

Luton Borough Council Fostering Service

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

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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.

This report details the main strengths and any areas for improvement identified during the inspection. The judgements included in the report are made in relation to the outcomes for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and the relevant National Minimum Standards for the service.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding:	this aspect of the provision is of exceptionally high quality
Good:	this aspect of the provision is strong
Satisfactory:	this aspect of the provision is sound
Inadequate:	this aspect of the provision is not good enough

Service information

Brief description of the service

The fostering service is part of the Children and Families Division and is based at Unity House in central Luton. The fostering service is managed by two fostering service team managers, one managing pre-panel assessment and approval of carers and the other managing post panel supervision and support of carers. The service recruits, approves, trains and supports foster carers and, when submitting statistics for this inspection, had 184 approved fostering households providing placements to 235 young people. Luton Borough Council serves a diverse population.

A range of placement types are provided including emergency placements, long and short term placements, kinship placements, shared care and short breaks for disabled children and contract care.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

This is an overview of what the inspector found during the inspection.

This was a full inspection that focused on all the national minimum standards.

The fostering service has made a vast amount of improvement since the previous inspection, addressing all the recommendations and improving the outcomes for children and young people who use the service as well as for the foster carers. This was evident from the questionnaires received and interviews conducted as part of this inspection. Children and young people spoke positively about the care foster carers have given them and that they felt comfortable and secure in their placements.

Ofsted received a number of questionnaires from children, young people, foster carers and parents of children and young people in placement. The feedback was mixed but the majority of the feedback was positive about the support given. Where individuals' were most unhappy about the service, these have been addressed by the fostering service through the complaints procedures.

The fostering service has a strong management team and that are experienced, enthusiastic and supportive. The supervising social workers are committed to achieving good outcomes for children and young people. This is achieved through identifying the weaknesses and strengths within the fostering service and setting out a plan to build on good practice, eliminate poor practice and deliver on areas that require improvements. They are supported in this task by colleagues within the Council and health service, such as the looked after children's nurse and from the child and adolescent mental health service. The fostering service is strong at matters such as: ensuring that children and young people are healthy; supporting their education; listening to children and young people; safeguarding their needs;

preparing them for independent living; as well as having a committed and competent staff team.

Areas for improvement relate to room sharing and the quality monitoring undertaken by the panel and the decision maker. However, these shortfalls do not have an immediate and direct impact on the service's support of children, young people and foster carers. The fostering service is already aware of these shortfalls and has been diligently working to address them.

Improvements since the last inspection

At the last inspection twelve recommendations were made. All have been addressed. These were in respect of: care and healthcare plans of children needing updating when a placement is made; all foster carers to undertake safer caring and first aid training; that the matching process takes into account all the elements of child when they are placed; that the foster carers placement agreements is in place; the decision making process is clear and transparent to all; the Statement of Purpose is to be updated and at least annually reviewed; that foster carers understand the roles of the child social worker and their supervising social worker and each foster carer has a qualified supervising social worker assigned to them.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Children and young people live in healthy environments and have good access to health services, both universal and specialist. One foster carer summed this up: 'One of the key guiding principles is that children and young people have the right to have their physical and mental health safeguarded and promoted. They also have the right to live a healthy lifestyle'. Foster carers help children and young people to develop their emotional, intellectual, social, creative and physical skills by providing effective support, help and guidance. When children and young people are first placed with foster carers they promptly visit a doctor, dentist and optician. It is commonplace for this to be organised within the first week. All foster carers are expected to keep a detailed record of all health issues related to the child. For example, during supervision visits these records are scrutinised by the visiting fostering social worker. As a consequence, no health matters are going unchecked.

Children and young people are able to keep fit and healthy. For example, many children and young people are members of their local sporting clubs, taking part in activities such as after school football clubs, fitness classes and gym. Children and young people's talents, hobbies and special interests are fully supported. For example, at a recent foster carer's forum included a presentation from youth service to highlight and promote the extensive range of activities available to children and young people. This innovative approach embeds the need for activities as a key aim to help children and young people keep healthy and fit which leads to good outcomes.

The fostering service works with other agencies to ensure better outcomes for children and young people. There is a successful 'joined up' working approach. Children and young people have equal access to health services. Foster carers are able to refer and get direct access to specialist health teams in a timely manner including the specialist nurse for looked after children. The needs of children and young people with additional complex health needs are being addressed. A key strength of the fostering service is the progressive relationship that the local child and adolescent mental health service to address mental health issues for young people. This intensive support helps to stabilise placements and prevent placement breakdowns. For example, the fostering service is currently undertaking a project to help children and young people in care to increase their emotional resilience. The aim is to replicate this across the authority.

Foster carers ensure that the health records fully reflect children and young people's individual needs, for example, in respect of culture, identity and disability. The child's placing social worker is responsible for devising the health plan and these are formally reviewed by a health professional. Children and young people participate in decisions about their health. As a result, foster carers feel well supported in meeting the needs of children and young people. Some foster carers have attended specialist training such as a therapeutic course. One foster carer commented: 'It has really given me a better understanding of the child's needs. You develop a more holistic view'.

Foster carers are provided with a good programme of training. For example, topics such as child development, health care planning, first aid, health and safety and safe care is being provided. In addition, training is provided to foster carers who care for children and young people with medical needs including guidance on the storage and administration of medicines. Foster carers visited, show full compliance with the fostering service's stated policy and procedure.

All of the foster carers visited provided a home that is comfortable, adequately furnished and decorated. Some foster carers homes reached a really high standard. All outdoor spaces are safe, secure and well maintained. The fostering service is very diligent with ensuring that a full health and safety audit is completed annually and the premises are inspected for this. A commendable area of good practice is that all foster carers have fire plans for their household. Children and young people with disabilities are placed in appropriate homes because they have enough space, privacy, equipment and safety barriers appropriate to their age, development and abilities.

In some cases it is the practice of the fostering service for some children and young people to share bedrooms. However, the fostering service has not yet taken into consideration the recent changes to the national minimum standards of ensuring that a child over the age of three is to have their own bedroom. When this is not possible, the fostering service does risk assessments but these are not sufficiently robust to assess bedroom sharing. For example, the strategies proposed does not always minimise risk.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

Children and young people's welfare is being promoted in all fostering placements. This is being achieved because foster carers model respect for children and young people that they care for. Safeguarding is discussed with foster carers during supervision visits and links between equality and diversity; bullying, disability, health and safeguarding are explored. All foster carers have received basic and advanced training related to child protection and safeguarding. This means that foster carers have the knowledge and skills to carry out their roles and responsibilities. One foster carer summed this up: 'Safeguarding is everybody's business'. This is underpinned by the fostering service's comprehensive policies on training such as, complaints and allegations and the supervision processes that promote good practice. Foster carers and staff have the skills and training to communicate with all children and young people. For example, young people are taught about how to use responsibly and safely the internet, interactive and digital technologies, mobile phones and email.

Children and young people know how to protect themselves. All foster carers households have a safer caring policy in place which is underpinned by the fostering network guidance, according to children and young people's level of ability the policy is fully explained. The fostering service promotes robust safe-caring guidelines for foster carers which are formally reviewed by fostering panel. Safer care plans properly address matters related to equality and diversity, disability and personal care. Safe care plans also include how incidents of bullying will be dealt with in the home. Children and young people know about their rights to personal space because this is openly discussed and agreed. Foster carers act as very good role models and through the comprehensive training programme have the appropriate skills and information to care safely for children and young people. The fostering services ensure that during supervision visits all children and young people have the opportunity to talk alone with the fostering social worker. Also, opportunities are provided to observe the quality of the relationship between the foster carer and the child.

A very few number of young people go missing. The fostering service has strong multi-agency links and procedures for addressing this problem of missing young people. Foster carers are aware of the procedures and follow these fully in practice. Young people understand that when they go missing, the circumstances and the possible reasons are explored in order to reduce further risks. Over time, some foster carers have been successful with reducing the incidents of young people going missing. One foster carer explained that, 'the fostering service social worker is a 'diamond' always answers the phone and responds swiftly'.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Children and young people feel comfortable in their placements. Placements are closely matched and monitored to ensure they meet the children and young people's needs and continue to do so. One foster carer explained about the child placed with him: 'This placement has brought permanence in his life'. One young person commented, 'I feel very lucky to have such brilliant foster carers'.

Children and young people develop a sense of self and belonging in their placements. Foster carers have high expectations and succeed in helping children and young people to take responsibility for their behaviour in a way that is appropriate to their age and ability. One foster carer commented, 'He is now attending school every day, this was not always the case in the past'. Another foster carer explained, 'I know as carers we are making a difference because our foster child's demeanour has changed, she is much more open and confident in expressing her views'.

For young people with more complex and challenging behaviours the fostering service employs a small dedicated group of foster carers that are known as 'contract carers'. This group of carers have a very specific role in helping young people placed with them to move forward in their lives. There is a very clear intervention plan and remit to these placements. Young people in these placements have the additional benefit of receiving extra specialist support, such as counselling and psychiatric services.

Children and young people have equal access to activities and leisure pursuits. Foster carers show great care and attention with supporting children and young people to pursue hobbies and sporting interests. Many belong to their local community youth groups and different projects around their local area. For example, there is the young voice group and sailing and kayaking groups. Children and young people are enabled to make and sustain friendships which involve reciprocal arrangements to visit friend's homes.

The educational needs of children and young people are given a high priority by foster carers and equally supported by the fostering service. Good educational support is provided to children and young people in care, whether in mainstream school or alternative provision. Foster carers have regular access to advisory teachers, an educational psychologist, educational support workers and education welfare officers. The fostering service provide training and support for foster carers to ensure education is valued and carers support children and young people to maximise their opportunities. For example, an educational conference was recently run which was well attended by foster carers and staff. It offered very practical support and guidance on personal educational plans, the national curriculum, attendance and behaviour, exclusions and transition.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The fostering service is good at ensuring that the wishes and feelings of children and young people can be heard. Foster carers spoken to said that they spend a lot of time talking and getting to know the children and young people in order that their individual needs can be met. This includes areas such as helping them to understand decisions that are made in relation to their future. Children and young people's particular likes and dislikes in relation to making individual choices about the food they eat are met. From the surveys received it was evidenced that children and young people are happy in their placements and where there are concerns these are addressed immediately. The fostering service has involved children and young people in redesigning the care review documents, training for prospective foster carers, updating the foster carers' handbook and ensuring relevant information given at the start of a placement is easy to receive such as via the internet. Children and young people are invited and asked to make a written contribution to their foster carer's annual reviews and this option is taken up by children. This ensures that questions asked about matters that are important to them and how is the placement working for them.

Contact arrangements are good. These are undertaken in accordance with children and young people's care plans to ensure that they only have contact with people who it is safe to do so. Foster carers are supportive of arrangements set and will accommodate contact specific to the needs of children and young people. This includes facilitating telephone contact or travelling to a place of contact with the child or young person. They receive remuneration from the fostering service where appropriate. Foster carers spoken to said that some contact arrangements can be difficult at times, but, their supervising social worker is always contactable and supportive on these issues. Existing contact arrangements can be changed if it is believed that it is not in the best interest of children and young people. Foster carers monitor children and young people's responses and will inform their supervising social workers if they have concerns for young people's physical, sexual and emotional welfare following contact visits.

Children and young people are able to enjoy their interests and develop confidence in their skills by engaging in leisure activities that develop their emotional, intellectual, social, creative and physical skills. The fostering service financially supports foster carers for children and young people to engage in leisure activities of their choice these includes holidays as well as everyday activities such as cinema or going to football practice.

The majority of the placement made are emergency placements, which all the foster carers know and accept what the procedures are when an emergency placement is made. Some foster carers have expressed this can be difficult at times not having all the information provided to them on day one of the placement or within a certain amount of time. However, the fostering service clearly understands this and ensures that information is provided to them as soon as possible to ensure the placement

remains safe. The child's social worker and the foster carer work together to ensure that the child's needs are well supported and are made this a priority. There is a clear partnership within the various teams ensuring that the outcome for the child is always safeguarded.

Children and young people are welcomed and leave foster homes in a planned and sensitive manner which makes them feel valued. Children and young people spoken to said that they have always feel apart of the family and those younger children who were unable to express how they felt were observed to interact with their foster carer in a safe and secure way. Foster carers explained the everyday household rules and expectations to children and young people. Where a child is leaving care, the foster family helps them to understand the reasons why they are leaving and supports them through the transition process sensitively. Foster carers also expressed that they sometimes need additional support when a child moves on and they obtain this support either through the foster carers forum, the coffee mornings or talking it over with other carers. Foster carers also spoke with pride about children and young people who have left their home and return to inform them of their progress, long after the child or young person has left the placement. Foster carers view children and young people as family members and maintain contact with them after they have left.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

Young people are prepared for and supported into adulthood so that they can reach their full potential and achieve economic well-being. Foster carers are aware that part of their responsibilities is to prepare children and young people to live independently from a relatively young age. As such, younger children are given responsibilities in caring for themselves. This includes their personal care and undertaking household chores in accordance with their age and capabilities. Older young people are supported with tasks such as budgeting and shopping. Children and young people have bank accounts and are encouraged to save regularly in order that they are helped to financially prepare for their future. Foster carers work together with young people's social workers to support young people in implementing their pathway plans. Young people have the option of being able to remain in foster care beyond the age of 18 with continued funding to the carers. There are also robust arrangements for children and young people with learning difficulties or disabilities to ensure a smooth transition to adult services, education, training or employment. Each young person has a pathway there is a policy and procedure in place on how young people are supported when they get to this stage of care. Young people are supported by the service to participate in various activities. One young person who is a member of the Children's panel said that we have made a difference for young people leaving care, the leaving care allowance has now been increased £1500.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

Prospective foster carers are prepared to become foster carers in a way which addresses, and gives practical techniques to manage, the issues they are likely to encounter and identifies the competencies and strengths they have or need to develop. Prospective foster carers were able to demonstrate what the impact of fostering would have on them, and they found the process good, informative and rewarding.

Payments to foster carers are made in a timely manner. There is a clear and concise payments structure that includes transport and food cost. Some foster carers raised concerns about the transport cost, but within the 'school to home' transport policy it clearly indicates that all contact arrangements cost is paid for and additional transport costs will be discussed with the supervising social worker.

Safeguarding of children and young people within the organisation is good. All allegation and suspicions of harm are handled in away that provides effective protection and support for the person making the allegation and support to the person who is the subject of the allegation. There is a robust and comprehensive safeguarding policy that reflects the Local Safeguarding Children Board requirements, which includes the procedures to be followed in the event of an allegation being made. Foster carers and staff have a good understanding of this. Courses are held for foster carers in the event that they may be the subject of false allegations made against them. Supervising social workers have a good understanding of safeguarding procedures and support and reassess foster carers and their families in the event of an allegation or concern being made against them. The designated officer child protection officer has the responsibility of liaising with the Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO).

Record keeping is now on the service's electronic system; the system is good, and is managed well is secure and accessible.

The fostering panel is attended by a core group of members who are quorate and make decisions about the approval and reviewing of foster carers. The fostering panel also undertakes a quality assurance role which ensures that assessments are of good quality and undertaken within a timely fashion. Reports are presented to panel members within the specified timescales, so that there is time for additional information to be requested to prevent any delay to recommendations being made in relation to foster carers' approval or reviews. Any queries or concerns are highlighted by the chair and effectively acted upon by the fostering team. The chair gave an overview of the panel members and felt that the knowledge, number and experience of the panel members was enormous and felt that the right decisions are being made. The Chair also said that minutes could be better at times, but they were generally very good. The fostering process is transparent for potential foster carers and it is only in rare and exceptional circumstances where they may not be invited to contribute and their views heard during this process. The fostering service has a

panel advisor and a decision maker who regularly meets and discusses the outcomes of decisions made by the panel. However, where there are issues relating to children sharing bedrooms and variation approvals that are complex, the decision with regards to safeguarding is explored thoroughly to ensure that the appropriate decision made is appropriate.

Matching of children and young people with foster carers is good and maximises the likelihood of a stable placement. Prior to each child or young person being placed, foster carers are provided with information about the child or young person in order that they can assess the appropriateness of the placement. The fostering service ensures the child's social worker completes a comprehensive referral form. Weekly referral meetings identify placements that will meet the appropriate cultural and religious needs. Once a match is made the fostering service will identify any unmet needs which the child's social workers and foster carers will address supported by the supervising social worker. The fostering service ensures that foster carers supporting and caring for children and young people from different cultural backgrounds understand the needs of the child they are caring for and they are supported to meet these needs. The fostering service supports carers by ensuring that additional training or resources are supplied. Trans-racial placements are kept under review.

The persons managing the fostering service are qualified and suitable to work with children and have the appropriate skills to deliver an efficient and effective service. The management team consists of the Head of Integrated Services the Integrated Services Manager and two team managers. Staff speak highly of the management team's approachability and commitment to promoting and safeguarding the needs of children and young people. The team managers have been in post for a number of years and have a good understanding of how the team functions. Staff supervisions are undertaken within the set timescales along with staff appraisals, which meant that staff training and development needs have been effectively identified.

Social workers have the appropriate qualifications and experience to competently support foster carers. Recruitment practice is good for staff, carers and panel members to ensure that children are safeguarded.

The Statement of Purpose clearly sets out the aims and objectives of the fostering service. It gives those interested in the service a clear understanding of how it intends to recruit and support foster carers and staff in promoting the welfare of children and young people. The document can be produced in various different languages.

Reviews and visits of foster carers are undertaken within timescales. There is a system in place to ensure that the renewal of foster carers' CRBs is conducted at appropriate intervals.

The fostering premises are suitable to ensure that it meets the objectives set out in its Statement of Purpose. For instance meeting rooms can be booked for meetings and interviewing of potential foster carers to ensure that sensitive information can be

discussed in private. In addition, designated members of staff are in place to answer initial queries and to ensure that literature is sent out to potential foster carers in a timely manner. This fostering service, along with others national Councils, faces the challenge of having to provide a good quality service, within budget constraints set by central government.

There is a development plan in place. Gate-keeping processes are in place to ensure that requests made for placements fit the criteria of the fostering service and for requests for placements with independent fostering agencies. These are reviewed regularly to ensure that they are providing 'best value' for their services. The local authority is also exploring commissioning initiatives to further enhance their service provision in a cost-effective way.

Training and support are available for all foster carers that assist them in meeting the specific needs of children and young people. This includes training in safeguarding and child development. Foster carers have support from the looked after children's nurse for health matters such as medication, training and practical support such as meeting the needs of a disabled child. Foster carers maintain a portfolio of the courses that they have undertaken so that they can meet the skills required of them by the fostering service. Foster carers' appraisal of their performance is discussed during their annual reviews against clear and consistent standards that are set. Children and young people's and other family members' views are taken into account during this process to ensure foster carers continuing suitability to work with children and young people. Annually foster carers are recognised for their commitment and also if they have undertaken any of the significant training such Children Development Workforce Council (CDWC) certificate. Throughout the year they are also recognised for their day to day achievements in the quarterly newsletter produced by the fostering service for carers and this also shares update information as to what is going on within fostering.

The fostering service's Statement of Purpose includes the services and facilities that they provide to family and friends foster carers. So they know what is expected of them, how they will be assessed, including the criteria that will be used and how particular issues for family and friends foster carers will be addressed, and any support offered during the assessment process.

Each foster carer is supervised by a named, appropriately qualified social worker, who they meet regularly with. All foster carers spoken to said that they receive very good support and supervision they need in order to care properly for the children placed with them. The majority of the foster carers praised their link workers who are the supervising social workers. Good cover arrangements are in place, should the supervising social worker be away for any length of time. This includes use of the duty system and out-of-hours service. Foster carers are provided with a handbook which covers policies, procedures and other information that relates to their care task.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The fostering service closely monitors the profile of children and young people into care and tries to match

recruitment to emerging needs. Evidence supports a consistent commitment to improving equality and diversity in practice. The fostering service provide specific training course on valuing diversity and all other training courses for foster carers promote appreciation of diversity and equality issues. The service provides interpreters where carers do not speak English or where it is not their first language. The service continues to provide adaptations and equipment to foster/shared carers and specialist training e.g. Makaton, feeding and suction. The fostering service has a diverse staff group who have varied backgrounds and experiences which helps to raise the awareness of difference. The service links carers up with each other to provide support and help with cross-cultural issues.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further the registered person should take account of the following recommendation(s):

- ensure in the foster home, each child over the age of three should have their own bedroom. If this is not possible, the sharing of a bedroom is agreed by each child's responsible authority and each child has their own area within the bedroom. The decision making process and outcome of the assessment are recorded in writing where bedroom sharing is agreed (NMS 10.6)
- take into account where a child is to share a bedroom an agreement of how this is to be risk assessed and managed, the wishes of the children concerned and other significant facts, the decision and outcome of the assessment is recorded in writing where bedroom sharing is agreed (NMS 10.6)
- ensure that the fostering panel and decision-maker make quality and appropriate recommendations/decisions in line with the overriding objective to promote the welfare of children in foster care (NMS 14.1)