

# 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**

This fostering service is part of the Children and Education Department within a County Council. Fostering is provided by one centralised, county-wide service split into two teams. One team is responsible for the recruitment, training and assessment of new foster carers including family and friends carers; the other provides supervision and support and ongoing training to the existing cohort of foster carers. The service deals with placement requests from the childcare teams through a newly configured duty function. An out of hours service deals with emergency requests outside office hours.

The service also assesses and supports carers for disabled children and provides short breaks for disabled children through the family link scheme. This team sits in the fostering recruitment team.

### **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 visit was to look at the progress the fostering service provider has made with the one action requirement and the recommendations made at the last key inspection.

The service has undergone significant re-structuring in recent months and has moved into new premises. New managers have been appointed since the last inspection. All of these fundamental changes have a significant impact on the service available to foster carers and children and young people. In spite of this still being in its formative stages, this inspection can report on the many positive changes this re-organisation has already achieved.

Outcomes for children and young people were analysed with the help of a questionnaire survey distributed to foster carers, children and young people and their families and a range of other stakeholders. In addition, a random sample of foster carers were visited in their homes and/or telephone interviews were conducted. Children and young people contributed to the findings of this report if and when present during these visits.

The previous inspection report rating has been improved on in a number of key areas, such as, being healthy which was rated as satisfactory and is now rated as good. The overall outcomes for children and young people remain good.

## **Improvements since the last inspection**

The fostering service has acted to make improvements to the following one action and six out of the seven recommendations made at the last inspection:

The action for the service to evidence all of the items in Schedule 1 when recruiting and vetting staff has improved the completeness of staff files. Electronic and hard copy staff files now contain a recent photograph and a proof of identity document. Additional findings about the general organisation of the staff file system are discussed in the organisation section of this report.

The recommendation to review and update the health care sections of the foster carer handbook has been acted upon. The foster carer handbook has recently been amended. Details relating to the assessing, monitoring and planning of health care have been regularly updated and revised since the last inspection.

As a result of the last inspection young people now benefit from the services of an additional looked after children's nurse specialist. This has greatly improved access to this service in previously understaffed areas of the county.

There is good evidence that the service is now in a better position to provide foster carers with essential pre-placement information. Carers chosen in a random sample did not voice any concerns relating to this area.

This visit included the inspection of the fostering panel. The chair of the panel reports that access to medical expertise has significantly improved since the last inspection.

When matching children and young people to potential foster carers, social workers can access a wealth of matching information. The quality of information and the available profiles of carers have made this task more relevant and effective.

The service has reviewed payment systems and re-organised the model in place at the last inspection. There are now no concerns regarding the regular payments to foster carers. However, family link carer's payments have not been included in the improvements made and the current system has significant weaknesses. This area was under review at the time of this inspection.

## **Helping children to be healthy**

The provision is good.

The fostering service makes good provision to promote the health and development of children and young people. Health needs are assessed and carers are provided with good information on individual health needs prior to a placement. A personal child health record is produced and remains with each child and young person for the duration of the placement and beyond. Foster carers are involved in the implementation of such plans and able to support the physical, emotional and social

development of the children and young people in their care.

Good systems are in place to evaluate and monitor the health services available for children and young people. A detailed annual report provides performance data on a range of health outcomes. The fostering service has extended the service of looked after children nurses across the county with the support of the Primary Care Trust. The employment of an additional nurse specialist enables good and improved outcomes in the areas of assessment and the planning, reviewing and monitoring of children's and young people's health.

The foster carers' handbook outlines clearly how carers are expected to promote the health of children in their care. The handbook is updated regularly and contains comprehensive information on health related policies and procedures. Foster carers know their duties to register children with primary health care services and ensure that health appointments are supported. Foster carers are provided with good training in first aid and on health and hygiene issues.

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

The provision is good.

The fostering service is managed by experienced and well qualified people able to promote and safeguard the welfare of children and young people. Action is being taken to register the Head of Children in Care to become the Responsible Individual and to recruit a permanent Registered Manager. The interim manager for the fostering service provides the skills and expertise to ensure children and young people receive good services during a period of departmental restructuring.

Children and young people are cared for by foster carers who have been carefully and comprehensively assessed. Visits to foster carer homes confirmed that children live in safe, comfortable and homely environments. Family support social workers employ rigorous health and safety checks to ensure that all elements of the environment remain safe and appropriate. Questionnaire responses from children and young people show that they are positive about the quality of foster care homes provided.

The family placement team ensures that children and young people are placed with the most suitable placement available in the circumstances. Written foster care agreements are in place containing specific reference to the elements of matching that were considered before a placement. Placement decisions are made after the evaluation of a child's assessed needs and normally consider the particular type of placement for which the carer is approved. However, evidence in a random sample shows that the terms of a carer's approval are not always consistent with the proposed placement. This is particularly evident in the higher number of children placed in some households.

Children and young people are protected from abuse and neglect. Child protection concerns are appropriately addressed. The service cooperates with the area local

authority safeguarding officers and follows agreed procedures. Child protection and safeguarding training is given a high priority and is mandatory for all staff. Training for foster carers includes safe caring policies and regular supervisions ensure that safe parenting is maintained for all, including the most vulnerable children. The children missing from home and care policy provides foster carers with a clear procedure to follow in these circumstances. The policy is currently available in draft and has been submitted to the local safeguarding board for approval.

Clear recruitment and selection procedures ensure that children are safeguarded from people unsuitable to work for a fostering service. All new employees are vetted by the county council's human resource department. Potential employees are recruited by applying strict recruitment and vetting procedures. Evidence of certificates of qualification, references, evidence of interview, and all other necessary checks are in place. Since the last inspection files also include a recent photographs and a proof of identity. Most but not all staff files are transferred into electronic filing systems. Parallel systems make the inspection of this area particularly difficult and time consuming.

The fostering panel protects the welfare of children by providing a good quality approval process for the assessment and scrutiny of prospective foster carers. Panel members are suitably experienced in representing their particular area of expertise and are appropriately recruited and vetted. All members including the panel chair have undertaken training relevant to their task. The panel has improved the access to medical expertise since the last inspection. The service appropriately and regularly asks the panel for exemptions and variations to a carer's approval. However, written reports prepared for the yearly reviews do not always take account of the fact that the terms of the approval for foster carers have not been observed and therefore do not continue to be appropriate.

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

The provision is outstanding.

The service ensures that carers and staff provide placements that value diversity and promote equality. Family support social workers are familiar with the content of the policies and are active in implementing its core values. Policies and procedures are designed to ensure that increasingly more targeted placements are on offer and individual needs in terms of ethnicity, disability, and cultural background are considered. Equality and diversity training is considered priority training for support social workers as well as foster carers.

The service provides a high level of support to ensure children and young people receive the best possible education and academic results. Since the last inspection the county has fully established a 'Virtual School' for looked after children and keeps excellent data on educational attainment and progress. Foster carer homes provide good educational resources and a dedicated space for homework. All looked after children and young people are provided with a laptop. Personal education plans (PEP) are in place detailing how educational needs are being met. Whenever

appropriate children and young people are fully involved in their PEP and formally provide their details on actions and views. All carers and social workers are well briefed about children and young people's educational past and current achievements.

Disabled children benefit from a short breaks and family link service that facilitates the maintenance of central and valuable relationships between carers and the child's family. A distinctly separate set of policies and procedures ensures that the particular needs of children using the service are known and met.

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

The provision is good.

Children and young people are generally supported to maintain contact with birth families, friends and relatives. The service prioritises young people's views on any arrangements by establishing systematic contact plans. Children and young people's opinions are also sought through the system of reviews.

Good feedback systems are in place to ensure that children and young people's views are heard. The service provides a range of literature and leaflets clearly setting out and explaining the advocacy and consultation services to be provided and how a child can voice a concern and complain. A children's guide outlines the complaints process in a child friendly format. The information contains contact details for Ofsted and the advocacy service 'Voice'. Access to advocacy and children's rights services is maintained through a dedicated Children's Rights Officer who operates the 'Voice' service. A Children's Care Council has been quickly established in line with the national Care Matters agenda. 'Voice' also delivers the 'Total Respect' training programme which is designed to teach professionals to listen and communicate with young people.

The fostering service uses effective ways to collect children and young people's views. This includes the use of IT based software called 'Viewpoint'. The software allows children and young people to express their views and enables them to make comments in preparation for their looked after children reviews. The complete online questionnaires are used to inform reviewing officers and for collecting statistics.

### **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is good.

The management of the service has recently reviewed and re-organised the system of paying allowances. This ensures that the vast majority of allowances and agreed expenses are now made promptly and at the agreed time. The new system does not include payments made to family link carers. A number of carers voiced strong concerns about this in questionnaires.



## Organisation

The organisation is good.

The Statement of Purpose outlines the aims and objectives of the fostering service and what facilities and services are being provided. The document has been revised in 2010 and is regularly reviewed. There is also an excellent information pack for prospective foster carers and an informative website.

The fostering teams have undergone a period of restructure and relocation. In spite of this being in the early stages of development the newly formed teams already deliver an efficient and effective foster care service. Suitable interim senior management arrangements are in place while the service seeks to recruit a permanent manager. There are plans to register the current Head of Service Children in Care and the new permanent manager with Ofsted.

Two very experienced and well qualified assistant team managers provide excellent first line leadership. Members of the newly centralised teams speak highly of their managers, of the effects of the restructuring on overall productivity and the positive impact on team morale. Team members praise the opportunities for direct exchange and discussions between the different remits and functions. Professional supervision and case load management are good. Staff report on good training opportunities but some find the central point of access for booking their training unnecessarily complicated and a hindrance.

Staff are adequate in numbers and well qualified. Team members are committed to providing a high quality service. All have an excellent understanding of children's needs and development and the fostering task. The Service Director Social Care reports on a successful recruitment campaign. The last cohort to fill all available social work posts arrives shortly after this inspection. Teams are well supported by business support staff.

Carers are well supported and benefit from a good frequency of regular supervisions. Social workers maintain regular contact with the carers with a high frequency of supervisory visits. This includes unannounced visits ensuring clear levels of quality control. Strategies are in place for working with and supporting carers. Carers report on responsive and helpful communication and feel well supported by telephone contact, supervisory visits, and support at key meetings.

Case records held for the children are comprehensive and are held securely. The quality of file keeping is good. An audit of the filing and record keeping systems is in place. Information kept in foster homes is clearly defined and foster carers benefit from clear policies with regards to recording. Carers have training in record keeping. Separate staff recruitment files are kept and maintained by the county human resources department. Records are currently not in a form which can be easily audited and inspected.

The new office building is suitable for the purpose. There are efficient and robust

administrative systems. However, staff voiced strong concerns about the adequacy of the current IT facilities.

## **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 a child is only placed with a foster parent if the terms of his approval are consistent with the proposed placement (Breach of Regulation, Reg 34.1b)
- ensure that at the conclusion of the annual review of each foster parent the fostering service prepares a written report setting out whether the terms of his approval continue to be appropriate (Breach of Regulation, Reg 29.4b)
- ensure that the Responsible Individual and the Interim Manager of the service are formally notified to Ofsted and apply for the Registered Manager to undergo the suitability process if and when appointed (NMS 2, 3, 4)
- provide adequate levels of IT infrastructure to enable staff to carry out their duties in an efficient manner (NMS 16)
- ensure that there is a system of monitoring the quality and adequacy of records and take remedial action if and when necessary. Here in particular: Ensure that recruitment files are organised adequately (NMS 25)
- ensure that payment to carers are made promptly. Here in particular: Review the payment system for family link carers and ensure that all payments are made without delay. (NMS 29)