

Worcestershire County Council Fostering and Kinship 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

Worcestershire County Council Fostering and Kinship Service, of which the Placements and Panels Team is a part, is located within the County Council's Children's Services Directorate. The fostering service works alongside the Integrated Service for Looked After Children (ISL) which provides support for the educational, health, community and leisure needs of children and young people cared for by foster carers.

The fostering service offers a range of services including recruitment, assessment, training and supervision of foster carers, kinship carers, support carers and contract carers. Between them these foster carers can meet the needs of children and young people requiring varying lengths and intensity of care, disabled children and young people and parents with babies. The suitability of foster carers to care for children and young people is initially tested by an independent fostering panel. It is reviewed annually to ensure foster carers remain suitable to care for children and young people.

Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

This was an unannounced inspection which covered all key standards. In addition the inspection considered the supervision and support provided to foster carers. The inspection covered all outcome areas of the Every Child Matters framework. It also assessed the effectiveness of the service in promoting equality and diversity.

The fostering service has a number of areas of exemplary practice. These include support for education and meaningful consultation with children and young people. The service provides excellent opportunities for children and young people to develop enjoyable social and leisure lives. Excellent support is provided to ensure children and young people develop good health and healthy lifestyles.

The fostering service provides good support to young people moving towards independence in partnership with the Aftercare Service. Foster carers show commitment and resilience in supporting young people beyond their 18th birthdays.

Support for foster carers is provided by a committed and capable team who focus on the best interests of children and young people. Foster carers offer warm, nurturing homes to children and young people.

The fostering service has a number of important weaknesses. The ability of foster carers to keep children and young people as safe as possible is not supported by

rigour in the implementation of matching or safer caring procedures. There are shortfalls in some of the arrangements to support health outcomes. There are organisational weaknesses which do not underpin the work undertaken by the staff or the foster carers. These shortfalls are the subject of recommendations in this report.

Improvements since the last inspection

Following the last inspection the service was recommended to make improvements to the arrangements for consent to medical treatment. However, weaknesses remain in this area which may result in delays to treatment of children or young people.

The service has not implemented a recommendation to put foster placement agreements in place for all placements of children and young people. This weakens the strength of arrangements for foster carers to meet the specific needs of each child or young person and to act consistently with the overall care plan for the child.

The staff vetting procedures have improved following a recommendation from the previous inspection. However, a further recommendation has been imposed in response to a shortfall in the implementation of the procedures.

The home has not introduced accessible formats of the children's guide as recommended. Consequently, some children do not have clear information about the service they can expect from the fostering service and their foster carers.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is satisfactory.

The fostering service demonstrates exemplary practice in the provision of integrated services to support positive health outcomes for children and young people.

ISL includes a multidisciplinary team of professionals which focuses on the health and well-being of children and young people. The team provides a consultation service to foster carers. It works in partnership with mainstream health services to raise awareness of the health needs of looked after children to ensure they are provided with effective access to primary health care services. The team includes psychology professionals and members from the child and adolescent mental health service. They support foster carers, children and young people to develop physical and mental good health. One young person stated that ISL had helped him to come to terms with his past and be more confident about his future. As a result of the wraparound care provided by ISL, children and young people placed in foster care can be confident their health will improve and they will be able to develop long term good health.

Through the work of ISL in leisure and community the service is also supporting children and young people to develop healthy and active lifestyles. They can access subsidised leisure facilities and take part in regular organised events which promote

an active lifestyle. Children and young people met during the inspection take part in a wide range of physical activities which support their good health and build their self-esteem.

Young people in foster care in Worcestershire had the opportunity to take part in the making of a DVD promoting the importance of attending annual health assessments. This is a resource which is used to demystify the health assessments and encourage children and young people to feel less daunted about the checks. Children and young people cared for by the service's foster carers have good levels of attendance at their annual health checks.

The Healthy Care Steering Group monitors and reviews the progress of services to meet the needs of looked after children. This ensures there is continuous overview of the effectiveness of provision to support health and good levels of cooperative work between different agencies meeting the health needs of children and young people.

Foster carers visited during the inspection offer good support for children and young people's health. They ensure they make use of primary health care services. They help them to develop healthy diets and life styles. Foster carers attend training on matters relating to health and are willing to undertake specialist training to develop skills to meet more complex health needs. Of children and young people responding to surveys 68% stated their foster carers always or usually help them to look after their health. The good practice of foster carers contributes to the positive health outcomes for children and young people.

There are, however, some important shortfalls in ensuring the health needs of all children and young people are met.

The service does not ensure foster carers have the required health consents for every child or young person. Failure to do so may delay the provision of medical care or treatment for a child or young person in the event of accident or illness.

The service has a comprehensive health record which is retained by foster carers to record all health interventions. However, this is not being used by all foster carers. As a result, some children and young people do not benefit from a comprehensive, portable record of their health care.

The guidance to foster carers on health matters in their handbook is often out of date. It does not support the good practice of the foster carers.

The matching documents do not always outline how carers' skills can meet the specific health needs of children and young people placed with them. The lack of transparent matching does not support the goal of always placing children and young people with carers who can meet their needs and identifying ways to support carers where there are gaps in the matching.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is satisfactory.

The fostering service has generally robust procedures to ensure those responsible for delivering foster care are safe to do so. Managers, fostering social workers and support staff are subject to a rigorous application, interview and vetting process which reduces the risk of exposing children and young people to those who would wish to harm them. This protection was compromised on one occasion when the service did not ensure they had taken steps to verify the reason why previous employment had ended where the applicant had been working with children.

The fostering service operates procedures which minimise the risk of foster carers presenting a risk to children or young people. Thorough assessments are undertaken which are rigorously tested by an effective fostering panel. The suitability of foster carers to continue fostering is tested annually through a thorough review process which incorporates the views of their own children, foster children and key professionals. Most children and young people contributing their views to the inspection felt they are always or usually cared for and listened to by their foster carers. A typical comment was, 'They always make sure that we are happy and that we are well.'

The supervision and review process also assesses the safety and security of the home and its surroundings. This ensures children and young people are not exposed to known hazards which may cause harm.

The fostering panel operates as an effective gatekeeper. Applications to foster and reviews are thoroughly scrutinised and subjected to rigorous analysis. The panel influences improvements in the quality of assessments and in the general practice of the service. The panel membership reflects a wide range of backgrounds and experience. It includes a care leaver who is able to provide a user perspective on suitability of foster carers. The robust practices of the panel reduces the likelihood of children and young people being placed with those who are not suitable to be foster carers.

Foster carers and staff receive good training in safeguarding children and young people. They are confident in the application of procedures to deal with concerns about abuse and neglect and how to respond to complaints. Training is provided in areas such as substance misuse, protective behaviours, bullying and dealing with children and young people going absent without permission. This contributes to safeguarding children and young people from harm.

There are a number of areas of weakness in relation to matching, foster placement agreements and safer caring policies which do not support the efforts of the foster carers and staff to keep children and young people safe.

A number of children and young people and foster carers met during the inspection indicated they felt they were very well matched. However, the matching paperwork

does not evidence rigour in the matching of the skills and abilities of the foster carers to the needs of specific children or young people. On occasions it has been completed retrospectively. On other occasions it contains minimal detail to evidence how the decision to place was made. The documentation does not outline how gaps in the matching will be addressed and the additional support and training which will be offered to foster carers to allow them to meet the needs of children and young people. Foster placement agreements do not include details about the matching and additional support. Additionally, on a significant number of occasions temporary changes of approval are made to foster carers' approvals to allow them to care for children or young people who fall outside their approval range. The documentation is not always in place to demonstrate how these decisions are taken. These shortfalls may result in children or young people being placed with foster carers who are not able or are insufficiently supported to meet their specific needs.

The service does not ensure that a fully compliant foster placement agreement is in place for every placement of a child or young person with a foster carer. This document provides the outline of how the child or young person's needs are to be met. In its absence, foster carers may fail to meet the needs of children or young people or to work consistently with the care plan for the child or young person.

All homes complete a generic safer caring policy for their household. This is designed to protect children, young people and fostering families from general, expected risk in the foster home. However, the fostering service is not ensuring these are updated at the point of each new placement in the household in line with their own policy. As a result, the safer caring policies do not reflect the particular risks raised by individual children and young people. Fostering staff do not ensure the policies are shared with the child or young person's social worker. As a result of these shortfalls, foster carers may fail to take the required steps to ensure everyone in their home is safe.

The foster carers' handbook does not provide up-to-date, comprehensive guidance to support foster carers in safeguarding children and young people.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The fostering service, supported by ISL, has some outstanding practice in ensuring children and young people have access to full social and leisure lives and the opportunity to fulfil their educational potential. One young person, when asked if he receives support for education, stated, 'ISL has brought me through so much and made me who I am today.'

ISL offers support to children and young people across all stages of education. The team provides direct support to children and young people through mentors, tutors and early years specialists. The service provides consultations and support to foster

carers. The team supports children, young people and carers in the transitional stages of education. Time limited financial packages are put in place to provide extra support with behaviour or learning needs. The team provides support in educational meetings and helps young people to apply for funding to assist their education. As a result of this highly effective support no children or young people have been permanently excluded from educational settings in the last five years and temporary exclusions have continued to decrease. Numbers of young people achieving five GCSEs at A* to C grades have increased.

The service also offers support to young people to access higher and further education through the provision of bursaries and funding for accommodation. The Aftercare Service seeks to support young people to return from university to their foster carers for holiday periods. There are a number of other initiatives which support young people to develop skills and knowledge for employment. The commitment of foster carers and the Aftercare Service to young people supports them to achieve qualifications which can lead to rewarding employment in the future.

Foster carers case tracked during the inspection are committed to the education of the children and young people they care for. They undertake training to increase the effectiveness of the support they can provide. They attend meetings and support children and young people with homework, equipment and involvement in extra-curricular activities. Two thirds of children and young people responding to surveys felt their educational needs were always or usually met by foster carers.

Foster carers and ISL also ensure children and young people have full access to community and leisure activities. They support children and young people to access subsidised sports and leisure facilities, to attend extra-curricular activities and local clubs. Children and young people told inspectors about a wide range of recreational and sports clubs they belong to. ISL provides extensive summer activities which are greatly enjoyed by children and young people. These offer the opportunity for children and young people to try new activities and develop social relationships through participation. Positive Opportunities Worcestershire funding provides additional support for children and young people to take part in organised activities and holidays. As a result of these practices and resources, children and young people are able to enjoy their lives, take part in the wider community and develop confidence and self-esteem.

The fostering service has some good practice in meeting the diverse needs of children and young people requiring foster care. The fostering service ensures carers who look after disabled children and young people enable them to access resources and activities in the community. Foster carers who look after children who are eligible for the higher level of Disability Living Allowance receive an additional 50% foster care allowance to support the additional costs in ensuring these children and young people are able to live enjoyable lives. Foster carers cannot proceed through the payment for skills scheme unless they have undertaken the required training in valuing diversity.

The county has received increasing numbers of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking

Children (UASC) in recent years. Although all UASC are currently placed in external placements contracted with independent fostering agencies, they continue to receive services from Worcestershire County Council. A dedicated team delivers this work, interpreters are available and the service has developed a support pack for foster carers to use when caring for children and young people from a range of countries. ISL continues to provide support to children and young people placed in external placements, ensuring they are not educationally disadvantaged by being placed with independent providers of foster care.

The fostering service does not clearly demonstrate how it matches transracial or transcultural placements. The matching documentation does not illustrate how carers' skills meet the needs of these children or how gaps in the matching will be addressed. Foster Placement Agreements do not include this information. As a consequence, it is not possible to establish the carers are able to meet the needs of children and young people in these placements. This may result in the specific needs of children in relation to identity and language being overlooked.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

Staff in the fostering service are committed to enabling children and young people to maintain links with their families. Arrangements for contact are established at the outset of the placement, are clearly recorded and adhered to. Foster carers receive training on the function of contact and how to support it effectively. This learning is reinforced in supervision sessions and training on attachment theory. Foster carers support contact arrangements in a variety of ways. They may supervise contact, use contact books to build communication with parents or record information on the outcome of contact for the child or young person. These practices in supporting contact enable children and young people to develop more positive relationships with their families which can promote their emotional well-being and ability to form healthy attachments.

The work of the service to involve children and young people in consultation about their day to day care and about the development of the fostering service is exemplary.

The Children in Care Council is now well established. Known as the 'Who Cares, We Care Council' it raises awareness of issues for looked after children and young people, carries out consultation with other looked after children and young people, organises participation events and brings about change. The young people on the council have organised showcase events to recognise achievements of children and young people and their foster carers. They have carried out large scale consultation exercises with children and young people to find out what matters to them. They

work alongside professionals on issues such as bullying. They are directly involved in the children's services department through participation in interviewing the applicants for Director and Heads of Service posts. They meet with members of the Corporate Parenting Board which offers an opportunity to educate and influence on matters which affect children and young people in foster care in the county.

The influence of the 'Who Cares, We Care Council' has resulted in improvements to the review process which allows children and young people to participate more meaningfully in the reviews. It has brought about changes in the role of the independent reviewing officers who are now available throughout the year to listen to the concerns of children and young people. The council has led changes to the provision of summer activities to allow more children and young people to participate. The success of the council has led to plans to introduce similar models of participation and influence for UASC and care leavers.

Those taking part in the 'Who Cares, We Care Council' and other forums are developing confidence and self-esteem which will serve them well in their social relationships, educational settings and as they move into independence.

Most children and young people responded in surveys that they are always or usually listened to by their foster carers. The fostering service has demonstrated determination to involve children and young people on a day-to-day basis in decision making and development of the service. The views of children and young people are regularly sought through questionnaires and one off events. The service promotes the use of advocacy and independent visitors to provide an additional voice for the child or young person. Increasing numbers of children and young people are becoming involved in their own statutory reviews. Children and young people feel their foster carers listen to them and they are able to have a say in their day-to-day care.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

Foster carers are well equipped to meet the needs of young people moving towards independence or semi-independence. They attend training on preparing young people for adulthood. They help young people to develop the social, domestic and working skills which they will require in adult life. They strongly advocate for young people to receive additional support required to make a successful transition. Increasingly, foster carers are maintaining placements for young people beyond their 18th birthday to allow them to benefit from the same support their peers have as they enter young adulthood and face the emotional and practical demands of caring for themselves.

Worcestershire County Council's Aftercare Service, the fostering service and the looked after children teams have developed a strong working partnership. As a

result, young people begin supported planning for adulthood at an appropriate stage. Pathway planning is generally strong and involves the young people and foster carers. Improvements in the numbers of care leavers living in appropriate accommodation and in the numbers in employment, training or education at 19 years old indicate the increasing effectiveness of the service. The Aftercare Service has ambitious plans to improve all outcomes for young people and is continually developing new services to support this. Following the good results of the introduction of a training flat the service has plans to develop further flats where young people can try out independent living with some support before making final decisions about their future accommodation.

The Aftercare Service also supports a number of initiatives designed to support care leavers to achieve their potential. These include partnership with a local university, university taster schemes, bursaries and accommodation support for higher education, mentors, designated tutors in further education colleges and various employment training programmes. A number of young people stated during the inspection that this type of support and the commitment of their foster carers was raising their ambitions and encouraging them to achieve their full potential.

Although foster carers are aware of their responsibility to prepare young people for independence, the handbook which provides guidance to them is out of date and factually incorrect. As a result, it does not support foster carers in meeting the needs of young people.

Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

Worcestershire Fostering and Kinship Service employs sufficient numbers of qualified, competent and knowledgeable staff. They are managed by equally able and qualified managers. Lines of accountability within the organisation are transparent and understood by staff. All staff are expected to maintain their professional development through continual training and regular supervision. As a result, foster carers are assessed and supported by staff with the skills to meet their needs.

The fostering service undertakes to provide a range of support to foster carers, including supervision, training and support for formal and informal networks. These are delivered in practice. Foster carers are very satisfied with the levels of support they receive from fostering social workers and from the ISL team. Of foster carers responding to surveys 92% indicated they receive good or outstanding support from the fostering service to meet the needs of children and young people. Typically foster carers agreed with the view that, 'I have received excellent support from my supervising social worker.' Foster carers believe this level of support helps them to meet the needs of children and young people placed with them more effectively.

Monitoring practices are adequate and generally pick up areas which need to be addressed to raise the quality of care provided to children and young people. The children's services performance monitoring reports supplement this to provide

statistical information on performance. This informs decisions about where improvements or changes are required to improve the quality of care to children and young people.

The fostering service has a clear Statement of Purpose which informs children's families, social workers and foster carers about what they can expect from the service. This contributes to informed decisions about the placement of children and young people with the service's foster carers.

The service approves and supports increasing numbers of kinship carers ensuring more children and young people are able to be placed in foster care with members of their own family. Kinship carers receive supervision and can attend foster carer support groups. They can access the same post-approval training offered by the service to all foster carers. Kinship carers feel increasingly supported by the service to meet the needs of the children and young people they care for. Children and young people in kinship care access support services, including ISL, in the same way as others in foster care. This allows them to have the same opportunities and support for good outcomes as other children and young people. The development of the kinship care element of the service has been demanding but the additional support to these carers, children and young people promotes greater stability in the placements and greater likelihood of good long term outcomes.

There are a number of areas where the fostering service does not perform so strongly. These weaknesses could undermine the effectiveness of the service.

The guide which children and young people receive is not suitable for most children of primary school age or for children and young people who have alternative methods of communication. As a consequence, children and young people may not have good information about what they should expect from the service or their foster carers. This may, in part, explain why a third of children and young people said in surveys they did not know how to make a complaint.

The foster carers' handbook has a number of areas where it is out of date, inconsistent or inaccurate which have been identified in this report. It does not support the good practice of foster carers.

A compliant foster care agreement is not in place for all foster carers. This forms the basis of the foster carer's contract to work in line with the service's requirements and the needs of the foster child. The weaknesses in the agreement may lead to confusion about the responsibilities of the foster carer which could, in turn, have an impact on the care provided to children and young people.

The fostering service's records are sometimes inconsistent and are not comprehensive. There are gaps in information in some registers and key documents. The difficulty navigating the records and finding information does not support the effective functioning of the fostering service's activities.

A number of professionals who work alongside the fostering service agreed with the

view of one that there is a, 'limited choice of carers when it comes to matching a child with appropriate carers.' Although the fostering service recruits and supports effective foster carers, there is a recognised shortage in some types of carers. For example, all UASC are placed with independent fostering providers and there are limited numbers of foster carers to meet the needs of children and young people from minority ethnic backgrounds. As a result some children and young people are not offered the opportunity to live with Worcestershire County Council foster carers.

The promotion of equality and diversity is satisfactory. The service has excellent practice in ensuring each child or young person is supported to meet their full potential in education, to access leisure resources in the community and to live fulfilling lives. The service ensures foster carers are aware of their responsibilities to promote equality and diversity in their home and community and to address issues of discrimination faced by children and young people. The pool of foster carers is not representative of the looked after children population in the county. This inhibits the capacity of the service to match children and young people to foster carers with similar backgrounds. The matching process lacks sufficient rigour to demonstrate foster carers can meet the needs of children or young people placed in transracial or transcultural placements or how gaps in the matching will be compensated for.

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 each foster carer is provided with appropriate information regarding the arrangements for giving consent to the child's medical or dental examination or treatment (breach of Regulation 17(3)(b))
- ensure the foster carer is provided with a written health record for each child placed in their care; this is updated during the placement and moves with the child (National Minimum Standard 12.4)
- ensure before making a placement the responsible authority enters into a written agreement (the "foster placement agreement") with the foster carer relating to the child, which covers the matters specified in Schedule 6 (breach of Regulation 34(3), Schedule 6)
- ensure each child or young person placed in foster care is carefully matched with a carer capable of meeting their assessed needs (National Minimum Standard 8.1)
- ensure the foster placement agreements contain specific reference to elements of

matching which were taken into consideration in agreeing the placements and identify areas where foster carers need additional support to compensate for any gaps in the match between the child and the carer (National Minimum Standard 8.4)

- ensure safe caring guidelines are provided for each foster home. Specifically, the safe caring guidelines should reflect the specific needs of individual children and young people placed with the foster carer (National Minimum Standard 9.3)
- ensure evidence is provided to show safe caring guidelines are cleared with the child's social worker and explained clearly and appropriately to the child (National Minimum Standard 9.3)
- ensure full and satisfactory information is available in relation to all persons working for the purposes of the fostering service in respect of matters in Schedule 1 (breach of Regulation 20(3)(d), Schedule 1)
- ensure each child has access to foster care services which recognise and address their needs in terms of religion, ethnic origin, language and culture (National Minimum Standard 7.2)
- ensure there are clear written requirements for what is expected of foster carers in terms of preparing children and young people for independent or semi-independent living (National Minimum Standard 14.2)
- ensure the children's guide is produced in different formats to meet the needs of different groups of children (National Minimum Standard 1.5)
- ensure the fostering service's written guidance to carers accurately reflect the Statement of Purpose (National Minimum Standard 1.6)
- ensure the service enters into a written agreement with all approved foster carers covering the matters specified in Schedule 5 (breach of Regulation 28(5)(b), Schedule 5)
- ensure a case record is maintained for each foster carer of each placement with the foster carer in compliance with Regulation 30 (breach of Regulation 30 (3)(a))
- ensure records specified in Schedule 2 are maintained and kept up to date (breach of Regulation 22(1), Schedule 2)
- ensure an up-to-date, comprehensive case record is maintained for each child or young person in foster care (National Minimum Standard 24.1)
- ensure the fostering service has a recruitment policy and strategy aimed at recruiting a range of carers to meet the needs of children and young people for whom it aims to provide a service. (National Minimum Standard 17.5)