

West Berkshire Council Fostering Services

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

West Berkshire Family Placement Team is part of the Children and Families Services provided by West Berkshire County Council. The team also undertakes adoption work, private fostering, supported accommodation (lodgings) and the identification and oversight of placements with independent fostering providers.

The fostering service currently offers planned and emergency foster care, including: specialist care for disabled children;; short-breaks and relief care when necessary for established placements; family and friends placements; supported accommodation for young people aged 16 plus who are looked after; mother and baby placements. At the time of this inspection there were 68 approved carers and 123 looked after children; 72 children were placed in-house.

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 is good, with the outcomes for children and young people being outstanding.

The outcomes for the children and young people in foster care are excellent. Placement stability is very good with very few unplanned endings. Children and young people are healthy and enjoy taking part in a wide range of activities that promote their social and emotional development. They enjoy very good relationships with their carers and report that they are looked after well. Children and young people make outstanding progress in their education, considering their starting points on coming into care. Attendance levels are extremely high which maximises their opportunity to achieve. Young people are very well supported in their transition into adulthood.

The fostering service is effective. Children and young people are placed without avoidable delay with foster carers who can meet their needs. High quality support is provided to sustain placements. Children and young people have positive views

about the quality of their care and their relationships with foster carers. Children and young people are kept safe.

Foster carers receive effective good quality supervision and support, and they demonstrate a good understanding of children and young people's needs. Children and young people are actively engaged in plans that are made for them and they understand what is happening to them. They are able to influence many areas of the service through the children in care council.

Leaders and managers are committed to fostering and have an accurate understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the service and have taken effective steps to improve it.

The shortfalls identified at this inspection do not directly impact on the safety of children and young people. These relate to the foster carers' training, children sharing rooms and dental checks.

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 children have prompt access to doctors and other health professionals, including specialist services, when they need these services; this specifically relates to dental care (NMS 6.4)
- ensure that in the foster home, each child over the age of three has their own bedroom. If this is not possible, ensure the sharing of a bedroom is agreed by each child's responsible authority and each child has their own area within the bedroom. Before seeking agreement for the sharing of a bedroom, the fostering service provider should take into account any potential for bullying, any history of abuse or abusive behaviour, the wishes of the children concerned and all other pertinent facts. The decision making process and outcome of the assessment should be recorded in writing where bedroom sharing is agreed (NMS 10.6)
- ensure that foster carers are able to evidence that the Training, Support and Development Standards have been attained within 12 months of approval (or within 18 months for family and friends foster carers) (NMS 20.3)
- ensure the support and training made available to foster carers, including hard to reach carers, assists them in meeting the specific needs of the children they are caring for or are expected to care for; this specifically relates to meeting the current needs of teenagers and children from minority ethnic groups. (NMS 20.8)

Outcomes for children and young people

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

The outcomes for children and young people in foster care are excellent. Children and young people's educational attainments have improved greatly. Their attendance at school is high and they are achieving good results. Educational provision for looked after children is given a high priority to give children a greater opportunity to achieve their potential. Foster carers are also committed to children and young people's education and learning. This includes close liaison with schools, ensuring that school placements are appropriate and attending school meetings. Young people are encouraged to participate in community-based activities. The virtual head teacher provides a clear strategic direction. They are very well supported by an outstanding team, comprising of the looked after children's education services and the life chances team, that support and guide schools in engaging looked after children in their learning.

Children and young people are actively engaged in every aspect of planning for their care. They know why decisions are made and understand how they have contributed to that decision. Children and young people are well involved in and influence the day-to-day operation of the service and its development. Participation workers ensure that young people can express their views. Young people are consulted about various matters and are part of the corporate parenting panel. Their involvement also included the recruitment of senior management staff and they are involved in the pre-approval training of foster carers. The authority's corporate parenting board meets with young people and the young people have been involved in developing the pledge to children looked after. Consequently, young people are empowered and their emotional well-being is well promoted.

Children and young people feel safe and well cared for in their foster placements and are treated as part of the family. Young people are matched with foster carers who can meet their needs and who benefit from good support. This results in excellent, stable and settled placements which meet children's needs and enable them to develop positive relationships with their foster carers. Therefore, the majority of placements are stable and only a few children experience unplanned placement endings.

The looked after children's health team provides support and advice to children, young people and foster carers in all aspects of health care, including sexual health and substance misuse. Children and young people are healthy and very well informed about healthy lifestyles. Where appropriate, they take responsibility for their own health. The percentage of looked after children's health reviews completed this year is almost 100 per cent. However, the percentage of dental checks completed is much lower. The service is aware of this, and strategic improvements are in place to increase the number of dental checks through various health care promotion and education programmes.

Young people are well supported in their transition into adulthood. The authority operates a 'staying put' policy and the number of young people remaining in their foster placements after their 18th birthday is increasing. This helps young people to live in a stable environment that provides a secure base for them to review their

options and plan for the future.

Quality of service

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

All those involved with the fostering service are generally very satisfied with the service they receive. For example, they agreed that the management team is strong and that communication between the fostering service and other professionals involved in the care of the child has improved. This has strengthened the service's ability to meet the wide range of children and young people's needs.

The fostering service recruits a range of foster carers who are able to meet the needs of looked after children. The preparation and assessment of foster carers focus on the needs of children and young people, therefore enabling carers to develop an in-depth understanding of how to meet children and young people's needs. Managers and staff are aware of the difficulties in recruiting a range of carers from Black and Ethnic backgrounds and carers with skills to manage teenagers. The service has undertaken some joint working with the South East Consortium to improve and develop clear strategies to address this. The service has been successful in recruiting new carer households and in meeting their yearly recruitment target.

Foster carers are trained and supported to provide positive care. There is a clear framework of training and development and this is used as the basis for assessing foster carers' performance and identifying their training and development needs. However, this has not been managed consistently by the service, for instance less than half of the carers have completed the Children Workforce Development Council training. Also, where specific training is required to assist a carer to meet the needs of a child they are caring for or are expected to care for, this is not consistently sought or managed effectively. The service is aware of this shortfall and part of the service's strategy to address this has been the introduction of added incentives and on-line training which carers have welcomed.

The panel promotes safe, secure and stable placements through active engagement with the fostering service. They carry out a quality assurance function that has led to improvements in assessments of prospective foster carers' suitability to foster. The panel is well-established with an independent chair. The panel membership includes people with a good range of skills and relative experience, such as one care leaver. All members of the panel are encouraged to contribute their views and opinions. The fostering panel has access to medical expertise and legal advice, as required. The decision-maker makes considered decisions that take into account all the information available to them. Therefore, safe, fair and appropriate recommendations are made by the panel.

Children and young people's needs are assessed and understood. Each child and young person has a care package. Additional support is provided or arranged by the fostering service to enhance the stability of placements, particularly for those children and young people with complex needs. Social workers stated that having the

input of the life chance team enables them to ensure each child's care package is managed effectively with the support of the foster carer. Therefore, children and young people receive a service that knows them and are able to ensure appropriate placements are made and maintained.

Approved foster carers are integral members of the professional working team. Their opinions and views are taken into account and acted upon. Social workers stated that foster carers' reports are usually praised highly in care proceedings for the child. Therefore, foster carers and their family's commitment and hard work is not only recognised by the fostering service but by other professionals; they value this.

Foster carers give good quality support and encouragement to children and young people and are proud of their achievements. Foster carers maintain close contact with schools and attend all meetings associated with the individual child's educational needs; they advocate on behalf of the child.

Safeguarding children and young people

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

Children and young people stated that they feel and are safe. The service provides appropriate support and independent advice for children and young people. This is enhanced by the good and effective joint working between the various services. Therefore, children and young people feel listened to and know who they can go to if they are unhappy about any aspect of their care.

Children are protected by robust safeguarding practices and there are no incidents of bullying reported. Foster carers understand what they can do if a child is being bullied or is the bully. Children and young people spoken to state that bullying rarely occurs but they know to whom they can talk to if they have any concerns.

Foster carers understand the potential impact of abuse on children and young people. They are fully aware of the procedures to follow to protect them and the training they attend enhances this. There are effective arrangements in place to ensure that children and young people are safeguarded, that their welfare is promoted and is central to the service. These include rigorous systems for checking the suitability of foster carers and staff. The service has good links with the local authority designated officer. Foster carers who have been subject to allegations or where there are serious causes for concern have their reviews considered by the fostering panel.

Children and young people very rarely go missing from their foster placements. The few who do are protected by effective partnership arrangements between the local police, the police in neighbouring counties, social work teams and other agencies. The service helps prevent children and young people from running away and becoming missing from care. Children and young people who are absent from the foster home without consent, but whose whereabouts are known or thought to be known, are also protected in line with the fostering service's written procedure.

Children and young people's safety is enhanced through sound recruitment procedures. The outcomes of recruitment and selection procedures are clearly evidenced. The quality of staff files examined was consistent with the recruitment policy and procedures. There are very clear guidelines in place for ensuring that only qualified staff undertake the assessment and approval of prospective foster carers. The supervision of unqualified staff is effective and well managed and they are seen as part of the whole fostering team.

Care and placement plans ensure that foster carers have the information they need to safeguard and promote the welfare of the children in their care. A range of risk assessments are undertaken to ensure that all possible areas of concern for children and carers are considered. However, the individual's Safer Caring policy does not cover shared bedrooms and the potential risks, such as lack of privacy and risk taking behaviours. As a result it is not clear how the decision making process about children sharing bedrooms was agreed and whether the arrangements safeguard the children appropriately.

Leadership and management

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

The service is effectively managed and staffed by people who have relevant qualifications, experience and knowledge. There are efficient administration systems. The management team monitors the delivery of the service and reviews the fostering service annually. The results of this review are used to drive improvements in the service.

The management team understand many of the strengths and weaknesses of the fostering service. There is a comprehensive Statement of Purpose in place which is reviewed annually. The document gives a strategic overview of numbers of looked after children and where they are placed by West Berkshire and the majority are placed in-house. The children's guide is a package of various leaflets and gifts that inform children and young people about fostering, what services they can expect and how they can complain. This was devised by the children in care council. Young people spoken to said they were given a package of information on their first day in care. The children's guide is received by all children in care.

The point in time surveys received by Ofsted in May 2012 had positive responses about the service overall. However, there was one main concern relating to the children's social workers and the stability of the team. The impact highlighted by carers is that children and young people were experiencing constant change. The senior management team are aware of the concerns and have implemented several strategies to address these areas and improvements have been made. Throughout the inspection there was strong evidence to show that the majority of social workers teams remained stable and where there were changes these had a minimal impact on children. One key area of the service that is seen by all professionals as dynamic is the life chance team, West Berkshire's multi-agency team approach to children in

care. Social workers are able to present challenging cases to the team for advice and the outcome is that children and young people receive a comprehensive care package that takes into account all their needs. Therefore, where children experience change the impact is minimal to their care and support they receive.

The fostering service is aware of the current demand for placements for looked after children. The current need is for skilled carers to support and accommodate teenagers, sibling groups, young mothers with babies and ethnic minority groups. To meet the current demand West Berkshire has joined forces with other county councils in areas of recruitment of foster carers and the list of preferred providers. The aim is to deliver an efficient and value for money service.

Corporate parenting is taken seriously and ensures that children looked after have good outcomes. This is led by the corporate parenting board whose membership includes looked after children and young people, councillors and members from the senior management teams. Children and young people have influenced and contributed to the development of the fostering service, mainly through the children in care council. Written feedback from children and young people about their placements contributes to their foster carer's review. Children and young people's achievements are also recognised by the council and once a year this is celebrated in an awards ceremony.

There was one requirement from the last inspection relating to recruitment and identification information and this has been complied with. Therefore, the fostering service demonstrates a capacity for continuing improvement and ensuring that the outcomes for children and young people are sustained.

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.