

# Herefordshire Local Authority 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

Herefordshire Council operates a Children's Resource Team comprising of both adoption and fostering services. The fostering team manager is responsible for the fostering service and carries responsibilities in relation to the adoption team in the absence of its manager.

The family placement social workers who comprise the two teams may carry both fostering and adoption caseloads with the equivalent of seven full-time workers being allocated to the fostering service.

The service provides a range of placement types including emergency, short-term, long-term, kinship, respite care and teenage placement schemes.

The service undertakes recruitment, assessment, support and training of carers. It is involved in the provision of a wide range of services for children looked after by Herefordshire Council.

## 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 at 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 the provision and support of shared-care within the county.

A few issues around the composition of the fostering panel, the procedures for the recruitment and selection of fostering panel members and the frequency of foster carers' reviews were noted, leading to requirements being made. 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 ensuring that the views of children and young people are promoted with some excellent consultative practices being developed with young people.

## **Improvements since the last inspection**

At the last inspection the fostering service was required to ensure the provision and support of shared-care meets Fostering Services Regulations. This provision has now been contracted out to a service specialising in short breaks for children with disabilities and will be inspected separately.

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

The policy regarding smoking has been revised and all current foster carers have had their approval status reviewed to ensure compliance with the policy. A policy has been developed to indicate when risk assessments should be carried out and risk assessments are now integrated with the matching and safe-caring processes. Safe-caring guidelines for each fostering household have been further developed to ensure they reflect the individualised needs of young people placed.

## **Helping children to be healthy**

The provision is good.

The fostering service places a strong emphasis on the promotion of children's health and development. The health and development needs of children and young people in their care are being clearly identified through appropriate matching with foster carers. Children and young people receive health care that meets their needs.

Foster carers are provided with appropriate information and support to understand and care for the specific health needs of the children placed with them. The health needs of children are detailed in the foster placement agreement Looked After Children (LAC) documentation which includes the consent to medical treatment. Where those with parental responsibility are unable to sign these forms, however consent to medication and treatment is not always in place which could potentially lead to confusion and delay.

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 during reviews and by regular support and supervision visits.

The service has developed a detailed and comprehensive health passport for each child and young person looked after. These will be given to foster carers to complete. The health passport contains a running record of all health appointments and treatments given to the child including medication, record of immunisations and other health issues such as dietary needs and disabilities. This will move with the child, for example to respite placements, and on leaving care the health passport will be given to the child. This is excellent practice and ensures all children's health needs are accurately identified and understood by everybody involved.

Young people's health is further promoted as foster carers and young people are

supported by skilled professionals who assist and give advice when required. A full-time health visitor holds responsibility for looked after children and is able to give advice to carers and staff and do direct work with young people when required. She also ensures statutory timescales for health assessments are met. Support is also provided to young people and foster carers in managing individual children's needs through the Community Mental Health Service (CAMHS).

The service has a range of 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 to ensure young children and those with disabilities are protected from the harmful effects of passive smoking. Guidance however is not clearly made available to carers on the correct household medicines to give to children.

The health and wellbeing of children and young people is further ensured through a comprehensive training programme, health promotion and development days accessible to staff and carers. First aid training is mandatory for all carers and is part of the services core training. Not all carers however are receiving first aid refresher training every three years.

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

The provision is good.

Herefordshire fostering service has developed good robust systems which help ensure the protection and safety of children and young people in their care. Foster carers provide safe and comfortable environments for the children placed with them and are given clear policies and training with respect to child protection and safe-caring. Annual health and safety checks are undertaken.

Children's and young people's needs are promoted and safeguarded because they are well-matched with their foster carers. The service uses a comprehensive matching form which incorporates a referral checklist and risk assessment. This form details carers' strengths and abilities to meet children's and young people's needs, any remaining concerns and how these will be addressed. Safe-caring plans are in place for all children and integrated with the referral and matching process. A more detailed safe-caring risk assessment is also completed when required. These processes are excellent working tools to ensure children are safeguarded within their placements and ensure the individual needs of every child are considered.

The service ensures all carers receive sufficient information to be able to adequately care for children and young people. Foster placement agreements are completed and available at the outset of the placement and comprise of a combination of LAC documents.

The authority has systems in place to ensure the appropriate assessment, recruitment and vetting of staff and foster carers. Children and young people are therefore protected by the authority's recruitment system. This robust system is

however not being applied to all fostering panel members. Employment histories, photographs and references were not being sought for all new panel members.

The fostering service has a robust fostering panel which operates efficiently and effectively. This provides a comprehensive quality assurance function which ensures good quality decisions are made about the suitability and approval of foster carers. The panel however does not have an adequate number of independent members and because of this on one occasion operated outside of regulations.

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

The provision is good.

Children and young people are encouraged to enjoy and achieve as staff and carers are aware of the importance of promoting their educational and individual needs within the foster placement. The service demonstrates a positive attitude to diversity and is aware of its responsibilities to meet the cultural and identity needs of young people fostered.

The authority has a corporate equality and diversity team who support individuals who have suffered disadvantage, harassment and bullying and who provide appropriate advice on individual care plans for children with specific individual needs arising for race, culture and religion or disabilities. A member of the team contributes to foster carer training on valuing equality and diversity delivered as part of their pre and post-approval training.

Children and their families are able to access leisure and community opportunities throughout the year through a free leisure pass scheme and the service organises an annual corporate parent celebration evening which recognises the achievements of looked after children and significant adults in their lives who are nominated by the children. Children's self-esteem is further promoted by additional financial support provided for a wide range of activities outside school tailored to individual needs and aptitude.

Equality and diversity are 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 assessments and in foster care training. The service is clear about how children's and young people's needs are to be met and addresses any issues that arise out of the child's ethnicity, race, disability, sexuality, faith or belief. This is accomplished through appropriate matching and through support and supervision with foster carers.

Children and young people receive excellent support to meet their educational needs and to maximise their potential in education. This is actively promoted through the Educational Liaison Support Service (ELSS) which provides a link between the school and the foster placement and is able to support children and young people of all ages including those in further and higher education. This service provides a range of

advice, support and training to young people and carers offering individual support packages to young people and co-ordinating multi-agency packages for individuals who have educational needs. It also helps provide support to looked after children who are not in school.

Herefordshire Council have made the strategic decision to contract out the shared-care short breaks service and therefore this is not included in this inspection.

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

The provision is outstanding.

Children's and young people's welfare is promoted within the fostering service by an active encouragement to maintain positive contact with birth families and through excellent consultative practices.

The requirements for effective contact and communication are considered at the referral and matching stage and there are clear procedures in the foster carers' handbook which sets out how contact arrangements are to be established, maintained and reviewed. Herefordshire Council use National Children's Homes (NCH) to supervise contact visits when required.

The importance of positive contact is emphasised on the pre-approval and post-approval training. Positive contact is further promoted through the carers' supervision sessions and reviews.

The service consults children and young people on issues which effect their lives. Children and young people are consulted prior to their own and foster carers' reviews and are able, if wished, to chair their own statutory review.

A high regard is placed on listening to young people and actively involving them in the development of service provision. The service has developed some excellent consultative processes for involving children and young people in the running of the service. It has access to various consultation forums and support groups run for carers, children and young people. These include the 'Voices' project, a service dedicated to ensuring young people's views are heard. The service runs celebration events, days out and a number of workshops for children and young people which include activity-based sessions such as arts and crafts. Interview training is provided which encourages young people to take part in the recruitment for posts within the Children and Young People's Directorate. Young people have contributed to local and regional conferences such as the regional Healthy Care Conference and the Council also run a "Listening Tree" as a permanent channel of communication to decision-makers. There are also a number of newsletters that are sent out regularly to children and carers from the foster team and other Herefordshire Council Departments.

The fostering service has also developed a support group for foster carers birth children enabling carers own children to share their experiences.



Children and young people are made aware of how to raise concerns or complaints through a complaints leaflet given to them by their own social workers at the start of being looked after. They are also asked at their reviews if they are aware of how to complain. Children and young people are able to access a Children's Rights and Advocacy Worker.

### **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is not judged.

### **Organisation**

The organisation is good.

Herefordshire fostering service is organised in a way which delivers an effective fostering provision to children, young people and foster carers with some good and excellent outcomes for children and young people being achieved. Systems are in place to ensure good outcomes and to improve quality of care to children and young people. Child protection concerns and complaints are dealt with appropriately.

There have been significant changes in the past year which have included the resignation of the service manager responsible for the fostering service and the appointment of an acting service manager. A new permanent appointment to this role will take up his post in April 2008. A full-time assistant team manager was appointed to the fostering service in December 2007.

Intensive recruitment has delivered an improvement in staffing levels amongst family placement social workers which has meant that the staffing establishment has increased from five and a half full-time equivalent (FTE) to seven fostering social workers. This has enabled the team to enlarge its recruitment and support networks which has resulted in the further development of new carer support groups.

The service has a clear strategy for working with foster carers and provides a high level of support to carers. All foster carers have an allocated social worker to them and receive good, regular support and supervision. This ensures that children's care remains appropriate and is constantly reviewed and evaluated. Foster carers, young people and parents are able to understand the aims and objectives of the service through a clear Statement of Purpose, children's guide and carers' handbook.

All foster carers have a foster care agreement (FCA) in place line with Schedule 5. Not all FCA's however accurately reflect current approval status.

The service continues to promote quality of care and improve outcomes for children and young people by providing a comprehensive training programme for foster carers. Foster carers are offered core training in safe-guarding, first aid and valuing

diversity, and a comprehensive training programme covering all outcome areas. National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) Level 3 training is also available to all carers. The fostering service has developed plans to implement the 'Training Support and Development Standards for Foster Carers' from April 2008, for all new carers to complete within one year of approval. Existing carers will have until 2011 to complete this training. This is good practice and will ensure carers are well-equipped with the knowledge and skills needed to provide high quality care for children and young people.

The service is able to meet the range of needs which children present through good recruitment practices for staff and detailed assessments of foster carers. Staff experience a clearly established process of recruitment. There is an induction period with increased frequency of supervision provided. All staff have to complete common induction standards introduced to provide a co-ordinated induction process for new staff. Herefordshire Council also operate a corporate induction training session for all new staff.

The fostering service uses the British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) Form F to assess prospective foster carers. Assessment reports are completed to a good standard and test the required qualities, competences and aptitudes of the prospective foster carers.

The service has developed systems to help ensure foster carers' reviews take place within 12 months. Organisational pressures however have meant that a small quantity of foster carers reviews have taken place outside of the 12 months required in regulation. All foster carers' first and subsequent alternate reviews are seen by the fostering panel. All other reviews are conducted as a home review. To improve consistency, the service has employed one person to chair all home reviews. All post-allegation reviews are seen by the fostering panel.

The fostering service ensures that an up to date, comprehensive case record is maintained for each foster carer and child in foster care. Case files are well-organised and maintained. Foster carers are expected to keep detailed records of children and young people they look after which are returned at the end of placement. Carers are also given a diary for recording events and behaviour. The policy does not give clear guidance on the ownership of the diary or whether this should be returned following placement.

Family and friend's carers are rigorously assessed and are able to access the same information, training and 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
30	ensure that the Panel comprises of people with the required skills and experience. (Regulation 24(3))	30/04/2008
30	ensure no business is conducted by the fostering panel unless there are the required members present. (Regulation 25(1))	31/03/2008
16	ensure reviews of carers are implemented within required timescales. (Regulation 29(2))	30/04/2008
15	follow clear procedures for the recruitment and selection of panel members to ensure children are protected. (Regulation 20(3))	30/04/2008
22	ensure the foster care agreement accurately reflects foster carers' approval status. (Regulation 28(5)(b)).	30/04/2008

## Recommendations

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

- ensure foster carers are provided with appropriate information regarding the arrangements for giving consent to medical treatment (NMS 12.1)
- guidance should be available to foster carers on the type of household medication that can be given to children and young people in line with current medical practice (NMS 12.6)
- ensure all foster carers receive regular training in first aid (NMS 12.5)
- ensure policies and procedures regarding recording and the use of diaries gives clear guidance on the ownership and whether this should be returned following placement (NMS 24.8).