

Buckinghamshire County Council Fostering Service

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

Unique reference number	SC058771
Inspection date	29/06/2012
Inspector	Paul Clark / Peter Harrell
Type of inspection	Full

Setting address	Children Services, The Friary, Rickfords Hill, Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire, HP20 2RT
Telephone number	01296 387 630
Email	fostering@buckscc.gov.uk
Registered person	Buckinghamshire County Council
Registered manager	Neil Wood
Responsible individual	Diana Kathreen Large
Date of last inspection	13/11/2008

© Crown copyright 2012

Website: www.ofsted.gov.uk

This document may be reproduced in whole or in part for non-commercial educational purposes, provided that the information quoted is reproduced without adaptation and the source and date of publication are stated.

Service information

Brief description of the service

Buckinghamshire County Council's fostering service provides a range of placements for children and young people. The service is subdivided into four teams. The fostering team supports and supervises the foster carers who provide short-term, long-term, emergency care, and parent and child placements. The recruitment team covers the recruitment and assessment of new carers and has the responsibility for delivering the training programme for all carers. The Take-A-Break scheme manages a range of support services, including overnight respite care, for children with disabilities. The Friends and Families team carries out the assessment, supervision and support of friends and families carers and private foster carers. Each team has its own manager, who reports to the Head of Children's Care Services. The teams are located in offices in Aylesbury and Amersham.

The service also includes a fostering advisor, who provides a quality assurance function in contributing to the development of the service, a fostering panel and a clinical psychologist. As of 26 June 2012, the service was supervising 107 fostering households accommodating 144 young people, not including the children using the Take-A-Break scheme.

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 large majority of children and young people who are looked after by this council live with foster carers and benefit from stable placements. The young people report that they feel safe and are looked after in accordance with their individual care plans. These plans are detailed and comprehensive and young people are actively involved in all stages of care planning as well as service development generally. Foster carers receive a high level of training and supervision. Staff recruitment and vetting system are generally thorough and the performance and delivery of the service is well monitored by an active senior management team.

There are some shortfalls in connection with: the recording of telephone enquiries

following employee references; the evidencing of the manager's management qualification; the shortfalls in placing sibling groups together; the evidencing of social workers memberships of their professional body; the sending of foster carers' monthly log reports to placing social workers and the notification to Ofsted in writing of the changes of manager and responsible individual. The manager is aware of these shortfalls and plans are in place to further develop the service.

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 telephone enquiries are made to each referee to verify the written references for all people working in or for the fostering service (NMS 19(1))
- ensure that fostering households understand the nature of records maintained and follow the service's policies (NMS 26(2))
- ensure that checks to confirm qualifications which are a requirement and those that are considered by the fostering service to be relevant are in place, including the manager's qualifications (NMS 19 (3)(c))
- ensure that the local authority notify Ofsted of the appointment and subsequent changes of manager (Volume 4, statutory guidance, paragraph 4.5)
- ensure that foster carers meet individual children's individual needs as set out in the placement plan as part of the wider family context, specifically if the plan for sibling groups is for them to be kept together. (NMS 2(3))

Outcomes for children and young people

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

The large majority (70%) of children and young people who are looked after in Buckinghamshire live with foster carers and benefit from stable placements where they feel secure and made to feel part of the fostering family household. There are numerous arrangements in place to consult children about their care and to listen to their wishes and feelings. Young people are generally invited to attend the review meetings of their care, unless this is otherwise thought to be detrimental, and make contribution to their ongoing care planning. Young people say they have support from their carers, social workers, and there is a participation worker with whom they can also share their views about their placements and the development of the fostering service. The authority also has a service level agreement with an advocacy service to whom children can and do, go to for advice and support. Because of all of these numerous built-in resources children feel that they have good avenues of support and can make their views and concerns known while they are being looked after. They told us that these services were easily accessible and responsive.

Most children and young people say they are comfortable in their foster homes and are treated as part of their fostering family. Children say they have the information they need about their foster carers. Carers construct written personal profiles about themselves and their households which help children in making decisions about their choice of placement.

Disabled children who are fostered in Buckinghamshire have a good level of care provided by well-trained carers. The service has a short-breaks scheme for children who have disabilities. There are also a number of mainstream fostering households who are skilled in caring for children with disabilities and who have received specialist training which is specifically related to the children for whom they are caring.

Children and young people are well supported by carers who have a good knowledge of their background. Information relating to the care history of children who access the service, is comprehensive and informative. The council has a number of well trained workers who have specialist skills in conducting life story work with young people. Young people who receive life story work feel that this work helps them to have a good knowledge of their history and to develop a sense of their own identity. Foster carers and social workers have also been trained in undertaking life story work and also contribute to children's understanding of their background.

Young people say that they are supported by social workers and foster carers in maintaining contact with their birth relatives and that they feel that their cultural and racial differences are respected. The service has worked hard in the past year to address the previous imbalance in the numbers of approved fostering households from black and minority ethnic groups and this has helped to ensure that children are matched with carers who can meet their racial and cultural needs. Foster carers show consideration and awareness of the religious and cultural beliefs of the young people in their care and young people report that they have been supported in attending faith services and events.

Children say that they experience a wide range of activities and holidays in their foster placements. Several young people spoken to were members of social or sporting clubs. Engagement in these activities helps children to integrate into their local community and improves their self-confidence. There is a Children in Care council and young people who belonged to this group said that they were consulted by social workers regularly. This gives children a forum for raising any concerns about things that are worrying them.

Young people's physical and psychological health is well promoted. Young people are generally healthy. Young people's ongoing health needs are overseen by a consultant paediatrician and a looked after children's nurse. The paediatrician will carry out medical checks on all children under five and general practitioners will check older children when they initially become looked after. The nurse conducts the medicals necessary for placement reviews. The service has a clinical psychologist who will promptly carry out any necessary assessments and will refer to the child and adolescent mental health services team if necessary. The service has an effective link

with this team who will see young people within a short period of time. There are effective policies in place on smoking cessation, drug and alcohol use, sexual health and healthy lifestyle programmes.

Children are well supported in making good educational progress. This is achieved by the provision of a virtual school with a headteacher. The school helps to ensure that the large majority of fostered children attend school or college. There have been no long-term school exclusions of looked after children in the past two years. Young people have personal education plans in place and these plans are appropriately reviewed. Older children and young people are being prepared for independence through a skills programme based on everyday living. Pathway plans are in place for young people nearing the end of mandatory school education and these are appropriately reviewed. These measures help to ensure that young people cared for in Buckinghamshire do better in their educational achievement than the national average for looked after children.

Quality of service

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

The service generally recruits carers who will meet the needs of looked after children. However, in 2010/11 there were four siblings groups for whom the plan was for them to be fostered together. This did not happen because there were no fostering households that were approved to take larger sibling groups. The service has responded to this by approving a large number of foster carers for one placement who also agreed a second placement if a sibling. However, the service has not actively recruited carers who can care for larger sibling groups and this has not helped children to maintain effective family links which may disrupt children's sense of identity.

The level of supervision that carers report indicates that it is regular and appropriate. Carers receive a high level of training and supervision. However, placing social workers state that they do not always receive from foster carers the copies of the monthly log which carers are asked to maintain and this means that they are not kept best informed of young people's progress which may have a detrimental effect on young people's needs being met. Carers are provided with free membership of an organisation that gives them personal advice and guidance about fostering and this enhances their knowledge and understanding of the fostering task. The service now actively recruits carers from minority ethnic communities and the pool of available carers now reflects the composition of the council's looked after child population. This ensures that children are mainly placed in homes which reflect their racial identity and birth culture.

The assessment and preparation process for carers is thorough and informative and several carers commented that this was of benefit later when they were approved to care for children. The assessment process is generally completed within recommended timescales. Foster carers' assessments are of a reasonable quality. The fostering panel has clear policies and procedures and a central list of members

in accordance with regulations. Minutes of panel meetings record clearly the detail of the discussions of issues raised by panel members and this gives evidence of due rigour of approval.

Foster carers have good access to a range of health and education services and to the headteacher of the virtual school. This helps to meet looked after children's and young people's needs. Young people's physical and psychological health is well promoted by a range of professional medical services and the educational support they receive from the service is exemplary.

Family and friends carers are assessed appropriately and receive support from social workers within the service. Foster carers undertake the Children's Workforce Development Council's training standards in foster care immediately after approval. Carers feel they are well supported by supervising social workers and there is an 'out-of-hours' support service provided by the fostering social workers which provides them with an excellent level of support.

Safeguarding children and young people

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

Young people comment that they feel safe and that if they are unhappy about any element of their care they know how to complain and how to talk to people to express any concerns. A protocol is in place within the virtual school to deal with any incidents of bullying experienced by looked after children and they know where they can go to get help in this regard. Children felt confident that any bullying incidents reported would be dealt with effectively. Young people can also access an independent advocacy service. The service has a Participation Officer to whom looked after children may raise concerns or complaints. Complaints are investigated and responded to within determined timescales. Foster carers receive a high level of training as part of their preparation and ongoing training which includes a focus on safeguarding, safe caring and current child protection practice; this is refreshed over time and takes place before and after approval. Foster carers also receive training on the effects of attachment and loss and birth trauma on children; this ensures that carers have a clear understanding of safeguarding and that they demonstrate an awareness of current practice and the impact of abuse on a child's development. The number of allegations of abuse and neglect raised by young people against foster carers is low and these are dealt with effectively and children and carers are well supported by the process of enquiry. A clear process for dealing with allegations ensures that they are handled in a manner which is in the best interests of looked after children and foster carers.

In order to check that the care of young people is safe, unannounced visits to foster carers' homes take place more than once a year and there is a system to record this. Children are always seen alone by placing social workers and asked if they feel safe in placement. Any concerns about foster carers' care practice, identified by supervising social workers, is shared with management and this may result in the reconsideration of carers' approval.

Staff and carers' recruitment and vetting are generally thorough and organised to ensure that staff appointed and carers approved are vetted correctly and are aware of their responsibilities to keep looked after children safe. However, there were some occasions where there was no evidence on the personnel files of staff and management that written references had been followed up by telephone enquiry.

The numbers of fostered children in Buckinghamshire who have gone missing in the past 12 months has reduced. Foster carers are aware of their responsibilities to report children missing from their care and there are procedures in place to be followed should this occur. The manager of the service states there is a collaborative relationship with the police in place and that they take seriously the safety of looked after children who go missing and will actively search for looked after children who have gone missing.

Leadership and management

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

There have been recent organisational developments intended to improve the capacity of the service. This has included a change of manager and responsible individual. However, Ofsted has not been formally advised in writing of these changes.

The performance and delivery of the fostering service is thoroughly monitored and is reported upon at least every three months. As a result the level of care that fostered children receive is constantly being scrutinized by senior management and the corporate parenting panel of the council. They use detailed action plans to actively improve the fostering service in supporting the needs of looked after children in Buckinghamshire. The authority's forums ensure that children and young people are consulted and involved in service development and this ensures that their voices are heard in this regard. The overwhelming majority of looked after children within Buckinghamshire are fostered rather than living in children's homes and this is above the national average.

Social work staff in the fostering service have relevant child protection knowledge, experience, qualifications and are registered with the national social work body for practitioners. However, some staff personnel records did not have evidence that memberships of the professional body were up to date. Young people are involved in staff recruitment. There is an induction process for new staff and appraisals of competency take place at least annually. Social workers receive high quality support, guidance and professional supervision. They also have access to a good level of ongoing training and are supported by the council in undertaking higher social work qualifications. This ensures that children receive good quality care from carers whose work is supervised by skilled professionals.

The manager of the service is a professionally qualified social worker, registered with the General Social Care Council and with many years experience in child care

management and has an appropriate management qualification. However, there is no evidence on their personnel file that this has been seen or verified.

Foster carers say that they feel part of a professional team in working with and helping children and young people. Support group meetings and ongoing training and information events are available for foster carers and this further ensures that children are cared for by an informed and professional service. Managers of the service have developed a working relationship with other agencies including the police, education and health services to ensure that there is a joint approach when assessing and meeting looked after children's needs.

The Statement of Purpose and children's guides are now clearly written, frequently reviewed and describe the service aims and objectives. These are also contained on the fostering webpage on the council's website. The children's guide is available in different formats that make it more accessible and inclusive for children below reading age, or who have a reading difficulty for whatever reason. The guides were produced in collaboration with young people and they are of an extremely high quality and provide an excellent information resource for young people.

There were six recommendations made at the last inspection which have all been addressed and this has resulted in a positive improvement in the service for young people who are fostered.

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.