

# Walsall MBC 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

Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council is committed to the development of a comprehensive fostering service to children and young people and their families. The local authority aims to recruit, assess, train and support foster carers from as broad a representation of the community as possible, in order to meet the diverse needs of young people. The fostering service provides temporary, permanent and short-term break placements. The service has 179 foster carers who are providing placements for 231 young people.

Foster carers receive the Fostering Network recommended allowances and all, except family and friends foster carers, have access to fee payments on a Payment for Skills scheme.

### Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

This is an announced key inspection. It focuses on the 17 key Standards relevant to this fostering service. These include National Minimum Standards (NMS) relating to health, staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution and organisation. The inspection also included consideration of NMS 2, 5, 22 and 26, relating to the management of the agency and its premises and the support to foster carers. The inspection considered the progress made by the fostering service in meeting the requirements and recommendations made at the last inspection.

The inspection found that the fostering service had made only limited progress in meeting outstanding requirements as the service has been affected by the remodelling of Children's Services, which has resulted in the loss of posts within the service and the change in premises. Consequently, attention has been paid to the day-to-day running of the service but there has been little opportunity for the development of the service.

### Improvements since the last inspection

The service has made limited progress in developing the service, due to the remodelling of Children's Services within the authority and the move of the premises. However, there have been improvements made in the consultation with young people, which ensures that young people's views are actively sought and used to inform the development of the service.

Contact arrangements are now clearly recorded and risk assessments completed. Arrangements for transporting and supervising young people's contact with their

families have also improved since the last inspection. This ensures that young people are kept safe.

Improvements have been made to the recording and accuracy of information kept in respect of foster carers and young people, thus enabling the service to monitor the day-to-day running of the service and provide accurate historical data if this is required by a young person or placing social worker.

### **Helping children to be healthy**

The provision is outstanding.

Young people's health needs are well met by the fostering service and its foster carers. Foster carers ensure that young people are registered with relevant health care professionals and make sure that young people's health is monitored regularly. Foster carers also encourage young people to have a healthy lifestyle through a nutritious diet and healthy activities. Foster carers are supported in this through regular supervision and training. Foster carers keep detailed records of young people's health and provide regular updates of health information to the young person's statutory reviews to enable their health to be monitored.

The fostering service works closely with its partners in the health service. The role of Looked After Children's (LAC) Nurse plays an important part in ensuring young people's health needs are met in an individualised way. Most young people receive an annual health assessment; this is usually undertaken in the foster carer's home, if this meets the needs of the young person. Health plans are developed in conjunction with the young person and monitored by the LAC nurse. Drop-in centres are also available for young people to obtain sexual health information and informal health advice.

The fostering service endeavours to gather as much information as possible upon referral regarding health issues, so that appropriate foster carers can be identified. This information is often supplemented at the placement meeting; however, placing social workers do not always provide all appropriate information in a timely fashion. This could potentially adversely affect the way a foster carer provides care for a young person. Foster carers receive clear guidance as to who is able to give consent for medical treatment and where appropriate, this is clearly delegated to the foster carer.

Young people who have specialist mental health needs are well supported by the fostering service. Independent support is provided by a psychotherapist, as the service has recognised that at the present time the needs of the young people cannot be met by the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service.

## **Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe**

The provision is satisfactory.

The fostering service and its foster carers were seen to keep young people safe, by providing warm, safe environments in which young people are cared for but policies and procedures within the service have not always been followed and could potentially result in the harm of young people.

Foster carers provide warm comfortable homes for young people placed with them. The fostering service has a policy regarding sharing of bedrooms and all young people visited had their own bedroom. Young people reported that they felt safe within their foster homes and that foster carers met their needs well.

Appropriate health and safety checks are undertaken by a dedicated person prior to approval and on an annual basis, so that the findings can be considered as part of the foster carers' annual review. However, it is not always clear when identified gaps and actions have been completed or the process for following these up. Foster carers receive training regarding health and safety issues and are provided with written guidance in the foster carer handbook.

The fostering service ensures that as much information is obtained at the time of referral, including a risk assessment to enable a young person to be matched with appropriate foster carers. The service states that this information is shared with foster carers so that they can make an informed decision as to whether they can meet the needs of the young person. Where possible young people have a period of introduction to foster carers so that their views can be sought regarding the proposed placement. Post placement meetings are held to complete the foster placement agreement and clarify the aims of the placement and who is responsible for undertaking identified tasks.

Young people visited were placed with foster carers who were able to meet the young person's needs. However, some young people had been placed with foster carers, where the placement was outside the foster carer's approval. A young person has been placed with foster carers with a view to this being on a long-term basis, when the foster carers had only been recently approved for short term care. This questions the validity of the original assessment of the foster carers and the recommendation of the fostering panel. This could result in a young person's needs not being adequately met.

Staff commented that like many local authorities they do not always have sufficient placements and on occasions young people are placed outside foster carer's approval range, although they always do an assessment to ensure that foster carers can meet the needs of young people. Where a young person has been placed with a foster carer outside their approval a report is presented to the Panel for change of approval.

There are clear policies and procedures in place to ensure young people are kept

safe whilst placed with foster carers. The service's child protection procedures and policy relating to investigating allegations against foster carers was updated in July 2007. Staff and foster carers receive training in respect of child protection issues and safe care training is provided for foster carers both during the pre-approval training and in post-approval training. Safe caring documents are in place for all placements, however, they have not all been updated to reflect any risks regarding current young people in placement and have not been signed by placing social workers to evidence that it has been discussed with them.

The fostering service's processes for ensuring that all staff, foster carers and panel members are suitable are not sufficiently robust. Whilst the authority has in place appropriate recruitment and employment systems, these have not been followed on all occasions to ensure that foster carers and staff are suitable to work with children and young people. Staff recruitment and employment checks are undertaken centrally by the Human Resources department of the authority. Examination of files demonstrated that procedures had not been followed as records show that a senior member of staff commenced employment before the appropriate (CRB) check was in place, records of qualifications were not in place for some staff and there was no robust system of recording whether references were followed up by telephone. In addition the renewal system for CRB checks is not robust, with a number of staff's CRB checks not being renewed within the required three year period. This could potentially result in staff that are not suitable to work with young people being employed or continue to be employed by the fostering service.

The fostering service undertakes checks in respect of the suitability of foster carers. Whilst initial checks and references have been undertaken for all foster carers, there is no robust system in place to ensure that foster carers remain suitable to care for young people as there is no effective system in place to ensure that foster carers and family members CRB checks are renewed within the required three year period.

The panel members' files did not include the required information: photographs, references and confirmation that references had been followed up by telephone, were missing on all files; information examined indicated that panel members undertook duties prior to CRB checks being returned and not all CRB checks had been undertaken by the service, as for some members the fostering service had relied on checks undertaken by another authority.

The panel is appropriately constituted, with an independent chair and other members having a wide range of knowledge and experience of young people. The panel was observed to be well chaired, with all members contributing to discussions regarding the suitability of prospective foster carers. Examination of panel minutes indicated that not all relevant issues were recorded and did not always accurately reflect the levels of concern expressed in respect of some issues.

The quality and assurance functions of the fostering panel have been developed further since the last inspection but require further work to ensure that they operate in a robust manner to ensure that the needs of young people are met by the

fostering service.

## **Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do**

The provision is satisfactory.

The fostering service aims to provide a service that reflects the needs of a multi-racial, multi-cultural community. The fostering service staff group consists of a workforce that reflects the multi-racial local community. However, there is a limited number of Asian staff employed and this is also reflected in the small number of Black and Asian foster carers. Consideration is being given to targeting specific groups of the community in the marketing strategy to meet these gaps. A lack of suitable foster carers can create difficulties in matching for suitable placements and meeting children and young people's needs in terms of diversity issues.

Foster Carers and social workers receive training and guidance in respect of promoting equality and understanding cultural diversity issues. The Skills to Foster preparation course emphasizes the need to value children's heritage and encourage carers to help children gain self-confidence and pride. Foster carers providing trans-racial placements receive regular support from link workers and are encouraged to access resources in the local community.

The fostering placement agreement is being used as new placements are being made. The format provides information in respect of young people's needs in terms of gender, religion, ethnic origin, language, culture, disability and sexuality.

Walsall local authority children's service works in partnership with other local authorities to raise awareness and celebrate diversity. For the third year Walsall participated in the celebrating cultural diversity event, having hosted it last year.

The Children's service has an excellent track record in respect of supporting young people to achieve educationally. Education Services have won several awards for schemes and developed strategies. A range of strategies have proved most successful such as direct consultation with Looked after children, the Excellence scheme and young people value the additional support they receive. There has been improvement in young people's attendance and attainment in the past year and no young people has been excluded from school during this time.

The fostering service and foster carers work together to improve young people's educational outcomes. Examples of this are; foster carers involvement in Personal Education Plan (PEP) meetings; the use of excellence rewards; the provision of computers and a virtual school has been developed to provide access to educational programmes for those without a school placement and additional educational support for those that want it. The role of the foster carer is clearly defined in the foster placement agreement and foster carers support for young people's educational achievements is discussed in regular supervision sessions.



The authority promotes sport and healthy physical exercise by providing free swimming lessons and passes. Foster carers encourage young people to participate in a wide range of activities to help increase young people's self-esteem and enjoyment.

The fostering service encourages foster carers to attend joint events with education such as the Excellence Awards evenings and workshops with the designated teachers. This helps to remove some of the myths and barriers and stereotypes of expectations for looked after young people and gives recognition of their achievements.

Young people requiring a short-term break are not well served by the fostering service. There has been a significant deterioration in the level of service delivery to short-term break foster carers and children with disabilities and their families over the last two inspection years due to the post for the link support worker remaining vacant. The negative effect of this loss of service has been compounded by several temporary appointments. An experienced qualified agency worker was in post at the time of inspection for a temporary period with an expectation of the post being filled by a staff member currently on a year's leave.

Due to a lack of support, training and supervision, foster carers offering short-term breaks have not felt about to offer additional placements; only one new carer has been recruited to the scheme. The young people with disabilities and their families are dependant on the continued good will, experience and skills of the foster carers for the provision of a valuable respite care service. Some young people do not have allocated placing social workers and duty social workers are allocated solely to cover statutory reviews. The fostering service is well aware of the shortfall and have tried unsuccessfully to appoint a suitable competent worker to the permanent post.

In addition to this the contracted service for children with disabilities is unsatisfactory with insufficient staff appointed to allocate each young person. The staff are not contracted to make visits in the evenings and at weekends when young people are in placement. Consequently, some young people have never been seen in placement by the placing social worker. The contracted service agreement fails to meet the service needs and outcomes for children with disabilities.

The local authority has developed a number of programmes and strategies to support young people with disabilities and to enhance outcomes for them. A number of specialist resources are available within the authority to assist in meeting the needs of young people with disabilities but those foster carers interviewed had no experience with or knowledge of these services and continued to access local networks and services. The strategy advocates the need to recruit additional specialist foster carers and provide necessary support and training. Many references in the report relate to the residential respite care services for children with disabilities. The timescale for developing these services is 2010.

The fostering service does satisfactorily administer the short-term breaks scheme with no monitoring of whether foster carer payments are made, that resources are

provided and reviews take place as required. Foster carers and parents continue to work well together despite the service shortfalls to ensure those children and young people with disabilities in well established placements continue to receive a good quality of care.

## **Helping children make a positive contribution**

The provision is good.

The fostering service makes in-borough placements where this is possible unless an assessment specifies an out-of-borough placement is required; this promotes and facilitates contact arrangements. Young people's contact arrangements with their family are included in the foster placement agreement, which is completed for new placements. The fostering service and foster carers have a clear understanding of the importance of contact and it is a regular topic discussed in monthly supervision sessions. Foster carers maintain well structured records for young people including information relating to contact arrangements and visits. Young people's views are taken in to account when planning and agreeing contact arrangements. The outreach and placement support team also prove to be a significant factor in supporting positive contact arrangements through a range of strategies including direct work with carers, young people and their families.

Young people take part in a range of activities and presentations to explore and express their views. The Outreach team organise a Respect group for Looked After Children where they are encouraged to attend and express their views and opinions. Amongst other projects the young people produce DVDs and a song called 'Every Child Matters'.

The outreach team implement clear positive messages for the young people whilst also modelling positive role models for carers thus promoting positive attachments. This way of working promotes self-esteem, confidence, self-worth, sense of achievement and aspirations for their future.

The fostering service and foster carers encourage young people to participate in more formal meetings such as statutory reviews, PEPs and health appointments. The fostering service provides training and support to foster carers to enable them to develop effective communication skills with young people placed in their care. Young people are encouraged to share any concerns or issues with the foster carer in the first instance. However, there are a range of processes and systems that provide opportunities for them to express their views such as reviews and complaints procedures. Recently alternative creative strategies have been developed both to give information to and listen to young people. Young people are also encouraged and supported to contact the National Youth Advocacy Service if they require independent advice and support. In addition the service has trained eight care leavers to be mentors.

## Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

## Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

The service is organised and managed in a way that young people's needs are central to the work undertaken by the service. Unfortunately gaps in some areas of the service result in positive outcomes not being met for all young people.

The fostering service has a clear statement of purpose and carers' handbook to provide information to foster carers and parents. The service has developed a children's guide, which contains useful information for young people regarding their stay with foster carers. However, the service has not developed a suitable guide for younger or less able young people.

There is a strong management structure within the fostering service, with all managers being suitably qualified and experienced. They provide positive guidance and support for staff within the service; however, due to the remodelling of Children's Services and the relocation of the service, managers acknowledge that the service has not made as much progress against their own action plan or in meeting the requirements and recommendations of previous inspections as they would wish. Nonetheless, the majority of the gaps identified in this inspection have already been identified by managers, who have developed an action plan to improve the service.

Staff are well supported, with regular supervision, access on the intranet to clear policies and procedures and regular team meetings. All staff commented that they have good access to training courses to ensure that their practice remains up-to-date.

The fostering service is adequately staffed with the exception of the service to family and friends and short-term breaks carers. The loss of a senior practitioner due to the remodelling of the Children's Service may also have a negative impact on the development of the service. Additionally, not all staff within the team are appropriately qualified and some staff who do not hold a social worker qualification supervise foster carers. This could potentially be detrimental to the support of foster carers and young people as the workers may not be fully aware of all issues and how to deal with them. The fostering service endeavours to limit the negative impact of this arrangement by ensuring that all support workers are supervised by a senior practitioner in respect of their work in supervising foster carers.

As with most local authorities the fostering service does not have sufficient foster carers, especially for older young people with complex needs and young people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. The service operates a recruitment shop in

the town centre to attract prospective foster carers. In addition the service has undertaken some targeted marketing to try and attract foster carers from a wider ethnic background and are working to establish a specialist fostering scheme to enable the service to meet these gaps. The service also works with the independent sector to ensure that suitable placements are identified for young people.

The assessments of prospective foster carers are generally good and ensure that carers are suitable to foster young people. However, some assessments of family and friends foster carer are not sufficiently robust and analytical, which could potentially result in some young people not being adequately safeguarded.

The fostering service has a clear strategy for supporting foster carers and carers generally comment positively about the support they receive from the service; however, not all foster carers have been appropriately supported, due to sickness and vacancies. Whilst the fostering service has endeavoured to provide support where staff have been on sick leave, the work undertaken has not been accurately reflected on file and therefore new or returning staff will not be aware of the work undertaken. This could potentially result in foster carers and young people not receiving adequate support. Unannounced visits are not always taking place or recorded in the appropriate format, only one file has evidence of an unannounced visit. Whilst the foster care agreement is a useful document which covers all areas, it would be beneficial for it to be updated to accurately reflect the current arrangement for inspection. It was disappointing to note that not all foster carers have been issued with a Foster care agreement, to enable them to be clear about their responsibilities and what they can expect from the fostering service. Annual reviews are undertaken by an independent chair to ensure that objectivity is paramount when considering the ongoing suitability of foster carers. Foster carers are also well supported by the Walsall Foster Care Association.

The fostering service keeps a record of young people placed with the service and have introduced foster placement agreement to record the needs of young people placed with foster carers and how these will be met and by who. Placing social workers are aware of the foster placement agreement, however, this is still to be fully embraced by all parties, reviewed and monitored to ensure it is an effective tool for supporting a stable and positive placement. Nonetheless, the foster placement agreement does not contain all relevant information, in that it does not cover who can give permission for overnight stays and is not always signed by all parties. Foster placement agreements are not being used for short breaks and respite placements.

Foster carer files were well organised, although as already stated records did not always accurately reflect the work undertaken. The fostering service also ensures that the foster carer register and young people's register include all relevant information so that an accurate record is available for monitoring.

The fostering service has recently returned to updated and improved premises, which now provides good quality accommodation for the fostering service.

Family and friends foster carers currently receive the same level of supervision as

other foster carers, however they are not always robustly assessed to ascertain whether they can provide suitable care to the young person placed with them and are not provided with the same levels of training.

## 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
8	ensure that foster carers are not requested to accept placements that are clearly outside their approval range. Regulation 33 (b)	27/02/2008
15	follow clear procedures for the recruitment and selection of managers, staff and panel members to ensure that staff do not commence employment prior to satisfactory checks being in place. Regulations 5, 7 and 20	27/02/2008
15	ensure that CRB checks are renewed on a three yearly basis in respect of all managers, staff and foster carers. Regulations 5, 7, 20 and 27	27/02/2008
30	complete all required checks in respect of foster panel members prior to them commencing attendance at panel. Regulation 20	27/02/2008
31	ensure that short-term break foster carers are provided with appropriate supervision, training and support. Regulation 17	27/04/2008
17	develop a strategy to ensure that all foster carers are supervised by an experienced and qualified social worker. Regulation 19	27/04/2008
17	ensure that all assessments, including those for family and friends foster carers are robust, analytical and covers all areas included in Schedule 3. Regulation 27	27/02/2008
25	make an accurate record of all work undertaken with foster carers and young people. Regulation 30	27/02/2008
22	ensure that all foster carers have an up to date foster care agreement, which includes all the matters as set out in regulation 28(5)(b) schedule 5	27/03/2008
24	enter into a written foster placement agreement before any placement is made, including short breaks and respite placements. Regulation 34	27/02/2008
32	assess the support and training needs of family and friends as carers and ensure their needs are met. Regulation 17	27/04/2008

## Recommendations

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

- encourage placing social workers to provide all relevant health information in a timely fashion. NMS 12
- develop a robust system for ensuring that outstanding health and safety requirements are followed up and actioned. NMS 6
- ensure that safe care plans are in place for all placements, are updated in light of a change in circumstances and are agreed by the placing social worker. NMS 9
- ensure that minutes of the fostering panel accurately reflect any concerns raised by panel members and the reason a decision has been reached. NMS 30
- develop a simpler version of the Children's Guide to meet the needs of younger and less able young people. NMS 1
- update the foster care agreement so that it accurately reflects the arrangements for inspection. NMS 22
- undertake unannounced visits at least annually and make accurate records of all visits. NMS 22