

Worcestershire 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

The fostering service is located within Integrated Services to Children, Young People and Families and consists of four teams working across the County. There are two teams, one north and one south foster care teams to support carers and assess family and friends carers; an adoption and fostering development team to recruit, assess, and train foster carers, and a placement team which includes a placement service and fostering panels. All teams are located centrally in Worcester, in premises appropriate for the purpose. All teams, including the short breaks support care scheme, are supported by the Integrated Service for Looked After Children (ISL) who provides a full service of support advice and training to children and carers.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This inspection was an announced inspection and all key standards were inspected. The inspection focused on health needs, individual support and keeping children and young people safe. The inspection also concentrated on how the service consults with young people. This inspection did not look how the service prepares young people for adulthood. The outcome area, achieving economic wellbeing, was not inspected.

The inspection looked at the progress the service has made with the requirements made at the last inspection. These related to ensuring regular support and supervision for foster carers, developing effective processes and systems to ensure policies and procedures are followed through and ensuring reviews conducted by team managers are approved by the agency decision maker.

A few issues around the procedures for the recruitment and selection of staff, foster placement agreements for respite carers and consent to non prescribed medication were noted. However the overall rating for this setting is good with some outstanding practice and outcomes for children being achieved. A strong emphasis is placed on promoting the health and educational achievement for looked after children through the support of the Integrated Service for Looked After Children (ISL).The service has also developed some excellent consultative practices with young people.

Improvements since the last inspection

The fostering service has implemented five of the seven statutory requirements required by the last inspection.

The service has effective processes in order to ensure policies and procedures are followed through. The outcome of reviews conducted by team managers now go to panel to help inform its quality assurance role and are approved by the agency decision maker. The service also ensures no business is conducted by the fostering panel unless it is quorate. All foster carers, including those in support care now receive support and supervision on a regular basis and have at least one unannounced visit a year from a supervising social worker.

Foster placement agreements however are still not completed for respite placements and the consent to non prescribed medication is not in place.

The service has also addressed the recommendations made by the previous inspection.

The children's guide has been revised to make the complaints process clearer and the policy and guidance regarding smoking has been reviewed. The matching pro-forma has also been reviewed and developed to better evidence a child's cultural and religious needs and should evidence gaps in matching and demonstrate how these gaps are filled. A risk assessment is completed for all children and young people in foster care and training on record keeping has been developed for foster carers. The policy and procedures with regard to foster placement agreements have been reviewed following the introduction of the placement record and procedures now cover decision making when all members of the fostering panel are not in agreement.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Worcester County Council Fostering Service places a strong emphasis on the promotion of children's health and development. They ensure the health and development needs of children and young people in their care are being clearly identified and met, both at referral and during matching with foster carers. The authority has a placement information record which is used as the foster placement agreement and which contains a considerable amount of information regarding a child's health needs when fully completed. This includes consent for foster carers to give prescribed medication to children but does not include consent to non-prescribed medication.

The service has developed a detailed and comprehensive health record which is given to foster carers to complete. The health record contains a running record of all health appointments and treatments given to the child including medication and other health issues such as diet, exercise and sexual health. This moves with the child, for example, to respite placements. At the end of being looked after the health record is given to the child. This is excellent practice and ensures all children's health needs are accurately identified and understood by everybody involved.

Children's health needs are well met by their foster carers and all children are

registered with doctors, dentists and opticians. The fostering service monitors this by regular support and supervision visits and during reviews.

The service has an excellent health support to children and carers through the Integrated Service for Looked After Children (ISL). This is a multi-agency team which includes health practitioners alongside social workers, education staff and a community & leisure development worker who support children and carers by ensuring looked after children are given priority in accessing Community and Mental Health Services (CAMHS), disseminating information and providing training to carers, and in ensuring health assessments are completed.

The service has a range of clear policies, procedures and staff guidance which help to ensure the promotion of children's health and wellbeing. They have introduced a policy on smoking in line with recent changes in legislation and have tightened procedures ensuring carers follow through health and safety policies and procedures.

The health and wellbeing of children and young people is further ensured through a comprehensive training programme and health promotion days accessible to staff and carers.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The service has good systems which ensure the protection and safety of children and young people in their care. Children are generally well matched with their foster carers and this enables their overall needs to be met. There are two tools in use for matching children and young people to foster placements; a detailed matching matrix for permanency placements and a matching pro-forma for short-term placements. The matching pro-forma for short term placements has recently been reviewed to demonstrate how the placement meets the needs of the children placed considering the five outcomes in every child matters.

Carers are fully informed about children who are placed with them to enable them to care safely for them.

The service use a placement information record as its foster placement agreement. This is comprehensive and thorough and provides the required information for children being looked after ensuring all carers have the appropriate information to adequately care for children. Respite foster carers have access to this information although do not sign a copy on commencement of a respite placement.

Foster carers provide safe and homely environments for the children placed with them. Safety is ensured by annual health and safety checks being undertaken and any areas of risk being followed up by the supervising social workers.

Comprehensive risk assessments and safe caring plans are in place for all children. These are completed alongside the placement request form at referral and matching stages and are reviewed on a regular basis. These are excellent working tools to

ensure children are safeguarded within their placements and ensure the individual needs of every child are considered.

Staff and carers are given a comprehensive selection of policies and procedures to positively promote protective care practices. The service further promotes the protection of children and young people by providing comprehensive mandatory training with regard to child protection and safe-caring.

The service employs qualified and experienced managers and social workers. They have a diverse range of carers with a variety of skills and experiences able to meet the complex needs and challenges of the children and young people placed with them.

The authority has systems in place to ensure the appropriate assessment, recruitment and vetting of staff and foster carers. Checks are completed and the personnel files demonstrate that audits are taking place. Children and young people are protected by the authority's recruitment system although a small number of files do not detail specific dates in employment histories. Agency worker files are generally in good order although administrative agency workers are starting work prior to fresh Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks being undertaken.

The fostering service operates two fostering panels; one for the north of the county and one for the south. The panel minutes demonstrate that a comprehensive quality assurance function is being provided by the panel and evidences that good quality decisions are made about the approval of foster carers. A panel advisor writes to every child who sends in feedback to panel. This is good consultative practice. She also offers guidance on policy, procedures and practice to panel members and coordinates feedback from members about areas of good and poor practice to the relevant team or individuals. This is good practice and enables improvement in quality and standards of care to be made.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Children and young people placed with Worcestershire County Council are actively encouraged to enjoy and achieve as staff and carers are aware of the importance of promoting individual needs within the foster placement. The service places a high priority on promoting the diverse needs and educational achievement for looked after children and ensuring children enjoy and achieve their personal goals.

The service demonstrates a positive and proactive attitude to diversity and considers the issue of diversity during the referral and matching process. The placement information record is clear about how children's needs are to be met and address any issues that arise out of the child's ethnicity, race, disability, sexuality, faith or belief.

The issue of diversity is explored during the foster carers' assessment process to ensure the appropriate awareness and values of prospective carers. This is further

promoted by providing training for foster carers and social work staff in valuing diversity. It is a core competency in assessment and in the preparation to foster care training.

Staff and managers value children's and young people's individuality, cultural, and religious needs and ensure these are met within the service. Foster carers looking after children with dual heritage are able to access organisations who can provide a support and advocacy service. The service has a dedicated social worker focussing on recruitment of carers for children with disabilities and interpreters are available to assist unaccompanied asylum seekers and any other child whose first language is not English. The authority has positive relationships with external providers of placements for children with disabilities and children from black and ethnic communities.

Children and their families are able to access leisure and community opportunities throughout the year. During the school summer holidays a programme of summer activities is provided by the Integrated Service for Looked After Children (ISL) to support children and carers. The service has organised a foster carers' convention focusing on enjoying and achieving with presentations and workshops on a range of different issues including higher education, transitions, protective behaviours and early years.

The authority recognises the higher costs associated with caring for children with disabilities and pays one and a half times the foster care allowances for those children in receipt of the higher rate of disability living allowance.

Children and young people receive outstanding support to meet their educational needs. The service actively and promotes the educational needs of children and young people and supports children to maximise their potential.

Integrated Service for Looked After Children (ISL) provide excellent support to young people through mentoring, advice and through training to carers. Priority is given towards looked after children in schools and carers liaise and work in partnership with school staff. Intervention through ISL has impacted on educational achievement reflecting an ongoing upward trend of children and young people achieving five A* - C GCSEs.

The fostering service continues to develop its short break scheme "Support Care" for non-disabled children living at home. Staff and carers work closely with parents in meeting the needs of the children looked after within the scheme providing a tailor made package of care for children and parents. This is an excellent scheme helping to prevent children coming into care on a full time basis thereby keeping children with birth families.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

Children and young people's welfare is promoted through a clear strong motivation within the fostering service to maintain contact with birth families and through excellent consultative practices.

There are clear procedures in the foster carers' handbook which sets out how contact arrangements are to be established, maintained and reviewed. The requirements for effective contact and communication are considered at the referral and matching stage and are included in the placement information record given to carers.

The authority actively supports carers in dealing with any difficult contact issues. Contact supervisors support carers by supervising contact between children and their birth families where this is deemed appropriate. Foster carers and parents use a diary to communicate about the child during contact. This is good practice and aids positive communication between carers and parents and good outcomes for children.

The importance of positive contact is emphasised on the pre-approval training and forms part of the mandatory core training for foster carers. Positive contact is further promoted through the carers' supervision sessions and reviews.

A high regard is placed on listening to children and actively involving them in the development of service provision and there are some excellent practices in involving children and young people in the running of the service. The authority has a Children in Care Council, which includes unaccompanied asylum seekers and children with disabilities, to strengthen and formalise mechanisms for capturing the views of children and young people. Children are currently being consulted through a 'Big Questionnaire' drawn up by Worcestershire Youth Cabinet to ascertain views on a large range of issues.

Children and young people are also involved where possible in consultations and engagement opportunities. In the past year children and young people have contributed to the selection of bids to promote the work of the Teenage Pregnancy Unit, participated in consultations at a 'healthy care fun day', presented on their experiences at an 'aim higher' seminar and performed a drama piece at the launch of the Safeguarding Board's Inter-Agency guidelines launch event. Young people will also shortly be contributing to the social work course at New College, Bromsgrove.

This is all excellent practice.

The service also consults children and young people on issues which affect their lives. This is conducted via children's own social workers from the children and families teams. Looked after children and birth children of foster carers are encouraged to provide written feedback to the foster carers' annual review. Looked after children and young people are also able to attend the permanency panel to contribute their views. This is excellent practice in involving young people in the

decision making process.

Children and young people are made aware of how to raise concerns or complaints as they are given a complaints leaflet and are asked at their reviews. The operational manager monitors complaints on a regular basis and liaises with the complaints officer.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

Worcester fostering service is organised in a way which delivers an effective service to children, young people and foster carers with some excellent outcomes for children and young people being achieved. Good systems are in place to ensure the monitoring outcomes and improving quality of care to children and young people. Child protection concerns and complaints are dealt with appropriately.

During 2007 the Operational Manager Fostering has achieved a Diploma in Management certified by the Chartered Management Institute.

The management and organisation of the service supports the fostering task. The authority has since the last inspection undergone a restructure of its services to children. The fostering service is located within Integrated Services to Children, Young People and Families. The structure of the fostering service has also been reviewed during 2007 and changes made to ensure most effective service delivery. There are adequate numbers of staff to ensure appropriate support to foster carers.

All foster carers have an allocated social worker. Good support and supervision practices are taking place which ensures that children's care remains appropriate and is constantly reviewed and evaluated. Formal supervision sessions is taking place on a regular basis and carers feel well supported which in turn enables them to effectively support the children and young people who are placed with them. The service provides practical support to foster cares by offering domestic help in times of crises such as ill health, or when extra time is identified for the carer to spend with children or young people placed with them.

The service continues to promote quality of care and improve outcomes for children and young people by developing a comprehensive programme of core and developmental post approval training for foster carers. This includes carers' accessing relevant National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) and Business and Technology Education Council (Btec) courses. All carers have a training portfolio and to progress to Levels 2 and 3 need to demonstrate that they have undergone appropriate

training and attended support groups. Preparation training for prospective foster carers is provided using the skills to foster course.

Foster carers, young people and parents are able to understand the aims and objectives of the service through a clear Statement of Purpose, service users' guide and carers' handbook. The children's guide and complaints guidance has been reviewed and developed for children coming into the looked after system to ensure the complaints procedure is clearly detailed. The role of giving the children's guide to young people is currently performed by children's social workers. This is being reviewed; the fostering service will provide all foster carers with a pack incorporating the children's guide and complaints leaflet to give to children and young people placed with them. The service currently does not have a children's guide accessible to younger children and those with learning disabilities.

The service also keeps foster carers and children informed of training, events, and changes to organisational structure through a quarterly newsletter.

The service uses the British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) Form F and has a clearly set out assessment process for carers in line with Standard 17. Assessment reports are completed to a very high standard and test the required qualities, competences and aptitudes of the prospective foster carers. The panel advisor ensures that assessments coming before panel are complete and sufficiently comprehensive.

The service has developed robust systems to ensure foster carers' reviews are now taking place within 12 months. All foster carers' first, fifth and any post allegation review are seen by the fostering panels. Team managers conduct all other reviews locally.

The fostering service ensures that an up to date, comprehensive case record is maintained for each foster carer and child in foster care. The authority has electronic files for children and young people accessible to those working for the fostering service. This exchange of information between carers, family placement social workers and children's social workers is effective and assists in the decision making about children and young people thereby improving outcomes. Foster carers' files are at present kept as paper records. Case files are well organised and maintained.

Family and friend's carers are also rigorously assessed and are able to access the same information, training and ISL support as other carers.

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 foster carers are provided with appropriate information regarding the arrangements for giving consent to the child's medical or dental examination or treatment. This refers to non prescribed medication. (Reg 17(3)(b))	31/01/2008
8	ensure the responsible authority enter into a written agreement, which covers all matters in Schedule 6, with foster carers before making a placement. This refers specifically to making of respite placements. (Reg 34(3))	31/01/2008
15	follow clear procedures for the recruitment and selection of staff/foster carers to ensure children are protected. (Reg 20(2)).	31/01/2008

Recommendations

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

- ensure the children's guide to the fostering service is suitable for all children fostered through the service.(NMS 1.5).