

# Warrington Borough Council Fostering Service

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

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<b>Date of last inspection</b>	24/06/2010

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## Service information

### Brief description of the service

This local authority fostering service supports 172 children and young people living in 96 fostering households. Of these 26 children and young people live with family and friends carers.

The service provides short term respite and long term foster care placements. It additionally provides a short breaks service for children and young people with a disability. The service also provides for family and friend carers.

### 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 **good**.

This is a well-managed service with strategic and frontline managers who have a clear understanding of the priorities of the local authority. Children and young people are at the centre of their work and they make outstanding progress in achieving their potential in their educational aspirations. The organisation has invested a significant level of resources to support and encourage the children and young people to achieve educationally. A significant number are currently being supported through university. This commitment to the young people means that their life chances in future employment are significantly improved.

Placement stability is good with very few disruptions. The calibre of foster carers is very high. This means that children and young people are placed with adults who have an understanding of the complex emotional and behaviour challenges presented by them.

There is a robust recruitment and training process for foster carers who are well supported and are regarded as integral to the professional team. The foster care forum is effective in terms of support to foster carers in identifying their developmental needs. This forum gives foster carers direct access to managers whereby they can influence service development.

Children and young people have a strong voice in the organisation and they have been successful in influencing changes in services available. It is commendable that the fostering service is supported by elected members who have a genuine interest in development of fostering services for children and young people.

There is a positive culture permeating this organisation which places an emphasis on all children and young people receiving the best care. It is a significant feature that staff refer to 'our children' in all discussions.

As a result of this inspection recommendations are made relating to some aspects of management monitoring of records and practice and training, support and development standards (TSD) portfolios.

## 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 all staff work and fostering activity is consistent with the services policies and procedures (NMS 25.3)
- ensure that all foster carers attain the Training, Support and Development standards within the required timescales. (NMS 20.3)

### Outcomes for children and young people

Outcomes for young people are **outstanding**.

Foster care is a first choice for the children and young people. This is a well planned and thought out process with the voice of the child being a major determinant in deciding on a foster placement. For example some young people chair their matching meeting and take a direct role in approving the match. They are actively involved at every stage of the fostering process and have a clear understanding of how and why decisions are made about their care. The council is committed to ensuring that the voice of children and young people is at the heart of service delivery. This is an excellent demonstration of a commitment to equality and diversity.

The fostering service almost always place siblings together. This ensures that relationships are maintained between children and provides them with a safe stable home to develop.

Children and young people develop self confidence through the excellent support and care of their foster carers. Some young people have taken on very responsible roles in developing the children in care council. These young people had previously no confidence in themselves and now speak at regional and national conferences on children's matters. The stability of foster homes clearly benefit the children and young people some of whom said. 'I love my foster parents and they treat me as

their own' and 'I am very happy in my foster home.'

Fostering placements are carefully thought out and as a result disruptions are few. This means that children and young people benefit from stable foster placements thereby enhancing their opportunities to develop meaningful adult and peer relationships. The calibre of foster carers recruited is high and this is a clear reflection of the robust selection procedures followed by this service. The manager describes how, 'we only select potential foster carers who are of a high calibre and who really understand the complex care needs of our children and young people.'

The children and young people enjoy excellent health care support. This ensures that they are healthy and all aspects of their health care needs are met through the strong multi-disciplinary approach to health care in this organisation. For example, the looked after nurse and the CAMHS service is based in the foster care building thereby ensuring close cooperation and sharing of information. This means that children and young people have their care, emotional and health needs managed effectively and efficiently. Almost all children and young people have an up-to-date annual health assessment and almost all have had dental checks in the last 12 months. The local authority provides free leisure centre passes for all children and young people including their foster carers to encourage exercise and to maintain good health.

The educational achievements of the children and young people is impressive. They make excellent progress in all aspects of their education. A unique feature is that the virtual school, health care, children's services and the foster team are all based together. Therefore any aspect of education can be managed speedily and effectively. In 2012 40% of young people in foster care achieved 5 A\*- C in the GCSE exams including English and Maths compared to 15% for children in care nationally. The children and young people in foster care achieve 87.5% of Key Stage 2 (2013). This is above the national average for all children and young people in care. The school attendance record of the children and young people is exceptional compared to their starting points. The progression rates for young people moving into higher education is significant with nine young people currently attending national universities. The fostering service supports young people to remain in their foster homes whilst at university through the Staying Put scheme. Through the positive support provided, young people are able to enhance their lives by going into higher education thereby promoting their employment prospects. This is another excellent example of a commitment to equality and diversity. The virtual school actively supports children and young people with extra help with any individual educational needs. A key role of the virtual school is in the training of foster carers. This enhances the understanding and confidence of carers to deal with any educational matters with the schools. Interventions that improve children's educational performance include: school challenge Visits; careful selection of schools so as to support placement stability; the book programme for year 3-7; 1:1 tuition or tuition at home for the majority of children; work experience program; apprenticeship scheme; university workshops and visits; targeted careers advice; rewards/awards evening. The success in Warrington has been due to the bespoke packages that are put together to address individual children's needs.

The children and young people influence the way the service is operated. There is a strong commitment among senior managers for the active involvement of children and young people. This is evident through the work of the children in care council where a number of initiatives emanating from this forum has brought about significant changes to the operations of the fostering service. For example, the development of The Pledge. This is a statement that ensures elected members and staff are committed to high standards of foster care. Young people additionally meet with elected members, attend foster carer training, and get involved in interview processes. Members of the children in care council attend the corporate parenting forum and the children in need strategy group.

### **Quality of service**

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

The preparation, training and assessment of prospective foster carers is sound. This ensures they are appropriately prepared to meet the challenging and demanding needs of children and young people. A minority of carers however, have not completed their portfolios as required by the training, support and development standards. The recruitment of foster carers is robust and the service is clear that only those who show the potential to meet the complex and challenges are selected. Assessment of prospective foster carers considers applicants' abilities to respect and promote diversity. A strong feature is the active involvement of young people in the recruitment preparation, training of foster carers and staff. This provides potential foster carers with a clear understanding of their role. The service has a commitment to continually recruit foster carers and this means that there is a supply available to provide placements for the children and young people. The service operates a flexible approach to demand and contracts with independent fostering agencies are in place if this is in the best interests of the child.

The foster panel is managed efficiently and ensures the quality of the recommendations are of a high standard. This provides the agency decision maker with the necessary information to decide on approvals. The panel carries out an effective quality assurance function on all reports submitted to ensure that only the highest calibre carers are appointed. The panel is ably managed by the chair who provides strong leadership and direction. There is a positive commitment from the panel chair for all members to play an active role in the formulating of recommendations. The administrative support to the panel is efficient, ensuring that all reports are received by panel members at least five days before the panel meets. Applicants to become foster carers are always invited to attend the panel and are given the opportunity to present their views on the process. Applicants are informed of the panel recommendation immediately after panel has concluded discussion of their case. The agency decision maker will finalise the process within five working days. This demonstrates an efficient service.

The service works hard to ensure that children are suitably matched with foster carers who are able to meet their needs and where possible reflect their background and heritage. Every effort is made by the service to identify the most appropriate foster carers for each individual where their needs will be met. Some examples of very good practice are evident with young people chairing their matching meetings. This is a good demonstration of equality and diversity.

Foster carers are positively motivated and they provide high standards of care. They demonstrate an enthusiastic commitment to the children and young people in their care. They are supported by a team of professionals who ensure that appropriate support is always available. This combination of talents strongly promotes the care and wellbeing of all children and young people in foster care.

A significant feature of the service is the excellent relationships existing between the foster carers and the social workers in the foster team. There is a high level of trust and respect where the interest of the young people is paramount. Foster carers are treated as full partners who are fully involved in all aspects of the care planning process and their views are valued by the fostering service. This promotes trust and respect between the professionals and foster carers.

The staff of the fostering service is a stable team who are ably managed and supervised by the manager. They are confident in their role and all have completed required training to maintain their skills and competences.

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

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

Children and young people live in foster homes that keep them safe. The training process is thorough and ensures that foster carers have a strong commitment to safeguarding. Young people know how to complain if they have any concerns about their safety, bullying or wellbeing.

The service operates a robust recruitment and selection processes to ensure only appropriate adults are chosen for this challenging role. The service responds to enquiries promptly and provides good information for prospective adopters. It is at this early stage that those considered unsuitable are counselled out from pursuing their application. The suitability of prospective foster carers is considered on an inclusive basis, based on the needs of children and young people, irrespective of applicants' race, sexuality, disability or marital status. The service places a strong emphasis on very thorough assessments of prospective foster carers. There is a positive commitment to ensure that children and young people are placed with foster carers who have been thoroughly checked for their suitability to provide children and young people with a safe and caring home environment.

The monitoring of placements is good with unannounced visits being undertaken at appropriate intervals. This helps to keep children and young people safe.

The safety of the children and young people is enhanced through robust care and assessment plans that provide foster carers with clear detailed information thereby enabling them to formulate plans to provide appropriate care to meet the safeguarding needs of the children and young people.

A testimony to the success of the service is the low level of children and young people who go missing. The fostering service has a dedicated multi-disciplinary group who meet on a quarterly basis to monitor and plan interventions for children and young people who are missing from home. An independent organisation is commissioned to undertake return interviews and provide direct work with children and young people who have been reported missing. This ensures that children and young people can discuss reasons for going missing in confidence.

### **Leadership and management**

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

This is a well-managed service with strong leadership and management in place. There is a positive commitment to continuous improvement in service delivery. This is demonstrated in the completion of the nine recommendations made at the last inspection. These related to several aspects of deficits in the overall operations of the service.

The day-to-day operation and activities of the fostering service are well monitored and managed. This ensures that children with a plan for fostering are found suitable and well-prepared families in a timely manner. The management team demonstrate positive commitments to improving outcomes for the children and young people in foster care. In the past three years the service manager has systematically taken steps to ensure, a more robust operation and improved the overall service delivery. Fostering is a first choice consideration for all children and young people who are accommodated by the local authority.

The fostering service is committed to ensuring that children and young people have a real say and influence in the way the service is operated. To this end, the Warrington Plan for 2011-2014 commits the service to promoting opportunities to engage children and young people in all decision making processes relating to their care and in appropriate operational areas. For example, children and young people are able to chair their own reviews and matching meetings. They are actively involved in the recruitment and training of foster carers. The children in care council play a significant role working with senior managers and elected members in service development.

Foster carers are regarded as integral partners within the service and they are actively encouraged to take a key role in all planning for the children and young people. Foster carers feel valued by the service and for many they have migrated from the independent sector to join the local authority service. The foster care forum meets periodically to provide a platform for carers to raise any issues with managers



and staff. This demonstrates a listening service. In a minority of cases however, foster carers have not been fully involved as required by the local authority policy and procedures.

This is a service that subscribes positively to multi-service cooperation to provide good quality care and to drive forward improvements. For example, the virtual school, CAMHS and the looked after nurse are based with the fostering service. This means that the sharing of information and inter-agency collaboration is very high. This ensures that the care needs of the children and young people are met in the widest sense.

The staff of the fostering service demonstrate a strong commitment to their work and they are appropriately trained to ensure that their skills and competences are of a high standard. All staff undergo formal supervision by a manager and this ensures that children, young people and foster carers are monitored by competent professionals.

This fostering service demonstrates a capacity to change and to improve. The service manager is a driving force who aims high for the service and to provide an efficient service to enable children and young people to thrive and develop into responsible adults of the future.

## 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.