

# Shropshire Council Fostering Service (Children's Placement 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

Shropshire Council's children's placement service recruits a wide range of placements to meet the family placement needs of the great majority of children looked after by the local authority. At the time of the inspection, the fostering service provides 205 foster carers approved by Shropshire Council in 108 households; 11 are single carers and there are 149 children placed with foster carers approved by Shropshire Council.

The children's placement service is located in new offices near Shrewsbury and is responsible for providing a service to the whole of the county. This team is collocated with the 'stay safe' team and the looked after children education and health team.

Foster carers receive the fostering network recommended allowances and most have access to fee payments on a 'payment for skills' scheme, currently payable on four skill levels.

### Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This was an announced inspection undertaken by one Ofsted inspector over five and half days. The inspection looked at the key fostering national minimum standards under the 'Every Child Matters' outcome groups. The previous actions and recommendations were also assessed during this inspection.

The overall outcome judgement is good. The fostering services ensures good quality services for children. Children are provided with good support and care from skilled people who are committed to meeting their needs. Children's needs are met in a manner which promotes their physical, emotional, social and psychological needs and in environments where they feel safe. This is a well managed fostering service. Approved foster carers and family and friends enjoy their work by supporting children to develop a sense of belonging with adults that they know and trust.

### Improvements since the last inspection

At the last inspection visit in September 2007 the fostering service was set 13 actions and 10 recommendations. All of these areas have now been fully addressed.

In respect of the required actions the fostering service has addressed these by improving the system to ensure that all consents for medical treatment are now clearly documented in the child's case notes.

All health and safety checks are completed because there is a formal assessment in

place which is monitored via the foster carer's annual review. Similarly, this is in place for family and friends foster carers.

The fostering service has now improved the written foster placement agreement so that foster carers know and understand their role and level of expectation from the fostering service. This is underpinned by the fostering placement plan which sets out the part played by the foster carers in relation to the arrangements made for the child's health, education, contact with his or her family and where appropriate, the child's behaviour management plan.

There is a clear system in place for exemptions which the fostering service strives to keep to a minimum. Where a request has taken place for the third time this is then referred back to fostering panel and a full review of the foster carer's conditions of registration takes place.

The working relationship with the stay safe team is now more effective in response to any allegations related to foster carers. The process is transparent and the fostering panel provides clear scrutiny and is robust in response to all key decision making.

All the required levels of checks and references are now in place in respect of all panel members for the fostering service.

All children are in education and the fostering service has clearly monitored, reviewed and helped to improve academic attainment by improving the work taking place with the health and education department.

The children's guide literature has improved because it now contains the details of Ofsted.

The fostering service has a register of all the children in placement who are placed with foster carers.

Family and friend carers now receive regular supervision and formally receive an annual review. Similarly there is equal access to training events which are the same for approved foster carers.

In relation to the recommendations made these have now been fully addressed; The fostering service has improved the level of scrutiny with the staff recruitment and selection process.

Children's risk assessments are reviewed and monitored more thoroughly.

The fostering service was asked to improve the safe caring guidelines for the foster carers and also for friends and family foster carers. This has now been fully addressed.

The on-call arrangements have now improved for foster carers with new

arrangements are in place. There is an emergency duty team and this is a team of social workers who provide out of hours support and have access to on-call managers. In addition, there is a foster carer 24 hour helpline and this is a telephone support service run by experienced foster carers to support other foster carers.

There is a new policy in place on how the fostering service provides support to children who are not in full-time education. All are in full-time education either in mainstream school, special education school, pupil referral unit, further education college, university or employment training.

The role of the two support workers is clearly defined and externally managed to meet the needs of the fostering service.

All approved foster carers and family and friends carers receive an annual unannounced visit in addition to their regular supervision visits.

There is a clear system in place for boarding out allowance provided to family and friends carers. This is provided in an accessible format so that all carers know and understand what allowances are provided which is detailed in the 'information for prospective foster carers'.

## **Helping children to be healthy**

The provision is good.

The fostering service ensures that foster carers help children to receive good health care which meets their needs. Children have a clear opportunity to benefit from family life and this includes their physical, emotional and social development. Children are able to take advantage of the nurturing and caring environments provided by foster carers. One foster carer commented, 'The fostering service helps me look after children in our care because of the training and the support from the link worker'. All children have their health needs reviewed because there is an effective designated health care partnership. The health needs of children are reviewed via the looked after children's review process. Foster carers are very successful in ensuring that children are registered promptly with a local doctor, dentist and optician following the placement move. All health assessments are child focused, child friendly and sensitive to the child's individual preferences, needs, disability, gender and culture.

Foster carers understand the purpose of the health care assessment which is to promote children's physical and mental health and to inform the child's health care plan. The health assessment is always conducted by a consultant paediatrician and the subsequent annual health check is completed by the looked after children's nurse. Children benefit because their health needs are being thoroughly assessed. There is immediate access to comprehensive health services and health professionals and foster carers advocate on the child's behalf. Children can choose where health assessments take place. For example, in the foster carer's home, a health clinic or in their school environment. This flexible approach is as a result of the strengthened

links between primary care services and public health.

The continuing health care partnership aims to maximise opportunities across agencies to improve the universal health of children. For example, all children have a 'medical passport' which is required to be updated at all medical appointments. As a result, children benefit because there is an accurate and comprehensive profile of the child's health needs and how these are being addressed. In practice, this means that children have access to 'child and adolescent mental health services' which include therapeutic services that are community based and clinical services. For example, the fostering service has direct access to two senior mental health practitioners who are colocated in the same building as the fostering service. Children benefit because there is no waiting list and the support involves liaison with a range of professionals and working in partnership with the foster carers. There is a clear aim to gradually develop a substantial relationship with the child in order to address their needs. In addition, training is available for foster carers which can assist them to meet children's health needs such as child development, attachment and health and hygiene.

Children and foster carers also benefit from the number of initiatives that the local authority provides for keeping children fit and healthy. For example, free membership to leisure and swimming facilities.

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

The provision is good.

The fostering service is being managed effectively, efficiently and resourcefully. The service is committed to safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children. Managers in the fostering service continue to be suitably qualified and experienced. Changes in the management structures have resulted in greater consistency regarding communication and staff supervision.

There is careful selection and vetting of all staff working with children in the fostering service and renewal of Criminal Records Bureau checks are completed every three years. As a result, this means that children's protection is enhanced. In doing so, the fostering service adopts a consistent and thorough process that ensures staff are suitable to work with vulnerable children.

The selection and recruitment of foster carers prioritises the safety of any child that they may care for. The recruitment of potential applicants is undertaken initially by a specialist external agency where there is an excellent system to respond promptly to enquires and provides meetings with the fostering service. For example, applicants are provided with a comprehensive information pack and are also invited for informal meetings with the fostering service. Once an applicant has agreed to proceed then a programme of formal training begins with the 'skills to foster' and this is followed by a formal assessment, generally lasting no more than six months. Foster carers' assessments are completed using the 'British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) assessment template which is a standardised way of collecting, analysing and

presenting information about prospective foster carers. All social workers are professionally trained to use these tools effectively.

Since the last inspection the fostering service has further developed its 'payment for skills' scheme which is linked to carers' competencies, experience and post-approval training. This enables the service to match the identified needs of the child more with suitable foster carers to minimise placement breakdown. The effectiveness of matching processes ensure that children are experiencing positive emotional attachment, resulting in good adjustment to foster care. Children are additionally protected because the fostering service keeps disruption of permanent placements to a very low level. This is because of the very good levels of monitoring and reviewing of foster placement households.

The fostering service provides a wide range of foster placements with approved foster carers to meet the needs of children who are looked after by the local authority. The length of children's placements vary and range from emergencies, short-term placements and long-term placements. For example, placements are offered to pre-adoption babies, teenagers exhibiting challenging behaviours, respite care and placements specifically for disabled children. One senior manager commented, 'We believe that the success of foster homes in offering positive outcomes for children is closely allied to a thorough assessment process for prospective foster carers, combined with high quality training programmes, high levels of support and continuous monitoring of those who are approved'.

The fostering service provides a thorough, robust and transparent investigation process in respect of allegations. The fostering service regularly updates the procedures when 'learning' has taken place which necessitates such action. The fostering service's effective relationship with the 'stay safe' and looked after children services promotes positive outcomes for children. All staff and foster carers are provided with up-to-date training related to child protection and safeguarding. As a result, they know and understand their vital role in the promotion of children's welfare.

The fostering panel meeting for September 2010 was observed for this inspection. The fostering panels are organised robustly, efficiently and effectively. This ensures that good quality decisions are made about the approval of foster carers, in line with the overriding objective to promote and safeguard the welfare of children in foster care. Panel members attend annual training and this keeps them updated in respect of legislation and best practice issues. Since the last inspection, the panel is now a single agency panel and is no longer a joint panel with an independent fostering agency. The diverse membership of panel allows all aspects of approvals to be considered. For example, the panel member with education expertise also line manages the directorate's multi-agency looked after children team. This is a good example of 'joined up' working arrangements in place. The panel has applicants attending when they are being considered for approval and for their first annual review. In addition, there is one sub panel who completes the foster carers' reviews and subsequent reviews.



A mandatory training panel meets regularly to review training attendance records for all fostering households. Each link worker attends the panel to talk through progress with the foster carers they supervise and relevant action plans are recorded. This mechanism keeps training high on the agenda and is an audited track of foster carers' mandatory training.

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

The provision is good.

The fostering service is committed to meeting the objectives of individual children's care plans and achieving outcomes for each child placed which are consistent with the provisions of stability and security. Fostering arrangements ensure that diversity and equality are taken into account with children and their families. Crucially, issues relating to race, culture, religion, gender and disability are positively supported within the fostering process. These areas are valued in the planning process and decision making which supports the individual placement.

The fostering service has a highly evolved working relationship with the looked after children education and health team. A senior official rigorously tracks all foster children's schooling and makes sure that schools are appropriately resourced to support the children's learning. Children benefit because good outcomes are being achieved from their continuity of schooling. If required, children have access to one-to-one tuition and these arrangements are exceptional. For example, qualified teachers work as tutors offering 10 hours support to individual children. One foster carer commented, 'When the young person needed extra maths tuition for GCSE there was no problem with funding'. One senior manager explained, 'The results and outcomes for 2010 show good results from the cohort of 23 students, 21.8% achieved 5 or more A\* - C GCSE including English and Maths'.

Children placed with approved foster carers are actively encouraged to attend school or any other educational provision identified to meet their needs. Children are further encouraged to fulfil their educational potential by completing schoolwork in their foster homes. Children partake in extra-curricular activities. In addition, children pursue individual leisure interests commensurate with their age and abilities and develop friendships within their schools and local communities.

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

The provision is good.

The fostering service makes sure that each child in foster care is encouraged to maintain and develop family contacts and friendships as set out in their care plan. One social worker commented, 'From the outset prospective foster carers are told the importance of family and network contact for looked after children and that this contact may include contact within the carer's home, subject to a risk assessment. Foster carers are prepared through the home study process and pre and post approval courses, specifically 'Working in partnership with Parents' and 'Personal

Safety', among others'. In addition supervising social workers develop this work further through individual sessions with foster carers covering a range of policies, procedures and guidance.

Contact requirements are recognised within the foster placement plan and agreement. Foster carers record all outcomes of contact arrangements and how it impacts upon the child. For example, contact venues are closer to the foster carer's home, which means that the child does the least amount of travelling. A designated team called the 'contact team' have a remit to provide direct support for supervised and non-supervised contact visits. One foster carer stated. 'It has greatly improved in the last year. Now we have the social worker engaging with the same contact worker, this in turn means that parents are in contact with the same worker'. This process is greatly appreciated by foster carers, birth families and also the child because it means that there is a 'constant' worker that is known to them involved in the contact visits. Overall, foster carers are really impressed with the improvement.

The main focus of the fostering service has always been the 'skilling' of foster carers. One social worker commented, 'We feel that any positive contribution made by young people in their childhood and adult life has its foundations in how they are parented. Our foster carers are provided with support, training and mentoring which is designed to maximise their existing skills and develop new ones'. The fostering service ensures that children's opinions and those of their families and others significant to the child, are sought over all issues which are likely to affect their daily life and their future. Regular visits by case managers ensure that the views of children are directly sought. Children are encouraged to be fully involved in their reviews and core groups meetings.

Children have access to the independent visitor and advocacy services available through a Children's Rights Officer. The fostering service has three consultation forums and this includes the 'consultation group' involving care leavers, 'children in care council' group and a 'children of foster carers' group. All three are involved in providing feedback to the fostering service on the way decisions are made and how services are run.

The fostering service has developed the use of a multi-media, interactive consultation tool involving the children. As a result, the children have created a video to inform others about being in care and this is also being used successfully as a training tool. Young people have been further involved with the fostering services training programme.

Other further initiatives include the rolling out of 'total respect' training with young people who have experienced the care system and are now providing this training. Young people are part of the fostering panel membership and looked after children are also routinely involved in staff and foster carer recruitment.

## Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

Foster carers are supported in helping children develop skills, competence and knowledge necessary for adult living. This is achieved as a result of the strong working relationships with the leaving care team which includes social workers, personal advisors and tenancy support workers. One senior manager commented, 'There is concentrated specialist support to all foster carers approved for young people 14 years and above'. This includes pathway planning and transitional planning for disabled young people which means that key decisions are being made on sufficient information. For example, all young people reaching this stage have in place a 'needs assessment', which underpins their pathway plan or transition plan. There are a range of practical tools used which demonstrates a real commitment to preparation. Young people have access to a 'training-leaving care flat' where a comprehensive training programme is provided. This is another 'stepping stone' to building a clear assessment about the practical skills and development in preparing young people for independent living.

The fostering service supports continuity of care for young adults. This is made possible because young people can remain in their foster home and into adult life through the revision of payments via supporting people initiatives.

## Organisation

The organisation is good.

This is a well organised and effectively managed fostering service which provides positive outcomes for all children who are in foster placements. Both the team manager and nominated manager have extensive knowledge and professional experience within the fostering field.

The recruitment of new foster carers has broadly met target expectations in the past two years but this has been challenged with the unprecedented pace of increase in the 'looked after children' population during the same period. Despite this, the fostering service is continuing to progress with a placement commissioning strategy with the overarching aim of securing a diverse range of accommodation provision in order to facilitate good quality placement 'matching'. Imaginative approaches have been utilised by the fostering service. These include redesigning the advertising literature in readiness for a mini foster carer recruitment campaign and utilising the use of local radio throughout a whole year. These initiatives have contributed positively to the increase of foster carer numbers.

Foster carers, children and significant stakeholders have access to a clear statement of the aims and objectives of the fostering service and of what facilities, services and specialist services are provided. In addition, the published children's guides are accessible across the age range for younger children through to adolescence. This is supported by the comprehensive range of policies and procedures that help guide

staff and foster carers with providing good quality outcomes for children.

Children and foster carers are provided with appropriate support. This is because all of the social workers are suitably qualified with a formal qualification in social work. The team manager commented, 'We have a very settled social work team all complementing each other and the fostering service likes to recognise social workers and foster carers' very positive attributes to the fostering task'. The team establishment includes two senior practitioners, seven full-time social workers, one part-time social worker, one staff and development officer and two fostering support workers who coordinate the duty service and provide direct support to families. For example, targeting support for placements becoming unstable and extensive preventative assistance to stop placement breakdowns. All the social workers currently employed have a wide range of experience in the field of childcare and family placement. In addition, some staff have other relevant qualifications including the social work team and business administrative support.

All approved foster carers are provided with a foster care agreement which confirms the expectations of them and the support that they can expect from the fostering service. All foster carers receive one unannounced visit which takes place to ensure that foster carers are providing appropriate care to children. The fostering service has a successful strategy for working with and supporting carers. All foster carers receive monthly visits apart from children's placements that are long term and these placements are visited every six weeks. Foster carers are contacted during the intervening weeks via telephone by the fostering social worker. Foster carers can also make contact with the fostering service for advice or support. The arrangements for duty, senior managers on-call and out of hours support are managed efficiently. This means that foster carers know and understand the help they can receive when they require specific support, advice or help.

The fostering service training programme for foster carers focuses on developing carers to meet the needs of looked after children. Although not unique to looked after children, training addresses drug and alcohol misuse, offending behaviour, sexual health, mental health, educational achievement and significantly, isolation in adult life.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The fostering service is committed to equality of access to the services that it provides. The fostering service responds positively to applicants interested in becoming foster carers from a range of backgrounds, cultures, sexuality, marital status and religion. This provides maximum opportunities to meet the diverse needs of children requiring foster placements. Children in foster placements understand their rights in respect to being accommodated and being looked after by the local authority. One senior manager commented, 'We believe that every child has the right to be free from oppression and prejudice to enable them to develop their self-esteem, self-control, self-respect and the respect for others'.

Foster carers' case records and children's records demonstrate the progress that has been achieved in the foster placement. The completing of the case records and

auditing maintains a good and consistent standard. This is because records are scrutinised during the social worker's supervision sessions, periodical audits by the team manager and the independent scrutiny by the local authority. There is a formal process to provide feedback about good practice and to assess areas for improvement.

Family and friends foster carers and the children placed with them are well supported by the fostering service. Families and friends are afforded the same quality of social work support, training and the same age related allowance payments.