

Warrington Borough Council Fostering Service

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

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About this inspection

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

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

The inspection judgements and what they mean

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

Service information

Brief description of the service

Warrington Borough Council fostering service provides local children with local family placements. It currently supports 108 approved fostering households to look after 153 children. This includes 20 families who provide short break care to children with disabilities and 32 family and friends carers.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

The service was assessed against the key national minimum standards during an announced inspection. The fostering service is effectively managed and provides children with safe foster homes where they are well looked after. Minor weaknesses were identified under three outcome areas and 12 good practice recommendations have been made.

Improvements since the last inspection

Action has been taken regarding the three requirements made following the last inspection. Two were in relation to the provision of relevant information to foster carers so that they would be fully aware of the needs of the children placed and could address them appropriately. One was in relation to the timeliness of foster carer reviews, to ensure that foster carers were continuing to offer suitable placements to children. The service now ensures that relevant written information is provided by the placing social worker at the time of the initial planning meeting, if not before. Monitoring systems ensure that all foster carer reviews due each month are identified and held. Foster carers receive the advice and support they need to look after children.

Thirteen recommendations were also made. Two of these were in relation to Staying Safe. The service has addressed them by ensuring that all foster carers have safe caring policies and by improving the matching of foster carers with children. Children's safety and welfare are better promoted because of this action. One recommendation in relation to Being Healthy has been met with the result that foster carers remain focused on children's health needs and regularly and frequently review them. Two recommendations relating to Making a Positive Contribution have been partially addressed and plans are in place for children to participate in the production of a new guidance leaflet about complaints. Further reference to how the service is consulting with children is made in the body of the report.

The remaining recommendations were in relation to improvements needed in the organisation and management of the service. These have been met with the result

that foster carers receive improved support and guidance. Monitoring procedures have improved so that the manager can better assess and deal with any shortfalls in the service. Better communication with placing social workers has led to a greater understanding of each other's roles and more sharing of information. This results in children having more stable and better supported placements.

The service has gone some way to providing foster carers with better access to training and records of training attended are maintained on foster carers' files.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

Children and young people receive support to lead healthy lives. They live in healthy environments and their health needs are identified and actively promoted. They are enabled to access medical services easily. Annual health assessments carried out by the Looked After Children nurse ensure that children's health needs are routinely monitored and addressed. Children are referred for specialist treatment or advice as necessary. Children and young people's mental health needs are addressed through the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service. Foster carers receive support, training and guidance to meet children's health needs. An electronic counselling service has been made available to children and young people and there is agreement for the recruitment of more therapeutic social workers in recognition of the need to help children and young people understand and deal with their emotions.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The service is led by a competent, qualified and well supported manager who ensures that systems in place to promote children's safety are followed in practice. Any allegations and complaints are investigated thoroughly and are referred to the safeguarding team where necessary. This ensures that children and young people live with foster carers whose practice is scrutinised and monitored carefully. Action is taken to address any shortfalls identified in the service that could impact on children and young people's safety and wellbeing. Annual health and safety checks on foster carers' homes ensure that children live in a safe, suitable environment. Individual safe care policies help foster carers to focus on the particular needs of the children or young people they are looking after so that individual safety needs are addressed. Associated risk assessments resulting from particular children and young people's known behaviours are not always completed. Not all foster homes can comfortably accommodate the children and young people who live there.

The service pays attention to matching children and young people to foster carers and to supporting carers to meet their identified needs. Where there are shortfalls in the ability of the carers to meet a child or young person's needs, additional services are provided to address this. Foster carers are provided with sufficient information to enable them to care for children and young people safely. They know and

understand the service's policy on corporal punishment and restraint and can access training on behaviour management so that children and young people's challenging or antisocial behaviour is appropriately dealt with.

Recruitment and selection procedures for staff and panel members are designed to keep children and young people safe and are followed in accordance with the local authority's policy. Only one reference is taken up on internal applicants and up to date Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks are not always in place for internal applicants prior to transferring to the service. The current procedures are therefore not sufficiently robust to ensure that those working for the fostering service are suitable to work with children and young people. The quality of information held on panel members' files is inconsistent although checks done on new members are robust.

The fostering panel is organised efficiently and effectively so that good quality recommendations are made in relation to the approval and review of foster carers. The panel thereby promotes and safeguards children and young people's welfare. Where the agency decision maker does not accept the panel's recommendation, good evidence to support his decision is available and shows that the welfare of the children and young people is paramount in his decision making.

The service has forged good links with other teams within Children's Services and with other local agencies. This results in better working together to safeguard and promote the welfare of children and young people .

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The service recognises the need to provide children and young people with a choice of carers from diverse backgrounds. It implements recruitment strategies aimed at attracting carers from different minority groups. Success has been limited and the current range of foster carers accurately reflects the local population.

The service provides carers who value diversity and promote equality. Asylum seeking children and young people live with carers who promote their welfare and respect their culture. Access to interpreters is provided for children and foster carers. Children and young people learn about other cultures and appreciate differences.

Children and young people with disabilities receive support to lead as full a life as possible. Close liaison is maintained between the foster carers and the parents so that children and young people benefit from having their needs clearly understood. Foster carers who look after children and young people with special needs are appropriately trained so the health and welfare of the children and young people are promoted.

Children and young people's education is prioritised. Good liaison with schools, education staff and connexions ensures that children and young people receive the

educational support they need. Increasing numbers of children and young people are achieving educational success and are developing good self esteem because their achievements are valued. Young people who choose to attend college or university are provided with a stable placement and financial and other incentives so they have every opportunity to succeed.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Children and young people are encouraged and enabled to maintain contact with their families and friends in accordance with their care plans. In the interests of the child contact may be supervised and a written record maintained.

Consultation with children and their birth families is not routinely carried out before the foster carer review so they are not given the opportunity to comment on the standard of care provided other than during statutory reviews of children and young people. Most children and young people have the opportunity to contribute to their care plans and to comment on all matters that concern them although their comments are not always recorded in review minutes. Young children and those with communication difficulties have less opportunity to express their views. The service is committed to improving consultation with children and is working closely with the National Youth Advocacy Service (NYAS) to this end. The service provides foster carers and staff who understand the importance of listening to children and who take their views seriously. Any complaints or allegations made by children are comprehensively investigated.

The service is supported by local businesses who work with the service to provide children and young people with the opportunity to get involved in community projects.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is outstanding.

Good corporate parenting ensures that young people who are approaching adulthood are provided with opportunities to develop life skills, to attend college and to engage in apprenticeships leading to permanent work. Young people who need stability and support beyond the age of 18 can remain with their foster carers for a further year if this is in their best interests. Children and young people receive support and encouragement to achieve their dreams and ambitions and are prepared for independent living.

Children and young people benefit from living in households where there is sufficient funding to meet their needs. Financial allowances are sufficient to provide pocket money, adequate clothing and to enable them to participate in hobbies and activities of their choosing. Additional funding is made available for activities such as school trips and music lessons. Children and young people have free access to leisure

centres within the borough and the service is working closely with leisure services to provide looked after children with more opportunities to develop healthy lifestyles.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The service provides a high standard of care to children and young people in accordance with its Statement of Purpose. A well presented children's guide is available but it is not in a format suitable for all children.

The qualified and experienced workforce is well led and sufficient in number. Staff are clear about their roles, responsibilities and lines of accountability. This results in the provision of an effective support service to foster carers and children.

A dedicated recruitment officer focuses on the recruitment and retention of good quality carers and works with other local authorities to raise awareness and hold joint recruitment campaigns. It has become increasingly difficult to recruit foster carers locally, however, the service continues to employ imaginative and varying recruitment strategies so that a sufficient number of suitable local fostering households are available for children and young people.

The manager and the panel effectively monitor the quality of assessments so that children and young people are cared for by skilled and competent carers. The fostering service works closely with other professionals so that children and young people have ready access to services from health, education, training and leisure services. Monitoring systems ensure that almost all foster carers are reviewed annually but slippage has occurred when staff have been off sick. This puts the welfare of children and young people in those placements at risk.

A training programme is available for staff and foster carers to equip them with the skills they need to provide good quality care for children and young people. Training records are held on individual files. Although two adults in a fostering household may be registered as carers, it is not unusual for only one to attend training. Individual records do not show which of the two foster carers has attended. Foster carers' access to training is limited because most training events take place during the working day. The service has begun to address this by providing selected training events at weekends and during the evening. Foster carers are constantly encouraged to attend training events that will better equip them to look after the children and young people in their care.

Individual children and young people's files are securely held by the placing social work teams. Staff from the fostering service can access them but usually rely on copies of placement agreements, care plans and other relevant reports to be provided by the social work teams. These are stored on the foster carers' files, where available. The local authority is in the process of transferring to an electronic recording system and some records are held electronically. Currently, social workers within the fostering service do not have easy access to all relevant written information held on children and young people's files. Foster carers usually receive

background information about children and young people at the point of placement and placement plans are drawn up within 72 hours. Placement agreements are signed wherever possible, giving foster carers clear expectations of the placement.

An effective monitoring system ensures that records are well maintained and highlights any shortfalls.

Some foster carers, children and young people are not familiar with the service's policy on access to records.

Detailed accounts of complaints and allegations are recorded on individual foster carers' files. Separate logs bringing together data on allegations and on complaints are also maintained but not all complaints have been entered in the log.

The service has a high number of family and friends carers and recognises the contribution they make to providing a good service to children and young people. The assessment and approval process takes account of pre-existing relationships between carers and children or young people and by becoming involved at an early stage, the service ensures that family and friends carers have a clear understanding of their role and responsibilities to the looked after child or young person. They work co-operatively with the service to meet the child or young person's needs. Children and young people living with family and friends carers have access to the same levels of support as other looked after children.

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 children and young people know how to access information held about themselves, taking into account their age and understanding (NMS 12.4, NMS 24.6)
- ensure that social workers within the fostering service have easy access to an up to date comprehensive case record for each child (NMS 24.1)
- provide the children's guide to the service in different formats to meet the needs of different groups of children (NMS 1)
- ensure training records are held for both foster carers in a family when they are both approved (NMS 23)
- ensure that all complaints are entered into the complaints log (NMS 25.13)
- ensure that current CRB checks that have been taken up by Warrington Borough Council are in place before a new member of staff joins the service and update these every three years (NMS 15)
- make sure that a suitable bed is available and that the foster home can comfortably accommodate all who live there for the planned duration of the placement, before a new child is placed with carers (NMS 6)
- ensure that each foster home is free of avoidable hazards that might expose a

child to risk of injury or harm and ensure safety measures are taken in line with the needs of stage of development (NMS 6)

- ensure that staff responsible for the recruitment of new staff to the service are familiar with and adhere to the requirements of Schedule 1 (NMS 15)
- obtain feedback about the foster placement from children placed and their parents before each foster carer review(NMS 11)
- ensure that approval of all foster carers is reviewed annually in line with Regulation 29 (NMS 21)
- facilitate foster carers' attendance at training events by holding more training at convenient times and locations (NMS 23).