

# Staffordshire Social Services 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

Staffordshire County Council provides a fostering service as part of the range of social services. The Fostering Service provides carers from all parts of the county and they take placements from within the same area. The head office for the department is in Stafford and this is where the manager responsible for the service is based.

Staffordshire's Fostering Service offers a range of different types of fostering: long-term and task centred, family link and family and friends. REACH is a developing service, which it intended to provide skilled foster carers able to meet the needs of some young people presently placed in external residential placements. The authority is also piloting an Intensive Fostering Scheme in partnership with the Youth Offending Service, which is funded for three years by the Youth Justice Board.

Staffordshire has developed various support systems including Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services which focuses on mental health issues for young people, SUSTAIN which works with looked after children whose foster placements are under stress and Children's Advice and Representation Service (CARS) which provides advocacy and support to looked after children. There is an out of hours support system and regular foster carer's groups which meet at established locations across the county. There is also a weekend telephone support line staffed by experienced foster carers who are able to contact senior staff from the family placement team.

## Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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 and 22 relating to the management of the agency 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 Staffordshire's fostering service provides an outstanding service to young people and their foster carers. The agency is well managed and policies, procedures and practice all ensure that the safety and well-being of young people are the focus of the service and its staff.

## Improvements since the last inspection

Two requirements were made at the last inspection, regarding the payment of allowances to foster carers and the support offered to family and friends foster carers. The fostering service has reviewed both these areas of its work and made improvements to the support to family and friends foster carers, with the team now being fully staffed. It has introduced a pilot for assessing family and friends foster carers using the Family Rights Group format. Allowances to foster carers have also been increased so that they are in line with the government's recommendations.

A number of recommendations were also made at the last inspection around the collection of data, monitoring of the service and consistency of consultation with young people who use the service. The service has made good progress in respect of meeting these recommendations; however, the delay in the installation of a new computer system has resulted in continued difficulty in gathering accurate management information. The service is hopeful that the new system will be operational in October 2008.

## Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

The fostering service effectively promotes the health and development of young people placed with its foster carers. The service works with other agencies, including the Looked After Children's (LAC) Nurse, drug and alcohol services and SUSTAIN (a project dedicated to the therapeutic support of looked after children), to ensure that young people's health needs are effectively met. The authority's Corporate Parenting Panel regularly receive information regarding young people's health and take action to address any issues that may arise, thus ensuring that improving young people's health is a priority for the authority.

A young person's health needs are clearly identified as part of the referral and matching process, to ensure that the young person is placed with a carer who is able to meet their health needs. Consent for medical treatment is also clearly identified at the time of the placement and is included in the foster placement agreement.

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. Health issues of any kind are routinely identified, monitored and addressed, whether they are physical, emotional or social. 83% of young people receive an annual health assessment and health plans are developed to ensure that young people continually strive to be healthy.

The service has a range of policies, procedures and staff guidance which help to ensure the promotion of children's health and well-being. 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.

The health and well-being of children and young people is further ensured through a comprehensive training programme, including access to a post approval Healthy Care programme.

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

The provision is outstanding.

Young people are protected from abuse and are kept safe by a wide range of excellent policies, procedures and practices. Effective management ensures that safeguarding systems achieve their intended impact of keeping young people safe and assure efficient responses where any concerns are raised.

The fostering service is managed by an experienced and suitably qualified manager. She is supported by four fostering team managers and the service has close working relationships with the Family Link Service. All managers and staff within the service are suitably qualified and experienced, with the fostering service having in place robust policies and procedures, which are known to staff and followed in the recruitment of all staff.

Foster carers are rigorously assessed prior to approval and reviewed annually, to ensure that they are suitable to be foster carers and that they can provide a safe environment for the young people placed with them. Health and safety risk assessments are undertaken annually, this ensures that foster carers provide young people with safe and high standards of material comfort. Most young people have their own bedroom; risk assessments are undertaken where young people share a bedroom. This has the effect of reducing risk of abuse, bullying and promotes young people's privacy.

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, where there is a gap the service takes steps to ensure that such gaps are met through alternative provision. The fostering service pro-actively works with independent fostering agencies to ensure that young people's needs are met when no suitable in-house placement can be identified. This practice results in young people experiencing a positive family environment, where disruptions are reduced to a minimum.

Young people's welfare is safeguarded through the child protection procedures operated by the authority. Foster carers and staff demonstrate a clear understanding of the procedures; they are supported in this by guidance within the foster carer's handbook and staff procedures. The fostering service provides training in child protection for all foster carers and discuss, during foster carer's supervision, any issues required for keeping a young person safe.

There have been seven allegations made against foster carers in the past year, all these have been thoroughly investigated and concluded in a timely fashion. Foster carers who have allegations made against them have the independent support of an

advice and mediation worker. Young people report they feel safe within their foster homes and that they do not experience bullying. There is a corporate anti-bullying strategy, which has been developed with the assistance of young people in foster care. The fostering service does not keep a record of restraints of young people. Where it is felt that a young person may need to be restrained, a risk assessment is completed and foster carers are provided with training and support from Sustain. Discussion with managers, staff and foster carers indicated that there was some confusion regarding what is considered as a restraint.

Risk assessments and safe care plans are used consistently and reviewed regularly to ensure that young people are kept safe. Each fostering household receives Fostering Network's Safer Caring publication, which is used in the development of the safe caring plan; this is good practice. Households receive an annual, unannounced visit from their supervising social worker.

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.

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

The provision is good.

Young people and their families benefit from a clear commitment by the fostering service to valuing diversity and the promotion of equality. This is represented in policies, staff training and the employment of a culturally diverse work force. Support is provided to staff and foster carers to meet young people's needs where they have been placed with foster carers from a different racial and ethnic background. A wide range of training courses are offered to foster carers to ensure that they are fully aware of the importance of valuing diversity.

The service endeavours to recruit carers from all sections of the community. Where children's needs cannot be met by the organisation's own foster carers, a search is made of local independent agencies to ensure the best match. Improvements have included the provision of specialist out of hours support for carers of young people with disabilities.

Young people are comprehensively helped to meet their full educational potential through effective support and guidance of foster carers: this has contributed to a recent improvement in academic results. Foster carers routinely help children to attend school and they in turn receive support from the organisation. An example of additional support to carers has been in the form of training about educational issues. However, the service's statistics in respect of educational placement are inaccurate in terms of the children who attend special schools and do not distinguish between those in foster care and those young people in other provisions.

Young people and their families benefit substantially from short-term breaks under the family link service. This is an effective service for families of children with

disabilities in which the role of the parents remains central. The effectiveness of the service has been enhanced by its location with other disability specialist services and the importance of the role played by carers recognised by the agreement to contract with some on a full-time basis.

There are clear policies and procedures for the service, which recognise that the parent remains the main carer for the young person.

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

The provision is outstanding.

Young people are encouraged and supported to maintain contact with family and friends where this is in their best interest. Young people stated that they were happy with arrangements for their contact with their families and that they were consulted in respect of the arrangements.

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. 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.

Young people are provided with an excellent range of imaginative opportunities to contribute to decisions regarding their care and in respect of the development of the fostering service. They informed inspectors that they are listened to both by their foster carers and the fostering service, with 95% of young people contributing to their LAC review. Young people are also encouraged to contribute to their foster carer's annual review.

The service has developed some excellent consultative processes for involving young people in the running of the service. Young people have been encouraged to actively partake in the Voice project. The project's aim is to consult with looked after young people in the revision of policies and procedures relating to their care or those who care for them. Young people have been involved in various matters including recruitment procedures and the employment of staff, revising the smoking policies, safe care guidelines and the Children's Guide. Young people receive regular newsletters, inspection reports are summarised and where ever possible methods of communication are interactive.

The authority has appointed a Children's Commissioner to ensure that the views of young people are considered. Young people are also encouraged to speak to elected members who are involved with the Corporate Parenting group. Where young people require additional assistance in representing their views, support is provided by a Children's Rights and Representation worker.



## **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is good.

The fostering service has improved the level of payments to foster carers so that payments are in line with the government's recommending rate. This ensures that foster carers receive sufficient funding to appropriately meet the needs of the young people placed with them. Foster carers commented that they receive payments in a timely fashion.

## **Organisation**

The organisation is good.

Staffordshire fostering service is organised in a way which delivers an effective fostering provision to young people and foster carers with some excellent outcomes for young people being achieved.

The fostering service has updated its Statement of Purpose, so that it accurately reflects recent changes in the Vulnerable Children Division of the authority. The provision of a Children's Guide and foster care handbook in addition to the Statement of Purpose, ensure that young people, foster carers, parents and staff understand the aims and objectives of the service

The fostering service is effectively managed by a qualified and experienced manager, supported by four team managers. The service has a close working relationship with the Family Link Service, which ensures the needs of young people with disabilities who require a short break are not overlooked. The service has clear lines of accountability, communication and delegation, from practitioners, managers through to Councillors. There are systems in place to monitor the service, but due to the delay in the introduction of a new computer system, not all management information is accurate.

Managers provide positive guidance and support for staff within the service, with monthly supervision, regular team meetings and annual appraisals. All staff commented that they have good access to training courses to ensure that their practice remains up-to-date. The service has an adequate number of appropriately qualified staff and a good level of administrative support.

The fostering service has 290 approved foster carers, who provide a wide range of placements for young people who require a placement. The service actively recruits new foster carers and have developed innovative ways of reach the public to publicise the need for a wide range of different foster carers. There is a robust process for assessing 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 fostering service has a clear strategy for supporting foster carers and carers

commented positively about the support they received from the service. Foster carers are clear about the agency's expectation of them and of the support they will receive from the agency, as this is identified in the Foster Care Agreement. Foster carers receive regular supervision, are reviewed annually and provided with a wide range of training opportunities. Occasional unannounced visits are undertaken; however, an unannounced visit had not been undertaken to the family and friends foster carer.

The fostering service ensures that an up to date, comprehensive computer record is maintained for each foster carer and young person in foster care. Records were not well-organised and there is a danger that crucial information will be overlooked. Inspectors were informed that the introduction of a new computer system in October 2008 will provide an effective system for maintaining records. 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; foster carers store all information securely.

The fostering service has reviewed the service provided to family and friends foster carers to ensure that these carers and the young people placed with them receive an equitable service in comparison with other foster carers. The team is now fully staffed and supports 47 foster carers and 70 young people. Nonetheless, not all family and friends foster carers have received the expected level of support, with long gaps between supervision and support visits.

## 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
22	ensure that all foster carers, including family and friends foster carers receive regular supervision visits in line with the fostering service's policy. Regulation 17.1	10/06/2008

### Recommendations

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

- ensure that young people are protected from all forms of abuse by providing guidance for staff and foster carers regarding restraint of young people and

- recording all incidents of restraint (NMS 9.2)
- ensure that information systems accurately record the educational placement and attainment of young people in foster care and the numbers excluded from school (NMS 13.6)
- implement a robust system for monitoring and controlling the activities of the fostering service and ensuring quality performance, this includes the provision of accurate data to the inspectorate and the notification of all significant events (NMS 4.1)
- develop a system which enables the organisation of information in respect of young people, that ensures that an up-to-date, comprehensive case record is maintained for each young person in foster care which details the nature and quality of care. (NMS 24.1)