

Milton Keynes Fostering Service

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

The fostering service is run by Milton Keynes Council, which is a unitary authority covering the town of Milton Keynes and its immediate area. The service currently supports 252 foster carer households covering a range of specific fostering functions. These include time limited, longer term and permanent fostering placements. The short break respite scheme offers placements for children with disabilities and for families experiencing temporary difficulties. A number of the fostering placements are kinship placements, where children are placed with members of their extended family. The fostering manager and staff team is centrally located in Milton Keynes, sharing office space with the main social services teams of the local authority.

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**.

Milton Keynes fostering service is a good service with some outstanding features. The fostering service meets well the placement needs of children and young people. The service provides excellent quality of care, and the outcomes for children are good. There is evidence of very thorough practice by both staff and foster carers. Children receive personalised care that meets their individual needs and they are kept safe. The service pays good attention to equality, diversity and identity issues.

This agency has many strengths. This includes the excellent support and supervision provided to foster carers. Managers and staff have extensive experience of working with the field of fostering and child protection. Staff and foster carers demonstrate a keen commitment to providing quality care to children and young people. There are clear recruitment strategies in place to ensure the service has sufficient numbers of foster carers to meet the needs of children and young people requiring foster care placements. There are effective procedures and practices in place to ensure the assessment process of foster carers is robust and the service is successful in its efforts to retain approved foster carers.

The leadership and management of the fostering service are strong. Managers are

appropriately qualified and experienced and offer excellent support to the staff group and foster carers. The fostering service provides all interested parties with clear and detailed information about the service and facilities provided. Managers ensure that all key policies are in place, safeguarding policies and procedures are comprehensive. Staff and foster carers' training opportunities are excellent and both have access to specialist training and support. The service's fostering panel functions effectively.

This inspection notes some shortfalls. The service's central list does not include some key areas of expertise. Foster carers do not receive medication training and some foster carers do not have a clear understanding of the service's allowance payment for holidays. Some young people do not excel educationally and required monitoring reports produced by the fostering service are not fully compliant. Some case file records are not dated and signed.

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 the number, skills, knowledge and experience of persons on the central list are sufficient. For example, increase the number to include those likely to make a valuable contribution to the panel's discussion, such as people with experience of being in foster care (NMS 14.8)
- ensure foster carers are trained in the management and administration of medication (NMS 6.10)
- promote the educational achievement of children placed with foster carers. This particularly relates to the need to improve educational attainment of children and young people (breach of Regulation 16 (1))
- maintain a system for monitoring the matters set out in Schedule 6 of the regulations (Regulation 35(1)(a))
- ensure that entries in records are signed and dated (NMS 26.5)
- ensure that foster carers are clear about the fostering service's payment structures, particularly in relation to holiday allowances. (NMS 28)

Outcomes for children and young people

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

Children and young people feel part of their foster family and have a strong sense of belonging. This helps to enhance their self-esteem and emotional resilience which prepares them well for the future. Children and young people receive personalised care provided by the fostering service in accordance with documented care plans. They enjoy sound relationships with their foster carers, who clearly enjoy caring for

them. Children and young people's issues of identity are well addressed by the service. This is crucial in ensuring the holistic needs of children and young people are met and that they have a clear understanding of their background. Young people receive clear information that outlines the fostering service's complaints procedure. This information is available in age appropriate language and is geared towards their use. The service's complaints information is also available in alternative forms of communication which makes the information accessible to all.

Children and young people are listened to and involved in decisions about their day-to-day lives and their futures. This is reinforced by their easy access to independent advocacy. All fostered children and young people are keenly encouraged by the agency to share their views of the fostering service and to actively participate in its service development. Young people participate in a range of groups, forums and councils in place to elicit views and help shape the operation of the fostering service. So for example, some young people are members of the organisation's children in care council and actively contribute to many aspects of the council's looked after children's services. There is a dedicated website for all looked after children and questionnaires are periodically distributed by the fostering service to shape the fostering service's development.

Children and young people's individual health care needs are well met by the fostering service and all have ready access to primary and specialist health care services. Foster carers have access to clear policies and procedures that relate to the health care needs of children and young people and they are first aid trained. However the service does not provide foster carers with medication training. This is important to ensure that foster carers' administration of any medication to children in their care is safe. Children, young people, foster carers and staff have good access to the children's nurse, who is available to offer information, advice and support on health care matters. Children and young people routinely participate in annual health care assessments that monitor their health care development. Foster carers providing care for disabled children and young people, or those living with specific medical conditions such as diabetes and epilepsy, receive specialist training. This ensures that children and young people receive safe care that addresses their specific health care needs. Young people have access to specialist alcohol and drug prevention services within the local area that help address related risk taking behaviour.

Children and young people's emotional well-being is well promoted by the fostering service. They benefit from the input from mental health support agencies such as Child and Adolescence Mental Health Services (CAMHS) for their mental health support needs. Children and young people also benefit from the commission of a clinical psychologist available to work with families to explore their difficulties in placement. These regularly include issues of attachment, loss, behaviour and trauma. Children enjoy good access to their parents in accordance with local authority or court ordered directions. The fostering service ensures that contact arrangements are adhered to by foster carers, and provide practical support to help facilitate contact arrangements. Children where required, have supervised contact in appropriate facilities to ensure their safety.

Children and young people make fair progress educationally. Staff acknowledge however that children's academic achievements require improvement. Children and young people benefit from foster carers' clear understanding and commitment to promoting their educational attainment, which is supported by training and written guidance. Children, young people, their foster carers and staff of the fostering team share good relationships with the council's educational support team which is located alongside the department's child care teams. Children benefit from direct work with members of the educational support team and have access to additional support in terms of individual tuition, assistance with homework and supplementary materials to aid their learning. Children and young people attend school very regularly, current school attendance figures are well over 90% for both primary and secondary school aged children. The educational support team work closely with school and college personnel in an effort to prevent school exclusions.

Children and young people participate in a wide range of leisure activities which support their development and social skills, according to individual wishes and interests. 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. The organisation's 'Staying Put' and Supported Lodgings programmes facilitate young people's successful transition into adulthood. Young people have the opportunity to remain in foster care after 18 years of age supported by the local authority, and many young people continue to visit and receive support from their foster carers after leaving.

Quality of service

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

The quality of the fostering service's provision is excellent. This is a clear strength of the service function. Young people enjoy sound relationships with their foster families and have a keen sense of belonging. They are happy with their home surroundings, bedrooms in particular, and are comfortable living in their homes. The fostering service conducts annual health and safety checks on household premises to ensure foster carers' homes meet the needs of those in placement. Children and young people enjoy a wide and varied range of leisure activities, which assist their overall development. These include sport, drama and music clubs, and horse riding, to identify a few. Periodically, the fostering team facilitates family focused activities. For example children, young people and their families participate in festive celebrations, fun events, and achievement evenings etc. Foster families as a whole enjoy these events and they enhance children's sense of belonging while in placement.

The service has clear and robust systems in place that promptly and efficiently manage all initial enquiries from the public interested in becoming foster carers. The fostering service provides potential foster care applicants with a clear and comprehensive information pack. This is promptly followed up with an initial home visit that further outlines the fostering purpose and task. The service provides

comprehensive preliminary training in the 'Skills to Foster programme'. This supports applicants' understanding of the role and responsibilities of the fostering task. These pre-assessment measures are effective in outlining the competencies and strengths applicants will need to demonstrate in order to become approved foster carers and provide quality care to children and young people.

The fostering service's assessment of applicants is vigorous and comprehensive. Written assessment reports are relevant, evidence based, analytical and fully explore applicants ability to offer safe care. This ensures that assessment reports proactively assist the panel's decision-making. Staff ensure that all required vetting checks are complete as a feature of the assessment process. This ensures that potential foster carers are suitable to care for vulnerable children and young people. The fostering service has clear procedures for the conduct of foster carer reviews, which staff adhere to. This ensures that foster carers remain suitable to offer quality care to looked after children.

This service has a small, but appropriately constituted fostering panel that functions effectively. The panel comprises qualified and experienced practitioners in their appropriate fields of expertise. These fields include social work, education, and child health. The central list of panel members does not currently include an adult with experience of being in foster care and one panel member represents both one of the qualified social workers and also the panel's independent foster carer. The service is exploring the expansion of its central list to help maximise the range of differing experiences and expertise on the fostering panel.

The fostering service has relevant policies and procedures in place and panel members receive an induction and periodic training. The service's vetting of panel members is robust and members are suitable to participate in the process. Foster carers and children benefit from the service's clear policies and procedures with regard to the purpose and operation of panel meetings. The administration of the agency's fostering panel is efficient and the panel excels in its quality assurance function. The agency decision-maker is appropriately qualified and they facilitate prompt and appropriate decisions that promote the welfare of children in foster care.

The fostering service's matching process is efficient and effective. Children and young people are appropriately placed with foster carers who are able to meet their needs. Staff decision-making about matching considerations is supported by clear and comprehensive written guidance. Staff are careful to ensure that the service and foster carers receive detailed information about the needs of children seeking placements. The agency's referral process is thorough. This ensures foster carers are appropriately skilled to meet the needs of children prior to placements being negotiated. As a result, effective, stable placements are made. Staff maintain clear records of matching considerations and decision-making. The fostering service's matching process considers well issues of individual identity such as gender, age, religion, ethnicity and disability. The matching process also considers any implication for safe caring, which enhances the well-being of all those in placement.

Foster carers are appreciative and motivated by the fostering services clear

investment in their individual learning, training and development. They receive extensive and superior training and development opportunities they need to carry out their role safely and effectively. Foster carers are highly satisfied with the training opportunities. One foster carer said of this aspect of the fostering service: 'You can't fault it. Training is excellent, there's so many courses you can do and we have input into what we learn. It's great and so useful'. All new foster carers receive an induction and all foster carers are supported to achieve the Children's Workforce Council Training. To date, most approved foster carers have completed this training. Children and young people benefit from high quality training available to foster carers that ensures their knowledge and skills remain current and promotes safe practices. Other members of the fostering household have full access to any training available to the approved carer. Staff regularly review the individual development needs of foster carers and these feature consistently in foster carers' supervision and annual reviews. The organisation's training programme is reviewed annually, is extensive in subject matter, and relevant to the fostering task. The service makes good use of the expertise of both internal and external trainers and experienced foster carers have the opportunity to train as trainers to deliver training to others.

The fostering service's support and supervision of foster carers is excellent. Foster carers' communication with staff of the service is consistent and meaningful; staff make themselves available to support foster carers practically and emotionally. Foster carers have very good access to managers of the service. The organisation has an effective out-of-hours service, staffed by the council's emergency social work duty team. Foster carers have access to independent advocacy services for external support if required. Staff maintain consistent records of formal supervisory visits that focus on placement progress and issues. This ensures that the needs of children remain paramount throughout the duration of the placement. Foster carers are highly satisfied with the nature and level of support they receive. Foster carers indicate this is a primary reason for them remaining foster carers for Milton Keynes fostering service for many years. Other, newly approved foster carers, indicate this is why they chose to apply to become foster carers with the agency.

Foster carers enjoy peer support via regular monthly coffee mornings and the birth children of foster carers can participate in a dedicated support group for the children of foster carers. This group has its own newsletter and webpage, while the service facilitates dedicated newsletters and web pages for its adult foster carers. The fostering service also promotes a mentoring scheme for newly approved foster carers, which is another source of welcome and effective support.

Safeguarding children and young people

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

Children and young people are safe while in placement and feel very safe. The fostering service views effective safeguarding a priority for all placements and has this ethos at the centre of its function and operation. Children and young people benefit from the fostering service's clear and comprehensive child protection and safeguarding policies and procedures. Foster carers receive good written guidance

and training to keep children from harm and abuse. The fostering service ensures that all fostering households have safe caring policies in place to support safe practice. Staff work effectively in partnership with other agencies concerned with child protection. This is particularly the case for staff's liaison with the Local Authority Designated Officer for child protection.

Children and young people do not experience bullying and rarely go missing. Where this does occur foster carers are aware of the correct procedures to follow in order to keep them safe. Managers monitor these incidents well.

The fostering service is managed by individuals who are well experienced and qualified to do so. Managers of the team are experienced, qualified social workers with a strong background in child care, child protection and the fostering task. The fostering service handles complaints, allegations and concerns promptly and in accordance with the agency's comprehensive written guidance, which is well known to all parties. The service's prime consideration in such situations is the needs and safety of any children and young people involved. The service receives a low number of complaints, allegations and concerns which are keenly monitored by managers.

Children and young people are kept safe because of the fostering service's robust recruitment and vetting practice. This ensures individuals working with the service are suitable to work with looked after children. The service has clear and comprehensive policies and procedures in place that ensure the careful selection and vetting of staff, foster carers and those identified on the agency's central list.

Leadership and management

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

The leadership and management of this fostering service are strong. Managers of the service demonstrate a keen commitment to providing quality foster care placements that improve outcomes for children and young people. All recommendations made at the last inspection have been addressed. All interested parties have access to clear and comprehensive information that outlines well the aims and objectives of the fostering service. The agency's Statement of Purpose is an informative document that is explicit about what services and facilities the fostering service provides. The children's guide is a useful summary of the agency's aim, objectives and services and is geared towards the use of children and young people. The children's guide is also available in symbolic form for easy access of information for those who use alternative methods of communication.

The fostering service has an excellent learning and development programme for staff that address their individual development needs. Staff are encouraged to pursue professional and personal learning opportunities and some have access to external mentors. Supervision and support are readily available and highly valued. Training is available for all those on the service's central list. Social work staff are appropriately qualified and experienced in foster care and child protection. Unqualified staff are appropriately supervised by experienced social workers. Staff appraisals are

conducted on an annual basis. The fostering staff team work effectively as a team and in partnership with other departmental teams and external professionals.

The service is well managed with an effective management structure in place. Leaders and managers routinely 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. However monitoring reports as outlined in National Minimum Standard 25.7 do not comply fully with Schedule 6 of the Regulations. In particular, for this monitoring report does not include information about compliance with children's care plans. The service has increased the number of foster carers through robust recruitment that meet the needs of looked after children requiring foster care placements. Managers ensure that all significant events relating to the health and protection of children fostered by the service are notified to the appropriate authorities.

The fostering service's premises and administrative systems are suitable to meet the aims of the service and staff case file records are generally well maintained. Children and young people's case records are clear, up to date and contribute well to an understanding of the child or young person's lives. However, some records do not contain key dates and signatures as required. Foster carers receive good information and training in relation to record keeping and maintain detailed and clear documentation of placement events. This ensures there is an accurate record of events to help children and young people understand their general development and care history.

The service's placement planning processes are effective. Staff's decision-making 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 works collaboratively 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 early in placements, to meet individual need or compensate for any gaps in matching. Staff and foster carers contribute well to placement planning reviews and statutory reviews. This enhances understanding of children and young people's placement progress and issues, which in turn supports the sustainability of foster care placements.

The fostering service has clear financial systems in place and foster carers have access to policies and procedures that relate to payments and allowances. Foster carers confirm that they are paid promptly and at the rate expected. However, some foster carers are unclear about the service's procedures with regard to holiday payments and require clarification of the payment of this allowance. The fostering service makes available to foster carers additional funds to support practical activities such as travel arrangements for family contact and essential placement equipment.

Family and friends foster carers receive the support they require to provide safe, quality care to children and young people. Experienced social workers take the lead for the recruitment, assessment and support of kinship foster carers. Staff practice is

guided by clear policies and decision making based on the needs of children and young people. The support and supervision of family and friends carers is excellent and they have access to extensive and relevant training opportunities and support. The fostering service is successful in promoting this and the use of other legislative routes to secure permanence for children and young people.

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.