

Wiltshire County 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

The Fostering Service is part of the Children and Education Department within Wiltshire County Council. Fostering services are provided by the three family placement area teams.

The Family Placement Teams are responsible for the recruitment, assessment, training, support and supervision of foster carers and adopters. They deal with placement requests from fieldwork colleagues, matching individual needs, as far as possible. The teams provide a duty service to respond to emergency placement requests during office hours. Family Placement Officers generally do not hold specialised roles in terms of fostering or adoption, although some staff members have developed specialist expertise in particular areas of work.

The Family Placement Team provides short-break foster carers across the county. This team is responsible for the recruitment, assessment, training, support and supervision of these carers and deal with all referrals for short break services for disabled children.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This was an announced key inspection. The reason for this inspection was to look at the progress the fostering service has made with the three action requirements and five recommendations issued after the last inspection.

The action requirements followed up at this inspection relate to the management of staff files and the recruitment of fostering panel members. Children's records were scrutinised to evidence essential information lacking at the last visit.

One recommendation of the last inspection was made to improve the 'Being Healthy' outcomes. Two recommendations related to children and young people 'Staying safe' and a further two to the education outcomes in 'Enjoying and Achieving' and the 'Organisation' of the service.

At this inspection all of the remaining key standards were looked at. A repeat action is made relating to staff files. A number of recommendations were made to ensure better outcomes in 'Being Healthy'. This affected the rating of this outcome area to be 'satisfactory'. All other areas inspected were rated 'good' to 'outstanding'.

In summary it is evident, that the fostering service is staffed and managed by well qualified and experienced practitioners who recruit, train and support competent

foster carers to look after the needs of young people using the service. An overall 'good' level of service is provided.

Improvements since the last inspection

The previous inspection report required for the service to include proof of identity to be included in staff files. Since the last inspection Wiltshire County Council has further developed electronic staff filing to eventually become the more dominant system. While proof of identity on conventional paper files has improved, proof of identity in the form of a recent photograph on electronic systems remains poor due to poor quality scanning. Further improvements in this area will help to ensure the protection of children and young people through rigorous recruitment and vetting.

Young people can feel better safeguarded now all panel members' files contain records of references.

The fostering service employs robust and improved systems to ensure that children's records include Essential Information 'Part Two' and Pathway Plans. All files scrutinized at this inspection contained the information lacking at the last inspection.

Children's and young people's rights by law are now better safeguarded since the service has completed an investigation and implemented effective measures in order to improve the time taken to complete a complaints investigation process.

Team managers now ensure that unqualified staff receive formal supervision at least monthly and keep a record of this. Improved standards of monitoring and accountability of all staff will benefit and better protect children and young people.

In the last inspection report it is recommended that the planned system for monitoring school attendance should be implemented without delay. The service has employed a 'Virtual Head Teacher' since the last inspection. This inspection found that the establishment of the new post and the implementation of the 'Welfare Call' school attendance monitoring system was producing excellent outcomes. However, 'welfare call' was not fully known and implemented in all areas of the county.

Children and young people will benefit from foster carers being fully informed and up to date about policies and procedures. The carers' handbook has been amended to include more detail on complaints, respite care and information on out of hours support.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is satisfactory.

The Wiltshire County Council Fostering Service provides good quality health care for children and young people. Informed participation in health care related decision making is good and all children and young people receive the health care services they need. Everyone currently placed with the fostering service is registered with

primary health services. Registration with dental services is satisfactory. Networking and links with local health agencies are good and foster carers are well informed of the health services available in their area. Children and young people with complex medical needs enjoy stable placements with carers who are well informed and equipped with the specific skills and knowledge needed to help and support them.

Systems to retrieve vital information from past placements are satisfactory. Initial referral information includes individual health needs such as prescribed medication and possible allergies. Some foster carers point to isolated cases where all or some of the essential pre-placement information might not have been available at the start of a placement.

The quality of a number of health related outcomes vital for Looked After Children (LAC) continues to differ according to which part of Wiltshire they live in. This is most relevant in the areas of assessment and the planning, reviewing and monitoring of children's and young people's health. Paediatricians carry out initial LAC health assessments in the early stages or prior to placement. The service aims to provide all placements with an assessment but timescales for this will vary widely across the different regions of the county. The depth and quality of information available to foster carers as a result of these medical assessments also varies from 'outstanding' to minimalist and 'satisfactory'. Nevertheless, regular health assessment reviews by a dedicated nurse and a well supported LAC reviewing process ensure good monitoring of health related issues. A health care plan is produced for each child and young person. However, also here timescales differ and some placements have to wait for a considerable period of time before all information has been collated and a meaningful health care plan has been formed. Once in place, foster carers can demonstrate that the health plan has been fully understood and the implementation of key information and recommendations is good.

Outcomes in the above key areas are significantly better in the south of Wiltshire with the dedicated but only part time employed LAC nurse being mostly based in this area. Consequently, the management of the fostering service has, some considerable time ago, identified the need to extend the service of LAC nurses across the county. The commitment to this has been reported in previous inspection reports and negotiations with the Primary Care Trust (PCT), which employs the nurse, have been ongoing. However, this has still not produced the desired outcome resulting in a much overstretched LAC nursing service unable to give an equal service to all of the children and young people across the county.

The foster carers' handbook contained comprehensive information on health related matters including registering with health services, health promotion, assessments and reviews, special needs and disabilities, manual handling and intimate care. However, details relating to the assessing, monitoring and planning of health care are in need of updating.

Training provided for foster carers on health and hygiene issues is good. Additional training affecting health such as in child development, attachment and behavioural and emotional management ensures that foster carers are available who have the

skills, training and understanding to meet the most complex health needs. The training plan for carers includes first aid and a wide variety of other health related courses. Training is well attended with some foster carers complaining about the availability and accessibility of training when living in remoter parts of the county.

Specific training is available for carers of disabled children and young people. Outcomes for children and young people with complex medical needs are good. Carers looking after disabled children are trained in specific health care tasks by a nurse and given formal approval verifying their ability to carry these out.

The LAC nurse provides advice on drugs awareness and other health promotion issues as part of the health assessments. The nurse also gives sexual health advice. The quality of this service is widely praised. Carers and children have the nurse's contact details.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The fostering service takes adequate quality assurance measures to ensure the children and young people are cared for in warm, nurturing environments. Foster carers' homes are comfortable, adequately furnished, clean, well maintained and looked after. In all cases children and young people are accommodated in single rooms unless they are siblings and this has been thoroughly risk assessed. Health and safety issues are discussed with the foster carers during the initial assessment process, and issues are further developed during the induction training period. Foster homes will then undergo a health and safety check prior to approval and again as part of each foster carers review. Stringent environmental monitoring is part of all visits by supervising social workers.

Children and young people in placement are happy with the environment they live in and the way they are cared for and supported.

The last inspection found that the family placement duty officers had brief profiles of the carers on their database to use for matching when needed. However, this inspection only found scant evidence of profiling being available and used in teams. Social workers are aware of a lack of in depth carers/family profiling and meaningful information being available when making matching decisions. Together with a current lack of placement choice in Wiltshire careful matching can be challenging. However, the fostering service is able to provide many examples of carefully placing children and young people with foster carers who are capable of meeting the specific assessed needs of the individual.

Placement decisions consider the young person's assessed racial, religious and cultural needs. Wherever possible the fostering service prefers a phased introduction. A placement agreement meeting is held to ensure that the child's needs will be met. Foster carers approve of the way in which matching and induction visits have taken place for the young people in their care. Written foster care agreements are in place

containing specific reference to elements of matching.

The family placement team staff visit within the first week to check that carers have all of the information they need and that the placement plan has been acted upon. The vast majority but not all of the foster carers receive all of the relevant pre-placement information about the children and young people in a timely fashion.

Foster carers are able to implement the highest standards of safeguarding and protection. Carers receive training in safer caring, child protection and other related issues. Single agency safeguarding training is compulsory for staff and carers. Good quality safer caring guidelines are provided for each foster home. All policies are highly individualised and comprise a risk assessments element for each individual child and young person. Some examples were found to be of an outstanding quality.

The foster care agreements and carers' handbook contains the child protection and other safe guarding policies and procedures.

The local authority has a contract with the NSPCC to carry out all investigations into allegations against foster carers. This process has recently been reviewed and the process improved in order to accommodate more realistic timescales.

All new employees are vetted by the county council's human resource department. Potential employees are recruited by applying the strictest recruitment and vetting procedures. The fostering service applies an additional level of monitoring and auditing the staff files of its own employees.

Wiltshire Council is in the process to make staff files fully electronic and subsequently runs parallel systems. Both paper and electronic files contain evidence of certificates of qualification, references, evidence of interview, and all other necessary checks. However, the quality of recent photographs on electronic files as a proof of identity is poor due to poor scanning equipment.

A rigorously monitored system ensures Criminal Record Bureau (CRB) checks are available prior to a possible employment and regularly updated in a three yearly cycle. The information is excellently organised, and all entries are signed and dated by the person making the entry.

Employees seconded to this or other services currently generate a second staff file. This creates unnecessary and potentially confusing problems locating the 'mother file' and disseminating vital information.

The family placement teams are staffed by qualified, experienced social workers and are registered with the General Social Care Council. Foster carers and children and young people praise the individual levels of support, competency and expertise of their support family social workers.

The fostering panel was observed as part of this inspection. The service has recently appointed an independent Chair to the panel. There are clear policies and procedures

which guide panel practice. The new panel chair is familiar with the guidance and followed it throughout the panel observed on 19/02/2008.

The personnel files relating to panel members demonstrate the suitability of members. They include CRB, CV, references and photographic identification.

All members have undertaken training on Form Fs and the Every Child Matters outcomes. The panel chair is to attend BAAF training for panel chairs.

The fostering service has currently no medical adviser on its panel who would be able to check all medicals on applicants and provide opinion on suitability, medical problems and so on. External advice is available if and when needed. However, the management of the service acknowledges that direct panel advice is preferable judging by the sheer volume of medical opinion needed at times. The panel includes members with expertise in education and child health and includes a member with a service user perspective.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The Wiltshire Fostering Service promotes and encourages carers and staff to provide placements that value diversity. The foster carers' handbook contains clear and detailed information about equal opportunities and promoting diversity and foster carers are informed and knowledgeable about this. When matching children and young people with foster carers, the process considers individual needs in terms of ethnicity, disability, and cultural background. Recruitment social workers are focussing on recruiting carers from a range of ethnicities and with specific skills to meet the needs of the children they place.

Children and young people with a disability receive good services and support and the availability of specialist equipment and adaptations to foster carers' homes are outstanding.

Equality and diversity training is considered priority training for support social workers as well as foster carers.

Support and services to ensure children and young people receive an appropriate education are outstanding and benefit from being constantly developed and enhanced. This is monitored and guided by a multi disciplinary working group. The recent employment of a 'Virtual' head teacher and the monitoring of school attendance through 'Welfare Call' have been highly effective and have a significant impact on helping children and young people to be successful in main stream education. The achievement of a significant reduction of unauthorised absences of LAC is outstanding and statistical information systems to capture this and other aspects of educational attainment are good. This includes systems for monitoring exclusions.

The service works closely with education welfare officers and schools to improve the educational achievement of fostered children. The virtual head teacher will initially work with secondary schools to enhance the education services for LAC.

Foster carer homes provide good educational resources and a dedicated space for homework. This includes all necessary educational materials. All children preparing for GCSE's are provided with IT equipment. Foster carers benefit from training courses enabling them to understand and support the specific needs of Looked After Children.

The children's and young people's files contain a section for education. Personal Education Plans are in place detailing how educational needs are being met. All carers and Social Workers are well briefed about children and young people's educational histories. Personal Education Plans and LAC review minutes contain relevant information relating to their educational needs and progress.

Children and young people are happy with the level of educational support they are receiving.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

Managers of the service are fully aware of their legal responsibility and prioritize contact with birth families, friends and relatives in many ways. Flexible contact plans designed by Social Workers in consultation with young people also detail possible hindrances and problems with contact. Recording tools are in place obliging and encouraging carers to record outcomes of contact arrangements. The service ensures that children's and young people's opinions are sought through the system of LAC reviews. The form devised for supervision visits by the supervising social worker to the carers includes the views of the child in placement. The children's files contain details of contact arrangements and records of contact visits. Children and young people report that they have contact with their families and are generally happy with the arrangements made.

In line with previous inspection reports also this report echoes the very positive findings of past visits. The Wiltshire fostering service has an excellent record of ensuring full access for children and young people to advocacy and children's rights services. The service benefits from a Children's Rights Officer to promote consultation with children and young people. The officer is employed by the local authority, but is independent from the service. The officer operates a service called 'Voice'. The services provided by the advocacy and consultation support services are outstanding. Information leaflets about the service have been produced for children and carers. 'Voice' have contracts with children and young people which also serve as a record of what work has been done with their advocate. In addition to advocacy support, 'Voice' ensures that the 'Total Respect' programme is run and that young people are supported with this. A quarterly newsletter is also sent to children.

The Children's Rights Officer is involved with a multi-agency working group looking at improving involvement of children and young people in the services they use.

The fostering service uses innovative ways to collect children's and young people's views. This includes the use of IT based software called 'View Point'. This system is highly efficient and its impact on the relevant consultation and advocacy outcomes is outstanding. The software package allows children and young people to express their views and enables them to make comments in preparation for their LAC reviews. The complete online questionnaires are used to inform reviewing officers and for collecting statistics.

The service has a children's guide which uses a child friendly format. Children also receive a leaflet about how to complain, which includes contact details for Ofsted and Voice. Children and young people feel well consulted and know how to make complaints.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

The fostering service works positively to prepare young people for adulthood and independent living. Should placements continue post 18 financial support is still available for carers. Foster carers are well informed about supporting young people achieve independence and effective pathway planning is encouraged throughout the service. Training is provided on independence to include all legislation relating to leaving care. Requirements of what is expected of foster carers are clearly defined in the foster carer's handbook. All available guidance aims to promote self reliance and living skills.

There are clear policies that detail allowances paid to carers. Allowances are in line with recommendations by the Fostering Network and published annually. This forms part of the foster carer contract. The service works hard to overcome recent problems in payments for short term carers.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The service has an appropriate statement of aims and objectives. The Statement of Purpose was last updated in January 2008 and is appropriate to the services being provided. It forms a part of a wide range of documents developed by the fostering service as part of their commitment to ensuring children, carers, families and staff members can determine that the service provided reflects the Statement of Purpose. The fostering service's policies, procedures and any written guidance accurately reflect the Statement of Purpose. A Foster Carer Handbook of policies and procedures for the guidance of carers has last been amended in January 2007. Both the Statement of Purpose and the Foster Carer Handbook, together with a smaller range of supporting documents, are also available on Wiltshire County Councils

dedicated fostering website.

Wiltshire fostering services employs a very experienced and qualified team of managers. All the managers and Family Placement Officers hold the minimum qualification of a Diploma of Social Work (DipSW). Managers have a management qualification or are embarking on management training. Everyone employed within the Family Placement Team has experience in children and families social work. The Family Placement Support Workers have relevant experience as children's support workers and as child care providers. All are undertaking or have completed a National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) or DipSW.

Managers have clear job descriptions. Clear management and delegation structures are in place. Teams are sufficiently well staffed. Social Work staff receive good levels of supervision and appraisals. Staff feel well supported and are happy with the systems in place which determine their workloads. Caseload management is good. Good quality training and professional development opportunities are available for staff.

The service has a clear strategy for working with and supporting carers. Carers benefit from a well established frequency of regular supervisions. Regular contact with the carers is maintained through a high frequency of supervisory visits. The outstanding levels of support are often praised by foster carers. Visits include unannounced visits ensuring understood levels of quality control. Out of hours support for carers is good with adequate levels of support in place for foster carers.

Pre-approval training is available for all prospective carers. The service is committed to providing a comprehensive training package for staff and foster carers. Carers have a range of training opportunities and their learning needs are discussed at reviews and in supervision. Effective systems for management to identify and address the needs of carers in terms of their training are in place. Plans and records identify attendance of a wide range of courses relevant to the respective roles.

Information kept in foster homes is clearly defined and foster carers benefit from clear policies with regards to recording. Carers have significant training in record keeping. Carers store information in a secure manner.

Administrative records contain all significant information as prescribed in the National Minimum Standards. A system to monitor the quality of records is in place. The children's case files are of a good standard, including clear and detailed information.

Family and friend (Kinship) carers are invited to attend the Skills to Foster course and the same ongoing training as other carers. They also receive the same level of support and supervision as other carers. Kinship carers are satisfied with the level of support and training they are received.

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
15	include a proof of identity document on all staff files and improve the quality of 'recent photographs' on all electronic staff records (Schedule 1).	01/03/2008

Recommendations

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

- review and update section 8 of the Foster Carer Handbook relating to 'Health Care' (NMS 22.5).
- unify all staff files for seconded staff (NMS 15).
- extend the LAC nurse service to all areas covered by the Local Authority (NMS 12).
- review and improve the services ability to provide all pre placement information including all health related information at or near the start of a placement (NMS 12.3,4).
- review and improve access to medical expert opinion for the fostering panel (NMS 30).
- ensure foster carer/family profiles are made available to all social work teams involved in placement and matching decisions (NMS 8)
- ensure regular payments for short term foster carers (NMS 29).