

# Walsall MBC Fostering Service

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

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<b>Unique reference number</b>	SC058401
<b>Inspection date</b>	14/09/2010
<b>Inspector</b>	Chris Fuller / Mary Timms
<b>Type of inspection</b>	Key

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<b>Date of last inspection</b>	10/12/2007

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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

Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council is committed to the development of a comprehensive fostering service to children and young people and their families. The local authority aims to recruit, assess, train and support foster carers from as broad a representation of the community as possible, in order to meet the diverse needs of young people. The fostering service provides temporary, permanent and short-term break placements. The service has 217 fostering households who are providing 320 approved placements for children and young people.

Foster carers receive the Fostering Network recommended allowances and all, except family and friends foster carers, have access to fee payments on a Payment for Skills scheme.

### Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

The management, staff and foster carers demonstrate a commitment to the development of the service and providing good quality of care to looked after children. The service is due to enter phase two of a process of realignment. This process resulted in the loss of posts and a review of the functions and operation of the service.

There are significant strengths in the service and considerable progress has been made in service delivery. Staff and foster carers highly value the Walsall fostering service and are well motivated and committed to providing good quality care to children and young people. Staff teams work well together and network closely with other professionals and agencies to provide therapeutic, educational and health support to children. Foster carers, family and friend carers, and short-term break carers all demonstrate a strong commitment to children and young people, and their role as foster carers. Young people feel safe and well cared for, speak with confidence about the foster carers who look after them.

### Improvements since the last inspection

At the last inspection, Ofsted found 11 major shortfalls. The service has taken action to fully meet all of these.

The service has significantly reduced the number of exemptions and variations through implementation of a rigorous process for matching and monitoring of any placements outside of the approval range. A robust recruitment process is in place to ensure that no staff commence employment prior to satisfactory checks being in

place. This includes a tracking process to ensure Criminal Records Bureau checks are renewed every three years. Safer recruitment practices ensure that all required checks are completed for fostering panel members prior to them commencing attendance at panel.

A senior practitioner has been appointed to ensure that short-term break foster carers are provided with appropriate supervision, training and support. Following the re-alignment of the fostering service in September 2008 all foster carers are now supervised by an experienced and qualified social worker. A senior practitioner post for family and friends as carers was created within the re-aligned service so that the needs of these carers in respect of training and support could be assessed and met. Similarly, a senior practitioner post was created in the recruitment and assessment team to quality assure assessments.

There is a system in place for all work undertaken with foster carers and young people to be recorded and monitored by a manager. All foster carers have an up-to-date foster care agreement and understand their roles and responsibilities. An effective system of arranging pre- or post-placement meetings has been implemented so that foster placement agreements are discussed and signed by all relevant parties.

In addition, the fostering service demonstrated their commitment to compliance and development of the service. Good progress has been made in respect of provision of health care plans and health information to foster carers and the fostering service. A robust system for monitoring health and safety requirements has been implemented. Strategies are in place to ensure that all children and others in the household are safe through effective implementation and monitoring of safe care plans. Panel meeting minutes have improved to clearly reflect any concerns raised and reasons for recommendations. There are clear detailed records of annual unannounced visits to foster carers homes. The children's guide has been revised and produced in different formats so that it is readily accessible to children and young people at different ages and stages of development.

## **Helping children to be healthy**

The provision is outstanding.

The service makes excellent arrangements to provide foster care that meets children's health, physical, emotional and social development needs. This is demonstrated through training for foster carers in a broad range of health care issues. In addition, specialist health care training is provided in a range of topics, such as medical practices, sexual health issues, substance misuse and attachment theory. This means foster carers are well informed and understand the health care needs of young people.

Health care issues are monitored through supervision, this means any changes or issues are identified and foster carers are supported in progressing the health plan. Each young person has a health care plan developed from a comprehensive health

assessment. Young people have direct access to information and support to enable informed participation in decisions about their own health care. A young person stated, 'my carers take me to the optician, dentist and to see the doctor regularly and when I feel poorly.' Clear chronological records are kept of all health care appointments and treatment, which means a full medical history is being maintained.

Foster carers are aware of healthy eating and promote this with young people. Foster carers encourage young people to join them shopping, planning and preparing meals so that they can develop their personal and social independent living skills. Young people are very well supported to engage in a wide range of activities that promote their general health and well-being.

Young people are able to access a wide range of specialist health services, such as children and adolescent mental health services, consultant paediatrician, consultant psychotherapist, sexual health agencies, alcohol and drug misuse. The excellent networking between the fostering service and health services ensures young people may access services to promote their health and well-being. For example, the district nurse works well in partnership with fostering service to provide training to foster carers in respect of medical practices for disabled children.

The fostering service has demonstrated it has maintained the outstanding service in respect of health and continued to improve resources and facilities. For example, the health advisor in the transition and leaving care service and health advisor with youth offending team both provide specific support to children and young people. In addition, psychotherapist services are highly valued by foster carers and the fostering service. There is clear evidence this support promotes the emotional health and stability of placements; achieving positive outcomes for children and young people.

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

The provision is good.

The fostering service and its foster carers demonstrate they keep young people safe, by providing warm and safe environments.

Foster carers provide warm comfortable homes for young people placed with them. Generally young people have their own bedroom, but where children share bedrooms this risk assessed and carefully considered to ensure young people are kept safe and their needs and wishes are considered. Young people reported that they felt safe within their foster homes and that foster carers met their needs well. Appropriate annual health and safety checks are undertaken by a dedicated person and the findings can be considered as part of the foster carers' annual review. Safer caring plans are completed and personalised so that they are meaningful to the young people in each placement.

The fostering service ensures that as much information is obtained at the time of referral, including a risk assessment to enable a young person to be matched with appropriate foster carers. Foster carers confirm that every effort is made when

placing young people to ensure there is a suitable match with young people already in placement. Where transracial placements are made any shortfalls in meeting their ethnic, social and cultural needs are met; for example linking with other suitable carers, facilities and resources. In addition, the placement remains under review and is monitored through supervision, review and panel processes.

The fostering service can demonstrate that foster carers have a very good understanding of protection of young people. This is established through raising awareness of vulnerability of young people at the initial assessment stage reinforced through training and regularly monitored during supervision. An extensive training programme is available for carers includes child protection, allegations of child abuse against foster carers, HIV, positive handling, self-harm, sexual exploitation and behaviour management. There is a whistle blowing policy specifically for foster carers and safeguarding and child protection is covered in the Children's Workforce Development Council training. Foster carers have clear guidance in their handbook about managing challenging behaviour and receive additional support and guidance if this is needed. There are formal management systems in place for recording and reporting of all allegations of neglect or abuse of a child in foster care. However, the monitoring of these systems does not always sufficiently address the threshold for, and timeliness of reporting these events to Ofsted, but this shortfall does not place young people at risk.

There is also clear guidance for foster carers regarding reporting any child protection concerns and the action to take if young people are missing or go absent without authority so that they are kept safe. Young people are enabled to express any concerns or issues through a range of independent people in addition to their foster carers.

Extremely good progress has been made with improvements the service's recruitment procedures. A thorough, efficient and robust recruitment process ensures staff and foster carers are suitable to work with children and young people. The vetting systems are exemplary. Confidential information is stored securely and further safeguarding checks are carried out every three years. Effective systems ensure that references are verified with the person providing the reference. Similarly, fostering panel members files are well organised and hold all the relevant information.

The fostering panel has clear written policies and procedures efficiently implemented regarding the handling of its functions. There have been changes in the panel chair and membership providing a well experienced informed membership from a broad range of different agencies and backgrounds. Panel administration is very well organised with information provided in a timely manner. Foster carers are made welcome and enabled to contribute to the meeting. Panel members are all given the opportunity to contribute to discussions and formulating the recommendations. Panel has effectively developed the process for the quality assurance of assessments, the running of the panel and the fostering service.

## Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The fostering service has raised the profile of equality and diversity leading to improvements to service delivery. The fostering service clearly outlines its equal opportunities and valuing diversity policy in the foster carers handbook. There are a wide range of courses available in the training programme that increase knowledge and understanding, such as disability awareness; promoting cultural identity; sex and relationships 'Speakeasy'; meeting the needs of dual heritage children; understanding the cultural needs of Black and Asian children; supporting asylum seeking and refugee young people and their families.

The placement referral process, foster placement agreement, post placement meetings ensure equality and diversity issues are central to the needs of the child. Where possible matches are made to ensure the child is appropriately placed. Where this is not possible due to capacity best matches are sought and any shortfalls are addressed.

The fostering service are mindful of and realistic about the resources they have in respect of placement availability for children from different ethnic backgrounds. Where transracial placements are made, this arrangement is kept under review and if appropriate children can be moved to alternative appropriately matched placements.

The complex needs panel for children with disabilities enables key staff within children services to assess children's needs and ways of supporting them. The fostering service provides some placements for young people with disabilities.

The local authority is proactive in promoting equality and diversity and are hosting the cultural and diversity conference which is an annual celebration for the West Midlands authorities. There are strong links with the youth service and black and ethnic minority groups to maximise engagement of involvement of the children and young people in the event. The service consulted with foster carers earlier in the year and hopes to develop understanding and raise our consciousness in terms of what it feels like to be a child from a minority ethnic community in its broadest sense and particularly what that experience is if you are also a child in care.

Foster carers awareness is raised through Childcare Workforce Development Council modules and specific courses relating to equality and diversity. The child care practices of foster carers promote inclusion and consideration of the individual young people. The fostering service actively reflects upon its practice and is outward looking in working with external agencies to develop its practice. Work is being done with Wolverhampton University about the role of foster carers and promoting the achievement of children.

Improvements to the marketing and recruitment process, reinforced through induction training, highlight the expectation of foster carers to be actively involved in promoting the learning and education of young people. Their responsibilities in this



area are clearly stated in the foster placement agreement and may include escort and transport to school. Young people benefit from consent to school trips and outings being agreed and provided at the placement planning meeting.

The local authority has been innovative in introducing the virtual school and has embedded this service to provide positive outcomes for young people. Education professionals applaud good communication stating there is tremendous working together with fostering service, staff and foster carers to promote good outcomes for children and young people. The virtual school is highly valued as providing support to children from 3 to 16 years and also for those out of county. A young person stated, 'The virtual school help me. My carers help me with my homework and helped me learn to read.' There are proposals to extend this to the virtual college for 14 years upwards. Foster carers and young people value the service provided and benefit from a wide range of additional educational resources and facilities. The personal educational plan format and structure has been reviewed within the past year so that all children and young people's contribute and their progress is carefully monitored and supported.

While there has been a reduction in the number of short-term break foster carers the service is well aware of the need to recruit and develop this aspect of the service. They are in strong position to develop this service with a dedicated staff member who has worked hard over the past two years to promote this specialist service. Following consultation with the carers, specific training has been established and they all receive regular supervision. Foster carers feel very well supported with appropriate equipment and resources. The foster carers are extremely well experienced and able to provide an extremely responsive and flexible service to a range of young people.

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

The provision is good.

The fostering service and foster carers proactively promote young people's contact with their family. They regularly consult with young people and encourage them to express their views regarding their care. The fostering service makes in-borough placements where this is appropriate and possible unless an assessment specifies an out-of-borough placement is required; this promotes and facilitates contact arrangements.

The fostering service has improved the understanding amongst foster carers of the expectation to facilitate contact through initial recruitment, assessment and training processes. Foster carers recognise the importance of providing transport or escort to the contact to facilitate the event and the support they can provide to young people, where this is part of the agreement.

Young people's contact arrangements with their family are clearly outlined and included in the foster placement agreement which is completed for new placements. The fostering service consulted with foster carers and has been very proactive and

supportive in addressing shortfalls in the arrangements to facilitate contact. For example when placing social worker is unavailable, off sick or not allocated and contact arrangements change. This benefits young people who value clarity and consistency in their contact arrangements.

Young people highly value the support provided by the outreach team in helping them to deal with their feelings about their birth families and how they manage contact. The outreach team is extremely creative and innovative using a wide range of activities and strategies, such as one-to-one work, group work and activities. These include senior and junior respect groups, Team "a", Council4kids, the Duke of Edinburgh scheme, 'Lots of Leisure', the pantomime, camping and a number of consultation groups. Foster carers say, 'Outreach is fantastic in supporting young people with life story work and outings like Brynitsillio. They provide a direct service to young people.'

There are a wide range of methods used and opportunities provided for consultation with young people and their families. Unannounced visits are made to the foster carer's home which provide an opportunity to meet with young people and seek their views. All young people are encouraged to attend reviews and any statutory meetings so that they can contribute to decisions about their future. While not all young people choose to attend they generally complete the feedback forms to contribute to decision making about their future. The fostering service and the fostering panel consider the feedback provided about foster carers during their annual reviews. In addition the young people may be consulted about particular aspects of service development, such as the virtual school services or celebration of equality and diversity.

Young people are encouraged to share any concerns or issues with the foster carer in the first instance. They are provided with clear information of how to make a complaint. There are a wide range of formats and opportunities introduced to give information to and listen to young people, such as the Council4kids. Young people are also encouraged and supported to contact the National Youth Advocacy Service if they require independent advice and support. In addition the service has trained eight care leavers to be mentors to support young people.

## **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is satisfactory.

The fostering service ensures that their foster carers are able to help young people develop personal, social and independent skills necessary for adult living. The fostering service works well with the transition and leaving care team to achieve positive outcomes for young people and care leavers. Management monitor the progress that young people make in their transition to further education and learning, employment and independent living. Specific events careers events are organised primarily for care leavers and those on supported housing schemes and young people using the youth offending service. They promote opportunities for training and work experience. An exemplary scheme has been implemented whereby

eight care leavers have been employed at the local authority via the positive action scheme.

Young people confirm that they are encouraged by foster carers to develop their personal and social skills for independent living. Foster carers are well supported and trained so that they have the relevant skills and knowledge to support young people in the transition process to adulthood. In recognition of the different ages and stages of development of young people, a strong area of improvement has also been through provision of targeted support to young people post-18 years to enable them to remain with their current carers where this is in their best interests.

Foster carers encourage young people to access local community services and resources to develop their social relationships. They are taught about their right and responsibilities of being a part of a family and the community. Young people confirm they are involved in decision making processes about their future.

## **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, the placement referral, assessment and matching process, staff recruitment and support, training and supervision of foster carers. Foster carers are well supported to meet the full range of children and young people's potential needs.

The fostering service has a clear Statement of Purpose and foster carers' handbook to provide information to foster carers and parents. The service has developed a children's guides in different formats which contain useful information for young people regarding their stay with foster carers.

There is a very strong management structure within the fostering service, with all managers being suitably qualified and experienced. They provide positive guidance and support for staff within the service. There has been a reduction in the staffing numbers and staff do feel stretched and welcome the implementation of an effective and equitable workload management. Development of the service is ongoing to ensure it is efficient and effective while providing value for money.

The management team have been effective in addressing actions and recommendations from the previous inspection and make every effort to achieve compliance and develop the quality of the service. They are creative and open to innovation of new ideas and methods that improve services to foster carers and achieve positive outcomes for young people.

They have a quality assurance role in monitoring the quality of agencies commissioned for assessments, independent fostering agency placements and contact services. The management have a range of monitoring mechanisms in place

for the audit for panel members, monitoring of assessments, quality of supervision of carers and progress for young people through supervision.

The managers have good working relationships and understanding each others role. This is also reflected in effective team working; for example bringing the recruitment and marketing team in house and retaining the initial assessment worker for the new foster carers for twelve months.

Excellent management and support of foster carers is delivered with an efficient and effective risk assessment of the levels of supervision to be provided. Additional support for foster carers is valued through the family support workers, outreach team and specialist psychotherapy services.

There is an extensive training programme and courses available to staff and foster carers. There are some opportunities for joint training. The training programme for carers is of an extremely high standard and is regularly reviewed to ensure it is fit for purpose.

Case records for children and young people are thorough and comprehensive. Foster carers and young people's files are generally kept in good order and are well organised with all the required information. The management regularly audit files during staff supervision to ensure records are being maintained appropriately. The fostering service holds records either electronically or on paper and work is progressing towards electronic files for the fostering service that are compatible with the mainstream systems. The fostering service has electronic registers for both foster carers and young people and these are compliant with the regulations.

The fostering service has seen a considerable growth in the number of family and friends foster carers. A senior practitioner co-ordinates and provides good levels of support and supervision to family and friend carers. Following consultation there has been considerable improvements to the assessment, training and support provided to family and friend carers to ensure they can provide suitable care to the young people placed with them.

## **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 if any of the events listed in column 1 of the table in Schedule 8 takes place, the registered person, shall without delay notify the persons indicated in respect of the event in column 2 of the table (breach of regulation 43 (1))
- ensure notification of the instigation and outcome of any child protection enquiries involving a child placed by the fostering service provider to Ofsted

(breach of regulation 12(1)(c))

- ensure management systems are in place to collate and evaluate information on the circumstances, number and outcome of all allegations of neglect or abuse of a child in foster care. Scrutinise this information regularly. (breach of national minimum standard 9.5)