

# Cornwall County Council Fostering Service

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

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<b>Date of last inspection</b>	06/10/2006

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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 Cornwall County Council Fostering and Short Breaks (F&SB) Service is a Local Authority Service operated by the Director of the Children's Services Authority (CSA). The service recruits, approves, supports and trains Foster Carers and Short Break Carers. It makes placements for children of all ages through a variety of placement types, including long-term, short-term, emergency and respite care placements. The service recognises and arranges Kinship Care and Parent and Child placements where appropriate. The Short Breaks service is predominantly for Children with Individual Needs and is a recent addition to the range of services managed by the Fostering Service. Previously short breaks fostering was an occasional provision arranged by the service. There is a single Fostering Panel that meets to carry out the specified functions of the Fostering Services Regulations 2002 in relation to Fostering Panels. This panel is now also responsible for the approval and reviews of short break carers. In addition to making and monitoring its own placement arrangements the Service is also responsible for the monitoring of other placements made within the area by Independent Fostering Agencies and for checking Private Fostering arrangements.

### Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This was an announced inspection of the LA Fostering and Short Breaks Service based on the Key National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services. During the course of the inspection there were meetings with registered foster carers in their homes and members of the local Fostering Network committee as well as with staff of the F&SB service and CSA. Questionnaires were sent to all registered F&SB carers as well as children over eight years of age. There was approximately a 20% response from Foster Carers and 60 responses from children and young people. From questionnaire responses most carers feel that the F&SB service performance has improved or is about the same as last year. Some commented that it was also good last year. The service has moved carers onto a professional footing in their view through the introduction of a skills based banding of payments and improved quality training opportunities. Support to carers from the fostering social workers and supervisory staff remains a strength of the service and whilst there have been improvements in relations with social caseworkers these are not universally acclaimed. Registered carers expressed concerns around the sustainability of the new skills banding system, district boundary changes and in relation to variations in available resources for supervised contacts between fostered children and their families. Children's responses generally showed them to feel safe and secure in their foster placements. Educational matters and healthy eating were very positively reported on, though there was a small number of children who reported being bullied

whilst at school. In the main children did not qualify their responses but only ticked the boxes. Where comment was made it reflected an appreciation of carers, the home environment and their skills.

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

The last two inspection reports included one requirement and recommendations for good practice. These were targeted to improve levels of communication and information sharing between the CSA and carers, to improve response times on allegations and improve the efficiencies of the service through recruitment, monitoring and regularisation of services provided. This inspection showed the service has achieved most of these or is in the process of completing these improvements. Carers reported better information sharing and that they felt viewed more as co-professionals with the F&SB staff. The service has introduced a skills based system of payments for carers thereby taking the weighting off the child and any interpretations of behavioural difficulties associated with that. Staffing within the F&SB service has increased in numbers and in terms of professionally qualified staff. This has benefited negotiations with social care caseworkers and enabled the fostering supervisory workers to be appropriately supervised themselves. Compliance with regulatory requirements has been achieved or improved in a number of ways including the appointment of professionally qualified staff, the improvements to staff recruitment records, the new records database and the revisions to the panel membership. Changes to accommodation in the Bodmin office have also been welcomed by that team. The biggest single improvement, however, is the amalgamation of the Fostering service with the previously unregulated Short Breaks and Family Care service. Carers in the Short Breaks service now have the benefit of training opportunities and can benefit from the mentoring service offered by the F&SB service. Their future care packages will be reviewed and other professional support facilities will be available to them through this amalgamation.

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

The provision is good.

The Fostering Service provides carers with good levels of information in relation to children's health history and needs. There is a holistic approach to children's health with all aspects of health, emotional, physical and sexual, taken into consideration. Placements visited demonstrated how these varied according to children's age and development. Where required specialist training in medical procedures is provided to enable placements to be made. Foster carers are enabled to access specialist health services where appropriate and there are in-house services available from the Children in Care Nurses and County psychological services. The latter service is used creatively to advise foster carers on suitable management strategies for the children placed, to avoid crisis situations or to work through difficulties. Children and carers commented positively on the importance of being healthy and the measures in place to enable this. Less positive comment relates to the availability of Psychiatric services for children and young people in the County. This is an issue outside of the Fostering Service's immediate control but is a resource issue for the wider Children's Services

Authority (CSA). The fostering service is aware of the restricted availability of these services and has in the past engaged private psychiatric services in response to acute need. The promotion of healthy eating and lifestyles is an established strength of this service and questionnaire replies supported this continues.

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

The provision is good.

The service has appropriate measures in place to protect the welfare of children placed with foster carers. There is one operations manager for the service who is experienced and qualified in children's social care. The operational manager has easy and regular contact with his immediate line manager and other senior managers within the Children's Services Authority (CSA). Foster placements varied in terms of the style, size and material provision of the properties but all were suitable for their scope of approval. The service aims to provide matched foster placements and the success level is improving. The placement team demonstrated a comprehensive knowledge of the registered placements available to them. The service reports their frustrations, to making matched placements, arise in part from late stage fostering placement requests from district social care teams. The service has improved its training and monitoring of child protection and safe care issues, including training. The County has in place new Safeguarding Children strategies including a new Safeguarding Children Board and local Safeguarding managers. As part of this the local safeguarding manager monitors all referrals relating to the fostering service and hears all allegations against foster carers. The safeguarding manager said she will have an annual monitoring role in respect of allegations and abuse referrals arising from the fostering and short breaks service. Children's questionnaire replies indicated that there are no issues with bullying in their respective placements. A few children stated they experienced bullying at school. There was no further qualification to most of their replies. The current Training schedule for foster carers does not contain any direct reference to courses covering the identification or management of bullying either. All staff employed in the fostering and short breaks service are recruited under County Council procedures and subject to full referencing and vetting checks. Since the last inspection there has been an increase in the overall number of staff employed and the number of those who are qualified social workers. There was no panel observation during this inspection but previous inspections have commented positively about these. Minutes of recent panel decisions were received and details of the panel's constitution and membership show it to comply with regulation requirements. Issues raised by foster carers about their feelings when attending panel meetings and short notice postponements of meetings were brought to the attention of the service manager. These are considered by managers to be valid issues requiring ongoing input and monitoring.

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

The provision is satisfactory.

The F&SB service is aware of its duty to respect and provide appropriate placements that respect and reflect the diversity of those placed. These are represented in the service's Statement of Purpose and in its provision of specific training to carers. There are improved communications between the F&SB service and district teams that help with care planning for individual children, though these are still not seamless agreements. The F&SB service makes special arrangements to enable children with particular medical needs to be fostered. This involves specialist training for foster carers in aspects of care required to maintain the children's particular health needs. Educational achievement is promoted and celebrated by the F&SB service. Foster carers are encouraged to be advocates for the children placed and from replies to questionnaires they undertake this role with commitment and dedication. Support from the caseworker is available where required. Children recognise the support they receive from their foster carers in relation to education and there are annual events to celebrate achievement that involve the whole family. There is some variation of experience across the districts and this is more apparent in relation to children and young people who have been excluded from school for periods of time. The provision of Education Out of School (EOS) varies across the districts as does the support carers receive from the caseworkers in such circumstances. This is not entirely within the control of the F&SB service but is more a resource and management issue for the CSA. The fostering service has used short breaks fostering occasionally and always recognises the role of parents whilst their children receive short breaks care. The inclusion of the previously unregulated 'short breaks and family care service' within the overall management of the F&SB service regularises the previous situation but full integration of the service remains a 'work in progress'. The F&SB service manager is aware of the issues and is working to resolve these. Children and young people using the short breaks service are the predominant group with disabilities and as their involvement in the F&SB service is relatively new their needs and care packages are still being reviewed. There has been one joint activity between foster carers and short breaks carers and their respective children and young people. This is reported as a positive experience for both groups and provides an insight for each into their respective roles, similarities and differences. More time is required before the full impact of the integration of short breaks care into the F&SB service can be made.

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

The provision is good.

The service promotes contact arrangements for the child or young person, overall. There are clear contact arrangements in files together with the arrangements for these. Foster carers are encouraged to develop a working relationship with the child or young person's family or friends. Children report no problems in maintaining contact. There is an overall positive feedback in questionnaires to the issues of contact. However, there are also some concerns expressed. These amounted to a

variation across the districts in the use of family aids to supervise contact. Some carers stated family aids have been withdrawn from facilitating contact, consequently, carers have supervised contact in their homes themselves. Others report that Family Centres no longer act as venues for supervised contact. Contact restrictions where they exist are clearly evidenced and when concerns regarding inappropriate access to children are raised the F&SB service acts appropriately to increase security in the family home. Consultation with children and young people receiving services from the F&SB service is good. There are regular events staged at venues around the County that have an element of consultation as well as fun or activity. Children are clear in their responses to questionnaires that they are regularly consulted (some felt too much) by foster carers and that they know how to make representations about the service. The service encourages the involvement of young people in its service development, including having a fostered young person as part of the interview panel for staff and panel appointments.

### **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is good.

After a number of years of phased amendments the F&SB service introduced a Skills Based Allowance Scheme for registered carers. A new handbook explains these bandings and the rationale behind the move. It also provides explanations of the range of other allowances available to carers. This scheme places carers on a Skill based level of payments rather than placing bandings on the child or young person. This scheme is generally welcomed by the carers and their questionnaire responses reflect this as an overall positive development. There are some concerns amongst carers regarding the sustainability of bandings that are linked to ongoing training and support-group attendance. This is a progressive approach by the service in relation to enhancing the service through the development, support and remuneration opportunities now available for foster carers, reflecting their value and role.

### **Organisation**

The organisation is good.

The management and organisation of the fostering service is progressive with managers involved and giving clear direction to the teams of fostering social workers and supervisory workers. The placements team has a key role and is a central reserve of knowledge regarding the placement opportunities available, demand and matching issues. The geography of the County requires the service to be organised in district teams to effectively manage the workload at a more local level. District boundary changes always raise issues for managers and foster carers in terms of changes in personnel and resources. This was the case in carers' questionnaire responses this time. Carers report better levels of information being received about potential placements, though this was not unanimous. There is improvement in communication between social case workers and fostering teams. This has been attributed in part to an increase in the number of qualified fostering social worker posts. There are still some delays in notifying the placements team of potential



fostering requirements. This results in decisions having to be made in a crisis situation rather than with a more planned approach. Records and information about children and carers have recently become more widely accessible through the introduction of a new database system, Frameworki. Staff within the CSA, including F&SB service staff have varying levels of access to information held and can update these records. This is a recent development within the County and has yet to bed-in but its potential for information sharing and access is clear. Staff throughout the F&SB service are highly thought of by foster carers and children. Questionnaire responses state they are approachable, accessible and helpful and most carers and children feel they have good relationships with F&SB service staff.

## What must be done to secure future improvement?

### Statutory Requirements

This section sets out the actions, which must be taken so that the registered person/s meets the Care Standards Act 2000, Fostering Services Regulations 2002 and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider(s) must comply with the given timescales.

Std.	Action	Due date
9	provide training for Foster Carers in recognising the signs of abuse, managing behaviour and responding appropriately to disclosures and allegations, including bullying (Reg.17)	30/05/2008

### Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further the registered person should take account of the following recommendation(s):

- continue discussions with the district children's care teams regarding the need for early involvement of the Fostering and Short Breaks service where there may be a possible referral (NMS8)
- review the provision of Education Out of School arrangements to fostered children and young people across the districts (NMS13)
- review the arrangements for contact in relation to the use of family aids and access to Family Centres as venues for supervised contact across the County (NMS10)