

Central Bedfordshire Council Fostering Service

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Bedfordshire County Council ceased to exist on 1 April 2009 when unitary councils were introduced across the whole of Bedfordshire. All services previously hosted by the County Council are now provided by either Bedford Borough Council or Central Bedfordshire Council, depending on the area concerned. The fostering service is operated under a shared arrangement and is hosted by Central Bedfordshire Council, on behalf of both authorities, under a service level agreement. Central Bedfordshire Council has, therefore, only had a fostering service since 2009. This is the first inspection of that service.

The fostering service undertakes assessment, approval, training and support of foster carers providing a wide range of placement options; short and long-term; permanence; family link; family and friends; respite; remand and youth care. At the time of this inspection the service has 147 fostering households. 14 of these are providing youth care placements to young people over the age of 10 years, who exhibit challenging behaviours. 100 households provide mainstream fostering placements, 23 accommodate young people placed with family and friends carers, and 10 households are approved to provide family link placements.

At the time of this inspection 84 Central Bedfordshire children are accommodated in foster placements and 11 are receiving family link services.

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**.

Foster carers are very well supported in providing positive placements for children and young people, in promoting their positive development and encouraging them to make positive transitions into adulthood. Carers feel that most of the young people they have in placement are achieving this and comment; 'X is a pleasure to have. He has matured as he has become settled into our home' and; 'X has a great sense of humour and fits so well into our family'; and 'it has been rewarding just to see a child relax and over time, feel comfortable, to see them blossom and socialise as they mix

within the family'.

Children and young people are generally making real progress in terms of their physical, emotional and mental health and are proud of their educational achievements. Many young people are enjoying the advantages of being placed within stable families where they can access a good range of activities, family holidays and receive support and advice to help them make successful transitions to adulthood.

Generally, practice is very sound. However, there are a number of identified issues regarding record keeping within the service. Records relating to allegations, complaints and concerns do not always fully reflect the action the service has taken; records retained by the head of service in relation to her monitoring do not always clarify actions taken and records relating to foster carer supervision are inconsistent.

Foster carers say that they do not always receive full information about children and young people when they are initially placed and that there can sometimes be long delays in obtaining the information. Although the fostering service has recently introduced a system for fully considering delegated authority at the initial placement meeting, which ensures that decision making responsibility in all key areas is clarified at the point of placement, this issue is still to be fully addressed with regard to young people placed prior to this form being introduced.

The experiences of foster carers and children and young people demonstrate that the shortfalls identified are not having an adverse impact on outcomes for young people. Young people make comments such as: 'I feel free'; 'It's just nice'; 'I can have fun'; 'I can be me'. These comments are clear indicators of the positive elements of this fostering 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 foster carers have an awareness of the role and contact details of the office of the Children's Rights Director in order to enable them to support young people to make appropriate use of this service (NMS 1.5)
- ensure that foster carers are given the maximum appropriate flexibility to take decisions relating to children in their care, within the framework of the agreed placement plan (NMS 7.4 and The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 4, 3.10)
- ensure that all foster carers complete the required Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) training, support and development standards within stated timescales (NMS 20.2, 20.3)
- ensure that, when placements are made, foster carers are provided with all the

information about the child and their family that they need to carry out their role effectively. The information must be in a clear, comprehensive written form (NMS 15.2)

- ensure that supervision provided to foster carers follows a clearly stated agenda, which ensures that that the carer is meeting each child's needs, taking account of their wishes and feelings, as well as providing a framework for assessing the carers' performance and developing their competence and skills (NMS 21.8)
- demonstrate, through clear recording practice, that all potential allegations are referred to the Local Area Designated Officer (LADO) and retain a clear record of the decision making process with regard to categorising incidents as allegations or concerns. All records relating to allegations, complaints and concerns must contain clear detail of actions taken and outcomes (NMS 22.6, 22.10)
- ensure that monitoring reports, relating to the matters set out under Schedule 6 of the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011, identify the action taken to address any issues raised and reflect the identification of any patterns and trends emerging and their implications for service development (NMS 25.2)
- ensure that the Statement of Purpose reflects the services and facilities provided to family and friends carers. (NMS 30.2)

Outcomes for children and young people

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

Children and young people have good relationships with their foster carers who respect their differences, culture and history. They benefit from stable, appropriate placements and a high proportion are placed with their siblings. They are looked after by carers who they come to know and trust. Children and young people benefit from engagement in groups and social activities run by the children in care council. They participate in life story work with their carers to support their sense of identity.

Children and young people are encouraged and supported to share their views through carers, independent reviewing officers and foster carer reviews. There are also opportunities for children to access a variety of planned activities and training events which provide them with the opportunity to express their views. For example, a workshop was held to look at the qualities of a good foster carer and how to best to help children and young people in care.

Children and young people say that they are listened to and suggestions acted upon. For example, there is a 'no bin bag' charter. This involved a commitment that placing social workers purchase a case or bag so that young people no longer move with their belongings in a bin bag. Young people say that this has been effective.

Children's and young people's placements take account of their need for continuity with education and family relationships. Arrangements for supporting contact with birth families are strong. Foster carers support these arrangements, often assisting with transport when contacts are frequent or a long way distant

Children and young people do well at school, attend regularly and overcome significant obstacles arising from their experiences. The majority of foster carers spoke of good support from the service and education team in identifying educational placements that meet young people's needs. Young people's attendance and achievements are supported through effective supervision and monitoring. This ensures that where areas of concern arise, immediate action can be taken to support young people's education.

Young people are encouraged to attend further education through taster days where they go through a graduation ceremony. In addition, university students act as mentors for young people. As a result, young people are encouraged to start thinking about further education early and those that have participated in it, say they have really enjoyed the experience.

Children and young people are supported to pursue active lifestyles with their foster families. They pursue leisure activities such as basketball and swimming. They have discounted access to leisure facilities and activity days provided by the service. Young people receive awards for outstanding talents, personal and educational achievement and the 'young person of the year'. Younger children benefit from groups where they can socialise, learn to play and share.

Children and young people are placed with foster carers who can meet their social, emotional, psychological and physical needs. For example, children who have complex behaviour needs are placed with carers who provide specialist placements, enabling the children and young people to receive the high level of support needed. This provides good outcomes for children and young people with complex behavioural difficulties.

Children, young people and foster carers are able to access a range of professionals, such as the looked-after nurses and the local child and adolescent mental health service. Foster carers receive training on 'maintaining and promoting good health of children and young people', which discusses the purpose of health assessments and health plans. This ensures that carers have the knowledge and information to support health needs. Children and young people learn to feel better about themselves and their appearance and self-esteem improves. Their emotional health and well-being, speech, use of language and confidence develops and improves.

Young people with disabilities and their carers benefit from dedicated, knowledgeable and focussed support. For these young people and their carers, there is also a high level of specialist health service support to help with effective management of complex health issues.

Young people receive help and preparation for adulthood and independence. Foster carers support young people with practical tasks to assist their developing independence. One young person, who had moved during the last year of education, reported that the move had no impact, as the foster carers and social worker were 'fantastic'. They are taught to cook authentic Chinese food and cook for the family

one night a week, as part of their independence plan.

Quality of service

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

The service has sound awareness of the requirement to recruit additional foster carers, particularly since there has been a significant increase in the number of placement referrals during the last year. There is a good focus on recruitment, both general and specifically targeted, with regular advertising campaigns and circulation of literature. Recruitment campaigns are not always as successful as the fostering service would like, in terms of increasing numbers. Strategies for recruitment are constantly assessed and reviewed with a view to improving the success rate. The usage of independent fostering agency placements to support in-house provision is high, but is well organised and robustly monitored. This ensures that there is placement choice when considering matching a young person to a placement able to meet their needs.

The fostering service operates a dedicated duty desk which is responsible for considering all placement referrals. Child care social workers say there is good co-ordinated working between themselves and the fostering team to ensure that the skill levels and experience of foster carers enable them to meet young people's needs. Foster carers feel that placement matching is carefully undertaken: 'We have found that the response that we have had from each child has been rewarding. The simple things such as a smile or a real laugh can often be enough. We also feel that our ability to say 'no' to placements that we do not feel able to integrate into our home, has shown that we are aware of our own boundaries and abilities and we feel strong in our ability to do this.'

Young people generally feel safe and well cared for in their placements: 'I am feeling comfortable with who I am living with.' This is an indicator of sound matching and effective safeguarding.

All foster carers receive preparation training to ensure that they are fully prepared for the fostering task. The assessment process is thorough and comprehensive and is focussed on consideration of their capacity to meet the needs of looked-after children and to balance these appropriately with the needs of their own family. The service operates a well-established and highly valued support group for carers' own children. The service has also provided some very appropriate training opportunities for this group, such as separation and loss, to help them to come to terms with young people moving in and out of their home. There has also been joint training for this group together with looked-after children, which featured certificated first aid training and a drama workshop called 'Walk In My Shoes', to help them understand each other's situations.

Fostering panel minutes reflect clear identification of the strengths and potential weaknesses of foster carer applications, with robust questioning of carers and presenting social workers to resolve any issues or concerns. The panel provides

regular quality assurance feedback in relation to assessment and annual review reports. This reflects that the quality of reports has really improved in the last year. The panel additionally receives regular feedback about service developments, to ensure that they are fully aware of activity within the fostering service.

The service operates a comprehensive post-approval carer training programme covering a range of topics; for example, creating a safe and caring environment; helping children and young people with their learning; helping to maintain and promote good health for children and young people; and safeguarding children. There are also specific training opportunities specifically geared to those caring for children with disabilities and complex health issues, such as autism or epilepsy and there is a range of on line training opportunities.

At the time of the inspection, only 79 out of 102 foster carers had completed the CWDC training, support and development standards for foster care. This means that not all young people are looked after by foster carers who have received all the required training. The service is operating workshops and working hard to encourage and support existing carers with completion of this training. Statistics are steadily improving, which demonstrates that the additional encouragement and support is having an effect.

Foster carers say that the information received about children and young people at the time of placement is variable, with provision of information sometimes subject to lengthy delays. One carer commented: 'It took over a year before the looked-after children team would release a copy of the child and adolescent psychiatrist's report on the children and their family'. Some say that they often have to contact their supervising social worker to chase up crucial background information.

The carers are concerned that young people are often confused about why they are in care and upset about leaving their family or previous placement. Not having sound background information makes it difficult to provide the right support. Some foster carers say that they have also experienced considerable delays in securing funding for additional services, especially transport for children and young people to get to schools. This can make young people's early stages of placement difficult.

Foster carers speak very highly of the support and supervision they receive from their allocated social workers and from the fostering team generally: 'our supervising social worker is very supportive of us providing the best possible care for the children in our care'; 'The service and my supervising social worker have been very organised and comprehensive, covering all areas of fostering with all my family. I now feel very confident.'

However, due to lack of clarity in the recording pro-forma, there are considerable inconsistencies in the recording of foster carers' supervision. This may make it difficult for some carers to receive effective supervision which covers all the required areas.

Foster carers gain additional support through the mentoring scheme, which ensures

that all newly approved carers get an experienced 'buddy'. There are also dedicated support groups, many of which have a specific focus such as male carers, family and friends carers and short breaks carers. Foster carers also speak highly of the fostering out-of-hours service, which operates until 11pm during the week and at weekends. They value the fact that they can speak with someone who knows who they are and has some knowledge of the young people they have placed, when they are in crisis.

The fostering service has recognised that the issue of delegated authority has not always been addressed comprehensively when young people have been placed, although the carers' handbook clarifies that foster carers should make decisions about young people staying overnight with friends. This means that foster carers are not always wholly clear about their capacity to make day-to-day decisions for young people. When young people's carers cannot give consent for everyday activities this can make them feel embarrassed and upset and different from their peers. The service has recently begun to utilise a new placement planning pro-forma, which ensures that decision making responsibility, in all key areas, is clarified at the point of placement. This issue is still to be fully addressed with regard to young people placed prior to this form being used.

Safeguarding children and young people

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

Young people feel safe in their foster placement. This is because foster homes are safe and child care practice is safe. The children in care council was involved in the design of the children's and young people's guides, which contains information about other forms of independent advice and advocacy services.

Foster carers and staff are trained to recognise the signs and symptoms of abuse. This ensures that they are fully aware of their roles and responsibilities in safeguarding children and young people and know how to refer any issues and concerns.

The service works promptly to protect children and has established good working practice to coordinate with safeguarding services where there are concerns. Allegations and complaints against foster carers are managed effectively. There is appropriate and timely involvement of the LADO in safeguarding. Foster carers are provided with access to independent support from an external agency, should they be made the subject of an allegation. The fact that there are recording shortfalls has a minimal impact on children and young people, as appropriate action is taken to safeguard them.

Within this last year, the service has altered its policy on unannounced visits, following lessons learnt from an incident of concern. Two such visits are made each year and were previously both undertaken by the allocated worker. One of the unannounced visits is now conducted by a different social worker, who sees the home with fresh eyes, rather than the supervising social worker. This results in foster

homes being safe places for young people to grow up in.

Very few young people go missing from their foster placements. The fostering service helps to prevent young people from running away, as policies, procedures and effective liaison with the police minimise the risk. Foster carers are well prepared and receive good support to reduce this behaviour. There has been proactive work to protect identified children who may be potentially vulnerable to sexual exploitation, through close partnership working with the police, children's social workers and foster carers.

Foster carers understand safe care practice well. The safer care agreement is effectively implemented in the fostering household. Annual health and safety checks are completed on all fostering households to ensure that the environment is safe for children and young people. As a result, children and young people are well protected.

Recruitment practices are robust for those working in and for the fostering service. The service operates a safe and effective carer recruitment process and has a stable, experienced and knowledgeable fostering panel. The panel has a good focus on safeguarding concerns when considering potential foster carers' suitability for the fostering task. Staff recruitment is strong, in terms of ensuring that all required checks are undertaken before staff begin employment, ensuring that they pose no potential risk to young people. This results in everyone working for the service being safely recruited, so that children are only cared for by people who are suitable to do so.

First aid training has been provided to both looked-after children and carers' own children, which is very good practice. Carers' children also receive training on safe caring, because this raises their awareness about personal and household safety. Older members of the children in care council have been provided with safeguarding training to enable them to operate as mentors for younger children and to understand fully how to respond to any potential child protection disclosures.

Leadership and management

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

A service level agreement is currently in place for Central Bedfordshire Council to deliver a fostering service on behalf of Bedford Borough Council. Operational responsibility for the service sits with the head of the adoption and fostering team within Central Bedfordshire Council. All fostering service staff and foster carers are contracted to this authority. Bedford Borough Council's current funding agreement expires on 31 March 2013. A number of options are currently being considered in respect of fostering service delivery for these two authorities. Carers and staff have been consulted as part of this process, but no definite decisions have yet been made regarding future arrangements. This means that staff and foster carers' anxiety levels are high and there is the potential for this to impact on young people.

There are dedicated teams dealing with recruitment, carer assessments and carer support and supervision. There are also designated social work staff who specifically support carers of young people with disabilities, both those providing fostering placements and those providing family link services, as well as carers providing placements on the youth care scheme. Staff speak very positively about the managers' accessibility and fostering expertise. They say that they receive regular and effective supervision and have good access to a range of relevant training opportunities. Staff say that there are strong mutual support systems within the teams. Managers, social workers and panel chairs speak particularly highly of the dedication and expertise of administrative staff in supporting them in their roles. Social work assistants fulfil a valuable role within the fostering teams, in providing specific support to carers in relation to issues such as behaviour management. They also undertake direct work with young people, where this will enhance their personal, social or emotional development.

The Statement of Purpose clearly identifies the aims and objectives of the fostering service and clarifies the nature of services provided. There is no specific detail regarding the services and facilities provided to family and friends carers. The fostering service does not produce its own guides for children and young people. The Central Bedfordshire children in care group has been involved in developing a booklet for young people coming into care and this contains a chapter on fostering. Whilst this incorporates all the required information, it is not produced in an attractive, child-friendly format and seriously undersells the potential positive experiences which fostering may provide for looked-after children. Foster carers are very unclear about the role of the Children's Rights Director, even though the fostering service has circulated various invitations to consultation events. This has the potential to restrict their capacity to support young people to access this service.

Managers demonstrate good awareness of areas for service development and have developed sound strategies to ensure the provision of equivalent services to young people placed by two local authorities. There is effective and regular communication at management level to ensure that the fostering service sustains positive working relationships with child care operational teams, looked-after children's health and education teams and corporate parenting boards in both authorities. However, an independent reviewing officer commented that 'the current arrangement does not have a clear line of communication with the conference and review service'. This means that there are occasions when carers and young people cannot always access the support needed to obtain additional services when required.

Since Central Bedfordshire Council and Bedford Borough Council became unitary authorities, the two have diverged in terms of service development and management responses to budgetary constraints. As a shared service, the fostering service has had to adapt to developments and changes in the organisation of both authorities. Therefore, as a relatively new service there is no capacity to demonstrate secure and sustained improvement over a period of years.

The service manager regularly monitors all records retained by the service, but pro-

forma records used to demonstrate this are insufficiently detailed. Where issues of concern are highlighted the monitoring record does not incorporate detail regarding the action taken to address shortfalls and there is no demonstration that patterns and trends are being identified to promote service development.

All carers are paid in excess of the national minimum allowance. However, the way in which the payment scheme is currently administrated for mainstream carers supports their perception of themselves as 'volunteers' rather than professionals. Some foster carers struggle to see themselves as part of the team of professionals working to secure positive outcomes for young people, even though the fostering service clearly values their contribution to this process.

A small number of carers commented on being excluded from professional meetings, because they were not deemed to be professionals but 'volunteers'. They considered that child care operational workers, in particular, did not value their views or contributions. The service's managers have put a plan in place to address this issue.

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.