

Telford & Wrekin Council Fostering Service

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

Unique reference number	SC043693
Inspection date	24/01/2013
Inspector	Martha Nethaway / David Morgan
Type of inspection	Full

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Date of last inspection	09/11/2009

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Service information

Brief description of the service

The Borough of Telford and Wrekin provide a fostering service as part of the range of family based care for children and young people who need to spend some time away from their family of birth. The fostering team undertakes the recruitment, assessment, support and training of foster carers and aim to make appropriate matches between the assessed needs of children and the skills of the foster carers. The different types of fostering include; short breaks for children at times of family crisis and a shared care scheme allows short breaks for children with disabilities; short term foster care is provided where children are unable to live with their family at the time they are placed and where the plan is to rehabilitate the children. The service also provides permanent substitute families for children unable to return to their families. Also provided is day care support with a foster carer where this will support the child's parent and prevent reception into care or where such support would assist the child's full-time foster carer in the fostering task.

At the time of inspection 127 households were approved and providing 161 places for children.

The last inspection took place in November 2009.

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 fostering service is adequately effective. The fostering service provides an adequate quality of care and outcomes for children and young people. They are performing strongly in health and education.

Children and young people's views are well captured through the children's council and at their review meetings. Foster carers and children and young people's assessments cover all required areas and contribute to keeping children and young people safe. Children and young people form positive relationships with their foster carers. Children and young people say they lead busy and active lives. They enjoy a

range of recreational activities that promote their confidence and self-esteem.

Leadership and management of the fostering service are adequate. The management team are honest and transparent in their approach. Much of their work is on-going and in the early stages of development. Development plans are in place to begin the tracking of children and young people's progress, development and outcomes.

As a result of this visit, there are 10 recommendations. These relate to foster carer recruitment; increasing opportunities to engage views further; improving the delegated authority arrangements; improving supervision record keeping; improving the uptake of foster carers training; organising unannounced visits to foster carer's homes; providing more information about the role of the Children's Right Director and to continue to monitor the performance of the fostering service to achieving good outcomes for children and young people.

Areas for improvement

Recommendations

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

- to continue to implement an effective strategy to ensure sufficient foster carers to be responsive to current and predicted future demands on the service (NMS 13.1)
- providing further opportunities for the child's birth family, their social worker, their foster carer and their Independent Reviewing Officer who will all have views about how individual children are being cared for and how the fostering service as a whole is run and managed. Fostering services should regularly seek these views and draw on this feedback in improving the care they provide (Volume 4, statutory guidance, para 3.36)
- ensure that foster carers are supported to make reasonable and appropriate decisions within the authority delegated to them, without having to seek consent unnecessarily (NMS 7.4)
- ensure supervision meetings have a clear purpose and provide the opportunity to supervise the foster carer's work, ensure the foster carer is meeting the child's needs, taking into account the child's wishes and feelings, and offer support and a framework to assess the carer's performance and develop their competencies and skills (NMS 21.8)
- ensure support and training is made available to foster carers, including hard to reach carers, to assist them in meeting the specific needs of the children they are caring for or are expected to care for (NMS 20.8)
- ensure foster carers are able to evidence that the Training, Support and Development Standards have been attained within 12 months of approval (or within 18 months for family and friends foster carers) (NMS 20.3)

- ensure all foster carers maintain an on going training and development portfolio which demonstrates how they are meeting the skills required of them by the fostering service (NMS 20.4)
- ensure the foster home is inspected annually, without appointment, by the fostering service to make sure that it continues to meet the needs of foster children (NMS 10.5)
- ensure children know how to access and how to contact the Children's Rights Director (NMS 1.5)
- ensure the fostering service monitors the management and outcomes of the services in order to satisfy themselves that the service is effective and is achieving good outcomes for children. (NMS 25.7)

Outcomes for children and young people

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

Placement choice for children and young people is adequate. Many children and young people live with foster carers where this is the placement of choice and best option; although, for some siblings and teenagers, placement choice is underdeveloped. However, the local authority is taking action to correct these gaps through targeted recruitment campaigns.

Children and young people's wishes and feelings influence their care and the development of fostering service. Children and young people report that they are listened to through the Children in Care Council. For example, they have been able to positively influence areas related to recruitment, training, finances and publicity documents. Equally, children and young people are encouraged to contribute to their reviews and share their thoughts and can influence some significant improvements. However, there is limited prominence of consultation through using questionnaires to maximise children and young people's participation. As a result, there may be missed opportunities to help the fostering service to make better decisions.

Children and young people are safe and comfortable in their foster homes. Foster carers act as good role models and advocate as a good parent would. Children and young people lead busy and varied lives outside their school day and at weekends. However, there is no confidence amongst some foster carers that delegated authority is properly understood and implemented. There are a number of inconsistent areas of practice. For example, there is evidence of a negative impact where children and young people are given extra supervision, restricting normal activities and in some cases this creates stigma. As a result, this can create a bar to children and young people experiencing a fulfilled childhood and feeling part of the foster carer's family.

Children and young people's health outcomes are good. Good attention is paid to completing routine health checks. The revised health passports aid improvement with information sharing and coordination of different health professionals. Equally,

children and young people are attending their health care assessments which are age related, such as for children under five, primary school children and adolescence, in a timely manner. Children and young people can also access therapy, including counselling, for dealing with their emotional health. Disabled children are receiving good health provision. As a result, this helps to protect and promote children's and young people's health.

Educational support for children and young people in care is good. They receive support with their educational attendance, attainment, study and exam revision. In addition, extra support is available to target good behaviour and prevent poor behaviour in their school environments. The number of children and young people receiving school exclusions are low. Children and young people's attendance levels are consistently good. A new and sharper focus is now being achieved through the implementation of personal educational plans and involving foster carers as integral partners in the discussions about targets, progress and achievement. As a consequence, this focus bolsters education further.

As young people progress, develop and mature they learn the key skills needed to become self-sufficient young adults. Young people with established relationships with their foster carers are given the opportunities to remain with their carers beyond 18 years. The fostering service is progressing this scheme further, but at present, as it is still in its infancy, it has not reached its full potential. A good strength of the service is the Telford College of Arts and technology (TCAT) and the sixteen plus team both of which offer support and college drop in sessions on weekly basis. Also there is access to the apprenticeship scheme to increase the route to further training.

Quality of service

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

The recruitment and retention of foster carers is adequate. The fostering service has improved its approach to marketing including the use of social media. In the past year, with the improved recruitment arrangements, the fostering service has been able to convert half of the enquiries from prospective foster households into applications. As a result, this is beginning to increase the range of placement choice for children and young people.

The preparation and assessment of foster carers is adequate. The fostering social work team are now carrying out the assessments; these are new arrangements that are now being embedded. One senior staff commented, 'This has been bolstered through the appointment of advanced social work practitioners to provide mentoring of staff undertaking assessments.' Broadly, assessments are completed within timescale. The fostering team are now also completing joint visits with the child's social worker of a connected person such as a relative, friend or other person with prior connection to the child. This is helping to complete more thorough viability assessments and improves these arrangements.

The panel plays its role in the provision and monitoring of foster care for children

and young people. Panel is well-established with a varied group of experienced professionals including a foster carer, health professionals, education and senior managers and social workers. Good administration supports the panel and panel reports are circulated in time. The chair of the panel commented, 'Supervising social workers ensure that prospective foster carers are fully conversant with the panel process.' The process used for panel's own self-evaluation is new and currently being embedded to make changes as appropriate.

Short-term foster placements and long-term placements are carefully matched. Decisions are taken with deliberation. One child commented, 'I know what the plans are for me. I have now been living with my carers for just under two years. I am very happy with my foster family.' Overall, placement disruptions are low. Placement stability is increasing.

The training of foster carers is adequate. All foster carers complete their 'Skills to Foster' course in preparation for their role as a foster carer. Most of the mandatory training is completed although medication training is not completed by all foster carers. In addition, there is no clear tracking of foster carers training to ensure that they have attended at least one training event in a year. Likewise, second carers do not always participate in training events despite these being organised at regular intervals. Similarly, not all foster carers are making enough progress to gain their Children's Workforce Development Council's training. As a result, this hampers foster carers in meeting their development and performance needs.

Supervision of foster carers is adequate. Foster carers are supported to ensure that children and young people are cared for in line with their placement plan. Supervision visits do show that they endeavour to provide appropriate care; although supervision records do not clearly show and reflect this in practice. The formats of the records show that individual needs are being considered. However, gaps such as to attention of specific targets are lacking. For example, strategies that the carer might implement to address behavioural issues are not clearly defined. As a result, foster carers are not always working towards the targets of the placement plan.

Safeguarding children and young people

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

While unannounced visits are made to some foster carers' homes on an annual basis this is not taking place for all foster carers. This means that not all placements are subject to the scrutiny they should be. There are also shortfalls in monitoring this aspect of the service's work and this means that the service has no clear overview of which placements have not been visited on an unannounced basis.

The fostering service complaints process is well used and last year there were 15 complaints. The management team learn from listening to what foster carers, children and young people and social workers tell them. They welcome this feedback and use it to improve practice. For example, the fostering service is working to improve communication with foster carers, assessments and placement support to

enhance the fostering task. There is one area that is an anomaly where children and young people do not have the correct advice and details on how to contact the Children's Right Director if they want to. Consequently, this partly compromises their rights and a way for them to be heard.

All children and young people are provided with safe caring rules which are reviewed over time in the foster family. Accidents are monitored and prevented. Foster carers play their critical role in modelling safe and respectful behaviour to children and young people. Foster carers know to act swiftly if they believe that someone is bullying or being bullied. As a result, children and young people are living in environments where they feel safe and relaxed.

Children and young people are provided with care and support that minimise the risk that they go missing. Missing from home events are rare. When they do take place, good and effective partnership working is taking place between the child's social worker, the foster carers, the police and the fostering team. A senior police officer commented, 'They like to get it right.' As a result, this ensures that young people learn to understand the risks and prevent recurrence.

The recruitment and vetting of adults working for the fostering service and foster carers are sound. Good systems are in place to ensure that all the necessary and appropriate checks are completed. Consequently, this helps to protect children and young people.

Investigations into allegations or suspicions of harm are handled fairly, quickly, and consistently. In the past 12 months, seven allegations have been investigated, resulting in clear actions and decisions being made. This results in safeguarding the interest of children and young people living in foster care.

Leadership and management

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

Since the last inspection there has been a significant service review and restructure. The initial phase of restructuring concentrated on better joint working across the corporate structure. The second phase concentrated on the realigning of service delivery within children and families services. This has impacted on the fostering service leading to new appointments being made in the fostering team. For example, enhancing the recruitment and matching of foster carers by increasing the resources to bolster better recruitment. The fostering service is aiming to provide more effective assessment and support through two distinct teams. This is all new and just being embedded in the fostering service. Because these are in their infancy the outcome and impact of these measures are not yet fully realised.

The fostering service is adequately managed. Leaders and managers deliver adequate outcomes for children and young people. Quality assurance at the fostering service is adequate. The fostering service knows the key achievements it has made

in the past year. It has made improvements to: the capacity of frontline fostering services; placement stability, improving recruitment of foster carers and developing staff skills to identify potential matches for children needing long term placements. In addition, there has been a reduction in the number of placement disruptions than the previous year. The fostering service is implementing its action plan for the next year and this is being adequately progressed. However, where gaps do exist, work is underway to monitor the management and outcomes of the service in order to satisfy the fostering service that it is effective and is achieving good outcomes for children and young people.

The fostering service has fully met the recommendations from the previous inspection. Health information for children and young people are well coordinated. The correct amendments have been made to the Statement of Purpose and children's guide. The recruitment processes for panel members are now correctly in place. Recorded information related to complaints and allegations are now comprehensive and show clear actions and decisions. All these actions show that the fostering service is aiming to promote the welfare of children and young people.

Effective working relationships exist with other agencies, especially with health and educational colleagues; these are strong and producing good outcomes. For example, the improved arrangements for developing personal education plans are impacting positively on children's educational chances. Additionally, work to improve the arrangements for initial health assessments so children's health needs can be identified and met as soon as children and young people become looked after is a key priority over the next year.

The supervision and management of staff are adequate. Staff are suitably qualified and interested in helping foster carers to provide good quality experiences for children and young people. A good feature of the fostering service is the effectiveness of the work carried out by two dedicated full time support workers who provide weekend, evenings and holiday support to children and young people placed with foster carers. One child commented, 'I like going to the activities that are organised.'

The fostering service takes its responsibility to promote corporate parenting effectively by safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children and young people. For example, the commissioning team has recently taken control of the placing of children and young people in both internal and external placements via its brokerage team. This has helped to improve internal services. Now the fostering service is beginning to track the progress of children and young people in internal placements. Other areas of improvement include opportunities for young people to have a 'Take over Day' where they shadow senior personnel during their working day for the local authority. This inclusive practice is a good feature of corporate parenting.

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.