

# Warwickshire County Council Fostering Services

Inspection report for local authority 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

Warwickshire Fostering Service provides a wide range of foster care services for children and young people for Warwickshire's children. This includes short or longer term care, permanent care, parent and baby placements and short stay care specifically for children with disabilities. There is a teenage placement scheme where the foster care can extend beyond 18 years under 'Staying Put' family care. A wide range of carers are recruited to serve the needs of children and young people in the local authority area. They include family and friends as carers.

Warwickshire is a large shire county that comprises five district councils. The fostering service performs some tasks centrally, but the delivery and provision of services and support to both foster carers and children and young people placed within the service, are provided locally in fostering teams. These are led by five fostering team leaders on a district basis. A sixth team, the central fostering services team based in Rugby focuses on the marketing, recruitment, preparation and training of foster carers. The emergency duty team also maintains specific carers who can provide emergency, out of hours and very short-term placements. The family Link service provides short break care which, like the emergency team, operates on a countywide basis.

The service has approximately 333 approved foster carers and approximately 381 children in placements. A further 54 children are placed with family and friends who have been fully approved.

### Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This inspection was announced and covered the new national minimum standards and regulations. It also looked at the two recommendations made at the last inspection in 2008 under the previous standards. This service meets the majority and exceeds many of the national minimum standards. There are shortfalls in health and medication training for foster carers and documentation of medication, and in planning for safe care.

The service meets young people's health needs and keeps them safe. Young people have positive relationships with their carers. The service offers excellent opportunities for young people to develop interest in hobbies and leisure and provides equally exceptional support for success in education. The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. The service helps young people to develop skills for independence and has developed an innovative 'Wright2becared4' scheme where some children have the opportunity to stay with foster carers beyond the age of 18. The organisation is professionally managed to ensure that the functions of a

fostering service are efficiently and effectively carried out. Staff like working in the service and for the local authority and consequently their longevity is a significant strength for the children who benefit from consistent care and knowledge. Children's well-being is at the heart of the service and drives the focus for continuous improvement.

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

The previous inspection found shortfalls in the range of carers available to provide care for children with disabilities. The short break service is now well resourced with plenty of carers for the children who wish to use the service. There were previously occasional issues with the frequency of foster carer supervision and support. This has significantly improved with the overwhelming majority of carers talking very positively about the level and availability of support.

### **Helping children to be healthy**

The provision is good.

The fostering service promotes children's physical, emotional and psychological health and makes arrangements to ensure they are able to access the health services they need. There is a high level of support from the service and external agencies which ensure positive outcomes for all children, particularly for those with complex health needs. Health records contained within the new placement plan fully reflect children and young people's individual needs, for example, in respect of culture, identity and disability, consents and authorisations for treatment. Foster carers have a good understanding of how to translate cultural needs into individual health and personal care. For example, they have good resources to help them provide healthy diets which meet medical and cultural needs. All children and young people participate in decisions about their health through the review process and in the day-to-day care delivered by foster carers; children say they feel well cared for when ill. The service provides guidance in health, administering medication and first aid, but not as part of foster carers' initial core training. While the service expects foster carers to make health and medication recordings, this does not happen routinely.

Children live in foster homes that provide a healthy environment and the space they need. Those with disabilities have the privacy, equipment and safety barriers appropriate to their age, development and abilities. The fostering service makes an unannounced, annual inspection of each carer's home to ensure that the environment is consistently safe, clean, secure and well maintained, and that vehicles used by carers are safe. Children over the age of three usually have their own bedroom. Sometimes they do have to share, and there is proper consideration given to individual needs and factors such as bullying, history of abuse or abusive behaviour. The service listens to children's wishes when they make the decision to share bedrooms. Foster homes are adapted to be child-friendly and give access to a range of activities which promotes children's development.

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

The provision is good.

Children feel safe and are safe. Children understand how to protect themselves and are protected from significant harm, including neglect, abuse, and accident. Children and young people live with foster carers who help them to understand how to protect themselves and live safely. There is excellent involvement of foster carers' own children in the discussions about keeping safe. All children have the opportunity to talk alone with staff and know how to contact safeguarding organisations such as ChildLine. The fostering service works in partnership with other agencies to protect children. There is a good range of immediate and further training and information about safe caring and protective behaviours. The service expects written plans for this; however, these are not always specific or detailed about particular children in placement. For example they may not refer to actual known risks, such as fire, behavioural challenges or how carers will meet intimate care needs safely in practice.

Fostering social workers help foster carers understand the triggers and implement strategies to reduce the incidence of children going missing. The service works creatively in accordance with local police and safeguarding protocols for children missing from care. This means that children rarely go missing and if they do, they return quickly, are protected as far as possible and responded to positively on their return. One child said, 'It's nice waking up knowing I won't be kicked out and going downstairs to be greeted by a smile.' These arrangements provide important safeguards for children.

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

The provision is outstanding.

Children enjoy warm, affectionate and supportive relationships with their foster family. They know that their privacy and confidentiality is important. Foster carers provide a skilled family framework for positive communication and ordinary childhood behaviour. A parent of a child in foster care said, 'they allow him enough freedom to learn about himself and life, respecting what is important to him first.' Fostering social workers make sure that carers understand the behavioural and additional needs of vulnerable children. They have full information about a child's history and are sensitive to the impact this may have on behaviour. The service is committed to avoiding criminalising children and promotes good practice through supervision. They understand how issues such as bullying can relate to difference. Carers are aware of the impact of their own feelings towards challenging behaviour and there is training for all carers in positive control and de-escalation. This helps children feel comfortable in their placements.

Children really enjoy their interests, develop confidence in their skills and are supported and encouraged to engage in leisure activities. Children talked of how life in their foster family gave them an interest in sports and how they appreciated being involved in family holidays. The carers contribute to the placement plan which makes

clear the detail, consents and financial support for children's equal access to activities and leisure pursuits. This helps children develop friendships and ordinary relationships in the community. Foster carers have an excellent focus on making sure that children maximise life experiences and opportunities. Children say they really feel cared for in this way.

The fostering service continually strives to promote the education and achievement of children as valuable in itself, and as part of their preparation for adulthood. A professional connected with the service said foster carers, 'demonstrate a general desire to act as advocates and champions for the children in their care.' The service trains and supports foster carers to value education and maintain regular contact with school and engage to advocate for the child. One child said, 'They encourage me and helped me boost my education.' They hold up to date information about progress and attainment. There were many examples of foster carers spending time and resources to help children succeed. Several young people had just completed A-level courses and were glad of the support while studying, the stability they got from being in a settled family and to can get on with their life. The service supports young unaccompanied asylum seeking children very well, through a special Virtual School group that meets weekly to help with socialisation, homework and promoting English. This coordinated care is only part of a range of extensive support to children to achieve their educational potential and have high aspirations for their future. A parent of a looked after child described their child's excellent educational support, 'I take my hat off and give credit to the fostering service.'

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

The provision is outstanding.

The local authority has very well established principles of consulting with children and an excellent children's advocacy and rights history. Children know that their views, wishes and feelings are taken into account in all aspects of their care and contribute to the development of the Young People's Charter, guiding principles for children's services. One young person talked about the difficulty of speaking about carers' abilities when still in placement; the service is actively considering how best to take account of children's wishes, feelings and views when monitoring foster carers.

Children know what plans have been made and are they kept informed of decisions and changes, even when they do not agree. Foster carers help them to understand why it may not be possible to act upon their wishes in all cases; and know how to obtain support and make a complaint. Many young people said that they feel part of the family and have warm relationships, often in long-standing placements. They have a positive self-view; develop emotional resilience and knowledge and understanding of their background through personalised care. Carers promote self-esteem when they enable children to exercise choice about the food they eat, clothes and personal items. Children can make and prepare their own food and snacks within an ordinary family context. Carers encourage social integration and really help children to get involved in local communities. Foster carers support children's

constructive contact with their parents, grandparents, siblings, half-siblings, wider family, friends and other people who play a significant role in their lives. This keeps them in touch with their family and community and promotes a sense of positive family identity. One child said, 'I can be part of two families, my birth family and my foster family.'

Children are welcomed into the foster home and leave the foster home, where possible, in a planned and sensitive manner which makes them feel loved and valued. Children feel part of the family and are not treated differently to the foster carers' own children living in the household. Children and young people said they absolutely develop a sense of self and belonging in their placements when the match is right. This careful planning means that children stay in stable family placements that meets their needs. One group of brothers and sisters said, 'You feel like you're a normal person. It's not them and us, it's all of us.'

## **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is outstanding.

The service takes its corporate parenting responsibilities extremely seriously. This is clear, in the wider organisational drive, and in foster carers' initiative and care, as they want the best for the next stage in children's lives. Children speak positively of the impact of the good care from foster families and one child said, 'They help me through the hard things.' The fostering service makes sure that children are prepared for and supported into adulthood so that they can reach their potential and achieve economic well-being. Foster carers provide all young people with creative opportunities to learn independent skills, appropriate to their age and development. Children can remain with carers into adulthood in 'Staying Put' placements, after their eighteenth birthday. This is excellent practice. Knowing that they have a future with families beyond leaving care helps children to put down roots and feel a sense of belonging. One young person described his foster parents as 'incredibly supportive'.

## **Organisation**

The organisation is good.

There is clear and accurate written information for children, their parents, foster carers, staff and placing authorities about the services and facilities provided. In practice, the fostering service's operation meets the aims and objectives described in the Statement of Purpose. There is an excellent strategy for recruitment, assessment and supporting foster carers. This ensures they are suitable and able to meet the needs of children in their care. This strategy is rooted in good knowledge of local needs and relevant research, and in assessing the current and future needs of children. The service recruits and retains foster carers who feel a terrific sense of loyalty and pride in their local authority and demonstrate an enormous commitment to vulnerable children. One parent described how reassured she was by the calibre of her child's carers, 'It's having them looking after my son that makes it just bearable



not having him with me.'

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. The fostering service prioritises equality and diversity and the rights of individuals and minority groups in their support to foster carers. A parent of a looked after child said that the foster carers, 'Respect my child's individual needs and her cultural and ethnic background.' This policy, procedure and good practice helps children to know that their individual needs are valued. The fostering panel and decision maker work effectively to make timely, quality and appropriate recommendations and decisions in line with the overriding objective to promote children's welfare. The effective and resourceful management of panel focuses on the priority given to promoting improvements, equality and diversity and an integrated safeguarding approach. Annual reviews of carers take place within timescales. Review reports are detailed and demonstrate that appropriate checks are taking place. The fostering service gathers the right information about children needing placements, including their wishes and feelings, so it can match the right carer for each child. Strengthened attention to matching through the new placement plan maximises the likelihood of stable placements. The short break service works particularly well in partnership with children's families in making the best choice of foster carer.

The manager, responsible individual and team leaders of the fostering service are suitable to work with children and have appropriate skills, experience and qualifications to deliver an efficient and effective service. There is a confident, stable senior tier of managers within the local authority and the fostering service that results in a confident and stable fostering service. The service has sound robust recruitment processes for staff and foster carers and carefully selects staff, fostering households, volunteers and panel members. Assessments of foster carers also robustly considers equality and diversity.

There is an excellent range of training available for foster carers. The programme has been developed with input from children and foster carers themselves so that is directly relevant to outcomes for children. There is a variety of face to face, on line and self-study delivery so that training is accessible to all. The training and development framework is used as the basis for assessing foster carers' performance and identifying their training and development needs. However, despite this, fewer than 50% of carers have completed core training and it does not cover some essential matters such as first aid and administration of medication. This means some carers may not have these qualifications at an early stage in their fostering career. The service is aware and implementing financial incentives for foster carers to improve this take up rate.

Children and foster carers receive a responsive and reassuring service from staff, panel members and decision makers, who have the competence to meet their needs. The learning and development programme for staff and panel members equips them with the right skills and keeps them up to date with good practice. The service values the skills of experienced foster carers as professional colleagues who support their peers, deliver training and assess quality under the National Vocational Qualification scheme. Fostering social workers give carers, including family and friend carers, good

support and supervision in order to care properly for children placed with them. Carers describe, 'excellent support, guidance and training.' Relationships within the service are excellent and foster carers are confident that they can ask for help and specialist advice. Fostering staff at all levels get professional supervision and appraisal; and can access specialist advice to provide a comprehensive service to children, including legal advice. This helps everyone do the work they need to do to improve children's lives.

Allegations and suspicions of harm are handled in a way that provides effective protection and support for children and the person making the allegation, and at the same time supports the person who is the subject of the allegation. District fostering teams deal robustly with concerns about foster carer competency. Foster carers and social workers are trained and confident with Local Safeguarding Children Board procedures and able to respond to allegations promptly. The service has a strong child protection steer from the panel's decision maker who is head of safeguarding services.

The fostering service is managed ethically, effectively and efficiently, delivering a service which meets the needs of its users. There are proper systems for managing financial viability, serious incidents, allegations or complaints, notifications to Ofsted and ensuring quality. Local authority corporate parenting representatives monitor the outcomes of the service and staff at many levels describe themselves as having responsibilities as 'pushy parents' for children in need. The service is to restructure but has protected front line staff, carer allowances and has increased investment in other key areas. The premises and administrative systems are suitable to enable the service to meet the objectives of its Statement of Purpose. Foster carers are clear about the fostering service's payment structures and the payments due to them are fair and paid in a timely way.

The records of the fostering service are clear, up to date and stored securely. However, the service does not currently have a system for monitoring the quality or the level of record keeping about children by foster carers in the home. This does not routinely happen at supervision visits and so there is some inconsistency in practice. The local authority has begun to implement the new Care Planning Regulations and this is having a positive impact on the quality of information available to carers about the children they care for. This new plan demonstrates a more inclusive and child focused process in which the daily routines of children with foster carers are described, and full information, consents and responsibilities are made clear.

## **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 that foster carers are trained in health, first aid and administration of medication; and they keep a written record of record of medication, first aid and

treatment given to children during the placement (NMS 6)

- ensure foster carers implement a proportionate approach to any risk assessment and safer-care practice. For example that they implement the fostering service's policy to have safe-care plans that relate specifically to each child in placement; particularly for intimate personal care and risk factors for placements of children with challenging needs or disabilities. (NMS 4)