

# Wakefield Metropolitan District Council Family Services - Fostering & Placements

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

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<b>Inspector</b>	David Martin / Jacqueline Malcolm
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<b>Setting address</b>	First Floor, Unit 21 Green's Industrial Estate, Wakefield, WF1 5PE
<b>Telephone number</b>	01924 302167
<b>Email</b>	
<b>Registered person</b>	Wakefield Metropolitan District Council
<b>Registered manager</b>	
<b>Responsible individual</b>	Lynette Marjorie Burns
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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**

The fostering service provides care for children and young people who are looked after by the local authority. The fostering service offers a number of different fostering arrangements which include emergency, short and long term, permanence, respite, remand and care with family and friends.

### **Summary**

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This announced full inspection was undertaken to assess outcomes for children and young people who are currently living with foster carers approved and supervised by the fostering service.

Young people enjoy good health and have access to a range of healthcare services which provide specialist support and guidance. Young people feel safe and understand how to protect themselves. All adults working for the fostering service are subject to rigorous vetting. Education and leisure activities are strongly promoted enabling young people to develop confidence and acquire life skills. Young people are actively engaged in decision about their care and are able to influence the organisation at the highest levels. Young people's participation in this way is a particular strength of the fostering service. The fostering service is well managed and both staff and foster carers are well trained. The fostering panel is working to a good standard in scrutinising the matters that come before it. The promotion of equality and diversity is central to the fostering service's value base ensuring that young people receive individualised care. Areas for improvement concern the length of time taken to bring foster carers' first reviews to panel and the need to demonstrate that young people have contributed to reviews.

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

Since the last inspection the fostering service has taken action to ensure that case records are maintained for all young people. Panel recommendations are now fully recorded ensuring that issues concerning young people and foster carers have been considered in a clear and accountable way. Foster placement agreements now contain references to the matching process. This demonstrates that placements are based on sound decision making. Family and friends carers are now assessed and supervised in the same way as all other mainstream carers. This ensures that all young people receive a service from carers who are qualified and well supported.

## **Helping children to be healthy**

The provision is good.

Young people's physical, emotional and psychological health needs are met well. They are able to access primary and specialist healthcare services as required. The support young people receive from the emotional health and well-being team is highly regarded and there is strong evidence to indicate that the team has worked effectively to improve mental health outcomes. The drugs and alcohol service provides dedicated support for looked after children and is working with young people on an individual basis.

Young people are able to access the childhood obesity service which has worked successfully with some young people to maintain a healthy attitude towards food. Young people understand healthy eating and have commented, for example, that, 'I always eat my breakfast, dinner, tea and supper. Healthy food keeps me healthy'.

Health care assessments are in place for all young people and pathway plans for care leavers address health issues. This ensures that there are arrangements in place to meet specific health care needs of young people. The fostering panel includes health representatives and there is evidence in panel minutes that health issues concerning young people and foster carers are actively considered. Foster carers have systems in place to ensure that medication is administered safely and, where required, the health authority will provide foster carers with specific training. This contributes to the overall good health and well-being of young people.

Young people live in a healthy environment. For example, the fostering service is ensuring that it is complying with good practice guidance on placing young people with foster carers who smoke and regular checks are carried out to ensure that foster carers' homes are safe and hazard free. Young people have their own individual bedrooms, allowing them to have private space.

Annual health checks are completed by the health professional with the best relationship with a young person. The looked after children's nursing team feel that the fostering service does not always make best use of their expertise. For example, they are not routinely asked to attend young people's reviews and are not currently located with other healthcare professionals working with the fostering service. The fostering service is aware of this issue and is working hard to address it and further improve health outcomes for young people.

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

The provision is good.

Children and young people have said that they feel safe and are looked after well. For example, one said, their foster carers 'make me feel loved and part of the family and the whole family has accepted me'.

Children and young people know how to protect themselves. This was demonstrated most clearly at a young people's meeting where they had a spontaneous discussion regarding personal internet safety. The young people were aware of the dangers and were able to share with each other the best ways of keeping safe.

Foster carers understand their responsibilities to safeguard children. They are aware of reporting procedures and have a well-developed informal support network with each other. Safeguarding training is mandatory and this contributes to the overall protection of young people.

Although foster carers feel that they are well supported by their supervising social workers they are less confident about the out-of-hours service. Specifically, they are concerned that they cannot always get through to the emergency duty team and that the issues they want to discuss are not understood by duty social workers.

There is a comprehensive safer care policy and all foster carers are supported to implement safer care plans in their own homes.

Fostering social workers are clear that they have a key role in safeguarding looked after children and have effective partnerships with other agencies, including field social work colleagues and foster carers to protect young people. As part of the ongoing supervision of foster carers, supervising social workers ensure that core competencies are monitored and this includes the provision of a safe environment.

The fostering service is the process of renegotiating the terms of the missing persons protocol with the local police force to ensure that it remains effective. In the past 12 months the number of young people reported missing has been low. This is an indicator that the care and support for young people minimises the risks that young people will go missing and their safety and well-being is promoted. Risk assessments are in place.

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

The provision is good.

Children and young people have positive relationships with their foster carers. One said, 'they always listen to my opinions by always talking to me directly about stuff'. Foster carers have specific training which equips them with a range of skills and techniques to promote positive behaviour and to effectively manage challenging and anti-social behaviour.

Children and young people are helped to develop personal confidence. They have opportunities to participate purposefully in organisational decision making. Children and young people have told the participation worker that they feel more confident, have made new friendships and enjoy participation activities. Children and young people are also engaged in a broad range of leisure activities and are strongly supported to pursue hobbies and interests. Funding is available for them to undertake activities where payment is required. Proportionate risk assessments are

in place to ensure that young people can participate in leisure activities safely.

The fostering service is committed to ensuring that young people benefit from their education. School attendance levels for all age groups are very good and in some cases higher than the district average. It is a great credit to the service that there have been no permanent exclusions of young people in foster care for a period of four years. Attainment for young people in year 11 is significantly lower than the district average and this has been identified as a key area for improvement by the fostering service management team. Some young people are supported to attend university through the provision of accommodation and financial assistance. On the whole young people feel supported in their education and one said, 'I get a lot of support at home and school'.

All children and young people are known to the looked after children's education support team and supported in accordance with their individual educational needs. In cases where a young person faces a short exclusion, the support team is able to provide alternative provision within 24 hours. The support team is able to target support for young people in the classroom environment in a way which does not stigmatise them. All foster carers looking after children of pre-school age are registered with a local children's centre. This maximises the children's opportunities to learn and to enjoy activities with other children.

Foster carers are actively engaged with schools and liaise with them to overcome any difficulties and obstacles to learning. They have access to educational information about children and young people through school reports, educational reviews and personal education plans. Foster carers are able to help children and young people with their homework and the local authority has made sure that most children and young people have access to internet resources. Young people benefit from this positive approach to learning and leisure.

Children and young people enjoy a range of activities that promote personal development. The participation worker runs regular 'I can cook' days which engage children and young people of all ages and ability. Foster carers are aware of their responsibilities to assist young people in acquiring independent living skills. Every year the fostering service holds a 'Celebration of Achievement' event to reward all looked after children and young people for their academic, sporting, artistic and social development.

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

The provision is outstanding.

The local authority has taken its responsibilities for listening to young people's wishes and feelings very seriously. Participation activities are well established throughout the organisation and children and young people are consulted on both an individual level and in broader organisational decision making. There is strong evidence that young people have contributed to the development of policies and key documents such as the children's guide. They have been instrumental in designing a website specifically

for young people in care. The authority's positive approach to participation has resulted in them achieving the highest award by a national group made up of care leavers. The local authority values the work undertaken by the children in care council which is made up of children and young people of all ages and abilities.

Foster carers hold the participation work in high regard and commented that young people have, 'representatives on the children in care council ensuring they have access to senior managers and the lead member to discuss any safeguarding concerns, this is also available to all foster children via the 'go straight to the top' campaign'. As a direct result of access to senior managers, young people have been able to secure apprenticeships with the council. They have also designed and delivered training on 'participation and voices' and 'life stories' which have been so impressive that the courses are now mandatory for all social care staff and foster carers. An equally positive development is that young people involved in this training are mentoring other young people to ensure that the courses can continue to be delivered.

At an individual level, young people said that they feel that they are listened to most of the time. They are supported to make a written or verbal contributions to review meetings. The local authority is currently undertaking work to develop its review format to enable young people to take an active role in running their own reviews if they want to. This is an innovative approach to the participation of young people. Foster carers have expressed the view that young people are, 'Appropriately informed and allowed to discuss what they want and what their needs are'.

Contact arrangements are set out in the placement plan for each young person. Visits to family are facilitated by local contact centres; foster carers are actively involved in ensuring that contact goes ahead as planned.

In general, young people benefit from well-planned placements that take into consideration matching requirements. The fostering managers are knowledgeable about individual carers' skills and expertise. Prior to a placement being made foster carers are provided with information about young people. One said, 'We had a meeting with a support worker and also a phone call from the child's social worker and then a placement information pack informing us about the child and their needs'. The local authority is actively considering how best to implement recent national guidance issued in relation to emergency placements.

## **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is good.

Young people benefit from a clear strategy designed to ensure that they can make the transition to adulthood in a positive way. Pathway plans are in place for all prospective care leavers which address young people's hopes and aspirations for the future. The plans contain good analysis of a range of issues including housing needs, financial support and any ongoing need for counselling and mental health input. Young people who intend to stay on in further education are supported to do so. The

local authority has a well established leaving care team that works jointly with foster carers and social workers at an early stage. There are separate housing projects for care leavers who can manage independently and for those who require ongoing support. Many of the children in care council representatives who have reached early adulthood are encouraged to continue to have input into the development of the council's work. This indicates that the views of care leavers are valued by the fostering service.

## **Organisation**

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The ethnicity of young people and foster carers reflects the general population of the district. The participation groups provided a fine example of young people supporting each other regardless of race, age, ability and gender. This was extremely encouraging and indicates that young people understand and practice acceptance of others.

In the past two years the fostering service has seen a continuous rise in the numbers of looked after children and to date the recruitment of new carers has kept up with the demand for placements. There is an impressive ongoing recruitment strategy which is aiming to ensure that there will be sufficient numbers of foster carers for the future. The fostering service is actively considering ways in which it can target foster carers for specific groups of looked after children. This includes the recruitment of foster carers from minority ethnic groups.

The assessment of foster carers is widely acknowledged within the local authority to have improved in the past 18 months. Evidence gathered throughout the inspection strongly supports this view. The separation of assessment work from the supervision of carers has served to improve the quality of work of both teams. Form F documents are comprehensive, competency based and evaluative. Case files indicate that all appropriate checks are carried out prior to approval.

The fostering panels are running well and are set up in accordance with regulations and requirements for a central list. The minutes of panel meetings demonstrate rigorous scrutiny of matters coming before panel and clear recommendations are made to the agency decision maker. Foster carer assessments are brought to panel within seven months of initial enquiries. The panel is fulfilling its function to provide quality assurance feedback to the fostering service. This contributes to the fostering services aims for continuous improvement.

The fostering service has experienced some delay in getting foster carers' reviews to panel and panel minutes are not explicit in demonstrating that young people have been consulted prior to reviews.

As noted above under 'positive contribution', matching young people to suitable foster carers is managed well. This makes a direct contribution to the high level of placement stability that young people experience within this local authority.

The statement of purpose has been reviewed and is up to date. It clearly sets out the aims and objectives of the service and is an accurate reflection of the fostering service and the facilities it provides. The young people have made a major contribution to the children's guide and are developing versions for young people of different ages and abilities.

The fostering service has a clearly written development plan that demonstrates that the service has the financial resource to continue to operate and to fund placements made using independent fostering agencies. It also clearly identifies areas for improvement.

All personnel employed by the fostering service are subject to initial and ongoing robust vetting. Fostering social workers are suitably qualified to undertake the work and are encouraged to participate in general and post qualifying training. The managers have a broad range of experience, are clear about relevant legislation and have the skills to ensure that the service is run in an efficient way that demonstrably puts young people at the centre of decision making.

The fostering service is committed to the development of its carers through induction and ongoing training which meets the Children's Workforce Development Council's standards. A support group for birth children has been established giving them an excellent opportunity to share experiences with each other and to ensure that they understand concepts such as safer care. Foster carers are supervised at the required intervals and report that during the day they feel they have good access to fostering social workers and their managers. There is an excellent foster carer's handbook which provides a broad range of information and details of the arrangements for making a complaint. Payments to foster carers are clearly defined and are linked to skill levels.

The fostering service has received a small number of allegations concerning the conduct of foster carers and in all cases these have been investigated and resolved swiftly. Foster carers under investigation are given access to independent support.

Records maintained by the fostering service are stored securely. Young people's files are solely electronic allowing all staff who work with young people to contribute to and access a continuous record. This ensures that information about young people is up to date and provides an holistic account of a young person's life.

The fostering service's offices and administrative systems are suitable for the service provided and are secure. Notifications to all responsible authorities are made in a timely manner.

The fostering service supports friends and family carers well. They are now subject to a full assessment prior to approval and are paid at the same rate as mainstream carers. They are supervised at regular intervals and are required to undertake formal training. The fostering service's approach ensures that all young people have an equality of service regardless of the background of carers.

Placement plans are completed for all young people and are subsequently made available to foster carers. Foster carers are actively involved in the review of placement plans. Young people have access to a well-established independent advocacy service which will assist them in making sure that their views are represented to reviewing officers. The co-location of the fostering teams with the looked after children's team and the emotional health and well-being team has enabled effective professional discussion making about young people in foster care.

## **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 there is an effective out of hours advice and support service for foster carers (NMS 21.3)
- ensure that foster carers' first reviews are brought before panel within 12 months of approval (Regulation 28.2)
- ensure that panel minutes demonstrate that the views of young people have been taken into account at foster carers' reviews (Regulation 28.3bii)