

# Worcestershire County Council Fostering and Kinship Service

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

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<b>Unique reference number</b>	SC060111
<b>Inspection date</b>	23/07/2013
<b>Inspector</b>	Rachel Ruth Britten / Sharon Treadwell
<b>Type of inspection</b>	Full

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<b>Date of last inspection</b>	21/05/2010

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## Service information

### Brief description of the service

The fostering service is local authority managed. The County Council Fostering and Kinship Service is located within the County Council's Children's Social Care Services. The fostering service works alongside the Integrated Service for Looked After and Adopted Children (ISL), a joint health and social care resource, which provides multiagency support for the educational, health, community and leisure needs of children and young people cared for by foster carers.

The fostering service offers a range of services including recruitment, assessment, training and supervision of foster carers, kinship carers and respite carers. (No short breaks for children with disabilities are provided because this is presently contracted out by the local authority.) At the time of the inspection there were 254 children placed with 350 carers in 197 carer households. Of these, 88 children were placed with 104 friends and family carers in 57 households.

### 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 provides an adequate quality of care, with individual plans for each child. The quality of care promotes very much improved outcomes for many children and young people. However, issues around delegated authority hold back some children and young people in experiencing family and social life to the full. Nevertheless, good support is provided to children and young people which minimises placement disruption and promotes longer term stability. Most children and young people have positive views about the quality of their foster placements and their relationships with foster carers and their families.

Foster carers and children and young people's assessments cover all required areas and contribute to keeping children and young people safe. However, there are service shortfalls in the timeliness of investigations. In addition, safe care practice does not have a sufficiently proportionate or progressive focus upon children and young people learning how to keep themselves safe. Nevertheless, children and

young people are safe and are adequately consulted. There is particular strength in the professional team around the child. Carers feel highly valued as core members of this team and, together, they all ensure that children and young people are central to all reviews of their care.

Leaders and managers are committed. They understand the strengths and weaknesses of the fostering service and have insightful development plans in place. These are already being demonstrated in some of their recent work. However, investigations are not completed timely and some documents are out of date. There are further service shortfalls in the timeliness of training and carer supervision. Nevertheless, there are no breaches of regulations or failures to meet national minimum standards that impact negatively on the welfare or safety of children and young people. Overall, the service is adequate and shows good potential to improve. The manager's own assessment is that the fostering service is, 'on the brink of taking a step up.'

## 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 that children can stay overnight, holiday with friends, or friends and relatives of their foster carer, or go on school trips, subject to requirements of the care/placement plan, if foster carers consider it appropriate in individual circumstances. Disclosure and Barring checks are not normally sought as a precaution (NMS 7.7)
- ensure the provision of consistently good quality carer profiles and extend the availability of these, so that all children receive good information about carer households prior to placement (NMS 11.3)
- ensure that foster carers receive the training and development they need to carry out their role effectively (NMS 20)
- ensure that the fostering service provides the level and nature of supervision to all carers that it undertakes to provide and that all such meetings, including unannounced visits, have a clear purpose (NMS 21.2 and 21.8)
- ensure that there is a proportionate approach to any risk assessment and that carers encourage children to take appropriate risks as a normal part of growing up. This relates to extending the effectiveness of safe care policies (NMS 4.4 and 4.5)
- ensure that recruitment records for all people working in the fostering service evidence that telephone enquiries are made to each referee to verify the written references (NMS 19.1)
- ensure that investigations into allegations or suspicions of harm are handled quickly (NMS 22.9)

- ensure that there is a good quality learning and development programme for panel members (NMS 23.1)
- update all foster carer agreements to reflect current legislation and to better clarify the matters to be recorded under schedule 5 (Regulation 27(5)(b))
- ensure that the executive side of the local authority receives written reports on the management outcomes of the fostering service every three months. (NMS 25.7)

## Outcomes for children and young people

Outcomes for young people are **adequate**.

The large majority of children and young people live with foster carers where this is the placement of choice and is the best option for them as an individual. They are placed with their brothers and sisters unless their individual needs mean that there are particular reasons why this is not appropriate. (This applied to 11 sibling groups in 2012/13.) A significant proportion of children and young people benefit from being appropriately placed with carers who are approved as 'friends and family' or 'kinship' carers. In addition, a new initiative to recruit able and skilled carers for teenagers is intended to directly benefit young people who are presently living in residential care. Social workers confirm that there is 'a fair choice of carers to choose from - often quite experienced.'

Young people say carers have provided them 'with a home and a family.' They are also benefitting from consistent, stable care with foster carers who are skilled in working with children's birth families. For example, carers have taken siblings and grandparents of their fostered child on holiday with them. A lack of availability of carer profile information for children and young people before they move to new placements mostly affects those who are placed in an emergency situation. However, carer profile information is also sometimes used to good effect in helping children prepare for a move to a foster placement. Overall, children and young people are generally well prepared for placements and then make sound progress in all areas of their development.

All children and young people are supported and enabled to share their wishes, views and feelings. They report that their independent reviewing officers 'are brilliant' at listening to them and helping them. Additionally, children and young people say that their foster carers are key figures in supporting them to have their say. One young person said, 'I have grown as a person and become more confident since being in foster care.' Children and young people are encouraged to, and usually do, attend their 'looked after child' (LAC) reviews. They also contribute their views about their carers to their carers' annual review. Fostering service managers have involved children and young people in designing a profile of what they want from a foster carer. In addition, many children and young people take advantage of the 'speak out' and 'who cares, we care' social and support groups.

Children and young people say they 'very definitely' feel part of their fostering family

and of the communities they live in. One young person said 'my carers have done so much - I play rugby for the local club now.' However, young people report that at times their carers cannot grant permission for activities, such as overnight stays with friends or trips with school. Issues about police checking of persons and social worker agreement are cited as delaying or blocking carers taking the authority that is delegated to them. As a result, some children and young people miss out on normal life events and feel that this marks them out as different from their peers who are not looked after.

Children and young people know how to complain and are satisfied with the way their complaints are listened to. For example, a child complained to the local authority about having too many changes of social worker. He felt listened to and heard when the team manager for the social workers wrote him a letter of apology. The large majority of children and young people respond to the county's bi-annual LAC survey questionnaire in 2011 (which was created by young people). They confirmed in it their 'positive emotion' about being fostered and the fact that they were able to identify someone they could talk to. Overall, children and young people have some influence in the local authority children's service, but are less well involved directly in the fostering service. For example, they contribute to social worker recruitment, but not fostering supervising social worker recruitment. They also do not presently have much input to foster carer training and there was only one child/young person response to the annual Ofsted survey in 2013.

Children and young people acquire practical and life skills to prepare them for adult life. They all attend school or other educational provision that provides for their statutory entitlement of 25 hours per week to the end of key stage 4. In addition, all children and young people have a current personal education plan which they have been involved in creating. Furthermore, a good number of young people are supported to stay with their long-term carers past the age of 18 and some of these have progressed to university. Placement stability long term promotes a good sense of belonging and identity for many children and young people. This is well supported in many instances through the emotional and practical support provided to children, young people and carers from the integrated service for looked after children (ISL). There are a number of examples of proactive help which has enabled children and young people to overcome issues like school bullying and difficulties with birth family relationships.

Children and young people make progress to develop a positive self-view and sound relationships with peers and adults. Diverse cultural needs are noted and addressed too. For example, a child is taken regularly to restaurants where he can speak the home language and keep in touch with friends. Another child is helped to obtain ingredients and make meals which are authentic to his birth mother's country of origin. Many carers help children collect treasures and memories over a period of years. They work hard to promote positive family links. This helps children understand the importance of their background. Some respite carers make a lasting contribution to this by preparing 'later life letters' for children. These capture in writing and/or photos, the story of a respite care episode. They are given to children for them to enjoy now and for future reference as part of their whole life story. A

social worker confirmed 'there is a whole shift in the way we approach placement planning, moves and permanency.' As a result, fewer children or young people experience avoidable, unplanned endings to their placements. (There were 19 in 2012/13 compared to 27 in 2011/12.) In addition, children and young people benefit from greater stability and continue to visit and feel attached to their carer family as they move into adulthood.

## Quality of service

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

The fostering service recruits sufficient foster carers to meet the needs of 73.1% of the looked after children (LAC) in the county. This is an increased proportion than previous years. This has been achieved within a context where an increasing number of kinship foster carers are entering into permanency arrangements for children which conclude their approval as a foster carer. However, the figure is still slightly below the national average of LAC cared for by local authorities' own fostering services. This service is aware of the need to recruit more carers and is focusing appropriately on present needs. For example, the recruitment of appropriate carers for young people and babies is a current priority as well as ensuring good resources for the approval of significant numbers of kinship carers.

The preparation and assessment of foster carers is sound. It covers the needs of looked after children in general and the role of foster carers as professionals and parents. There is also good quality tailored induction training for kinship carers and some good quality training for all carers in attachment and bereavement. Children benefit from the skills their carers learn from training. Training enables carers to care for children and young people successfully. There are examples where carers have been confident to demonstrate their commitment to children they foster through legally contested cases when their witness evidence has been taken. However, a significant number of approved carers have not completed the children's workforce development council standards. In addition, the three year window for essential core training means that some carers have not completed essential training for lengthy periods after starting to foster. As a result, some carers lack confidence in key areas of their work, including behaviour management, first aid, and the impact of past abuse. This potentially holds back children and young people's progress in their foster placements and is possibly a contributing factor in occasional placement instability. Furthermore, the fostering panel does not always receive annual training. This too potentially holds back the panel's understanding of their role within the context of current fostering practice. Nevertheless, the panel makes timely, appropriate and child-centred recommendations. Their activity drives improvement in the quality of social work fostering assessments and reviews despite some concerns about their role in considering some kinship assessments before they have been completed.

A clear understanding of children and young people's needs and of the skills of the foster carers informs placement decisions. Social workers indicate that they have time to undertake this work effectively now. One said, 'It requires time - you need to

almost camp out with children - back three years ago I had no time - now I do in looking for carers.' Carers have children's placement plans and work towards them. Carers say that they are central to placement meetings. The fostering service is also shortly to take the lead in chairing placement planning meetings. The aim is to make the meetings and the resultant placement/care plans more organised and effective for children. However, foster carer's own agreements with the fostering service do not reflect current legislation and do not clearly describe all the two-way commitments and expectations. This makes it harder to use the agreements as effective tools for placement planning or driving forward training of carers. Despite this, carers enjoy good relationships with the service overall, with few complaints.

Most carers are able to meet the needs of children and young people competently. Any gaps in their skills and knowledge are met effectively through supervision and support. Carers are particularly pleased with ISL psychology support and the support from their supervising social workers. Some supervision records demonstrate this well and include good examples of how children and young people's individual needs, including ethnicity, are being met. Supervising social workers in turn celebrate carers' professionalism and skill. One social worker said, 'Carers are such good advocates - getting speech and language support, psychology support - making amazing links with school - working more and more as professionals - they are passionate about their role as carers and professionals.' However, some carers do not receive the level or nature of supervision which the fostering service undertakes to provide. It is not always made clear what the purpose of visits, including unannounced visits, is, and records of these sometimes lack clarity. Supervising social workers agree that there is room for them to be more creative and timely, but are confident that children and young people benefit directly from their work. One social worker said, 'we are moving to a place where resources and support will be there for us to use creatively and share - we really are giving carers support, not just writing about it.'

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

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

Children and young people report that they generally feel safe from bullying and abuse, both in and outside of the foster home. Restraint is very rarely used by carers and the fostering service manager has clear knowledge of the circumstances of every instance. This ensures that negative outcomes are minimised and carers and children are fully supported. Children and young people know how to complain and know who they can talk to about any concerns they have, both inside and outside of the organisation. Investigations into allegations or suspicions of harm are handled fairly and consistently with proper involvement of the local authority designated officers. Effective protection is provided for the child or young person making the allegation as well as sufficient support for the person who is the subject of the allegation. This includes the provision of adequate summaries of all the action taken and the outcomes of the investigation. However, investigations into allegations are not made quickly. This mitigates against good placement planning and undermines foster carers' confidence, but does not impact upon any child's safety. In addition, training needs identified following investigations are not provided for quickly. This is despite

the service allocating spare places on courses, such as behaviour management training, to allow carers to 'slot in' if unforeseen training needs are identified.

Recruitment, assessment, preparation and supervision of foster carers have a clear focus on safeguarding and child protection. The vetting of all staff, including social workers and foster carers is robust in all respects. However, records of social workers' recruitment do not show that telephone enquiries are made to each referee to verify their written references. Carers understand the importance of following child protection procedures and speak positively about child protection training they have undertaken. Social workers are impressed with the quality of carers' action when children or young people make disclosures or allegations. They comment upon the support given to children and how carers help children to feel safe during investigations. However, supervising social workers do not always complete extra unannounced visits when they have concerns about foster carers and do not always make their agenda for unannounced visits very explicit.

All carers utilise household and child specific safe care policies. The latter policies take into account children and young people's individual risks arising from past abuse. However, carers and supervising social workers do not confidently identify key risks and devise ways to manage them proportionately and progressively. For example, some carers state that they are 'not allowed' to sit on children's beds to read them a story but do not understand exactly why this is or what must happen for them to be able to change this. Safe care policies do not identify clearly how children are to be enabled to begin taking manageable and appropriate risks or work towards understanding how to keep themselves safe. Analysis of the circumstances around the very few instances where young people have gone missing from home for short periods links to this shortfall. The analysis further indicates a reluctance to promote young people in taking appropriate risks by supporting free time and increasing opportunities to be out with friends. Nevertheless, overall, children in foster placements are kept safe by carers who work well as part of the professional team around each child.

## **Leadership and management**

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

The fostering service sits within children's services, the whole of which has been subject to two re-organisations in two years, with a complete 'redesign' underway at present. While staff morale has been dented by the loss of some skilled, but unqualified workers, the manager and social workers are confident that children and carers are already being better supported. This is because present arrangements minimise the number of changes of placing social workers for children and because the amount of time available for those social workers to spend with children and young people is significantly increased. Similarly, newly recruited carers now have only two key workers involved from initial enquiry stage through to assessment, training and placement. Social workers and their managers have also benefited from a recent high quality training course on effective supervision. Learning and

techniques from this are being applied to supervision of carers as well as benefiting the morale of supervising social workers and their own supervision quality. There are therefore early indicators that the redesign is benefiting children and young people through good support to, and retention of, foster carers.

The fostering service manager is committed and insightful. She monitors the performance of the service and completes a comprehensive annual report. She is satisfied that the service is effective, but is not presently providing written reports at three monthly interviews to the executive side of the local authority. The service development plan describes the agenda for continuous improvement in outcomes for fostered children and young people. It also describes adequate action that has been taken on the majority of matters raised at the last inspection. However, two areas of shortfall already described persist. These relate to the effectiveness of foster carer agreements and safe care policies, resulting in two recommendations at this inspection.

The local authority fostering service is well resourced and provides a high quality, appropriately qualified, workforce. It is investing in staff and support services which aim to: prevent placement disruption; bring more children back into the county; and run a service based on only qualified people. There is evidence that the service's 'kinship strategy' is having a very positive impact on long-term stability for children and young people. Twenty four children and young people in kinship care were made the subject of special guardianship orders (SGOs) in 2012 - 2013. This represents an increase of 14 from the previous year.

The manager has a good overview of the service's strengths and weaknesses. She consulted carers on: the redesign; the opening of the payment for skills scheme to family and friends carers; the kinship strategy; and development of the 'Positives Moves' scheme. She is currently focusing on: recruitment, assessment timescales, complaints and allegations and kinship carers' issues. For example, the manager is now taking increased responsibility for the placement of children under regulation 24 of the care planning regulations in recognition of concerns about how these placements have been used hitherto. The manager also wants to ensure that placement meetings are better organised and address more potential issues early (for example, obtaining passports for children to go on holiday with their carers). The manager wants to embed the practice of holding disruption meetings and also to improve the service's consultation with parents about their views on carers and placements. In addition, she has realised that there is a need to celebrate and disseminate successes among the carer and staff groups.

The manager of the fostering service can clearly identify learning from both practice outcomes and current research. She says 'the service must look at: how we assess the impact on carers when they themselves have been 'looked after'; the weight that should be given to children having been in placement for a number of years when there are concerns around levels of care; how we help young people understand what standard of care they should expect when they have come from neglectful and abusive homes; and at what point the service intervenes when there are a series of minor concerns, including how there can be better use of good chronologies, for

example, at carers' reviews.' However, the service has been slow to implement the foster carer charter. Some issues regarding delegated authority and clarity on allowances persist for some carers. Nevertheless, there is notable progress in understanding and respecting the role of family and friends carers. They now have full access to all carer training and skills level payments. As a result, almost all carers say that they feel part of the team and valued as professionals.

## 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.