

# Gloucestershire County Council Fostering Service

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

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## Service information

### Brief description of the service

Gloucestershire County Council Fostering service is a local authority managed service based across rural and urban areas, covering a range of fostering functions. The service currently supports 586 looked after children in 300 fostering households. The service is split into four areas of fostering: recruitment; support; family link which provides carers for the short break respite scheme for disabled children, and a newly established family and friends carers team.

### The inspection judgements and what they mean

**Outstanding:** a service of exceptional quality that significantly exceeds minimum requirements

**Good:** a service of high quality that exceeds minimum requirements

**Adequate:** a service that only meets minimum requirements

**Inadequate:** a service that does not meet minimum requirements

## Overall effectiveness

The overall effectiveness is judged to be **adequate**.

The large majority of children and young people who are looked after by this local authority, live with foster carers and benefit from stable placements. Young people report that they generally feel safe and are looked after in accordance with their individual care plans. Foster carers receive regular and appropriate training and supervision. Staff recruitment and vetting is thorough and organised; the performance and delivery of the service is monitored, with action plans in place.

There are some significant shortfalls in connection with accuracy of fostering panel minutes and panel administration. Statutory checks are not completed when changes of approval are presented to the panel. Pathway plans are not in place for all young people in preparation for their independence. Assessments of foster carers are not always completed within prescribed timescales. The manager is aware of these shortfalls and describes the service as developing following a recent restructuring process and is committed to improve outcomes for the young people and provide them with a quality fostering service.

## Areas for improvement

### Recommendations

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

- ensure the fostering service makes available foster carers who provide a safe, healthy and nurturing environment and have access to health programmes related to smoking cessation, drug and substance abuse and healthy lifestyles (NMS 6.1)
- ensure there are comprehensive arrangements for preparing and supporting young people to make the transition to independence. In particular that pathway plans are in place for young people approaching adulthood (NMS 12.3)
- ensure checks are carried out in line with regulation 26, in particular relationship status and health checks are made about prospective foster carers and adult members of their household (NMS 13.5)
- ensure the fostering panel makes its recommendation on the suitability of a prospective foster carer within eight months of receipt of the prospective foster carer's application to be assessed (NMS 14.4)
- ensure written minutes of panel meetings are accurate and clearly cover the key issues. Where issues are raised in panel minutes to ensure that these are recorded in the minutes and there is a clear record of any actions points made (NMS 14.7)
- ensure there is an effective out of hours advice and support service for foster carers, particularly when children are in crisis. ( NMS 21.1)

### **Outcomes for children and young people**

Outcomes for children and young people are **adequate**.

Most children and young people say they are comfortable in their foster homes and are treated as part of their fostering family. Children say the fostering service is 'alright' and 'it's OK overall'. Children say they have the information they need about their foster carers; although not all knew a great deal at the initial time they were placed, which lead to some anxiety when first received into care. In order to ensure children and young people were more stable in their placements, foster carers show consideration and awareness of the religious and cultural beliefs and needs of young people in their care. Children are consulted, and consequently, their wishes and feelings are taken into account. Children say they have support from their carers or a participation worker to share their views. There is a child in care council and young people who belonged to this group said that they were consulted by social workers regularly.

The vast majority of children are placed with their siblings; there is a low number of exemptions. There have been relatively few unplanned endings to placements, although a carer stated they were not pleased with the sudden nature in which a child in their care was moved which they felt did not benefit the child's overall stability. Children say that they are supported to attend contact with their birth

relatives; they also say they experience a wide range of activities and holidays in their foster placements. The short breaks service, which operates within the family link team, is well established and children, several of whom have disabilities, are secure in their time away from home. This provides a quality, respite service for several families who say they benefit from being provided with short breaks in caring for children.

Most children and young people are generally healthy. In order to meet children's health needs they access a wide range of relevant services from a designated surgery and looked after children's nurses. However, there are no proactive campaigns taking place focusing on smoking cessation, drug and alcohol use, sexual health or healthy lifestyle programmes. This can detract from their physical and psychological health outcomes over time.

A large majority of looked after children attend school or college; the established head of the virtual school has a system for measuring children and young people's educational progress. Data demonstrates that young people in Gloucestershire County Council's fostering service achieve much better than the national average for looked after children. Older children and young people are being prepared for independence, however some carers and young people reported that they do not have pathway plans or these plans were out of date. Without a plan in place, young people are not able to be fully supported to plan for their future and move onto independence.

## Quality of service

The quality of the service is **adequate**.

It is evident that the service recruits carers who meet the needs of looked after children. Carers report that they receive regular and appropriate training and supervision and are members of the fostering network, which enhances their fostering task. The service is actively attempting to recruit carers from black and minority ethnic communities, which would adequately reflect the composition of the county's looked after child population and ensure where possible, children are placed in homes which reflect their birth culture. This recruitment has had some limited impact and is under review.

Foster carers say that they felt that the assessment and preparation process was informative and benefited them later when they were approved to care for and had children placed in their homes. However, some reported that the assessment process took a long time. An application recently presented to the fostering panel took longer than eight months to be assessed. A carer reported a long wait for application paperwork which when returned was mislaid. These delays prevent available carers being available to meet the needs of children.

The fostering panel has clear policies and procedures and a central list of members in accordance with regulations. However, minutes of panel meetings do not record details of discussions of issues raised by panel members. In addition, the panel

makes recommendations and the decision maker makes approval decisions before completion of full checks. This practice was not identified by either the panel chair or the manager of the service.

Foster carers say that they have access to a range of health and education services with a very active head of the virtual school, this helps to meet looked after children and young people's needs. Family and friends carers are assessed appropriately and receive support from a designated team within the service. Just under half of approved foster carers have completed the Childcare Workforce Development Council (CWDC) training standards in foster care. The service is working toward increasing this number, in order to maintain skilled foster carers who can understand the needs of looked after children. A foster carer said, 'I cannot praise my (supervising) social worker enough'. Support group meetings are not well attended throughout the authority, but those that do attend say they gain a great deal from meeting other carers.

### **Safeguarding children and young people**

The service is **adequate** at keeping children and young people safe and feeling safe.

Looked after children and young people reported that they felt safe. They also say they know how to complain and how to talk to people to express any concerns regarding their care. Children access an independent advocacy service and complaints are investigated and responded to generally within timescales. The service takes prompt action to safeguard children from bullying. For example, an incident where a young person was targeted, was followed up by the virtual head of school and an assurance made that children were listened to when they voiced concerns.

Foster carers training, as part of their recruitment, includes a focus on safeguarding, safe caring and current child protection practice. Training is regularly refreshed and takes place before and after approval. This ensures that carers have a clear understanding and that they demonstrate an awareness of current practice and the impact of abuse on a child's development.

Children and fostering social workers say that the number of allegations of abuse and neglect by young people against foster carers is low. These are dealt with effectively and when they do occur, both children and carers are appropriately supported. The fostering service takes action when carers are identified as not suitable to care for children and they are deregistered. A clear process for dealing with allegations ensures that allegations are handled in a manner that is in the best interests of looked after children and or the foster carers' own children.

Unannounced visits to foster carers homes take place before and after approval, and there is a system to record this. Staff recruitment and vetting is thorough and organised to ensure that staff appointed are vetted correctly and are aware of their responsibilities to keep looked after children safe.

Carers say there are varying response times of the local authority's emergency out-of-hours duty service and this can lead to inconsistencies in dealing with urgent situations where concerns are raised regarding the care of looked after children. Foster carers were aware of their responsibilities to report children missing from their care. There are procedures in place should this occur and attempts to minimise this, which protect children in this vulnerable situation. The manager says there is a supportive relationship with the police in place.

## **Leadership and management**

The leadership and management of the local authority fostering agency are **adequate**.

Leaders demonstrate improvement in the service, but in some areas this has not gone far enough. An action plan was put together by the manager to demonstrate how the nine previous recommendations were met and how most of these shortfalls were acted upon. Improvements to systems have shown some capacity to improve the service; however children have not reported dramatic improvements.

The performance and delivery of the fostering service is monitored and reported upon every three months. There are also action and development plans in place. There is some evidence that children and young people are involved in this process, which ensures that their voices are heard in order to develop the service and to meet their needs and promote positive outcomes. The service is developing a management structure with systems in place. The manager commented that following a recent restructuring and moving of premises this is a 'work in progress'.

The large percentage of children looked after are placed in foster care in the local authority, this is comparable to statistical neighbours. In order to help to make sure looked after children's needs are known, social work staff in the fostering service are appointed with relevant child protection knowledge, experience, qualifications and registration. There is evidence of an induction process for new staff and regular appraisals and supervision.

Foster carers say that they are involved in decisions and most say that feel part of a team, working with and helping children and young people; however some carers have not understood the reasons when placements end abruptly. Others gave positive examples of information sharing about children. Managers of the service have developed a working relationship with other agencies including the police, education and health to ensure a joint approach when assessing and meeting looked after children's needs. The Statement of Purpose and children's guides are comprehensive and clearly written. They describe the service's complaints procedure and its aim to apply the council's fairness and diversity policy. Children say they have seen the guide and it is made more accessible being in three formats; for younger children, young people and a version in Widgit.





## 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 to assess the effectiveness of the service and to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards.

The report details the main strengths, any areas for improvement, including any breaches of regulation, and any failure to meet national minimum standards. The judgements included in the report are made against the inspection framework and the evaluation schedule for local authority fostering agencies.