

Shropshire County Council Fostering Service

Inspection report for LA 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

Shropshire County Council Children's Placement Services aims to recruit a wide range of placements to meet the family placement needs of the great majority of children and young people looked after by the local authority. At the time of the inspection the Service provided placements for 124 young people. Placements are provided by 103 approved foster carers.

The Children's Placement Services team is located in Shrewsbury, but is responsible for providing a service to the whole of the county.

Foster carers receive the Fostering Network recommended allowances and most have access to fee payments on a Payment for Skills scheme, currently payable on four skill levels.

Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

This was an announced key inspection of Shropshire County Council's Fostering Services and covered all Standards with the exception of short term breaks, financial systems and viability which are not relevant for this service. In addition the inspector did not consider the Standards relating to premises or foster carer training as these have met the Standards at past inspections and there have been no changes since the last inspection.

The inspection was undertaken over a period of five days and followed up on outstanding requirements and recommendations made at the services inspection in January 2007. The manager completed a self-assessment and questionnaires were returned from foster carers and young people in placement in addition to placing social workers.

Improvements since the last inspection

The fostering service has made good progress in meeting outside requirements and recommendations made at the last inspection in January 2007. There has been an improvement in the amount and quality of information provided to foster carers prior to a placement being made, so that all parties can be confident that they can meet the needs of the young person to be placed. Work has been undertaken to produce a health passport, which will clearly identify a young person's health needs and who will be able to give consent for treatment.

Improvements in matching and the development and reviewing of safe care

guidelines assist in keeping young people safe. The needs of young people from different ethnic and racial backgrounds are better met due to improved training for foster carers. Education support for young people who have been excluded from schools has improved, although there remains gaps in the service provided; however, the service are continually advocating for young people with the relevant services.

There have been improvements to the working relationships between the Children's Placement Services and young people's social workers. This improvement is significant in the working relationship the Children with Disabilities team and has enable workers to have a better understanding of young people's needs and therefore able to identify suitable placement for the young people who require substitute care.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is satisfactory.

Young people's health needs are generally well met by their foster carers. However, the agency does not always promote and safeguarded the health of young people who are fostered by friends and family, this may put their health at risk.

Young people's health is being well promoted by foster carers, who ensure that young people are registered with local health professionals. The Looked After Children's (LAC) nurse works closely with foster carers and young people to ensure that young people's health needs are met. This includes undertaking annual health checks, which informs the development of a health plan to promote healthy living for young people.

The fostering service has ensured that consents for seeking medical treatment are in place for the majority of young people, thus ensuring their health can be met at all times. Young people, who are placed with friends or family carers have not always had their health needs protected in this way, neither were their carers clear as to who could consent to any medical treatment. This could jeopardise any treatment required by a young person. The planned introduction of medical passports, if implemented fully, should ensure that all young people's health is fully promoted.

The fostering service provides first aid training and other health related training for foster carers, which provides them with the skills and knowledge to deal with basic medical needs and emergencies.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is satisfactory.

Keeping young people safe is a priority for the service; this is evident in policies, procedures and practice. Nonetheless, there are areas where improvements are required to ensure the safety and wellbeing of all young people at all times.

The service ensures that all staff and foster carers are suitable to work with young people. Appropriate checks and references are undertaken and the files were seen to be well organised and of an excellent standard. Whilst telephone references are undertaken that are not always being appropriately recorded.

Foster carers provide safe and homely environments for young people placed with them. Safety is ensured by annual health and safety assessments being undertaken. Nonetheless, this has not happened in respect of family and friends foster carers as they are not reviewed on an annual basis. All young people visited had their own bedroom; where this is not the case the service ensures that a risk assessment is undertaken. General risk assessments are undertaken as part of referral for a placement; staff reported that risk assessments regarding individual behaviours or events are often undertaken but not recorded. This may put young people at risk of harm if not all parties are fully aware of risks and how to minimise them. Safe caring plans are completed with foster carers and agreed by placing social workers; however this work is not always undertaken with family and friends foster carers.

Young people are generally well matched with their foster carers and this enables their needs to be met. Duty workers ensure that as much information about the young person is gathered at the referral stage to enable them to use their knowledge of foster carers, to make placements. The service acknowledges that due to a shortage of foster carers it is not always possible to exactly match a young person to a foster carer's skills. In such circumstance the service would consider how gaps would be met, alternatively they consider an external placement to ensure that the young person's needs are met. Young people have the opportunity for planned introductions with their foster carers prior to placement, wherever possible, to enable them to make an informed decision about their placement.

The fostering service has made four placements where an exemption to the normal fostering limit has been required in the past 12 months. However, the service does not always ensure and record that the placement can meet the needs of all the young people within the placement, including the foster carers own children.

Foster carers stated there had been an improvement in the amount of information received about a young person prior to placement, which enables them to be clear as to whether they can meet a young person's needs. Nonetheless, the fostering service has still not implemented the use of a foster placement agreement, which covers all areas required, including why the young person was matched to the foster carers and whether there are any areas which require additional support. The manager stated that a checklist is to be introduced, which includes information about matching.

The fostering service has clear child protection policies and staff and foster carers are provided with training in respect of child protection and safe caring. There have been five investigations into allegations against foster carers in the past 12 months. These have been appropriately notified to Ofsted. However, there have been delays in completing two of the investigations. This could cause a break down in

relationships between the service and the foster carers, which could impact on the safety of young people.

The inspector did not observe the fostering panel at this inspection, as previous inspections and examination of minutes of the last three panel meetings show that there is a robust fostering panel in place which ensures good quality decisions are made. The panel has clear policies and procedures to guide its work, which includes the action taken if the panel is not in agreement. The composition of the panel meets the required standard and panel members have an appropriate range of skills and experience. However, not all appropriate checks have been undertaken regarding panel members.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is satisfactory.

The fostering service values diversity and where possible encourages equality, to promote the welfare of young people. The service works within the authority's procedures for promoting equality and diversity. Valuing diversity and promoting equality is a major part of the assessment process of foster carers. Post-approval foster carer training includes sessions on 'Equal Opportunities'. Training sessions ensure that the importance of working to meet young people's diverse needs is the basis for all presentations. Foster carers endeavour to meet young people's diverse needs, including those young people with complex needs due to disabilities. The service has supported these placements by having regular meetings with the children with disability team.

Young people are encouraged to enjoy and achieve as staff and carers are aware of the importance of promoting individual needs within the foster placement. The authority recognises young people's achievements through the annual LAC celebration event.

Foster carers support young people in respect of their education and all the young people visited were attending full time school. The fostering service has taken pro-active actions to advocate for young people who are not in full-time education or who have been excluded from school. Work has been undertaken with relevant personnel to develop a service for these young people. Whilst the LAC team provide some support, they are not able to provide full-time education for all young people who do not have a school place.

The provision of short term breaks for children with disabilities is contracted to Barnardos, and is no longer the responsibility of the local authority's fostering service.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Young people are encouraged and assisted to maintain contact with their family and friends. Foster carers are provided with training to enable them to appropriately support young people and are required to record outcomes of contact arrangements and how it impacts upon the young person.

Young people's contact arrangements are subject to a risk assessment, which is completed at the time of referral. This information is used as part of the matching process. Where appropriate foster carers supervise contact in their own homes and are supported to develop positive working relationships with parents. Contact arrangements are clearly recorded on file and reviewed regularly.

Carers and the fostering service encourage young people to express their views regarding their care. Young people are consulted on a regular basis by their foster carers and social workers.

Young people are regularly consulted by the service regarding how decisions are made and the services run. This consultation also includes the sons and daughters of foster carers. This results in services being child focused. Young people are also supported to attend their statutory reviews where they can give their views regarding plans for their day to day care.

Young people are provided with information as to how to make a complaint if they are unhappy about their care. Young people can access the services of an independent advocate provided by the Children's Advice and Representation Service.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is satisfactory.

The majority of young people are well supported by their foster carers to assist with their move into independent living. Additional support is provided by the Leaving Care team. However, Pathway plans had not been completed for all young people, which results in a lack of clarity over the tasks required to be completed and by whom. This may result in some young people not receiving all the support they require. Some young people have missed opportunities, including a placement at college, due to a lack of a consistent response from the Leaving Care team.

The fostering service operates a payment for skills scheme for its foster carers, with four different levels, dependent on the skills of the foster carers. Foster carers also receive a weekly fostering allowance, which is in line with Fostering Network's recommended rate. Payments are made in a timely fashion to all foster carers. This ensures that young people needs can be met by their foster carers.

Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

The fostering service has developed a Statement of Purpose, which provides interested parties with useful information regarding the services available to young people placed with foster carers. However, the service has still not updated their Children's Guide as planned, which would provide young person with details of the help and support available to them when placed with foster carers. The service is hopeful that the Guide for teenagers will soon be available. A draft version of this proved to be a useful document and reflected the input from a number of young people who use the service; however, the Guide did not include information about how young people can contact Ofsted. There is a need for the other documents to be completed as a matter of urgency and for them to be circulated to all young people.

Staff and foster carers are provided with detailed policies and procedures to guide them in their work with young people.

The Nominated Manager is responsible for the oversight of the fostering service. He is supported by a team manager, two senior practitioners, seven full-time social workers, three part-time social workers and three support workers. The service is well managed and the service has made good progress at meeting previous requirements to ensure that the service is compliant with the National Minimum Standard and Fostering Service Regulations 2002, so that foster carers and young people are provided with appropriate support.

Staff report that they receive regular supervision, annual appraisals and that appropriate training is available for them to access; however, some staff stated that they found it difficult to undertake training due to other commitments to the service. The staff practice forums have provided a positive tool in developing good practice. It is anticipated that a new computer system will be introduced within the next three months, which is likely to assist with gathering and collation of information.

The service has seen a reduction in the number of foster carers approved since the last inspection. This results in less choice of placements for young people and has increased the number of young people who have to be placed outside the authority to enable their needs to be met. The service is currently developing links with independent agencies to provide an increased range of placements for young people. Social workers use a newly introduced standardised process for assessing foster carers. Assessments seen by the inspectors confirmed that assessments were of a good standard and covered all areas required to ensure that foster carers were suitable to care for young people. Work is currently being undertaken to standardise assessments of family and friends foster carers.

Foster carers are well supported by supervising social workers. Out of hours support is provided by the authority's out of hours team. Comments from foster carers are that this support is not effective. Reviews on foster carers are being undertaken in a timely fashion to ensure that foster carers remain suitable to care for young people.

Workers ensure that the views of all parties are sought to inform the review; however, there is frequently a delay in young people's social workers and others completing reports causing a delay in reviews being presented to Panel due to not completing paperwork. However, the service does not review friends and family foster carers as required.

All foster carers have entered into a foster care agreement, which confirms the expectations of them and the support that they can expect from the agency. Unannounced visits have taken place to ensure that foster carers are providing appropriate care to young people.

Support to foster carers is also provided by the use of support workers and this is welcomed by both foster carers and staff. However, there is a lack of clarity regarding what work the workers can undertake; with disagreement within the service as to what circumstances support can be offered. This has resulted in support not always being available and workers not being fully employed.

The fostering service ensures that an up-to-date, comprehensive case record is maintained for each young person in foster care, these are maintained by social workers within the district teams. These were generally in good order and provided information on the nature and quality of care provided to the young person. Confidential information regarding other young people was found on other young people's file, thus breaching their privacy.

The fostering service has still not implemented a foster placement agreement, which covers all required areas. LAC documents were used for collating information and planning, however, these were of variable quality and did not contain information regarding consent for overnight stays or school trips.

Records regarding foster carers are maintained securely and were seen to be well ordered and up to date. The service keeps a register of foster carers and young people's. The young person's register is not fully compliant as it does not include the previous addresses of the young people.

Family and friends foster carers and the young people placed with them are not well supported by the fostering service. As reported throughout this report they are treated differently from other foster carers and do not receive supervision, training or have their approval reviewed to assess whether any additional support is required. Whilst family and friends foster carers receive an allowance for each young person placed, they do not receive the same additional allowances as other foster carers, for example birthday and holiday allowances.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Statutory Requirements

This section sets out the actions, which must be taken so that the registered person/s meets the Care Standards Act 2000, Fostering Services Regulations 2002 and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider(s) must comply with the given timescales.

Std.	Action	Due date
12	ensure that the consent for medical treatment is clearly documented for all young people, including those young people who are cared for by friends and family foster carers. Timescale of 20 April 2007 not met. Regulation 15	28/11/2007
6	undertake health and safety checks of all foster homes, including family and friends foster carers, on an annual basis. Regulation 29	28/01/2008
8	ensure that before making a placement, a written foster placement agreement is drawn up which covers all matters specified in Schedule 6. This must include specific reference to elements of matching. Timescale of 01 June 2005 not met. Regulation 34(3)	28/11/2007
8	ensure that where an exemption from the usual fostering limit is granted the requirements of Schedule 7 are fulfilled. Timescale of 01 June 2005 not met. Children Act 1989 Schedule 7(4)(2)	28/11/2007
9	ensure that investigations into allegations against foster carers are conducted in line with the Authority's procedures and in a timely fashion. Regulation 12	28/11/2007
30	ensure that all checks and references are undertaken in respect of fostering panel members. Regulation 20	28/12/2007
13	ensure that any education it provides for any young person is efficient and suitable to the young person's age, ability, aptitude and any special educational needs he may have. Timescale of 20 June 2006 not met. Regulation 16 (3)	28/01/2008
14	ensure that young people's Pathway Plans are fully completed and include all relevant information. Regulation 16	28/12/2007
1	include in the Children's Guide the details of how a young person can contact Ofsted. Regulation 3 (3) (c)	28/01/2008
24	ensure that each young person has a separate and confidential file, which only contains information regarding that child. Timescale of 1 June 2005 not met. Regulation 40	28/12/2007
25	ensure that a register is kept of all young people placed with foster carers which is compliant with Regulation 22 and Schedule 2. Timescale of 20 April 2006 not met. Regulation 22	28/12/2007
32	ensure that all friends and family foster carers receive regular supervision and are reviewed on an annual basis. Timescale of 20 May 2007 not met. Regulations 17 and 29	28/01/2008
32	ensure that the support and training needs for family and	28/01/2008

	friends carers are assessed and met in the same way as for any other carers. Regulation 17	
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Recommendations

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

- ensure that telephone references are clearly recorded. National Minimum Standards 3 and 15
- develop more detailed and robust risk assessments for young people. National Minimum Standard 9
- develop safe caring guidelines for all foster carers, including friends and family foster carers. National Minimum Standard 9
- ensure that all young people who are not in full-time education are offered structured occupation. National Minimum Standard 13
- produce a simpler version of the Children’s Guide to meet the needs of younger/less able young people. National Minimum Standard 1
- review the foster carer recruitment strategy to ensure that the service has sufficient foster carers to meet the needs of young people. National Minimum Standard 17
- review and improve the out of hours support to foster carers. National Minimum Standard 21
- clarify the role of support workers to ensure that there is a consistent approach to their employment. National Minimum Standard 22
- ensure that all foster carers including family and friends foster carers receive unannounced visits. National Minimum Standard 22
- ensure that family and friends foster carers receive the same allowances as other foster carers. National Minimum Standard 32