

# Dudley Local Authority Fostering Agency

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**

This is the fostering service of Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council. It is based in the centre of Dudley in a building shared by other Social Services workers. The fostering service has 142 mainstream foster carers who are providing 305 placements with 269 young people currently placed. There are 55 Family and Friends carers with 74 young people placed. The service has also developed a therapeutic fostering service, based on the Oregon model. The project is called Flipside and has nine foster carers. Five young people are currently placed with foster carers in this project.

Foster carers receive the Fostering Network recommended allowances.

### **Summary**

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

This was an announced key inspection. It focused on the key National Minimum Standards (NMS) relevant to fostering services. The NMS were inspected under the outcomes of Being Healthy, Staying Safe, Enjoying and Achieving, Making a Positive Contribution, Achieving Economic Wellbeing and Organisation. The inspection also included consideration of NMS 22 and 29, the support to and payments for 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 satisfactory progress in meeting outstanding requirements. In some areas there has been considerable improvement in the service development provided by the fostering service following reconfiguration of the fostering service, new staff appointments and an increase of resources. However, some aspects do not as yet meet NMS and there are new actions and recommendations in respect of monitoring of the service, a range of staff issues and consistent implementation of good working practice to meet outcomes for young people. The management team demonstrated a commitment to meet the actions and recommendations both from the previous inspection, and in response to issues raised during the current inspection.

### **Improvements since the last inspection**

A considerable number of requirements and recommendations were raised at the last inspection in all outcome areas, the majority of these related to safety and organisation, a number of which had not been dealt with adequately from the previous inspection. The fostering service has worked effectively with an independent consultant on targeted activity, development and implementation of

policies and procedures to improve practice and service delivery.

The main areas of development centre around a review of the staffing structure, support to foster carers and implementation of a placements service. There are three new posts; a full time training officer and two part-time posts of a Family and Friends social worker and a review officer. In addition, contracted experienced sessional staff are used to progress Family and Friends assessments. Financing for the service business plan has facilitated 32 carers to progress from level 1 to level 2. These changes have the potential to make a significant impact on the recruitment and retention of foster carers. Similarly, they impact on the quality of service delivery to young people through the development of foster carers' skills and abilities.

The fostering service has restructured to provide a single referral point with a central database to inform the matching process and commissioning services.

Implementation of a matching pro-forma and risk assessment to look at the young person's needs and match these to the skills of foster carers secures suitable placements and reduces the number of placement breakdowns.

Improved recruitment, assessment and approval processes have produced an increase in Black and Dual Heritage carers by 46% in the last 12 month period. The number of 'family and friend' carers is steadily increasing. The deployment of designated staff, production of policies and procedures, revised time-limited approval process and clear tasks for district and fostering workers has successfully improved the support to Family and Friends carers and the young people placed with them.

## **Helping children to be healthy**

The provision is satisfactory.

The fostering service has made some progress with meeting the health care needs of young people. For example, where possible consideration is given to the appropriate venue for the health assessment to take place and also cultural preferences are respected regarding male and female medical practitioners. Social workers generally provide foster carers with health care information in the LAC documents and the fostering placement agreement which in part addresses any issues that arise out of the child's ethnicity, race, disability, sexuality, faith or belief. Almost 80% of young people have received an annual health assessment and health plan, which is undertaken by the designated Consultant Paediatrician and/or Looked After Children's (LAC) nurse. The health plans that remain outstanding frequently relate to those processed through local general practitioners or where young people are in out of borough placements.

Health care plans are held centrally. However, there is no robust process to ensure these are completed in all instances and that relevant parties receive a copy in a timely manner to facilitate the health care of young people upon placement with foster carers. Health assessments and health plans are usually held on social workers' electronic files (SWIFT) and in hard copy on fostering service files, however, these are not always provided to foster carers. This does not fully promote the health

care needs of young people.

Young people benefit from the individual skills and knowledge of foster carers, for example, in the Flipside scheme which provides a treatment foster carer service for some young people with the most complex needs. Foster carers access the CAMHS consultancy service to which 28 young people have been referred during the twelve month period. The fostering service has good links with the 'Respect yourself campaign' (formerly the teenage pregnancy team). Foster carers actively promote the health and well being of young people through encouraging healthy eating and health lifestyles. For example, young people can obtain the leisure services (Smart Card) and free swimming lessons. They are encouraged and supported to attend appointments and receive appropriate medical treatment. Foster carers receive training in a range of health care topics including health assessments, consent issues, sharing of medical information, first aid and the administration of medication so that they can meet young people's health needs. Foster carers state, 'Dudley Fostering Service help us in every way they possibly can such as, equipment and any other specialist requirements the children in our care may need.'

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

The provision is satisfactory.

The local authority has an established recruitment policy and procedure. The central systems and infrastructure are well organised and efficient ensuring the references of any persons carrying on or managing the service are completed satisfactorily in the majority of cases and they are suitable persons to safeguard and promote the welfare of young people. The police checks are renewed every three years and appropriate checks are kept of checks and references and their outcomes.

The fostering service appropriately assesses the ability of foster carers, their homes and cars to provide a safe, healthy and nurturing environment for young people. Although it continues to have a considerable number of young people that share a bedroom due to a shortage of foster placements and a number of sibling placements, progress has been made with implementation of a risk assessment prior to placement to ensure due consideration is given to the risk factors involved in young people sharing a room and how these will be addressed. The annual review of the safety and suitability of foster carers' homes is generally completed at the same time as the annual foster carer reviews. However, as there is a delay in the latter being completed, the same delay arises with the review of home safety with the potential for young people to be accommodated in an unsafe environment.

The number of exemptions to the normal fostering limit has reduced with fewer young people being placed outside the foster carers' approval range. However the fostering service continues to have some difficulty in making the appropriate match of young people to foster carers with the right skills and experience to meet their needs as the service does not have sufficient foster carers. Progress is mixed as the new single referral database is incomplete and inaccurate as not all social workers provide the required information in a timely manner. The process for updating the

system to show any changes in foster carers' approval, for example, exemptions and variations is also not robust. Similarly, the foster placement agreement does not consistently include information as to why a young person is matched with a foster carer, so does not demonstrate how well young people's needs are matched with foster carers' skills. The combination of insufficient foster carers, inaccurate information sharing and subsequent exemptions does not fully safeguard the welfare of young people. The exceptions to this are placements within the Flipside project, where young people are very carefully matched with foster carers. A specialist foster carer confirms, 'Improvements have been made with specific risk assessments and better referrals and information sharing.'

There are clear child protection policies and procedures in place; these were updated in December 2007 and staff and foster carers receive training in respect of child protection issues. Safe caring documents are completed by foster carers. The fostering service has issued guidance regarding safe caring and the need for foster carers to complete their own safe caring plan. Revised risk assessments are being completed prior to a placement being made. The foster carers state the fostering placement meetings and agreement facilitate information sharing prior to or at the time of placement to enable them to appropriately care for young people. Child protection investigations are dealt with in an efficient and timely manner and appropriate action is taken when necessary to ensure children are safeguarded.

The people working in the fostering service are appropriately checked to ensure they suitable to work with children and young people. There is an effective and efficient system for the process, renewal and recording of the required checks. Administration staff demonstrate diligence in monitoring and obtaining checks particularly where exceptions are identified. The Head of Service is the verifier for CRB checks and will discuss any issues with the relevant line manager for decision making to ensure only suitable people are appointed to work with children and young people. Similarly, the required checks references are undertaken in respect of foster carers assessed by the fostering service. There is some improvement with checks being completed in respect of the Family and Friends foster carers with the new process and timescale for completion of a viability assessment.

The fostering panel is properly constituted, has an independent chair person and a wide range of experienced practitioners as panel members. The administration of panel is very well organised with efficient planning for and delivery of paperwork. The panel members are issued with a code of conduct which provides guidelines of expectations of panel members. However, there are no clear policies and procedures for the fostering panel. For example, there is no clear recruitment process which means that panel members are allowed to begin and attend panel meetings before all checks including CRB and personal references have been satisfactorily completed. On this occasion it was found that all members either had satisfactory current CRBs or previous CRBs from their status within the local authority. Whilst the fostering service does not have rigorous procedures to ensure panel members have the required checks in place before attending panel meetings, this does not directly place young people at risk.

The panel considers all new assessments of foster carers, including those undertaken by district social workers in respect of family and friends foster carers and the first review of all foster carers. Flipside assessments are excellent; the clinical psychologist also undertakes a reflective capacity assessment. This contributes to the thorough and rigorous assessment of foster carers.

The process and reports for exemptions continues to be problematic with inappropriate exemptions being requested and made. For example, foster carers who are approved for four permanent placements do not appear to have a permanent exemption in place and cannot also be approved for an additional young person (traditional placement). Exemption reports whilst covering all required areas do not provide sufficient detail in respect of how the placement of additional young people will impact on the young people already in placement. Also no review dates are entered although guidance states they should be reviewed after 6 weeks. This does not fully promote the welfare of young people.

The fostering panel is generally well managed and provides a quality assurance function in respect of the assessment process. The chair is effective in engaging all panel members in provision of constructive feedback, specialist comment and analytical discussion to produce informed recommendations. However, the fostering panel does not receive management information about the outcome of foster carers' annual reviews. Neither does the panel monitor the range and type of carers available to the authority in comparison with the needs of children. The monitoring and quality assurance function of panel is not identified as one of the functions of panel in the information provided to members. The quality assurance, monitoring and reviewing functions of the panel are not sufficiently robust to fully safeguard the welfare of young people.

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

The provision is good.

Young people are encouraged to enjoy and achieve as staff and foster carers are aware of the importance of promoting their educational and individual needs within the foster placement. The fostering service has relevant policies and demonstrates a positive attitude to diversity and is aware of its responsibilities to meet the cultural and identity needs of young people fostered. The staff team is diverse in relation to gender and ethnic origin and the service endeavours to recruit foster carers from a range of backgrounds, to assist them to meet the individual needs of young people placed by the service.

The service has improved the information they collate prior to placement regarding a young person's needs to enable an appropriate match to be made so the specific needs of the young person's culture or ethnicity can be met. Where there are shortfalls, strategies are identified to support foster carers in meeting the needs of the young people. Staff review issues of diversity and equality during regular supervision visits with foster carers, such as, young people's participation in their religion and development of a positive sense of identity.



The fostering service continues to have a lack of placements for young people with disabilities, this results in young people with disabilities either being placed in a residential unit, which does not allow them to experience family life or with foster carers from an independent agency, which could potentially result in them being placed a distance from family, friends and support. Foster carers do have access to training in respect of disability issues to assist them to meet the needs of any young person placed with them.

Young people receive good support to meet their educational needs and to maximise their potential in education. This is actively promoted through the involvement of the 'Virtual School' and the LAC Education Team. This service provides a range of advice, support and training to young people. It also helps provide support to young people who are not in school. The progress and achievements of young people are celebrated at award ceremonies. However, the arrangements for who is responsible for each aspect of young people's education are not clearly identified in the service's foster placement agreement. The foster placement agreement does not identify where financial responsibility lies for school costs, including school uniform, school trips and equipment. In addition most social workers do not identify within the foster placement agreement the foster carer's role in school contact. This has the potential for certain tasks to be overlooked.

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

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

The provision is good.

Young people state that they are happy with arrangements for contact with their families and that they are consulted in respect of this contact. Arrangements for contact are clearly established and recorded at the outset of placement, and arrangements are reviewed in the course of the placement and records revised.

Young people reported that they are listened to by their foster carers. Young people and social workers report that foster carers advocate strongly on behalf of young people to enable the young person's views to be taken into consideration. Young people have regular opportunities to express their views at meetings with their social worker and are encouraged to contribute to their own reviews either in person or through the completion of consultation documents. However, their views are not consistently sought or recorded in respect of their foster carer's annual review.

The authority has developed some positive consultative processes for seeking young people's views and involving them in the running of the service. The work undertaken by young people to promote fostering has won a number of awards and is being used widely as a training resource. In addition the service has access to various consultation forums and support groups run for carers, children and young

people. 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. A young person confirmed, 'I have made a complaint before and know who to see.' Young people can access an advocate through the National Youth Advocacy Service if this is required.

## **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is satisfactory.

Foster carers provide good support to young people in developing independence skills so that they are able to successfully move into independence. Foster carers assist young people to acquire age-appropriate independence skills and to develop practical skills for the home and in the community. They assist young people in money management and developing the emotional skills to cope with independent living. However, not all young people have a Pathway Plan even though they are eligible for one. This has the potential for appropriate support not always being identified or provided.

Foster carers receive a fostering allowance, which is in line with Fostering Network's recommended rate. In addition the fostering service operates a 'payment for skills' scheme for its foster carers, with three different levels, (level one does not attract a fee) dependent on the skills of the foster carers. The service has made progress to develop an equitable system for foster carers to progress from one level to the next. Further financial support, including the development of retainers for foster carers, is in place for the forthcoming year. It is hoped that these measures will assist with the recruitment and retention of foster carers. A specialist foster carer commented, 'Been fostering with Dudley service since 1999 and have enjoyed it – we have support from our link worker monthly and are pleased with the services offered.'

## **Organisation**

The organisation is satisfactory.

The promotion of equality and diversity is satisfactory. The individual needs of young people are being addressed, regarding personal, social and cultural issues. This is demonstrated through a range of policies procedures and practice, for example, consultation with young people on a range of issues, gender consideration for health assessments, additional budget for cultural and religious needs of young people, equality and diversity training for staff and carers, increased cultural diversity of carer population and an increase in the number of placements with black and/or dual heritage carers. Whilst still variable, improved recording in children's records and foster carer's supervision records indicates an increased awareness of equality and diversity issues with due consideration given to the individual needs of young people.

There is a clear Statement of Purpose for the service which is led adequately by managers with the necessary child care knowledge and experience. The revised children's guide was produced with the 'Just Say it Group', the children in foster care consultation group. They are supported by the National Youth Advisory Service (NYAS). The user friendly folded leaflet is colourful with pictorial images and clear relevant information including useful contact details.

The management team demonstrates a commitment to meet the actions and recommendations both from the previous inspection, and in response to issues raised during the current inspection. However, the action taken is limited by available resources, restrictive infrastructures and prolonged timescales for achieving change. The fostering service does not have an established system for monitoring the matters set out in Schedule 7 at appropriate intervals and for improving the quality of foster care provided by the fostering agency. The existing monitoring, review and planning systems are insufficiently robust to promote proactive development of the service and consistently achieve positive outcomes for young people.

There is a clear management structure with clear lines of accountability. The staffing structure is outlined with details included in Statement of Purpose. The fostering services are being reconfigured with changes to the management structure to address some of the inequalities in the service for friends and family foster carers, the Flipside therapeutic programme of foster care and mainstream. There are tensions between the different groups within the team that can produce ineffective working relationships as services compete for limited staffing and resources. Whilst some provision has been made since the last inspection, additional funding and resources are agreed and authorised for 2009-10. At the present time the fostering service does not have effective systems in place to determine, prioritise and monitor workloads and assign tasks to appropriate staff, such as, a workload management system. Low staffing levels on district social work teams and lack of understanding of the fostering service role and responsibilities produces barriers to effective and efficient working together. Management have begun to address the latter through regular joint service management meetings, joint training opportunities for social work staff and foster carers and designation of responsibility for joint working through the matching process and placement meetings. However, poor communication and lack of understanding between respective social work staff detracts from suitable matching for placements and the effective progression of young people's placement plans. This could potentially impair effective working together to meet the needs of children and young people.

The staff team have successfully improved recruitment, assessment and approval processes which have resulted in new foster carers. Assessment of prospective foster carers is undertaken by members of the fostering service. There is some improvement with Family and Friends foster carers assessments being undertaken by contracted qualified experienced social workers, who fully understand the requirements of the Fostering Services Regulations 2002. Foster carer assessments, including Family and Friends are generally of a good standard and provide thorough assessment of the prospective carer's ability to provide good quality care for young

people likely to be placed with them. Those completed for the Flipside foster carers are particularly comprehensive and robust with a range of professional assessments being produced.

Staff receive regular supervision and support from experienced management. Staff appraisals are completed annually and staff confirm management are readily accessible and supportive. The staff team value the support and effective systems delivered by the administration team. All administrators are open and flexible to developing new systems that facilitate efficient working.

Whilst there is some improvement to staffing levels in the fostering team with the provision of three new posts, two part-time posts and one full-time training officer which has yet to be appointed, workloads indicate that foster carer and staffing levels remain insufficient to be effective in meeting the diverse placement needs of young people. Nevertheless the newly appointed posts have already made a significant impact and contribution to the team and foster carers state, 'The staff are very friendly and helpful even when they are very busy.'

The Dudley Foster Care Association (DFCA) and feedback from individual foster carers is very positive about the support provided by link workers and the manager of the service as seen for example, in the prevention of placement disruptions. Foster carers state, 'The fostering service is excellent in providing support and planned moves for children. The DFCA have regular contact with senior management and feel able to express their views in respect of policies and procedures and development of the service.'

There is some improvement with the independent monitoring of reviews with each manager auditing the review reports of the other staff group. However, the computer system for tracking dates of foster carer annual reviews is inaccurate as occasionally individual link workers fail to inform the administrator the review has been undertaken. The delay in reviews being completed impedes effective monitoring and support of foster carers and does not fully safeguard the welfare of young people.

Foster carers across the service spoke positively of the excellent support they receive from link workers. They expressed an understanding of the supervision process and the fostering service expectations in respect of record keeping. Whilst most foster carers have a current foster carer agreement this does not include information regarding complying with the inspectorate or with policy on child protection, measures of control and unauthorised absence as outlined in Regulation 12 and 13. In addition the Flipside foster agreement has not been updated to accurately reflect their status as Flipside foster carers with full information they need to know to carry out their functions as a foster carer effectively.

Considerable progress has been made in respect of training for foster carers with the appointment of a designated training officer to post in November 2008. Foster carers are recognised and given the same opportunities and rights of access to training as other employees. For example, there is joint training in the topics of education of

children in care, domestic abuse and child protection. Foster carers are encouraged to contribute to development opportunities through involvement in working parties, pilot schemes and information services. For example, one carer produced an extremely helpful leaflet as 'a guide for new foster carers on training', with useful information, legal references and contact details. Foster Carers state, 'Dudley fostering service have been very supportive and enabled me to complete professional qualifications to enhance my fostering and continue to do so.'

Children's files are generally well organised with the relevant documents available. Recording of information is variable, including evidence of diversity, such as, racial cultural and ethnic issues. Similarly, the signing and dating of documents is not consistently applied or indicate they are implemented in retrospect. The fostering service produces hard copy files for each young person and can also access information held by district social workers on electronic files. Foster carers generally receive relevant LAC information at the time of placement. All young people had a foster placement agreement in place. Foster carers have a clear understanding of the records they are expected to keep and receive training in record keeping. Link workers provide foster carers with lockable filing boxes to keep records secure and confidential.

The administration systems and records are wide-ranging and include all significant information for running of the service. There are some aspects of technology or practice that do not provide an effective, confidential or efficient service. For example, copies of CRB records for some of the panel members are held on file. There is no system in place to send secure e-mails, which can be a hindrance in working with other departments and agencies.

Steady progress is being made with development of the service for Family and Friends carers. Whilst the staffing quota is insufficient, the staff are committed and enthusiastic in their efforts to provide effective support through regular supervision sessions and annual reviews to the foster carers and young people in placement. The process for assessment and approval of Family and Friends carers has improved. Family and Friends carers confirm they receive the agreed payments and any additional resources as needed.

## 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 placements are only made, that are clearly within a	30/04/2009

	foster carer's approval range and for which they have the appropriate skills (Regulations 33 and 34)	
30	ensure no panel members are allowed to begin work until all checks have been satisfactorily completed (Regulation 20 (4))	30/04/2009
22	ensure the foster carer agreement includes all matters of Schedule 5 (12, 13) and accurately reflects their status, for example, as Flipside foster carers (Regulation 28(5)(b))	31/05/2009
17	ensure that there is a sufficient number of suitably qualified, competent and experienced persons working for the purposes of the fostering service (Regulation 19)	30/06/2009
4	establish and maintain a system for monitoring the matters set out in Schedule 7 at appropriate intervals and for improving the quality of foster care provided by the fostering agency. (Regulation 42(1) Schedule 7)	31/05/2009

## Recommendations

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

- ensure before a placement begins, the carer is provided with as full a description as possible of the health needs of a child including, health plans for the young people in placement (NMS 12.3)
- provide fostering panel with clear written policies and procedures, which are implemented in practice, about the handling of their functions including monitoring of the service delivery and storage of confidential recruitment records (NMS 30.1)
- ensure that where an exemption from the usual fostering limit is granted the requirements of Schedule 7 are fulfilled. (NMS 30.2)
- ensure before making a placement, a foster placement agreement, is made, which covers the matters identified in Schedule 6, with specific reference to meeting the financial and educational responsibilities of all parties (NMS 13.4 & 13.8)
- develop clear written requirements of what is expected of foster carers in terms of preparing young people for independent or semi-independent living, in the form of a Pathway Plan (NMS 14.2)
- ensure the fostering service has systems in place to determine, prioritise and monitor workloads and assign tasks to appropriate staff, such as, a workload management system (NMS 16.5)
- ensure there is adequate administrative back up, office equipment, and infrastructure to enable staff who recruit, assess, supervise, support and train foster carers to carry out their duties in an efficient and effective manner, for example, usage of suitable electronic social care records and SWIFT systems (NMS 16.10)
- ensure all fostering service social workers understand the role of the children's social workers, and there is a clear understanding about how the fostering service social workers and the children's social workers work effectively together

(NMS 16.15)

- ensure both foster carers review reports, including children's opinions and the safety and suitability of foster carers homes are all undertaken annually in a timely manner and are available to the Fostering Panel (NMS 21.5)
- ensure the foster carer agreement is updated for Flipside foster carers to accurately reflect their status as Flipside foster carers (NMS 22.4)