

Borough of Telford & Wrekin Fostering Service

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

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About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to assure children and young people, parents, the public, local authorities and government of the quality and standard of the service provided. The inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000.

This report details the main strengths and any areas for improvement identified during the inspection. The judgements included in the report are made in relation to the outcomes for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and the relevant National Minimum Standards for the service.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding:	this aspect of the provision is of exceptionally high quality
Good:	this aspect of the provision is strong
Satisfactory:	this aspect of the provision is sound
Inadequate:	this aspect of the provision is not good enough

Service information

Brief description of the service

The Borough of Telford and Wrekin provide a fostering service as part of the range of family based care for children and young people who need to spend some time away from their family of birth. The Family Placement Team is based in Wellington and undertakes the recruitment, assessment, support and training of foster carers and aim to make appropriate matches between the assessed needs of children and the skills of the foster carers. The Statement of Purpose indicates that the Borough of Telford and Wrekin fostering service offers a range of different types of fostering. A part-time fostering scheme offer short breaks for children at times of family crisis and a shared care scheme allows short breaks for children with disabilities. Short term foster care is provided where children are unable to live with their family at the time they are placed and where the plan is to rehabilitate the children, the service also provides permanent substitute families for children unable to return to their families. They also provide day care support with a foster carer where this will support the child's parent and prevent reception into care or where such support would assist the child's full-time foster carer in the fostering task.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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) of fostering services. The NMS were inspected under the outcomes of being healthy, staying safe, enjoying and achieving, positive contribution, achieving economic wellbeing and organisation. The inspection also included consideration of NMS 22 and 29, the supervision of and payments to foster carers. The inspection also monitored the progress made by the fostering service in meeting the actions and recommendations made at the last inspection.

The fostering service had made exceptionally good progress in meeting previous requirements. In some areas there has been a marked improvement with considerable development in service provision following reconfiguration of the fostering service, new staff appointments and an increase of resources. The enjoying and achieving outcomes for young people is outstanding particularly in respect of the involvement of young people. There are a small number of requirements on this occasion with three minor breaches of regulations and two breaches of the national minimum standards. These relate to provision of health assessments, recruitment records of panel members, records of complaints and allegations, contact details for Ofsted and issuing of the children's guide.

Overall, the inspection found the hard work, commitment and dedication of the management and staff had been successfully applied to achieve a significant change

and marked improvement in the service delivery. This means the fostering service provides a good quality of service that is effective in achieving positive outcomes for children and young people.

Improvements since the last inspection

A considerable number of requirements were raised at the last inspection in all outcome areas. There were 17 actions and 14 recommendations, the majority of these related to safety and organisation. The fostering service has worked very hard and extremely effectively with an independent consultant on targeted activity, development and implementation of policies and procedures to address these matters and to improve the overall practice and service delivery. The fostering service has established good working relationships with the: elected members, director of children's services, business manager of placements, customer services manager and rights and representations officer which means they are well supported by corporate services. The fostering service staff successfully involve foster carers, children and young people in a wide range of activities to obtain their views about issues of major concern to them and the development of service quality.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Young people in placement benefit from good levels of health care provision which meets their needs for physical, emotional and social development. The health care needs of young people are assessed at the time of referral and given full consideration when matching to a suitable foster care placement.

A wide range of specialist health services are available for young people and carers to access which include advice about sexual health issues and substance misuse. Community nurse is available to support children with health care needs in the community. A respiratory nurse and a diabetic nurse are also available and oncology nursing expertise can be accessed as needed. A specialist child adolescent and mental health service (CAMHS) post specifically supports foster carers in dealing with mental health issues. Young people are involved in decision making in respect of how their emotional health needs can be addressed therapeutically.

The looked after nurse (LAC) specialist ensures that all foster carers have health promotion information covering: the promotion of a healthy lifestyle, good diet and exercise, puberty and substance abuse. Support and training is available for attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder, autism and asperger's syndrome where this is required. The LAC nurse is constantly striving to reach 100% of health assessments, however, this has not been achieved at the present time, as there is only one LAC nurse employed for three days a week. This means foster carers do not always have the full information relating to a young person's health care needs at the time of placement. To address these shortfalls the fostering service gives a high priority to obtaining all relevant information to enable the foster carers to meet the young person's needs.

Health records on young people's files are generally good. Foster carers are provided with a full written health record for the young people they are looking after. Foster carers are aware of the need to record any medication administered to young people on weekly progress sheets. This means there are current accurate records of young people's medical history and health care needs.

The agency provides a wide range of good quality training for foster carers on health issues which includes: attachment and detachment issues, emerging sexuality, children's rights and disability services and inclusive play for all. Foster carers are required to attend mandatory first aid training on a three year cycle. Foster carers are expected to undertake administration of medication and first aid training. In addition, where services are provided to children with disabilities, specific training is available for peg feeding. This is undertaken by community nurses who then judge competencies and update carers as necessary.

The foster carers' handbook includes a clearly stated expectation of carers in relation to registering young people with health practitioners and organising appointments. Young people reported being taken for regular and appropriate medical appointments and felt their health needs are being looked after in placement.

The foster carers provide information from their records and observations to the review and planning process for young people's health care needs. The fostering panel has members with relevant health care backgrounds including a paediatric specialist. This means that professional scrutiny and advice is available of foster carers assessments and reviews to address any health care issues that arise.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

Young people are kept safe by foster carers and the fostering service through the provision of suitable foster carers and the support of comprehensive guidance and training. Whilst records of recruitment that relate to the suitability of foster panel members are not consistently recorded and held in good order, in this instance they do not place young people at risk.

The fostering service has made good progress in further developing their policies, procedures and practice for keeping children and young people safe. The systems for ensuring all staff and foster carers working within the service are suitable and robust. Appropriate checks have been undertaken in respect of the managers of the service and all new staff. Good practices are established with telephone enquiries being made to follow up references. Similarly, criminal record bureau (CRB) checks are renewed on a three yearly basis for both staff and foster carers.

The foster carers households provide a good standard of care and where possible young people have their own bedroom. Where rooms are shared young people are consulted and risk assessments completed. This enables young people to be cared

for safely. Fostering households were seen to be safe, homely and of good repair. Where shortfalls are identified resources or finances are provided to address environmental issues such as, household space, equipment or adaptations needed to keep young people safe. Health and safety checks are completed at the time of assessment and renewed annually during foster carer reviews. All young people have current individual risk assessments including safe caring guidelines. These are updated regularly or as needed to reflect changes.

The fostering service has improved the matching process with all referrals going to a single referral unit managed by a placement officer. In addition, in recognition of the limitations of the fostering service placement choice a number of placements have been purchased from an independent national fostering agency. This allows for improved matching of placements. The revised process provides consistency in the provision and sharing of information. A referral form, matching form, risk assessment and the placement information (PIR) record is completed prior to placement. The latter includes all aspects of the foster placement agreement. Young people are generally well matched with their foster carers. This means the placements offer stability and good outcomes are being achieved as young people's needs are being met.

The service has clear child protection policies and staff and foster carers are provided with training in respect of child protection and safe caring to enable them to protect and look after young people. Young people are actively involved in developing their individual safe care plans and are provided with information about keeping themselves safe. Foster carers are assisted to develop safe care plans and individual risk assessments of young people are completed. Foster carers state, 'these have been done and are reviewed annually with my supervising social worker, all health and safety issues are in line with requirements.'

There is some improvement with the records kept of allegations so that monitoring can occur and action taken where necessary as a result of this monitoring. The service is improving practice in respect of resolution meetings and recording and reporting outcomes of investigations in an effort to ensure that all information is available to protect young people. Independent support and advisory services are available to foster carers and young people through a service level agreement with the national fostering association and rights and representation officer respectively. This means they have access to independent support to assist them through these processes.

The fostering service has well established robust recruitment processes. The files and records are held secure and confidential, they are generally well organised and kept in good order. There is a clear process for checking any issues that arise and records of decision making for clearance. This ensures people who work in or for the fostering service are suitable to work with children and young people.

Although there have been some changes in panel membership, this remains a robust fostering panel. There is a clear process for the recruitment of panel members, however, the administration does not appear to be as robust as other recruitment

systems in the service due to inconsistent recording and retention of records in panel members files. Whilst there are no omissions on this occasion and so young people are not at risk, the poor administration does leave the potential for errors to occur.

The panel is chaired by an experienced independent person and has a diverse group membership which contributes to ensuring good quality decisions are made. Membership and tenure of the panel are found to be satisfactory with confirmation being given of the appointment of a previous young person in care identified as suitable for panel membership. There have been changes made to the composition of the panel since the last inspection; appropriate references and checks have been undertaken in respect of these members. Panel members receive sound preparation and training including equality and diversity and updates of best practice in assessment and placement planning. Observation of the panel and reference to minutes of previous meetings demonstrated that the panel is generally thorough in its functions and fully aware of safe care practice and their roles and functions in respect of safeguarding children. The fostering social work staff are up to date, aware of their cases and showed a good knowledge and understanding of carers and young people's needs. Administration of the panel is generally well organised and managed. Panel has a quality assurance function and this is fully implemented. The fostering panel serves children and young people well and can demonstrate good outcomes for children.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The fostering service continues to actively and effectively promote equality and diversity within the service. Young people's individual needs are exceptionally well met by their foster carers. Foster carers provide high levels of support to children and young people to enable them to develop their skills and abilities and meet their educational potential.

The fostering service is extremely pro-active in promoting equality and diversity for all aspects of the service. This reflects the corporate parenting approach to raising awareness and addressing diversity issues across the services. Policies and procedures are all currently being reviewed and are subject to an equality impact assessment as part of the approval process. Innovative staffing initiatives have increased the number of staff from culturally diverse backgrounds into the fostering service. For example, visiting major cultural events in the local community and application of the 'Golden Hello' scheme. This means the service is more representative of the local population and is more able to meet the ethnic and cultural needs of young people. Management, staff and foster carers attend ethnicity and diversity training to develop a common value base and understanding. Foster carers have a wide range of training available to enable foster carers to meet the diverse needs of young people requiring foster placements.

Young people spoke enthusiastically of their hobbies and interests. Foster carers consistently provide opportunities for young people to explore new skills and abilities

to build their self-identity and self-esteem. To facilitate access the corporate parenting team of the local authority has developed a wide range of leisure activities in which young people can participate. Many of these are accessed through a leisure card which is issued to foster carer families and young people.

Young people are well supported by their foster carers in respect of their educational achievements. Foster carers liaise closely with young people's educational establishments to ensure that all necessary information is shared so that young people are appropriately supported. Additional support is available to young people through the corporate parenting team. Whilst there are limited educational details recorded in the foster placement agreement, any issues are clearly discussed regularly during foster carers' supervision and young people's personal education plan meetings and care plan reviews. Most young people have access to a computer to support them with school work either at their place of education or when at home with their foster carers. The school attendance of all Telford and Wrekin's looked after children is monitored, so that non-attendance can be quickly identified and responded to. There are regular multi-agency meetings that look carefully at the needs of those young people who have difficulties securing or maintaining a school place. A service manager and his team with specific responsibility for the education of looked after children; work closely with designated teachers to improve the attendance and achievements of young people.

The looked after children education team is actively involved in providing a range of training to foster carers. Foster carers and young people value the support provided by the 'letterbox club' and particularly the books provided to children. Foster carers spoken to during the inspection demonstrated a sound awareness of their role in promoting young people's educational achievements. For example, the fostering service has successfully supported three young people to gain a place at university, while others have been recognised for their achievements in coping with change and overcoming challenges in their lives. Children and young people's achievements, educational and otherwise, are recognised and celebrated by the fostering service and local authority through specially organised events.

Young people with disabilities who are provided with a service through the shared care scheme receive good support from their shared care foster carers. This continues to be developed as a dedicated and specialist service with appropriate facilities and resources provided. The scheme has recently seen an increase in recruitment, allowing wider access to the service. Additionally, a foster carer has been recruited on a contract basis to increase the scope of provision. Foster carers experience of receiving suitable equipment to assist with meeting the young person's needs is variable. Foster carers reported that they received good support from supervising social workers and that training opportunities have recently been developed.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Young people placed with foster carers benefit from being encouraged to maintain and develop family contacts and friendships. Young people's views are sought in respect of contact and young people report being very satisfied with arrangements for contact and visiting friends. Contact arrangements are addressed at the planning stage of placements and clearly recorded. Consideration is given to the distance from home when making every placement; all efforts are made to place children near home where possible and appropriate. Carers are appropriately assessed and trained in respect of their ability to help a child maintain and develop appropriate relationships with family members. They have the skills required to encourage and facilitate contact. Carers spoken with demonstrated a thorough understanding of issues relating to family relationships and contact. The role of carers in contact is clearly outlined in the placement information record and financial support is provided to carers in respect of contact. Carers regularly record outcomes of contact arrangements and their perceived impact on the child appropriately.

Young people benefit from the fostering service ensuring their opinions and those of others significant to them are sought over all relevant issues. Foster carers demonstrated a full understanding of the need to be child centred and focused which includes listening to children and seeking their views. The service has been extremely creative in developing a wide range of mediums to seek the views of children and young people about their care, daily life and futures. This happens on a regular and frequent basis, and the information obtained is used to inform practice. Children in foster care are provided with thorough information advising them how to make a complaint and are familiar with the process.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

The authority has clear policies detailing that carers will be financially supported and encouraged to continue to support young people who continue in education post 18. The fostering service is aware that carers supporting young people preparing to leave care need individual support. They have developed ways to increase carer awareness about supported lodgings and to talk about the very specific role of the 16-plus service. Placing social workers say that support for young people to develop independent living skills is currently very good.

A number of professionals and foster carers are able to describe situations where young people have received very appropriate support to make a successful transition into adulthood and some carers are particularly skilled in promoting this. There are some examples of excellent networking between agencies and services to promote and meet the needs of young people.

Departments across the local authority are encouraged to offer work placements to

looked after young people providing opportunities to increase their skill levels. The fostering service provides carers with clear information about payments and allowances as well as tax and insurance liabilities. Professional fees are paid to some carers in recognition of more complex placements.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The individual needs of young people are addressed well, regarding personal, social and cultural issues. This is demonstrated, for example, by the equality and diversity training provided to foster carers to raise their awareness of the different individual needs of young people they care for. Similarly the success of targeted recruitment drives of staff and foster carers to attract applicants of diverse cultures and ethnicity.

The fostering service has produced a Statement of Purpose, which gives a comprehensive overview of the service. It contains information regarding the number of complaints received about the service or the outcomes of investigation of complaints. However, the Statement of Purpose, foster carers handbook and children's guides do not have the full contact details for Ofsted. The document has been endorsed by elected members. A Children's Guide is being prepared, however, at the time of the inspection had not been distributed to young people to enable them to understand what the fostering service will do for them.

There is a strong, consistent, well qualified and experienced management team in place. Managers are very dynamic and pro-active, their innovative action has achieved a positive change of culture in the team. At all levels of the service there is good communication, excellent networking between services and agencies producing creative and innovative strategies for development of the fostering service. Management maintain clear professional boundaries and exercise proper management responsibility. The service has robust quality monitoring and assurance systems from which information is shared with the local safeguarding board for any issues to be addressed. The monitoring process includes effective methods and systems for staff and service user views to be heard and responded to. Management take timely action to address identified areas for improvement and achieve good outcomes for a significant number of young people.

Staff stated, 'There is better morale in the office as a whole and they feel improvements are being made by better robust recruitment to pertinent roles within the service.' Following successful recruitment drives there are a sufficient number of suitably qualified and experienced staff to fulfil the duties and responsibilities of the fostering service.

Similarly effective recruitment and selection strategies draw increased numbers of referrals of foster carers progressing to approval. The fostering service provides 196 young people with fostering placements in 137 fostering households. The fostering service provides for 86 young people within Telford and Wrekin. A further 44 young

people are with relatives and friends. There are 18 young people in private fostering arrangements and nine young people receive shared care. There are 66 young people presently placed with external independent fostering agencies, as the fostering service are unable to provide a placement at the time the placement was required or a placement which would better meet the young person's needs. The service has entered into a contract with an independent agency to provide additional placements, this is predominantly for teenagers.

Staff are organised effectively and there is a clear management structure. Managers are experienced and qualified in the supervision of staff who feel they are accessible and approachable. Most of the assessments of new foster carers are undertaken by an independent assessor, these are generally of a good standard and explore significant issues including those relating to safeguarding.

Foster carers state they are very well supported by the fostering service and more directly by their supervising social workers. Most foster carers receive supervision on a monthly basis and the annual unannounced visits. Supervision agreements are completed and records of sessions signed and provided by the supervising social worker. All foster carers have a foster care agreement and all foster carers are reviewed on an annual basis. The latter are taken back to panel for monitoring of the quality of service provided and available to young people.

The foster carers have access to a comprehensive training programme. There is a clear expectation that foster carers should attend training and there are financial penalties if attendance is not met. The foster carers valued the training provided and held certificates of their attendance. The fostering service provides practical and financial support to enable them to attend. Foster carers stated, 'I have completed separation and detachment disorder, skills to foster, taking drugs, first aid, Speak easy, resilience and respect and I am going on a sexual abuse course in the near future.' Foster Carers and young people are encouraged to participate in the delivery of training where this is appropriate.

Foster carers and young people's files are generally kept in good order being well organised with front index and file dividers. There is a regular audit of files and staff chase records and documents that have not been made available. The fostering service holds records either electronically or on paper and work is progressing towards electronic files. The fostering service completes registers for both foster carers and young people and these are now compliant with the regulations.

There have been sixteen complaints from foster carers or the parents of young people since 1 April 2008 until 31 August 2009. Some of the issues relate to foster carer fees and allowances, receipt of training certificates, processes relating to allegations and loss of income during investigations. The complaints led to action being taken in respect of ongoing review of specific documentation and practice and the development of a new policy for foster carers to represent their grievances. However, the complaints process is unclear with some complaints apparently being dealt with solely by the corporate complaints unit and others by the fostering service. This must be addressed to ensure there is an accurate record of the number of

complaints and the fostering service is aware of any issues or concerns that arise in respect of young people and the service they receive.

The fostering service has reviewed and revised the payment structure for foster carers to provide parity across the service and ensure value for money. Foster carers are consulted and engaged in the process through representation on working groups. The fostering service aim to establish clarity regarding their expectations of foster carers roles and responsibilities through the foster carer agreements and a clear payment structure.

The fostering service continues to maintain and develop the support offered to friends and family foster carers who report this is of a high standard. The individual needs of young people are addressed very well, regarding personal, social and cultural issues. The fostering service is managed ethically and efficiently, delivering a good quality service. The fostering service achieves positive outcomes and effectively safeguards children and young people.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Recommendations

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

- ensure a foster carer is provided with appropriate information of the state of health and health needs of a child placed or to be placed, for example, ensure all health assessments and reviews are completed and provided in a timely manner (breach of regulations 17(3)(a))
- ensure person's working for the purposes of a fostering service, foster carers and children placed by the fostering service have access to contact information for Ofsted, for example, in both information relating to complaints, the Statement of Purpose and the children's guide (breach of regulation 12(f)(ii))
- supply a copy of the revised children's guide to each foster parent approved by the fostering service provider and (subject to age and understanding), to each child placed by it (breach of regulation 4(c))
- ensure the fostering panels policies and procedures are implemented in practice, for example, in respect of records of the recruitment of suitability of foster panel members (breach of national minimum standard 30.1)
- ensure separate records are held which bring together data on allegations and on complaints. (breach of national minimum standard 25.13)