

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

This local authority fostering service supports 154 children and young people living in 121 fostering households. Thirty one children and young people live with family and friends carers.

The fostering service is part of the local authority Children's Targeted Service that has been established within the last twelve months following a re-organisation of children's social work teams. It aims to deliver effective, high quality care to looked after and vulnerable children.

Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

Thirty two fostering households and 15 children and young people contributed to the inspection either through questionnaires or discussion with the inspector. Two fostering households were visited as part of the case tracking exercise. One child's social worker returned a questionnaire. The service was assessed against the key national minimum standards during an announced inspection that took place over four days.

The fostering service is effectively managed and provides children and young people in foster care with safe foster homes where they are well looked after. However, the systems currently used do not ensure the safety and well-being of children and young people who are placed with family and friends carers in an emergency.

Recent and ongoing developments in the service are aimed at providing better information, advice, support and guidance to carers so that they can improve outcomes for children and young people. During this time of change, the service has not managed to maintain a consistently high quality of service and has breached a number of regulations. Despite this, children and young people report they are happy, well looked after and listened to. Fifty per cent of foster carers consider the service provides them with good or outstanding support.

Ten recommendations are made following this inspection and four of these relate to breaches in regulations. The service is aware of all its shortfalls and is already introducing new systems and procedures to address them.

Improvements since the last inspection

Twelve recommendations were made following the last inspection. The service has developed by addressing ten recommendations in full. Children and young people

reported that they know how to access information about themselves. They contribute to the reviews of their current foster carers. A children's guide to the service has been developed for young children to help them to understand about fostering.

They are protected from coming into contact with potential abusers because the service ensures that robust recruitment procedures including Criminal Records Bureau checks are completed before new staff start work. Health and safety checks are carried out at least once a year on each foster home to ensure it continues to provide a safe environment for children and young people to live.

Supervising social workers can easily access children's case records because the service has introduced a computerised recording system. This means they have up to date information about a child's assessed needs. Annual reviews are held on all foster carers so that the service ensures foster carers continue to be suitable to provide children with a satisfactory standard of care. The manager monitors complaints made and the record shows these are addressed in good time. Training records are held on both foster carers where both are approved. This gives the service information about how committed carers are to developing their skills and how well trained they are.

Two recommendations have not yet been implemented. One was to facilitate foster carers' attendance at training events by holding more training at convenient times and locations. A training officer has been appointed and plans are in place to address this recommendation in the very near future. The second is not met. The service does not ensure 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. This means that some homes are over-crowded and sleeping arrangements are not satisfactory for all children and young people in the household.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is satisfactory.

The service provides foster carers with a satisfactory level of support to promote the health of the children and young people. Carers receive basic training in health matters and further training is offered but many carers have not yet done it. Some do not appreciate the importance of keeping health records even though the service promotes this.

Foster carers understand the importance of good nutrition and children report that they have a healthy diet and are encouraged to lead healthy lives. This includes regular exercise and routine health check ups. Foster carers ensure that those with particular health needs receive the treatment they need.

The local authority does not always provide carers with health plans and this means children's health needs may not be addressed because they have not been identified. Foster carers sometimes have no information about the child's health history and this

can impede prompt diagnosis and treatment of a condition. Some carers do not appreciate the need to have and keep parental consent to medication and treatment. Nor do they recognise the importance of maintaining a record of children's health that can be passed on to future carers or parents. Supervising social workers continue to promote good working practices and the value of training.

The service has identified that children and young people's emotional and psychological health needs have not been well met in the past and have worked with the children and adolescent mental health service (CAMHS) to develop a service for vulnerable children. Two specialist CAMHS workers have been appointed to work with children and young people who are looked after by the local authority. They are based in the social work teams so that referrals can be made easily through closer working together and children can receive the service they need promptly. Plans are in place to develop their role to include providing information, advice and guidance to foster carers and social workers. This will enable children's emotional, psychological and mental health needs to be better met. A psychologist has also been appointed but has not yet taken up post.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is satisfactory.

The fostering team manager is suitably qualified to lead the service. Robust recruitment checks are carried out on staff and panel members and this protects children and young people as far as possible from coming into contact with potential abusers. There are, however, shortfalls in agency staff member's files. For example, photocopies of original qualifications are not held in two instances and a full employment history is not held in one instance.

Staff work effectively with foster carers to promote the well-being and safety of children and young people in their care. Health and safety checks and safer caring policies are completed prior to each foster carer's approval and are renewed as necessary. This means that children and young people live in foster homes that are safe and their individual safety needs are addressed. The service supplied foster carers with specialist safety equipment to promote the safety of children and young people with disabilities. However, the service cannot demonstrate that it adequately safeguards children and young people living in emergency placements with family and friends carers. This is because it does not routinely assess the health and safety of the home or consider children and young people's individual safety needs.

There are good systems for matching children and young people to suitable carers when they need long term care. However, matching for short term care is inconsistent. Children and young people are sometimes placed with short term carers without sufficient attention to their needs and to the particular strengths and skills of the foster carers. Children's needs are not always identified. Social workers sometimes do not have the information they need to make an informed decision about whether particular carers have the skills to care for a child or young person referred. This leads to children and young people being placed with carers who are

unable to meet their needs and results in them moving, sometimes frequently, between placements. Several carers expressed dissatisfaction with the way children are moved with little or no planning and insufficient time for introductions to new carers.

Complaints from children and young people and allegations of abuse are taken seriously and addressed promptly. One young person commented, "I am making a complaint that is being dealt with but there is no major issue". Where necessary, referral is made to the local safeguarding team and the service co-operates with colleagues and partner agencies to safeguard children and young people. Foster carers receive safeguarding training and know what to do if a child or young person makes a disclosure or allegation of abuse to them.

The service provides clear guidance about behaviour management, the use of restraint and the 'missing from home' procedure so that foster carers know how to respond to challenging children and young people and when to notify the local authority of serious incidents. The service recognises that some children and young people demonstrate very challenging behaviours and that foster carers sometimes need more specialist advice in how to meet their needs. To address this, it has recently appointed a psychologist and two social workers who specialise in children's mental health. This means that foster carers can receive good quality information, advice and guidance in managing challenging behaviours and supporting children and young people through emotional trauma.

The current constitution of the fostering panel does not completely meet the Fostering Service Regulations. This means that the range of expertise is limited and this may impede a full and broad discussion of each item. The service cannot therefore be assured that all relevant information is given proper consideration. The local authority is aware of this shortfall and is addressing the matter promptly by recruiting new panel members. The service recognises the need to develop the panel so that it provides more effective and challenging scrutiny of items presented. An independent panel chair has been selected and is currently going through robust checking procedures before taking up post.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The service values diversity. It supports carers to meet children and young people's needs arising from their culture, race, language or disability. It does not always identify their religious needs although there is evidence of these being well met when children are placed with family and friends carers. Foster carers report that they receive training in equality and diversity so they know how to promote a sense of identity amongst children from different backgrounds. Carers of children with disabilities receive additional training so that they can meet their complex health and other needs.

The service promotes children's education and children achieve much better

outcomes than the national average for children who are in local authority care. Foster carers encourage children to attend school and work hard. Children and young people know the value of education. Those with high aspirations achieve well and the service supports them through university. One child said, "my foster parents encourage me to do extra revision, they say", "If you want to be a vet, you have got to do homework". Another child said, "I always get help with education from teachers, social workers and care support workers".

Foster carers attend personal education planning meetings for school aged children and young people. These address children's education needs and identify any additional support required to enable them to reach their potential. The service monitors school attendance and provides a personal education allowance to children and young people to support their education. However, foster carers and children report that although it is agreed in individual planning meetings that the personal education allowance can be spent on such things as guitar or horse riding lessons. It is sometimes not forthcoming and children are still waiting to receive it, more than a year later.

The fostering service works with social workers, Connexions and the education support team to promote children's education. Supervising social workers liaise with other professionals on behalf of foster carers; however, continuing shortfalls in other services mean that children and young people do not always get the support they need. For example, a young person who attends residential school outside of the local authority is not receiving a service from Connexions and despite requests from the foster carer, is not getting the support needed to find a college placement for next year.

Plans are in place to develop the education support service further with the appointment of a virtual head teacher. Closer working with the Connexions service and the development of an apprenticeship scheme is beginning to open up more choice to young care leavers. The new organisational structure gives the fostering service greater opportunity to influence partner agencies and the social work teams. It is anticipated that this will further improve the outcomes for individual children and young people because each one's progress and needs will be more effectively monitored and addressed.

The service provides short break carers for children with disabilities who normally live with their families or long term carers. This service is highly valued and children enjoy their short breaks. The fostering service is aware that there are shortfalls in the provision and have taken steps to improve it. These include the new appointment of a dedicated short break worker who can provide good advice, support and training to short break carers.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The service ensures that children and young people maintain and develop relationships with family members through regular contact. Children's views are given high priority when making contact arrangements. Where necessary, the service facilitates and supervises contact and carers monitor its impact on children. This helps the service to assess the quality of familial relationships so that good advice can be provided to courts and used in care planning. Arrangements for contact are not always set out clearly in foster parent agreements although they are usually made clear to carers. On rare occasions, changes to contact arrangements are made without informing carers and children. This can cause distress to children and inconvenience to carers.

Consultation with children and young people is good and they report they are listened to and their views count. A very high percentage of children and young people participate in their statutory reviews and many contribute to their carer's review. The service is aware that it needs to be more proactive in consulting with children and young people who have had short stays with carers. There are currently no arrangements for obtaining the views of foster carers' own children. This means they do not have the opportunity to comment on how fostering is impacting on their family life.

A 'children in care council' has been established and is led jointly by a worker from the National Youth Advocacy Service and a local authority placing social worker. Members of the council report that they enjoy participating in service developments and having the opportunity to meet with other children and young people who are looked after by the local authority. They value the opportunity to talk openly about their feelings and experiences relating to being in care.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is satisfactory.

Children and young people speak highly of their foster carers and report that they are helped to prepare for future independent living. Foster carers take into account children's developmental stage and level of ability and assist them to develop the knowledge and skills they need to be as independent as they can be. They help children and young people to learn the value of money and provide them with a wide range of experiences that prepare them for adult life. Young people are supported to remain with their foster carers beyond the age of 18 when this is in their best interests and in line with their wishes. Young people with disabilities receive advocacy services to ensure their views are represented when going through transition to adult services. Carers demonstrate a high level of commitment to the young people they look after. For example, some foster carers are assessed as adult carers so that they can continue to look after young people with disabilities who have become an integral part of their family.

The service continues to develop good links with the Connexions service. It is working increasingly closer with Connexions personal assistants and leaving care social workers to assist young people to find appropriate education or employment after leaving school. The local authority is developing an apprenticeship scheme and already eight young people are being supported in apprenticeships.

Young people, including those with disabilities, are encouraged to aim high. The service encourages foster carers to make sure that children and young people have opportunities to participate in a range of positive experiences that promote their self esteem and encourage them to realise their potential. For example, a young person has developed leadership skills and self confidence through joining the Air Cadets and participating in a range of sporting and other team activities, including flying a light aircraft. Several young people receive financial support for higher education and their foster placements are held open during this period to provide stability in their lives.

The service pays family and friends carers the same allowances as other foster carers so that all children who are fostered live in households that are financially sound. Payments are sufficient to meet children's needs. Additional payments are made for such things as initial clothing grants, holidays and birthday allowances. The service has introduced a new payment method so that foster carers can receive payments faster when a new child is placed with them. However, the system is not yet working effectively and there have been unacceptable delays in paying some carers.

Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

The Statement of Purpose provides information about the aims and objectives of the service and how the local authority sets out to achieve them. It is currently being updated to include information about the additional resources available to looked after children. The organisation and structure of services to children has changed substantially within the last twelve months and there has been a massive injection of funding to improve the whole service. This means that additional social work and specialist staff are being taken on across all teams. The council knows it has not previously provided sufficient resources to meet the needs of looked after and vulnerable children and their families. Recent changes to the service have included the appointment of a practice manager to assist the service manager in the day to day management of the service and to release the manager to take a more strategic role in the development of the fostering service. Two extra supervising social workers, a dedicated training and development officer and a dedicated recruitment officer have also been appointed. Additional staff are being recruited to the children's social work teams as it is recognised that staff have been over-loaded and this has resulted in an inconsistent level of service to children and young people. The local authority is working more closely with its partners to enhance the quality of its service.

The reorganisation has involved a number of staff changes and this has resulted in temporary gaps in the service provision that have impacted on children in foster care. One carer said, "Because the fostering service is overworked and is constantly reshuffling staff, they are not able to meet the needs of the children; the lack of communication has caused undue stress on us as a family". The local authority continues to address this by recruiting staff to new roles quickly; however, some roles have had to be re-advertised due to a disappointing response. Some foster carers have already begun to see an improvement in the service. For example, one commented, "social workers are now actively turning up to meetings and answering emails promptly".

Staff report that they are well supervised and supported. They value the team manager's knowledge and expertise and welcome the reorganisation of the service and the additional resources it brings. Changes to the organisation of Children's Targeted Services has involved relocating the fostering team so that it is based in a more central location, alongside the children's social work teams. Already, teams are working together better, but the service is planning further changes to promote more effective communication between workers. Changes to the office contact arrangements have left many carers frustrated; however, the service is actively addressing this matter so that foster carers, children and parents can contact the fostering team easily by telephone, mobile phone or email.

Approximately 16% of looked after children are placed with independent fostering agencies because no suitable carer is available within the local authority fostering service. The service knows where the unmet need is and is targeting recruitment accordingly. Plans are in place to develop the recruitment role and to improve the effectiveness of recruitment strategies. Consideration has been given to the changes needed within the service to promote retention of carers. This shows that the service is concerned about providing good value for money and is actively considering how it can best meet the diverse needs of local children.

The quality of foster carer assessments is good and staff that carry these out are appropriately trained, supported and experienced. Careful consideration is given to each foster carer's approval status. However, there are times when carers are asked to look after children outside of their approval status without an exemption being made. For example, during one year a foster carer looked after five children outside of her approved age range. At the annual review, no consideration was given to whether there was a need to change her approval status. This means that children may be placed with carers who do not have the skills or capacity within the home to meet their needs.

Supervising social workers visit foster carers every six weeks or more frequently where needed. The level of support provided is variable. A foster carer, who rated the support from the fostering team as outstanding, said the service provides "reliable support at the end of the phone". Another said, "We have an outstanding fostering officer who always returns calls and offers great support". In contrast, some carers report that supervising social workers provide limited support. For example, one said, "You are left to get on with looking after the children yourself".

The fostering service does not enter into a foster care agreement with family and friends carers who are approved as foster carers following an initial emergency placement. This means that there is no clear, written agreement for these carers to receive appropriate levels of support, supervision, training or legal advice. Nor is it made clear to them what expectations the service has of them.

Short term and emergency foster carers do not always have information about children's assessed needs because placement agreements are not routinely completed at the start of every placement. Out of the carers who participated in the inspection, 50% reported that children's social workers provide a poor level of support, inadequate information and do not respond to telephone calls. Some children have been without social workers for several months. This means carers are not receiving the information, advice and support they need to provide children with the best possible care. In contrast, long term foster carers receive good and detailed information about the children in their care.

An independent reviewing officer has recently been appointed to chair foster carer reviews and bring independent scrutiny to the review process. This has highlighted for foster carers the importance of their annual review and ensures they have the opportunity to comment on the support they have received from the service. Health and safety checks, pet assessments and safer caring policies are all updated prior to the annual review. Comments are sought from children currently in placement and their social workers; however, social workers rarely contribute and parents, young children and children who have moved on are often not consulted. This means their views are not taken into account when reviewing the foster carer's assessment. All reviews are presented to panel for additional scrutiny.

The service is committed to developing the skills of its carers. To date, foster carers have been invited to attend training arranged by the local authority for its social workers. This has given them the opportunity to attend high quality training in a range of relevant matters. However, many carers do not avail of these opportunities because of the limited times at which training is offered. The service has listened to the concerns of foster carers and has responded by creating a new post of training officer for foster carers. Plans are in place to deliver additional, focused training more flexibly at different times of the day and evenings so that foster carers have the opportunity to develop their understanding of looked after children's needs and their expertise in meeting those needs. The service provides guidance to foster carers who are completing the Children's Workforce Development Council training and helps them to review their own practice and consider how they meet the competencies required. A number of foster carers have developed their skills through a relevant National Vocational Qualification in caring for children and young people.

The service does not adequately protect and promote the welfare of children who are placed with family and friends carers in an emergency. This is because it does not begin its assessment of the family until approximately six weeks after the placement. Placing social workers carry out a viability study on the carers that they present to panel. The quality of these reports is variable and some are poor, containing few

details about the carers, their circumstances and their home. The reports often do not indicate whether Criminal Records Bureau checks have been applied for. This means that children and young people are living with carers who have not been assessed as suitable to look after them. It also means there is an unnecessary delay in carrying out an assessment and this can, in turn delay care planning for children and young people.

The promotion of equality and diversity is satisfactory. Children and young people with disabilities are placed with foster carers who are trained to meet their individual, diverse needs. Recruitment is specifically targeted, for example, a recent recruitment campaign focused on carers for teenagers and babies. The ethnicity and culture of the local population is considered. Carers are encouraged to consider how they can meet the identity needs of each child or young person and individual needs are taken into account when matching children and young people with long term carers. Interpreters are available to the service and the fostering service website is available in 35 different languages.

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 each foster home can comfortably accommodate all who live there (breach of NMS 6.2)
- ensure the fostering panel is appropriately constituted (breach of regulation 24, (3))
- ensure you only place a child with a foster parent if the terms of his approval are consistent with the proposed placement and that the carer has entered into a foster care agreement. Ensure also that before making a placement, you enter into a written foster placement agreement with the foster carer and ensure all matters specified in schedule 6 are covered (breach of regulation 34 (1) and (3))
- ensure that when you place a child with a person who is not a foster parent, you make sure that this is the most suitable way of caring for the child, that the period of the placement does not exceed six weeks and that robust arrangements are in place for the assessment of family and friends carers (breach of regulation 38 (2))
- facilitate foster carers' attendance at training events by holding more training at convenient times and locations (breach of NMS 23)
- ensure that matches are achieved through information sharing and consideration involving all relevant professionals, the child, carers, families and other children in placement (breach of NMS 8.3)
- obtain feedback about the foster placement from children placed, their social worker and their parents before each foster carer review (breach of NMS 11)
- ensure that payments to foster carers are made promptly and at the agreed time

(breach of NMS 29)

- ensure staff files, including those of agency staff members, contain evidence of robust recruitment checks. (breach of NMS 15)