impressive in relation to education. Both attendance and attainment are very good, with two recent graduates, and a number of young people progressing through university.

The service has good relationships with other agencies to provide a joined-up approach to meeting children's safety, healthcare and educational needs. The strategic management structure and the co-location of inter-professional teams help to ensure effective professional links throughout children's services in Slough.

The service has strong, creative and inspirational leadership. There is robust monitoring in place across all aspects of the service. A development plan is implemented consistently to ensure continued improvements in service quality.

Recommendations made on this occasion do not directly impact on children and young people's welfare or safety. These concern written information provided to children, information provided to Ofsted about the quality monitoring of the service and recruitment checks for panel members.

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 children's handbook includes information about how they can contact the Children's Rights Director (NMS 1.5 and NMS 16.4)
- ensure that the registered person provides the Chief Inspector with a written report in respect of any review conducted for the purposes of paragraph (1) (Regulation 35(2))
- ensure that the fostering service has a record of the recruitment and suitability checks which have been carried out for those working for the fostering service; in particular, members of the central list, including interview notes and two written references. (NMS 19.1 and 19.3)

Outcomes for children and young people

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

Children benefit from being placed with carers who are carefully matched to meet

their needs. However, the local authority has a limited number of in-house placements. As a result, it makes use of independent fostering agencies to provide placements for children whose needs cannot be met in-house, in order to ensure that children's needs are met.

Children and young people confirm that they are consulted about their care. There are good systems for gaining the views and wishes of children about their care planning and developing the quality of the service. When their wishes cannot be granted, they understand the reasons why. Some children and young people have produced a children's guide and DVD. Although beautifully produced and well written, the children's guide does not provide details for contacting the Children's Rights Director.

Young people say that they are happy in their foster placements and are treated as members of the family. Occasional day-to-day disagreements that would occur in many families are usually able to be resolved. A very small number of young people were not confident about their placements continuing in the long term, however, they said that they knew who they needed to talk with in order to resolve these situations. Very few children and young people experience unplanned endings to their placements. The service is good at holding pre-disruption meetings, in order to prevent placement breakdowns. If these interventions are not successful, placement disruption meetings are held. There have been only five unplanned endings in the last year, out of a total of 106 placements made up to March 2012.

Children and young people are very well supported by their foster families and are encouraged to participate in a wide range of leisure and social activities, designed to help them to develop self-confidence, resilience and a positive self-view. Examples include making the video information pack and having the opportunity to interview a range of professionals involved in the looking after of young people. Some young people participated in a dance presentation at an annual award ceremony for looked after children. Young people are proud, albeit slightly embarrassed at the achievements being recognised and celebrated. All young people spoken with said they are making good progress and understand the reasons why they are looked after. They confirmed that they are able to maintain contact with family and friends, in line with their care plans.

Children and young people are encouraged to lead healthy lifestyles. They receive advice from their foster carers and a range of health professionals on healthy eating and lifestyles. All young people are able to exercise choice regarding their healthcare needs and say they are happy with the arrangements for promoting their health. They are able to access a full range of health services, including emotional and psychological support and therapy. There are good links between the fostering service, looked after children nurses and the education and well-being service. Children and young people attend school regularly, and therefore receive the benefits of the school nursing service. Consequently, they receive good quality healthcare advice about the risks of smoking, drug-taking, and sexual health issues.

Most children and young people make very good progress in school. Their

educational attainments are very good, for example, two students have recently graduated and another eight young people are at university. Children are positive about their education and say they are well supported through foster carers providing incentives for learning. Children enjoy positive relationships with education support staff and the virtual headteacher, who ensures that every child has an up-to-date personal education plan to promote their educational needs. Children in transition between schools are also very well supported by the virtual headteacher and her staff.

Children and young people benefit from a service which works hard to match them with foster carers and keep siblings together wherever possible. A strength of the service is its considered matching of children with carers when seeking permanency for children. All permanent placements are agreed at the fostering approval panel; this helps to ensure that children's needs are met.

Young people aged from 15 and a half years upwards have a pathway plan for their transition into adult life. Their foster carers receive support and guidance to help young people achieve their independence objectives. Children and young people are encouraged to take greater self-responsibility for their day-to-day living in an age-appropriate manner.

Quality of service

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

There are effective recruitment and service development plans in place to ensure that children's needs can be met. Foster carers reflect the wide diversity of the local community. The service has appointed a specialist member of staff to promote foster carer recruitment and retention as part of the recruitment plan. There are excellent monitoring systems in place to ensure that the service is able to monitor outcomes for children and ensure that carers are able to meet the diverse needs of children and young people. The recruitment of sufficient numbers of foster carers is still 'work in progress', but the strategy is sound and the direction of travel is positive.

Foster carers are well prepared and trained to meet children and young people's diverse needs. All carers have either completed the Children's Workforce Development Council's training standards programme or are completing it. When foster carers require specific skills to care for a particular young person, this training is provided. The assessment of carers is rigorous and focuses on how carers are able to meet the needs of children. Previously there have been some delays in foster carers accessing pre-approval training in a timely manner; however, this is now addressed in a shared strategy with another Berkshire authority for providing pre-assessment training for carers.

The fostering panel is properly constituted and appropriately chaired. It is rigorous and promotes children's safety by thoughtful questioning of social workers' assessments and recommendations. The panel provides a regular quality assurance function and reports to the service on the quality of assessments presented to the

panel. This promotes the quality of assessments and contributes to improved placement outcomes for children. The fostering panel supports the service effectively and under strong and decisive leadership. This means that children and young people are more likely to enjoy stable and secure placements which meet their needs. Although foster carers have recently had their approval changed to cover a wider age range, in practice they are consulted about the preferred age range. Some foster carers were not convinced that they would not be placed under pressure to take children outside their preferred age range; however, to date none had. The service maintains that careful matching will avoid any such issues. The service has written to foster carers to explain this.

Foster carers are very well supported and most are happy with the level of support, supervision and training. Foster carer supervision is well recorded and carers say it is effective, focusing on the needs of children and how foster carers are able to meet these needs. Foster carers say that supervision is more focused than has always been the case in the past.

Children and young people's needs are assessed very thoroughly. All young people have placement plans and these are regularly reviewed. There are good monitoring systems in place to ensure these take place at appropriate intervals. Placement plans are held on an integrated children's system and although concise, they are effective tools for appropriate planning. Specialist advice and guidance are available to foster carers looking after children with complex needs. Foster carers are an integral part of the team planning the care of young people. Measures are now in place to improve contact and relationships between the authority and foster carers. This work is ongoing, however, not all carers currently consider that they are always seen as equal partners.

Matching for placements, particularly long-term placements, is very thorough. This is one of the service's strengths. Foster carers receive information on children prior to placement and introductions are able to take place. In the case of unplanned placements, information on children and placement planning take place soon after placement. Foster carers say they are given all the information held by the service on the needs of children, and any risk factors. Foster carers generally enjoy good relationships with the fostering service and report they are improving.

Safeguarding children and young people

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

Children and young people feel safe in their foster placements. They say that foster carers keep them safe and any concerns that they may have at home or in school, such as bullying, are followed up by their carers. There are a number of strengths in safeguarding. Foster carers and staff receive regular training and say they are confident that they know how to respond to any safeguarding concerns they may have.

There have been three incidents where allegations have been made against foster

carers, two of which have been dealt with appropriately to safeguard children. However, there was one historical safeguarding incident since the last inspection, where practice at the time was insufficiently child-centred. This issue was identified and rigorously addressed by the then newly appointed interim corporate parenting manager and was from that point on, dealt with very effectively. Prior to that, the decision making process for this case was flawed. The role of the panel in providing necessary checks and balances was unclear. This placed children at risk at the time, although the subsequent decisive action has meant that they are no longer at risk.

The only current issue in safeguarding is that there are shortfalls in the checks conducted on central list members; specifically, interview notes are not on file and there is no evidence of written references being taken up in respect of independent central list members. It is acknowledged that this situation has been inherited from a difficult period in the past, but it is still to be resolved. Staff recruitment practice is good.

Staff training and foster carer preparation and ongoing training are all very sound. There are strong links between the fostering service and Independent Reviewing Officers and the Local Authority Designated Officer. Appropriate safeguarding referrals are made; outcomes are monitored by service managers.

Children and young people's safety is promoted through the foster carer recruitment and assessment process. Supervision of carers has a safeguarding focus, and foster carers are very aware of their responsibilities in terms of keeping children safe.

Foster carers receive regular supervision from supervising social workers. This is now more solution focused than previously; foster carers are aware of the impact of abuse and work with supervising social workers and children's social workers to minimise the impact.

There are effective policies in place for young people who go missing, including proactive social work input and joint working with the police to try to ensure safe return. There is a joint protocol in place between the service and the police. Foster carers are clear about the protocol and the role they play in trying to reduce the number of occasions on which children are missing from home. As a result, the numbers of children going missing is low.

Children and young people and their carers are given advice on how to complain, and how to support children in making a complaint. Children and their carers confirm that they know how to raise a complaint and say that any concerns they have will be looked into fairly and thoroughly.

Leadership and management

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

Leadership and management are good. For example, the quality of monitoring is extremely rigorous and there is a strong commitment to driving up standards. The

combined management structure has led to good inter-professional working relationships to improve outcomes for children. Some aspects of the service monitoring and inspirational projects are in themselves outstanding, but there has not been sufficient time to fully embed these very positive changes. Managers and staff are very aware of the strengths and weaknesses of the service.

The service has relatively new managers and has come from a low baseline in terms of staff and carer morale. This had an impact on outcomes for children. There has been a significant and marked improvement in recent times, but this needs to be sustained over a longer period of time to meet the criteria for outstanding. The managers acknowledge that some elements of practice are still 'works in progress'. For example, there is currently no report to Her Majesty's Chief Inspector in relation to reviews of quality of care.

Children and young people contribute to the development of the fostering service. Consultation with children is good. Managers are committed to seeking the views of children and young people and use a number of methods to seek their views. The service's managers are working hard to engage all fostering families in order to meet children's needs. Foster carers hold the recently appointed team manager in high regard and have increasing confidence in the service.

Foster carers and leaders of the service have developed an effective Foster Carers' Charter. This helps to ensure that foster carers are valued by the service and that their needs are considered in decision making.

The service has received only one complaint. This has been addressed fairly and effectively, with good communication to the complainant.

There are excellent relationships with other agencies, including the police, education and health services. This helps to ensure a 'joined-up' approach to caring for children. The fostering service works closely with the education and well-being service and placing social workers. They are all co-located, which improves communication and planning for children.

Staff receive good quality and regular supervision which meets their professional development and casework planning needs. Staff receive good quality training. All staff have annual performance appraisals and have personal development plans; however, not all appraisals were signed or dated.

All the requirements and recommendations arising from the last inspection have been fully addressed to improve the quality of service and outcomes for children.

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.