# North Somerset Council Fostering & Family Link

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

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| **Inspector** | Wilfried Maxfield |
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| **Date of last inspection** | 07/01/2008 |

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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

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| 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 within North Somerset Council consists of a recruitment team, a supervision and support team, and the family link service (short breaks). The recruitment team is responsible for promoting adoption, fostering and short breaks and for the recruitment of foster carers for mainstream and kinship placements, private fostering assessments and supported lodgings for young people over 16 years old.
The supervision and support team provides all the services to support and enable placements with foster carers once they have been approved to foster. Family link provides short breaks and a flexible shared care scheme for disabled children and has its own manager (full time) who also manages the disabled children's service.

The fostering service operates within the resource service which has responsibility for looked after children with a plan for permanency. This service also includes looked after children's teams, the virtual school, the looked after children's nurse, the CONSULT service as well as a number of other multi-agency professionals who provide support and guidance to foster carers and children in care.

At the time of inspection there are 125 foster carers in North Somerset of which 37 are kinship carers and 88 are mainstream carers. 158 children are placed with in-house foster carers. The service supports 90 approved foster care households looking after 150 young people. Some of the young people are placed with independent fostering agencies. The family link service supports 14 approved foster care households providing care for 19 children and young people.

# Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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 eight recommendations made at the last key inspection and to inspect the service against the key national standards for fostering services and the fostering services regulations.

The fostering service has not been able to maintain the overall judgement of outstanding from the last inspection. However, the outcomes for children and young people in being healthy and in enjoying and achieving are still judged to be outstanding and positive contribution and economic well-being are rated as good. The satisfactory outcomes for children and young people in staying safe and the satisfactory organisation of the service determine the overall rating of satisfactory.

## Improvements since the last inspection

The recommendations from the last inspection have been largely addressed. Supervising social workers now attend placement planning meetings where possible. Health and safety checks of foster carer households are now of a good quality. The service follows a good policy which is well implemented to ensure that children of all ages are protected from foster carers who smoke. The children's guide has been updated to include a range of contact details for relevant agencies, including Ofsted. A suitable person from a minority ethnic background has been appointed to be a member of the fostering panel. The service ensures that notifications for care plan review meetings contain detailed information on the availability of additional advocacy. The birth children of foster carers have good opportunity to share their experiences. A recommendation for resource workers to provide more support to foster carers and young people is no longer applicable.

## Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

The fostering service promotes children's physical, emotional and psychological health exceptionally well. Foster carers praised the outstanding levels of support stating that the promotion of health of children and young people is high on the service's agenda. Through excellent partnership and a wide range of supportive strategies and activities, foster carers are enabled to protect and promote the health of children and young people in placement highly effectively. Foster carers receive good regular training on various health topics, such as improving the health of looked after children, paediatric first aid, loss and trauma, children's mental health and adolescence. Carers have easy access to a good range of written guidance on how to promote children and young people's health. Supervising social workers provide foster carers with consistent support, enabling them to easily access comprehensive health advice and treatment for children and young people they foster, when it is needed. The family link service ensures that foster carers' households receive an occupational therapy assessment to meet the needs of all disabled children and young people placed. All foster carers, children and young people interviewed stated that having access to such a rich variety of health professionals is an excellent asset and provides for invaluable placement support.

Children and young people's general state of health and well-being is regularly monitored and assessed. The fostering service has excellent links with CONSULT. This service focuses on the needs of children and young people whose mental health has been affected by difficult early history and complex family relationships. Alongside this additional support can be sought through the speak out advocacy service giving children and young people the opportunity either to understand their rights or access counselling or psychiatric input.

The looked after children's nurse is available to foster carers for help and advice about the health of young people. The nurse has formulated a health pack which is given out to young people. The pack contains a comprehensive amount of

information and advice about health generally, sexual health, drug and alcohol misuse and some more general advice about keeping themselves safe. The nurse also provides foster carers with training in first aid and general health during the skills to foster course which is part of their initial training.

There is safe practice followed with regards to appropriately storing and administering prescribed and non-prescribed medication.

Children and young people live in foster homes which provide them with adequate space and a safe and comfortable environment. Foster carers know how support each child and young person to enjoy and have access to a range of activities which promotes their overall health and well-being. Children and young people praised the service for supporting excellent access to local gyms, swimming pools and other leisure facilities and stated that they have developed a healthier life style while living with their foster parents.

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

The provision is satisfactory.

Children and young people state that they are safe in their respective fostering placements and understand how to keep themselves safe. Foster carers are knowledgeable and competent in safe care practices and are able to protect children from significant harm and abuse. The fostering service provides good levels of safeguarding training. This includes training for foster carers who offer placements to children with specific safeguarding needs and on issues affecting disabled children.

The fostering service has published a comprehensive missing from care policy. Not all foster carers have received and know the content of this policy and subsequently state that they are not able to implement the current procedures in relation to children going missing. Satisfactory records are kept when a child goes missing and overall numbers of incidents are monitored appropriately.

Allegations and suspicions of harm are handled effectively. Children and young people with concerns benefit from good levels of support. The service works closely with the Local Safeguarding Children's Board
and the Local Authority Designated Officer for Child Protection. All allegations against people that work with children or members of fostering households are reported to the relevant agencies for investigation. However, the fostering service has no clearly designated person who manages such allegations.

## Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Foster carers are supported to manage children's behaviour positively and effectively. They receive excellent levels of training in behaviour management and on positive forms of control. Intense levels of support are available for families with children who

display challenging behaviours. Children and young people enjoy good relationships with their foster carers. Relationships were observed to be respectful and focus on promoting positive and appropriate behaviour. Effective strategies are in place to help children who encounter discrimination or bullying at school or in any other setting.

Children and young people enjoy excellent access to education, employment and leisure activities. Good placement planning ensures that foster carers are have an excellent focus on developing their children's emotional, intellectual and creative capabilities and skills. The fostering service supports families to make good use of local facilities and supports them to contribute actively to the local community. Children spoke very enthusiastically about the opportunities available to them.

The fostering service works jointly and highly successfully with the local authority's virtual school. Carers praise the high levels of logistical and academic support children receive. Children and young people enjoy outstanding levels of access to a range of educational resources. Foster carers receive an excellent training package enabling them to support and encourage children's educational aspirations. All are frequently briefed to ensure they support the aims of the virtual school. Excellent systems allow the head teachers to constantly review individual progress, monitor attendance and respond to possible concerns.

## Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Children and young people's views are generally taken into consideration when a placement is made. However, it is not always clear what procedures are followed if and when a child or young person expresses specific views, wishes and feelings or raises a concern about their care. Good access to an external advocacy service is provided.

The fostering service supports the Children in Care Council. Members spoke highly of the support they are getting and the way their views on the quality of the fostering service was being listened to and acted upon. Young people on the council have clear ideas on how to enhance the impact they are having on service development. However, vital plans to enable all children and young people to contribute their views and wishes through an online networking application are currently on hold due to funding restrictions by the Council.

Children speak positively about having regular and well supported access to their family and friends. Good placement plans outline how children's contact with their parents, wider family and friends is promoted and supported. Contact arrangements are constructive and appropriately supported. The fostering service makes sure that foster carers follow agreed protocols to be certain that any restrictions on contact are in the best interest of the child.

## Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

The fostering service promotes young people's moves into independence. Young people are prepared and encouraged to develop life skills throughout their foster placements. Foster carers contribute to individual care and transition plans. Arrangements are comprehensive and plans are highly specific. Elements include strategies to support young people to move into their own accommodation and prepare for work or higher education. Joint working with the Next Step and the Connexions agencies is good. The service is currently developing a policy to enable young people who are still in education or training to remain with their foster carers after their 18th birthday.

## Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

The recruitment and assessment team of the fostering service strives to recruit sufficient carers to meet the needs of the children in the local authority. Good advertising and marketing campaigns ensure that the service manages to raise awareness about fostering within the community and numbers of enquiries are high. People who are interested in becoming carers are treated fairly and without prejudice. The quality of assessments of prospective carers is good and all assessment work is carried out by qualified and experienced social workers. However, limited staffing currently impacts on the efficiency and actual turnover of applications and assessments by the team. Senior staff are aware that additional social work posts are needed to compete with the demands of the service.

The fostering service does not implement clear policies and procedures to the recruitment and maintenance of the central list of persons considered by them to be suitable to be members of a fostering panel. The lack of information available about persons on the central list means there is a lack of clarity about if their skills, knowledge and experience equips them to make competent recommendations. However, this does not significantly impact on the quality of the functions of the panel. Good written reports are available to the fostering panel and decision maker to demonstrate the suitability of all applicants to be approved as carers. The panel provides good feedback to the service about the quality of applications and processes decisions and recommendations in a timely way. Good quality minutes show good consideration of key issues, reasons for recommendations and any general views expressed by panel members.

Satisfactory procedures are in place to maximise the likelihood of a stable placement when matching children with available carers. However, a significant amount of carers highlight that they are not always provided with adequate information prior to the start of a placement. The ethnicity of children and young people supported by the fostering service is not reflected in ethnicity of the foster carers that have been approved. The majority of foster carers have gained a wealth of knowledge and

experience working as a foster carer. However, foster carers' overall understanding and the information available to them on how to promote equality and diversity in line with current legislation is limited and has not been up-dated with carers for sometime.

The service's has a clear Statement of Purpose. The aims and objectives of the statement are suitably child focused and outline how the service intends to meet outcomes for children and young people. The statement reflects on how the service aims to promote equality and diversity in a minimalistic manner.

The fostering service has undergone significant structural change, including a number of changes in management and staffing since the last inspection. It is now enjoying a period of stability. The current team of managers have a good knowledge of the strengths and weaknesses of the service. They have the appropriate skills, experience and have recognised professional qualifications to deliver an efficient service. However, the manager has not yet obtained a relevant management qualification.

The fostering service benefits from the services of an external human resource provider to assist with the recruit and vetting of staff. This company follows good safer recruitment and selection guidance. All people working for the fostering service are subject to appropriate suitability and vetting checks. However, staff files do not contain a recent photograph and employment histories are not subject to a satisfactory written explanation of any gaps in employment. The current recruitment and vetting procedures for members of the fostering panel are not adequate.

The service fully recognises that foster carers play a crucial role in promoting good outcomes for children in care and are subsequently given good opportunity to developed skills essential to their role. Opportunities for training are good and good systems are in place for working with and supporting foster carers. Foster carers praise the social work staff for the good levels of support and their constant availability in times of difficulty and crisis. Foster carers receive regular visits from their supervising social workers and written records of these visits are maintained to a good standard. There is a foster carers' handbook but it is out of date on a wide range of issues, including key safeguarding policies and procedures. Foster carers are able to make a complaint about any aspect of the service which affects them directly. The current systems to demonstrate and evidence how complaints are dealt with are not satisfactory.

Support and supervision arrangements for social work staff are satisfactory. However, not all staff receive professional formal one-to-one supervisions at adequate intervals. Equally, staff do not have their performance individually and formally appraised at least annually. Capacity and workloads of the fostering teams are being monitored and addressed adequately.

Foster carers' and children's files are held electronically and in hardcopy format with appropriate safeguards in place to ensure that confidentiality is maintained. The offices used by the fostering service are adequate. Difficulties with the review of the

current system of payment for foster carers are being resolved. A number of foster carers point out weaknesses in the system. However, the processing and payments of allowances are generally satisfactory.

The promotion of equality and diversity is satisfactory. The fostering service's approach to ensuring that children, young people, and their families, are provided with foster care services which value diversity and promotes equality is satisfactory. Children and young people are provided with personalised care specific to their needs. Social workers and carers have a good understanding of children and young people's backgrounds. The fostering service supports children and young people to exercise choice. Foster carers' overall understanding of promoting equality and diversity in line with current legislation is limited and this has not been up-dated with carers for sometime. Information on how the service aims to promote equality and diversity contained in the Statement of Purpose is minimal. Children and young people with disabilities receive a good service and are placed in homes appropriate to their age, development and abilities.

# 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 foster carers know and implement the services policies in relation to children going missing (NMS 5.2.)
- delegate a designated person, who is a senior manager, to be responsible for managing allegations (NMS 22.5.)
- ensure that children's views and wishes and feelings are taken into account in all aspects of their care (NMS 1)
- implement clear written policies and procedures on the recruitment to, and maintenance of, the central list of persons considered to be suitable to be members of the fostering panel (NMS 14.1)
- ensure that prior to placement of each child the foster carer is provided with all the information that they need out carry out their role effectively (NMS 15.2.)
- enrol the manager on a management course (NMS 17.3.)
- ensure that the fostering service is staffed in a manner that delivers the best possible outcomes for children and foster carers. In particular, ensure that the placement and assessment team is staffed to meet the demands of the service (17.5.)
- ensure that staffing files contain a recent photograph and employment histories have written explanations for any gaps (NMS 19)
- ensure that the recruitment and selection process for members of the fostering panel adheres to the relevant regulations and standards (NMS 19.1.)

- ensure that foster carers receive the training and development they need to carry out their role effectively. In particular, ensure that foster carers' overall understanding of promoting equality and diversity is in line with current legislation (NMS 20)
- ensure that foster carers are given a handbook or electronic resources which cover all of the information listed in the national minimum standard and is updated regularly (NM 21.10)
- keep adequate records of representations and complaints, how they are dealt with and any action taken (NM21.11)
- ensure that all staff are provided with regular supervision and have their performance individually and formally appraised at least annually. (NMS22.4,6.)