

# Cumbria County Council Family Placement Scheme

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

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<b>Unique reference number</b>	SC057378
<b>Inspection date</b>	18/06/2010
<b>Inspector</b>	Sarah Oldham / Jacqueline Malcolm
<b>Type of inspection</b>	Key

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<b>Date of last inspection</b>	13/06/2008

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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

Cumbria Social Services Fostering Service is part of the overall service delivered to children, young people and their families. The service currently has 225 approved fostering households providing a potential 556 placements. This comprises carers who provide long and short term care, short breaks to families who have children with disabilities, friends and family carers and specialist foster carers.

In the 12 months leading up to March 31st 2010, 34 new fostering households were approved. Seventeen of these were family or friends placements for specific children.

There are two locality based fostering teams in Cumbria. The West covers Workington, Whitehaven and Carlisle. The South covers Barrow and Kendal. The central placements team is situated in Carlisle. The service is managed by a county manager, supported by 3 team managers who work in close cooperation with the adoption service.

### Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This was an announced inspection and included a review of all the key national minimum standards. This is a large fostering service and has recently been restructured in line with other services within the county. It provides a good standard of care and support to the majority of children and carers. The service has been through a period of restructuring. Previously, a number of management posts had been filled on an interim basis. The restructuring is now complete and all management posts are filled on a permanent basis. This has resulted in greater stability for the staff and service.

Outcomes for children and young people are good. Staff and carers are supported well. Foster carers receive regular visits and have a clear understanding and knowledge of the care and support required by the young people. There is effective communication between supervising social workers and the children's social workers and foster carers. This enables positive outcomes for the young people to be promoted. The development of the central placements team has enabled a consistent approach to placements made and enables the service to have an overview of any shortfalls in the service for foster carers to care for specific groups or ages of children. This enables the service to focus their resources for recruitment of carers more effectively. The panel is effectively chaired, robust and thorough. Consultation with children and young people is positive and innovative, including their involvement in making and recording a CD and an animated film to launch the new pledge for Looked After Children.

The service has a clear development plan in place. An independent reviewing officer has been appointed to undertake foster carers annual reviews. However, some of the reviews have not taken place within the required twelve month timescale. Foster carers training is ongoing and all carers have undertaken safeguarding and child protection training. However, some carers updated safeguarding training is overdue. A new training strategy is being introduced to address this. Most young people say that they are aware of how to make a complaint. However, some young people reported that they were unsure of how to do this. Information is detailed within the children's guide. These are in the process of being updated to be more specific for different age groups. Recruitment of staff is generally robust. However, when staff who already work for the authority apply for another job within it, a second reference is not sought. Therefore this does not ensure that there is a consistent approach to recruitment and selection for all staff.

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

The service has made good progress on a number of the previous actions and recommendations made at the last inspection. At the previous inspection, four actions and four recommendations were made. The actions related to the service ensuring that exemptions (permitting household numbers to exceed the original agreement) were robust, that foster carers had up-to-date foster carer agreements reflecting current approval, that the views of young people were sought for foster carers reviews and that the service had appropriate numbers of qualified staff to support carers effectively. The service has addressed three of these actions effectively. Seventy-two exemptions made in the period of April 2009 to March 2010. However, on examination it was found that not all of these were necessary, for example, some related to a change of approval: Therefore the exemption process had not been clear. Foster carers have foster care agreements in place that are current. The service has an independent reviewing officer undertaking foster carer reviews. The views of the young people in placement are taken into account at carers annual reviews. These are gathered prior to the foster carer review and enable young people to effectively contribute. The service has been through a restructuring process that was ongoing for a substantial period of time. This restructuring has been finalised and management posts are permanent. There is a clear and detailed structure in place to ensure that the service fits into the overall children's service restructure.

The recommendations were: to ensure young people know how to complain to Ofsted should they wish to; the creation of an independent process for foster carers reviews; to ensure that family and friend carers are provided with same level of support as other carers; and for all carers have up-to-date training on safeguarding. The service has detailed the complaints procedure within the Statement of Purpose and the children's guide. However, some children and young people said that they did not know the process of whom they could complain to. The service has commenced independent foster carers' annual reviews. All family and friend carers are allocated a supervising social worker and have access to training and support the same as recruited foster carers. Training for foster carers is ongoing. However, there

is still a shortfall in updated safeguarding and safe care training being held within agreed timescales.

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

The provision is good.

The service promotes and supports the good health of children and young people. Foster carers receive training in health care matters as part of their initial training and have access to further training including first aid. Children's health care needs are monitored by foster carers who maintain records of health care appointments and any other related health care issues. Supervising social workers review these records at each visit as part of the ongoing supervision and support to carers. Annual health care checks are undertaken by a looked-after-children's nurse, school nurses and health visitors. These are recorded within the children and young people's annual reviews. In addition to this the carers have access to the community adolescent mental health service, although in recent months this service has been more difficult to access. In the light of this, and to provide further support, carers have access to the clinical psychologist and team who are providing support to the multi-dimensional treatment foster care programme. This enables ongoing advice and support to be provided to carers.

As part of the assessment and approval of carers, medical assessments are undertaken for potential carers and detailed information is gathered on how carers will support young people with their health care. This includes supporting and promoting healthy eating and lifestyles for children and young people. Supervising social workers ensure, during supervision of carers, that this continues to be promoted. This includes reviewing accidents, illnesses and medication records to ensure that issues are responded to and recorded appropriately. Foster carers annual reviews also establish how the carers support health care promotion for young people. Young people spoken to during the inspection, and individual responses to questionnaires, confirm that they are supported to maintain a healthy lifestyle.

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

The provision is good.

The fostering service is managed by a county manager who is competent, experienced and suitably qualified to lead the service. There are a further two locality managers, a placement manager and specialist fostering manager, all of whom have appropriate qualifications, experience and knowledge to promote good safeguarding practices.

Carers are providing a good standard of care to the children and young people placed, promoting good outcomes for them. The service has reviewed all carers safe care policies to ensure that they are current and provide appropriate information in relation to the children and young people that they have in placement.

The arrangements and responsibility for placing children and young people is held within the fostering service. This arrangement was introduced just prior to the previous inspection and had resulted in some concern regarding short term placements. The introduction of the central placements team has developed the matching process to ensure that all placements made are done so following appropriate matching, and discussion with children's social workers, foster carers and supervising social workers. Following the previous inspection, all family and friend carers were allocated a supervising social worker to ensure that support is provided in line with support for all carers approved by the service. This ensures that all carers receive appropriate support and supervision to support young people effectively.

Foster carers receive training and support to provide safe care. However, some carers have not completed their three yearly refresher training within this timescale. To address this, the service is further developing its training strategy to ensure that all carers have the opportunity to undertake refresher training within timescale. Supervising social workers carry out routine visits to carers as well as at least one unannounced visit a year. There is positive liaison with children's social workers who also visit the families to ensure that any issues of concern are promptly addressed for the protection and promotion of children placed.

Monitoring arrangements are in place to identify any children who are missing from home and appropriate support is provided following their return. The fostering service is clear that restraints are not allowed. De-escalation techniques are used. However, when any form of restraint has been used in an emergency situation, to promote the safety of young people, the fostering service clearly records and investigates these. Allegations against carers and complaints are appropriately investigated.

Recruitment and selection procedures in place ensure that staff recruited to work for the service have the necessary skills, experience and qualification as well as appropriate Criminal Record Bureau checks. However, when staff currently working for the local authority apply for an internal post, second references are not taken up as a matter of course, with a reliance on previous references. This does not ensure a consistent approach to recruitment and selection.

The fostering panel is chaired by an independent experienced practitioner. Members of the fostering panel are experienced and knowledgeable with a high level of expertise in their own areas. This ensures that the panel provides good, independent scrutiny of foster care assessments, first annual review, and matching for placements.

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

The provision is good.

The service has appropriate policies and procedures in place which help to ensure that the needs of children who are disabled, and specific religious and cultural needs, are met. The service recognises the need to provide children and young people with

a choice of carers from diverse backgrounds. It endeavours to recruit carers from a range of cultural backgrounds but acknowledges that this is an ongoing issue and is within their recruitment strategy. The development of the central placements team has enabled the service to commence a clear recruitment and selection programme for the whole of the service. It is envisaged that this will ensure that resources are used appropriately to recruit carers where there is an identified shortage, this includes recruiting carers to care for teenagers and care for children and young people from Black and ethnic minority backgrounds. However, the current range of carers accurately reflects the local population.

The service provides training and support to carers to value diversity and to promote equality. This enables carers to have the necessary skills to promote young people's welfare and to respect their culture.

Educational support for children and young people is outstanding. A 'virtual head' and the looked-after-children education service ensure that every looked after child is receiving a good standard of education. The virtual head tracks the progress of all children and young people who are looked after to ensure that they are making good progress. Additional support is provided in the form of tuition, liaising with schools and further education in ensuring that positive outcomes are achieved. Lap tops are made available and the further development of interactive educational programmes is ongoing. The service also has a letterbox scheme for all children in Year 3 and Year 5. This provides young people with educational books and maths games through the post to further develop and engage young people in education. When practical children live in foster placements close to their own schools to enable them to maintain friendships with peers and for the continuity of their education. However, due to the size of the local authority, this is not always possible. When a young person is placed in a different area and commences a new school, support is provided to the young person and the carers to ensure a smooth transition. Carers are involved in attending educational reviews and parent evenings to further support the young people that they provide care for. Young people spoken to during the inspection were very positive about the support provided to them by their carers, including with education.

Children and young people have access to a range of leisure and recreational facilities. Carers are supportive of young people taking part in leisure activities and support them to access these. During supervision of carers, children's leisure activities are identified and discussed. This enables carers to provide an overview of activities and leisure interests the young person takes part in.

Children with disabilities receive support to lead as full a life as possible. They are placed with carers who have training to enable them to meet the complex needs of individual children and young people. However, some carers say that on occasions there has been a delay in receiving equipment to effectively support the needs of the young people. This is in particular when children grow and the initial specialist equipment is no longer suitable to meet their needs. The share care scheme provides a good service and recruitment of carers to provide this service is ongoing.



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

The provision is good.

The service supports and promotes contacts with family and friends. Individual contact arrangements are identified in placement plans and are taken into account as part of the overall matching process. Foster carers understand their responsibilities in relation to contact and receive training and advice to enable them to effectively support this. Some carers supervise and facilitate contact in their own homes and feel that this is beneficial to the young person.

The service has been creative and innovative in promoting consultation with children and young people. This has included working with a company to develop individual skills with music and promotional work for young people. This has included recording a single and making a film about being a looked after child. Further plans include consulting and developing a range of children's guides that are more child friendly and age appropriate. They are also preparing an animated film to launch the new pledge for children and young people. Young people have the opportunity to contribute to their own care plans and their reviews.

Staff and carers ensure that young people are consulted with regarding their statutory reviews and are able to attend these if they wish to do so. Most young people know how to raise a concern or how to make a complaint. Leaflets and information is made available on a regular basis and details are contained within the Statement of Purpose and the children's guide. However, some young people identified on questionnaires sent to them that they were unsure of the procedure. Further development of the children's guides is planned to ensure that this is detailed in appropriate formats for all ages of children and young people.

## **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is good.

Young people say that that they receive support and help to prepare for independent living and learn how to look after themselves. The service has developed good links with the Pathways service who have developed a range of information for carers to enable them to provide effective support. Foster carers are actively involved in the pathway planning with young people. In addition, young people have opportunities to stay with their current foster carers and there is also a supported lodging scheme in place to enable this.

A recent review of foster carer payments has been undertaken and this identified that there were some discrepancies in payments to carers in different areas within the service. To address this, the payment structure has been updated and is now applied consistently throughout. This has impacted on some carers who identified this on their individual questionnaires. However, the service is making payments in accordance with the national guidelines and is continuing to hold meetings with foster carers regarding the new payment structure.

## Organisation

The organisation is good.

The Statement of Purpose was revised and updated in November 2009 and ratified by elected members in December 2009. Information within it is comprehensive and meets the national minimum standards. The children's guide in place provides information to children and young people. This guide is in the process of being updated to include information in a number of age-appropriate formats.

The children's service has been through a reorganisation, initially in 2008 with the integration of education and children's social care and the development of four localities within the local authority. The fostering service has been restructured and the new structure was implemented in April of this year. Prior to this a number of senior management posts were filled in an acting capacity. The new structure has enabled a clear management structure, with permanent managers in post. The fostering service is managed by the county placements officer who has appropriate experience, qualifications and knowledge to provide effective overall management. Team managers also have the necessary qualifications and experience. Although the service still has some staff vacancies, interviews for staff were being held at the time of the inspection. Staff working for the service are appropriately qualified and experienced.

Social work staff receive good levels of support and supervision in their work from managers. Formal supervision is usually held on a monthly basis or within agreed timescales. This ensures that managers are kept informed of matters concerning each foster carer and the children they care for. Foster carers receive good levels of supervision and records are maintained of all visits, including unannounced visits. Foster carers reviews have now transferred to an independent reviewing officer. This is a new post and due to existing timescales, some carers reviews have not been held within the agreed timescale. Some carers are not aware of the new process and expressed concern about overdue reviews. However, the service ensures that the views of children's social workers are sought and also those of the children in placement.

Foster carer assessments have developed further since the last inspection and overall are of a good standard. The panel adopts a quality assurance function in addition to other systems for the monitoring of assessments.

There has been some decrease in exemptions being made since the last inspection. However, there is still some confusion about when an exemption should be made. This has resulted in some being made when they were not an exemption but a change of approval.

Foster carers receive a good level of support from supervising social workers. This includes regular visits, supervision and training. They also have access to an out-of-hours service. This service is being reviewed to enable greater support to be

provided. Training for carers includes initial skills to foster and the Children's Workforce Development Council standards for foster carers as well as ongoing professional training and development. The fostering service is currently reviewing the training programme to ensure that it provides a comprehensive and diverse training programme providing skills to foster carers to enable them to continue to support children and young people effectively.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The service operates within a framework of anti-oppressive practice. It provides carers who are trained to demonstrate and promote tolerance.

Case records for foster carers and young people's files and administrative records are appropriate and well organised. Records are maintained within files and a computerised system. However the computerised case records for children do not enable the views of children and young people to be clearly recorded in depth, to enable staff and managers to have an initial overview in respect of assessment and planning. Supervising social work staff and children's social workers do liaise directly with children and young people to gain their views.

Foster carer agreements are in place and mostly reflect their current approval.

Family and friend carers all have an allocated supervising social worker and are supported in accordance with national minimum standards. This ensures that they are provided with opportunities to access training and support groups, receive supervision and have an annual review.

## **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 all exemptions for the authority to exceed the normal fostering limit meets the requirements of legislation (Children Act Schedule 6) ( NMS 8.1)
- ensure that there are clear recruitment and selection procedures for appointing staff which follow good practice in safeguarding children and young people (NMS 15.2)
- ensure that each child with a disability receives specific services and support to help her/him to maximise her/his potential and to lead a full a life as possible, including appropriate equipment (NMS 7.6)
- ensure that young people know that they can complain to Ofsted should they wish to (NMS 11.5)
- ensure that the fostering records contain all significant information, this relates specifically to the computerised records, to ensure that there is prominence given to recording the views of children and young people. (NMS 25.1)

