

Herefordshire Council Fostering Service

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

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Inspector	Dawn Bennett
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Service information

Brief description of the service

Herefordshire Council operates a Children's Resource Team comprising of both adoption and fostering services. The fostering team manager is responsible for the fostering service and carries responsibilities in relation to the adoption team in the absence of its manager.

The service provides a range of placement types including emergency, short-term, long-term, kinship, respite care and teenage placement schemes.

The service undertakes recruitment, assessment, support and training of carers. It is involved in the provision of a wide range of services for children looked after by Herefordshire Council.

At the time of the inspection the service supports 171 fostering households who care for 136 children and young people.

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 last inspection in March 2008 found the service was good.

The fostering service provides good outcomes for children and young people and quality of service. Children and young people form positive relationships with foster carers and their fostering household. They are achieving appropriate outcomes in relation to their health and education. Through the care of foster carers, children and young people's safety is actively supported. Where they have additional needs, these are being met effectively. The strength of the fostering service lies in foster carers having access to consistent supervising social workers and consistency of practice. This in turn helps children and young people to feel positive about the care that they receive. Herefordshire promotes the child's right to experience living within a family setting. This is reflected in the number of children in Herefordshire placed with foster carers which is higher compared to the proportion across England.

Leadership and management of the fostering service and safeguarding are adequate. The management team is focused on improving and developing the fostering provision. This is on-going and work is progressing well. Much of the work is still at the early stages. Work is underway to evaluate practice and children and young people's progress through to measurable outcomes.

As a result of this inspection, eight recommendations are made. These relate to: panel membership; appropriate matching of children with foster carers; staff vetting; unannounced visits to foster carers; improved risk assessments; timeliness of assessment and approval of family and friends; monitoring of practice; and improved record keeping.

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 panel has sufficient members, and that individual members have between them the experience and expertise necessary, to effectively discharge the functions of the panel. This specifically refers to an educational representative (Regulation 23.7)
- ensure a potential match for a child is only suggested if the foster carer can reasonably be expected to meet the child's assessed needs. This specifically relates to appropriate matching with a foster carer who smokes (NMS 15.1)
- ensure all people working in or for the fostering service, and the central list of persons considered suitable to be members of the fostering panel, have telephone enquires made to each referee to verify the written references and that these are recorded (NMS 19.1)
- ensure that each approved foster carer has at least one unannounced visit a year by a qualified social worker (NMS 21.8)
- ensure the service implements a proportionate approach to any risk assessment (NMS 4.5)
- ensure a record is kept of each placement with a foster parent, including the name, age and sex of each child placed, the dates on which each placement began and terminated and the circumstance of the termination (Regulation 30 (3) (a))
- ensure the manager regularly monitors all records kept by the service to ensure compliance with the service's policies and to identify patterns and trends (NMS 25.2)
- ensure the assessment is completed and a written report presented to the fostering panel before approving anyone as a foster carer. This should be undertaken within a timescale which allows the fostering panel to make a

recommendation on approval within eight months of the application to be assessed. (Volume 4, statutory guidance, paragraph 5.32)

Outcomes for children and young people

Outcomes for young people are **good**.

Children and young people feel safe, secure and experience positive care. The majority of children and young people are in an appropriate placement and placement disruptions are few. There is a significant drive to keep sibling groups together and reduce the number of children and young people placed outside of Herefordshire. There is also a strong drive to reduce residential placements and give all children the chance to experience family life. Currently there are only five children placed in residential care from Herefordshire. Consequently, for the large majority, the best option for each child is sufficiently considered.

Children and young people are achieving good outcomes in health and education. For example, attendance at school is good. Children and young people are helped to develop and achieve improving personal educational progress. Annual health assessments are now taking place in a timely manner which monitors and promotes healthy growth and development. Specific work has been undertaken, including a consultation exercise with young people, to ensure all young people are reached through this process. Children and young people also now have direct access to additional health services such as Child and Adolescence Mental Health Services and the youth counselling service. This is resulting in children and young people's specialist health needs being addressed and their outcomes monitored to help prevent health inequalities.

Children and young people are kept fit and healthy. Foster carers support them to access activities and clubs and pursue hobbies and sports. Children and young people with more complex health issues have their needs met effectively. This is because foster carers are properly trained and supervised by medical professionals. As a result, this promotes children and young people's healthy development. A foster carer caring for a young person with complex health needs stated: 'Support across the board has been excellent. It has all linked together. There are daily phone calls. The young person's views are sought. As foster carers we are provided with all the relevant training. Transition is being discussed and palliative care has been introduced. It is seamless.'

Children and young people's independence is supported and takes into account their age and ability. Throughout their placement they are encouraged to develop social and key practical skills. For example, older young people are encouraged to use public transport and develop skills to manage financial matters. This develops their confidence, self-esteem and helps them mature as young adults.

Children and young people are happy in their foster placements and are treated as part of the family. They make good progress in developing a positive self-view and make and sustain strong attachments with their carers. Their emotional resilience is

developed. They can specifically explore separation and loss, self-esteem and life story work with confident, skilled foster carers or through alternative support such as the play therapist. They are supported to re-establish and build upon important relationships and experience positive transitions. Foster carers are appropriately trained and skilled at supporting transition back to the family home, onto independent living or into an adoptive family.

Quality of service

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

The recruitment and retention of foster carers has been a key focus for the fostering service. The local authority has a clear strategy to recruit and increase numbers of foster carers. It is also developing new and existing foster carer's expertise and specialisms. This is being achieved with Herefordshire currently exceeding its targets for recruitment. Overall, the recruitment and retention of foster carer's shows improving diversity of foster carers in relation to matching children's needs in Herefordshire.

In March 2012 Herefordshire launched a DVD to promote the service and recruit new foster carers. This DVD involved children, young people and foster carers talking about their experiences of fostering in Herefordshire. It is a key element of the recruitment process and has been well received.

A fee payment scheme has also been introduced for foster carers in Herefordshire. This has improved the recruitment of foster carers, increased attendance at training and recognised and developed foster carer's specialisms.

The preparation, assessment and matching of foster carers is good and leads to effective placements being made and maintained. The assessments of foster carers are comprehensive and analytical. They focus strongly on the needs of looked after children but also the understanding and needs of birth children. The timeliness of assessments and approval of family and friends is currently being monitored and there are improvements. However, there also remain occasions when timescales are not being met. Supervising social workers have been appropriately trained to run the training. Foster carers find it 'informative', 'inspiring' and 'thought provoking'. They feel 'it allows you to develop friendships and support networkers with others', 'consolidate knowledge and learn new skills' and 'form positive relationships with the fostering team'.

The fostering panel is functioning effectively. The number, knowledge and experience of persons on the central list are sufficient to enable the fostering service to constitute panels that are equipped to make competent recommendations. However, it lacks the skills of an individual with an educational background. The internal quality assurance function is robust and provides the fostering service with constructive feedback. This ensures that good quality reports, assessments and review reports to panel are maintained and improved.

In the majority of cases, the quality of placement matching is good. Foster carers clearly understand children and young people's needs when being placed with them. Where gaps exist in skills, knowledge and understanding, these are met through training, support and supervision. As a result, this allows children and young people to establish positive relationships. There has been an occasion when babies were placed with foster carers who smoke. This had been thoroughly risk assessed and practice put in place to reduce risk; however, it goes against current good practice guidance.

Training for foster carers and family members is good. It has been developed to be more accessible, running in the evenings and at weekends. It is also linked to the new fee payment scheme. Training is provided for all foster carers as well as some specifically for foster carers to meet individual children's needs. Foster carers can also access Herefordshire's programme of training online and sign-up online. This enables them to attend training alongside children's social workers and supervising social workers.

The quality of reports, placement plans and minutes from reviews is good overall. These support foster carers to ensure that children and young people's identified needs are being met.

Foster carers state that a key strength of the service is the support they receive from the fostering manager and team. They find them approachable. They are easily contacted and always return phone calls. They help them address any concerns and promote their growth and improvement in meeting the needs of those children and young people placed. This is enhanced by additional support from other departments and partnership agencies. There are also a number of formal and informal foster carer support groups, including a newly formed man's group and a buddying system, which is in the process of being developed further.

Safeguarding children and young people

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

Children and young people feel safe and are safe. Supervising social workers and foster carers fulfil their role related to safeguarding children and young people. Their safety prior to and during placement is actively promoted. This is underpinned by effective monitoring and oversight by foster carers under the guidance of supervising social workers. For example, the safe caring policy is effectively implemented in practice in the fostering household. This promotes children and young people's safety as remaining central to the fostering service.

Each approved foster carer is supported by a named, appropriately qualified social worker who undertakes visits and formal supervisions throughout the year. However, unannounced visits to foster carers are not taking place every 12 months.

Relationships within fostering households are positive. Foster carers are able to set appropriate and fair boundaries. Children and young people do not identify bullying

as an issue. Foster carers are vigilant and act appropriately to concerns raised by children and young people.

Incidents of inappropriate high risk behaviours are low and those that do occur are effectively managed with partnership agencies. Challenging behaviour is sensitively addressed and young people are emotionally supported by well-informed foster carers. No incidents that required physical intervention have occurred over the last two years. Incidents of children and young people running away and becoming 'missing' from home are also low and are promptly addressed. Working effectively with the police and within the multi-agency partnership-working agreements, foster carers achieve a reduction in incidents. This helps promote children and young people's safety and the stability of their placement. Where risky behaviour is identified, assessment of risk is not always recorded and shared between partner agencies. This could compromise strategies and lead to inconsistent practice.

An established staff recruitment process is in place for those working in and for the fostering service. However, it does not always record when and who undertakes the telephone call to verify written references.

The fostering service has an effective whistle-blowing policy which is well communicated to staff and foster carers. This additionally safeguards children and young people from abuse.

The handling of allegations is appropriate. The fostering service follows the local authority reporting procedures. Careful scrutiny of individual cases is taking place with clear outcomes and conclusions. One referral raised concerns that lead to an internal investigation. The manager took prompt action in line with the recommendations made. The fostering service learnt lessons and improved practice as a consequence.

Leadership and management

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

All the recommendations made at the previous inspection have been met except for one relating to the membership of panel. This recommendation has been repeated in this report.

Significant restructuring to the Local Authority has taken place since the last inspection. A number of systems have either just been introduced or are about to be launched. For example, participation of children and young people at a corporate level has reduced but there are new initiatives and incentives such as a Facebook page to encourage new interest. Statutory visits to children and young people by their social workers are now being monitored and are taking place within timescale. However, Herefordshire are currently restructuring a child's entrance into care to increase the consistency of social workers.

In other areas steady progress has been achieved, including a significant amount of work on recruitment, training and pay scales for foster carers. This has particularly impacted positively on the foster carers' skill-base.

Resources are allocated to prevent placement disruptions and promote placement stability. There is effective partnership work with health, education, youth service and police, which is generally well coordinated. Foster carers' working relationships with their supervising social workers remain strong and are based on an inclusive partnership and professional work ethic. Foster carers benefit from the inclusive approach adopted in practice throughout the fostering service. They are valued and respected as key people who make a difference to the child's life. Supervising social workers are supportive.

The fostering service is well managed. Prior to October 2011 there had been an interim management arrangement. However, since the appointment of the current manager the service has stabilised. The supervising social work team remain a key strength of this service and have been able to mitigate some negative effects of the change of managers during this time. Herefordshire have invested in the team and increased staffing, with an additional supervising social worker and family support worker post with specialist training in the 'Solihull Parenting Approach'. Although the team structure has been increased, the benefit of these additional posts are yet to be realised as existing vacancies have not been recruited to.

The fostering service's self-assessment is adequate. The collection of data is hindered by the service's computer system. The manager is now collecting data manually which over a period of time will be analysed to identify patterns and trends and inform practice and improvements. The current computer system does not ensure a running record is kept of each child placed with a foster parent.

Staff are well supported. Supervision and appraisals are taking place. Supervising social workers feel well supported and valued by the leadership and management team. Staff are qualified and experienced. Newly appointed staff receive appropriate induction and mentoring. As a result, this supports positive and safe care for children and young people.

Complaints are dealt with professionally and sensitively. In the last 12 months the fostering service has investigated two complaints.

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 the inspection of local authority fostering agencies.