

Bolton Metropolitan Borough Council Children's Services - Fostering

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

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Inspector	Caroline Jones / Mandy Williams
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Service information

Brief description of the service

Bolton local authority fostering service assesses, supports, trains and reviews a range of foster carers to ensure placements meet the assessed needs and personal preferences of looked after children. The service provides mainstream and enhanced foster carers who have completed further training and gained more experience. Short term breaks and foster placements for children with disabilities are arranged through the children with disabilities service which works closely with the fostering team.

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 overall effectiveness of the fostering service in Bolton is good with outstanding outcomes achieved for children and young people. Leaders and managers are ambitious for continuous improvement and champion children and young people's progress across all areas of their development. Equality and diversity is central to the service delivery with designated practitioners to champion day-to-day work with foster carers and children and young people from minority groups. The service is responsive to local need for foster care which is reflected in their increase in the approval of foster carers to a further 51 households between 1st April 2010 to 31st March 2011, double the performance of its statistical neighbours. Placement stability is achieved for the vast majority of children and young people, who feel safe and part of the fostering family. One commented: 'I don't feel like I'm in care, it's my family.'

Children and young people influence the development of the service as a result of proactive consultation practices. Children and young people, including those with a disability, receive effective joined up services that challenge and overcome barriers to participation. This enables them to enjoy a range of stimulating opportunities and services to achieve their potential. Children and young people are actively involved in care planning and feel listened to. They make positive comments about their carers, for example: 'She is really nice and I go to lots of places.'

Good multi-agency working enhances the services around children and young people to ensure their individual needs are met. Furthermore, foster carers are subject to robust assessment, training and supervision processes that complement their skills in providing children and young people with the care they need to grow and develop into confident young adults. Foster carers are genuinely dedicated to their role, the majority of whom confirm high standards of satisfaction with the service. The 'Bolton Family' concept is prevalent within the culture of the service and is built on partnership working between all professionals in the best interests of children and young people.

Managers provide clear leadership, accountability and excellent support to the notably stable staff team. A Foster carer commented: 'The staff go above and beyond, they are extremely supportive.' They work closely with staff through regular, quality supervision and timely annual appraisals. This further assures the quality of care provided to children and young people in foster placements.

There are five recommendations made as part of this inspection which relate to differing areas of the service including, improving recording and monitoring activities to enhance quality assurance processes.

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 foster carers attain the training, support and development standards within 12 month of approval, or 18 months for family and friends foster carers (NMS 20.3)
- Make sure that the panel chair ensures written minutes of panel meetings are accurate and record the reasons for its recommendation before being forwarded to the decision maker (NMS 14.7)
- ensure that unannounced visits are recorded in detail to demonstrate the quality of care provided and take into account children and young people's wishes and feelings (NMS 21.8)
- ensure that the decisions to appoint or refuse an applicant in light of criminal convictions or other suitability concerns are thoroughly recorded (NMS 19.5)
- ensure that the manager regularly monitors all records kept by the service. (NMS 25.2)

Outcomes for children and young people

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

Children and young people are supported by a progressive and innovative service

with a clear focus on improving outcomes. There are proactive approaches to developing children and young people's self-esteem, resilience and independence to equip them with the skills and knowledge for life. The service works effectively with partners including health, education, leisure and voluntary agencies to ensure children and young people enjoy and achieve success in their lives. For example, the learning mentors advocate for them and work creatively with schools to maintain placements and seek further opportunities. Children and young people live in foster placements of choice and feel very much a part of the family. They report a strong sense of belonging and safety.

Children and young people live in stable placements and stay for short breaks with committed families who support them in making excellent progress across all areas of their development. Consequently, they flourish and make excellent progress in all aspects of their development. There are numerous examples of success including, young people attaining A to C grades in GCSE examinations and children and young people with disabilities achieving educational accolades and subsequent employment and training opportunities. They have achieved pupil of the year awards and received awards from the local Mayor. A significant number of young people are also in higher education and have settled at university knowing they can return to their carers in the holidays. Children and young people comment: 'I get chances and activities that I wouldn't get, I like being in foster care.'

Children and young people's views influence the development of the service which are sought through an array of consultation methods including group meetings and forums. For example, children and young people are involved in the assessment and preparation of prospective foster carers. Similarly, a group of children with disabilities have been trained and involved in the recruitment of staff and their views count.

Additionally, as a result of direct consultation namely, 'the trampoline role play' the organisational approach to giving permission for sleep-overs and activities changed and gave better clarity to all involved in young people's care. A children's rights and advocacy service commissioned from an independent agency, provides children and young people with independent support and advice through a number of social groups and activities. These practices empower children and young people to ensure they remain central to decision making and care practice.

Children and young people with disabilities and complex needs benefit from individualised care packages that are tailored to their unique needs and talents. Outstanding work is undertaken with them to promote and overcome barriers to participation. For example, the Bridges service provides befrienders and shared carers to support families to enable children and young people to enjoy new experiences and achieve their potential. Examples of creative practices include supporting children and young people who have a disability and are Muslim in their community. Furthermore, a responsive and flexible short-break service ensures that foster carers are available to meet the growing need for services to enable children and young people to remain in their family home. Parents commented: 'I can't believe that there are such people willing to help, they are my life line.'

Children and young people enjoy very good health and health professionals are flexible in meeting their needs. Foster carers commented: 'I can always get hold of the community paediatrician, she really is there to help.' Moreover, the paediatric nurse is responsive to the needs of children and young people and provides group and one-to-one training for foster carers and staff to ensure safer caring of children and young people with disabilities. An emotional health practitioner is also available to provide advice, guidance and direct work with children and young people to enable a better understanding of their behaviours. Foster carers are well trained to meet children and young people's health needs and provide a healthy environment for them to grow and develop in.

Children and young people, including those with disabilities, enjoy taking part in an excellent range of constructive leisure activities, including holidays abroad. Children and young people take part in armed forces cadets, climbing walls, football, horse-riding, walking trips, writing the jokes corner for a local news letter and community events and clubs such as Lads' and Dads' Club. These opportunities develop their skills and confidence further as well as engaging them in their local community.

Quality of service

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

The service has a robust approach to the recruitment and assessment of foster carers and children and young people are involved in this to ensure their views and ideas are central to decision making. The assessments, conducted by qualified social workers, are thorough and provide an evaluative account of the prospective foster carers. All annual reviews are now referred to panel for consideration and the panel scrutiny of assessments is sufficient. However, panel minutes do not fully record reasons for the recommendation. Also, the final minutes are not agreed by all panel members for their accuracy before they are forwarded to the decision maker, to ensure a more robust process.

The service advertises using a range of media, and by word of mouth. It is successful in attracting applicants from differing backgrounds within the community. Consequently, the service provides culturally appropriate placements for children and young people. A specialist worker, who is very experienced and skilled in working with foster carers from an ethnic minority, supports these placements. This has been very successful in enabling the foster carers whose first language is not English to take part in the training, access support and reach the required development standards.

Foster carers describe the preparation, training and support they receive as 'excellent'. Many of the foster carers have achieved the training, support and development standards. The comprehensive training programme includes mandatory, optional courses and more specialist and in-depth courses to enhance foster carers' skills so that they are well equipped to meet the needs of the children and young people placed. However, not all foster carers have attained the training, support and development standards.

Matching is good, with a strong awareness of children's needs arising from disability, culture, ethnicity, faith, and age. The service has sufficient in-house placements to meet the needs of children and young people. A small number of external placements are used if the needs of the children and young people demand this. Foster carers report that they feel part of the professional team caring for children and young people. They report that they are fully involved in planning children and young people's care and receive sufficient information in a timely way. They also feel valued by the service and generally report very high levels of satisfaction.

Foster carers benefit from excellent structured support through at least two-monthly home visits and supervision meetings. In addition supervising social workers telephone them for a weekly update and there is a consistent out-of-hours service in operation. Foster carers cite the support groups, the support groups for sons and daughters, the foster carers' forum, the Asian support groups and the days out as excellent examples of how the service values all family members and their contribution to caring for children and young people.

Safeguarding children and young people

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

Children and young people are effectively safeguarded and have a strong sense of feeling safe. Foster carers and staff receive safeguarding training and have a good understanding of their duties in promoting the welfare of children and young people. Policies and procedures are in place to ensure a robust response to any allegation or disclosure of abuse. Allegations are responded to promptly and are thoroughly investigated to ensure effective protection to children and young people and their foster carers. Independent advice and support is also provided to the person subject to the allegation.

There are many forums and groups attended by children and young people in which they are given strong messages about how to keep themselves safe or raise any concern they may have, including bullying. All children who responded to the survey for this inspection strongly agreed or agreed that they felt safe with their foster family, none disagreed with the statement. They comment: 'I feel safe, this is best home I have lived in, I moved around when I was younger this is the right place.' There are relatively few incidents of children and young people missing from home, and protocols with partner agencies are in place to ensure a multi-agency response within the protective network of professionals to safeguard them.

Staff files include all the required information to demonstrate a safe and competent workforce. Foster carers are safely recruited and have good access to training and support. There is now a procedure in place to consider applicants' suitability in light of a criminal conviction, but the detail of this decision making is not recorded to demonstrate a robust process. Additional training and guidance is provided to foster carers of children and young people with disabilities to ensure their needs for safety and security are thoroughly met. Unannounced visits take place to monitor the care

provided to children and young people. However, not all of these are sufficiently recorded or detailed to capture the quality of care provided or the wishes and feelings of children and young people placed.

Foster carers confirm that they are trained and confident in managing children and young people's behaviour. A range of training opportunities are attended by them to ensure their depth of understanding of the impact of trauma and abuse. There are safer caring plans for individual children and young people that are reviewed appropriately by supervising social workers and the panel to assure their effectiveness. Safer caring plans are also updated as a consequence of an incident report, further demonstrating the service's commitment to safeguarding children.

Leadership and management

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

The management team including, the assistant director of service lead by example; they have an exceptionally good vision about what constitutes child-centred practice. Improving outcomes for children and young people is central to the ethos and culture of the whole service. Information for all those interested in the service is easily accessible, available in a range of formats and clearly states the aims and objectives of the fostering service. This is an inclusive service where all are valued. The service has signed up to the Foster Carers' Charter to demonstrate their commitment to ensuring a good quality of care to children and young people is provided. Foster carers and staff exude commitment to the work and to improving outcomes for children and young people. There is a strong drive to secure and sustain improvement which is championed by senior management. A number of new posts have been created to support the expansion of the team, which demonstrates the value of the service.

Management monitoring is generally good and includes an insightful annual report and quarterly monitoring reports for executive members. These focus on improving outcomes for children and young people. However, there are some gaps in relation to quality assuring day-to-day practice for example, the adequacy of the recording of visits, updating information on files and the auditing of files. Recommendations from the previous inspection have been implemented. The improvements include: the introduction of an improved foster carer agreement that covers all appropriate matters; a detailed health and safety checklist for the assessment of foster carers' homes; routine practice of unannounced visits and better reflection of children and young people's views during reviews.

The management are innovative in the way they respect foster carers as part of the team. Foster carers are involved in planning for children and young people and their views are actively sought in the development of the service. During supervision meetings foster carers are supported and encouraged in their professional development with a view to improving practice. There are also incentives for them to gain additional remuneration within the grading structure in recognition of their achievements. The quality of care for children and young people in placement is also

assured through staff having regular supervision and appraisals. This serves to monitor and support their professional development in ensuring young people receive high standards of care within their foster placements.

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.