

# Staffordshire County Council Fostering Service

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

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<b>Date of last inspection</b>	17/03/2008

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## Service information

### Brief description of the service

This local authority fostering service offers a range of different types of foster placements including emergency, short term, long term and permanent. There is also a range of specialist placements and a friends and families team.

In December 2012, the service had 558 foster parents in 308 households caring for 507 children and young people plus a further 44 children and young people in short break placements.

### 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 **outstanding**.

The service continues to provide foster care at an outstanding level. No breaches of regulations are identified. This is a substantial achievement, especially because of the challenging economic and professional environment. In particular, the service is progressive and constantly seeks ways to improve further. For example, it has recently employed social pedagogues from European countries to encourage new ways of thinking in the service. It is intrinsically and productively engaged with carers, children and young people. New ideas are welcomed and lessons are learnt from shortfalls. Monitoring forms a key part of the service.

As a result, carers, children and young people feel proud of the service and are almost completely positive about it. They feel that their individual needs are met and that they all progress. Substantial resources are brought to bear to support fragile placements and prevent children and young people from experiencing further disruptions.

Leaders focus effectively on retaining carers and establishing children and young people in permanent placements, with their siblings where appropriate. Vigorous recruitment is taking place to ensure that children and young people receive the most appropriate placements. Steps are taken to ensure, as far as possible, that the same standards apply to those children and young people who have the most

complex needs. The last inspection noted one breach of regulations. As a result, family and friends foster carers now receive regular supervision visits.

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

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

Most children and young people are extremely positive about their placements and benefit from particularly thorough consultation. This applies to them individually and also to groups that represent them, such as the children in care council. Local politicians as well as managers ensure that the views of children and young people have a direct bearing on developments in the service. As a result, children and young people are individually confident that their views matter. This success was independently recognised in 2012 through the receipt of a national award for giving young people in care the chance to influence the way council services are run. Children and young people have contributed to various improvements including foster carers' training, the way children and young people contribute to carers' annual reviews and documents, such as the children's guide. These systems for consultation, including statutory reviews, are maintained within timescales at an exceptionally high level, despite a substantial increase in the demands on the service.

In the view of all the professionals and carers, children and young people usually make significant progress. Supervising social workers regularly review their needs to ensure that carers are acting as effectively as possible. This process is kept under review and recent improvements have been made to the placement planning documents to ensure that key issues are regularly considered. Some children and young people have especially complex needs that require specialist interventions. The fostering service provides foster carers, training and support to meet these needs. As a result, children and young people develop improved behaviours and relationships.

Children and young people receive outstanding support with their emotional health through a dedicated and well-established mental health team. Children and young people have contact with their families and friends as often as is agreed and the service recognises the importance of this in placement stability. They are always placed with their siblings when this is the agreed option. These steps help to ensure that they are able to benefit as much as possible from the secure base that most placements provide. Very few children and young people experience the difficulties caused by unplanned endings. Their emotional resilience is emphasised, especially through the intensive fostering projects. Better outcomes and decreased vulnerability are a clear result of this aspirational approach. One young person said, 'I'm living my life now; I don't need someone with me all the time anymore.'

Children and young people in foster care benefit from good attention to their individual attainments and achievements. There is particular success in obtaining five GCSE passes compared to similar authorities. Attainments are also improving in all other age groups. Progress is clearly being made to narrow the gap with children and

young people who are not looked after. One carer reported, 'my foster child lacked self-esteem, but now looks forward to school with excitement and greater confidence.' The vast majority of carers confirm that their foster children learn, attend regularly and make progress in their education. A significant proportion of young people enter higher education and strategies are in place to substantially increase this number. Children and young people benefit from the substantially improved knowledge that their carers have about the education system. For example, there is now more focussed use of personal education plans and personal education allowances. This supplements the already wide-ranging social, recreational and sporting opportunities, including volunteering and charity events, that children and young people enjoy.

Children and young people's progress is supported by careful attention to their health. Their health is promoted as well as, or better than, similar authorities. This means, for example, that health and dental checks are completed promptly and that immunisations are up to date. Effective work is undertaken to educate children and young people about substance misuse and other negative behaviours. Children and young people are enabled to remain with their carers into adulthood where this is appropriate. There is good training for independence; many remain in touch afterwards. Nearly all carers say that this is a strength of the service and several young adults who are living independently continue to contribute to service development.

### **Quality of service**

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

The service succeeds in providing placements in foster care rather than residential care for substantially more looked-after children than the national average; the majority of its placements are with in-house carers. The service is able to show that this has marked benefits for children and young people; for example, in terms of placement stability. The large majority (78%) of children and young people are in placements that are stable, or they have only moved for positive reasons. There is also a strong commitment to achieving permanence; for example, by placing with family and friends and applying for special guardianship orders whenever possible. These are critical factors in establishing and improving outcomes for children and young people.

The recruitment of new foster carers, for both mainstream care and specialist projects, is based on a predictive, wide-ranging strategy and is producing a net increase in carers. Training and recruitment are provided by a dedicated team. This helps to provide a cost-efficient and effective range of placements. The strategy incorporates the results of both recently commissioned research and previous campaigns, for example, those that have targeted minority ethnic groups. The sons and daughters of carers have produced a video for use in recruitment about the important role they have in foster households. Work is also underway to increase the number of family link carers for children and young people who have disabilities. The vast majority of carers are pleased with their experiences during recruitment and

assessment, which are completed in a timely way.

The matching process is detailed and overseen by a specific team who have extensive knowledge of the foster carers. There is highly efficient use of the available placements and there are very few vacancies. However, pressures to exceed the normal fostering limit are successfully resisted, which was described by one member of staff as a 'cultural shift'. The amount of such exemptions is substantially less than last year. Staff pride themselves on making appropriate matches that are driven by children and young people's individual needs arising, for example, from their cultural, physical or other needs. One professional reported: 'they don't pay lip service – they go above and beyond; they want to do it properly'.

Placement choice is facilitated by judicious and economical use of independent fostering agencies. One young person represented the vast majority by saying, 'they have done their utmost to place me in the best household for me'.

Internal survey reports show that most carers are very pleased with the matching process, which is a significant testimony to the processes effectiveness. Compared to other authorities, the service is particularly successful in placing children and young people in foster care rather than residential care. Methodology is constantly being refined to improve children and young people's engagement in this important process. For example, additional prompts are now on matching paperwork to show the consultation that occurs with them prior to admission. The written descriptions of households that are provided to social workers and children and young people are also reviewed to ensure accuracy.

There is a clear focus on the retention of carers, which is reflected in their high rates of satisfaction. Mentoring is in place for new carers; larger vehicles are available to borrow, and loans are provided for property adaptations. One carer represented many by saying, 'we feel privileged to have an authority that goes the extra mile'. Supervision meetings occur regularly and levels of contact between staff and carers is high being face-to-face at least monthly in most cases; unannounced visits too are in excess of the required amount. These steps also help to ensure that children and young people's needs are kept under review. Carers are actively engaged in improving the service and feel part of the team. One carer said, 'they treat us as professionals; they're never adversarial'. There are also local support groups that one carer described as 'uplifting'. These also address the particular needs of male carers.

Carers also appreciate the significant support of their own children. This is a substantial contribution to placement stability. Improvements to the service have included involvement of carers' sons and daughters from an early stage in the assessment of new carers. This helps carers to understand how to balance the needs of their families with those of foster children. In order to normalise the care of foster children and reduce the stigma and delay that some experience, substantial work has taken place and is still on-going, regarding delegated authority. Joint training and other opportunities are being taken to ensure that carers have as much authority as possible to make day-to-day decisions.

Carers are overwhelmingly positive about the training they receive, some of which is prepared and delivered by foster children. It is applied equally to both carers in households and has been improved in light of carers' comments. One said, 'the training is second to none and with the added benefit of e-learning, we can participate without having to find alternative care for our placements'. Another carer said, 'there is a lovely spectrum of courses; we have even had a tax inspector come and deliver a course'. There is particular success in helping mainstream and short-break carers complete national workforce development training within 12 months; case studies from the authority are used to promote good practice nationally. Carers' skills are developed so they can meet the needs of particular children and young people. The service has also obtained funding to provide an externally accredited programme of training and support to carers. This has decreased behavioural problems and ineffectual discipline strategies and led to improved tolerance of difficulties by carers.

Following a successful bid, the service is one of only six social pedagogy demonstration sites in England and Scotland. Two social pedagogues have been employed and carers are currently receiving training. This aims to emphasise the relationships between carers and children rather than systems.

The fostering panel has seen a doubling of its work since the last inspection and there are particular challenges caused by Family and Friends (connected persons) work. However, standards overall are high with recommendations and decisions being made in a timely way. Panel members readily challenge assessors and are willing to defer matters if this is in the best interests of children and young people. Shortfalls are identified promptly and remedial steps undertaken. As a result of such monitoring, the number of panels is being increased as is the capacity of those in panel adviser roles. The latter is critical for the smooth operation of panel, such as the panel agenda, checking of reports and panel development.

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

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

It is to the credit of the organisation and the extensive training programme, that all the carers who responded felt fully able to deal appropriately with child protection issues and to keep children and young people safe. Their confidence is verified by independent professionals. Similarly, all the children and young people who responded feel safe in their placements. Multi-agency emphasis is successfully placed on keeping children and young people safe from absconding. Very few foster children go missing. Carers establish strong working relationships with children and young people and understand the possible causes of negative behaviours. They are able to discuss such triggers and obtain support if it is needed.

Children and young people are kept safe in their foster homes through close attention to health and safety issues. Recruitment processes are also strong so that only suitable adults work with children and young people. There are very few incidents of bullying. One young person represented most respondents by saying, 'I

don't get bullied, but I know they would help me if I needed them'.

Children and young people rarely feel the need to complain. They understand how to complain and have confidence that their concerns will be handled sensitively. This is explained to them in written and pictorial formats and they all have access to several independent adults and advocates. The close monitoring of complaints and allegations always incorporates learning outcomes, which are clearly implemented. This is an important contribution to continual improvement. Careful consideration is given to collating minor concerns, for example regarding children and young people who have communication difficulties, and patterns are assessed with safeguarding colleagues. One professional reported that 'the service does not resist negative outcomes'. This means that rigorous steps are taken to safeguard children and young people even if, in extremely rare cases, it means a loss of placements because carers are de-registered.

### **Leadership and management**

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

In light of the extensive challenges created by managerial changes, new legislation and increasing demand, leadership and management are excellent. Not only have consistently high standards been maintained over many years but new projects have been commissioned as a result of national and local initiatives, such as the Foster Care Charter. This demonstrates substantial capacity and enthusiasm. The charter, as devised in Staffordshire, is currently used by the Department for Education as an example of best practice. Each quarterly monitoring report shows large numbers of new initiatives designed to improve the service; this gives some indication of the pace of change.

The service also maintains both national and regional profiles that expose it to additional scrutiny and peer review. Particularly high levels of participation and consultation and close monitoring mean that patterns and trends are quickly identified. There is a strong and systemic commitment to asking 'would this be good enough for my own child?' Staff and carers consistently reflect this ethos and also the idea that the acceptable minimum standard is no lower than a 'good' standard. Thorough development plans show how the service will progress further. Leaders are known to children and young people and vice versa.

Staffing arrangements are extremely good in terms of complement and competence. The authority is enabling the service to 'invest to save' as well as improve standards. Intensive intervention schemes are funded to address the particular needs of young people moving from residential to foster care; to change offending behaviour, and, most recently, for young people on remand. Staff support is good and all staff consider that they benefit from effective management; one member of staff described it as 'visionary'. Supervision meetings and appraisals occur regularly and ensure that standards of support to carers, young people and children are maintained and improved.



The families and friends (connected persons) team has also attracted additional resources following a restructure. It now supports private fostering arrangements, special guardians and undertakes friends and families assessments. The team continues to contribute to national good practice and is represented in regional groups. Adaptations have been made to processes so that the needs of family and friends carers are met appropriately. Carers receive the specialised support they need during their assessments. High standards in this area are supported by the panel. Subsequently, carers are helped to complete national workforce development training and other training in line with mainstream carers.

## 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.