

# Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council Fostering Service

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

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<b>Date of last inspection</b>	25/07/2008

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## 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.

This report details the main strengths and any areas for improvement identified during the inspection. The judgements included in the report are made in relation to the outcomes for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and the relevant National Minimum Standards for the service.

## The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding: this aspect of the provision is of exceptionally high quality  
Good: this aspect of the provision is strong  
Satisfactory: this aspect of the provision is sound  
Inadequate: this aspect of the provision is not good enough

## Service information

### Brief description of the service

Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council provides a fostering service for Wirral local authority. The service recruits, approves and supports a range of carers. These include recruited carers, family and friends carers, respite carers for children with complex needs and therapeutic carers who look after young people engaged in a multi-disciplinary support programme.

### Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

This is an overview of what the inspector found during the inspection.

This announced full inspection was undertaken to examine the outcomes for children and young people who are currently living with foster carers approved and supervised by the fostering service.

Children and young people receive good quality care with some outstanding outcomes. Children and young people's needs are central to their care and welfare and all aspects of their lives are well promoted. Children and young people benefit from good health and are well supported and guided by a range of healthcare services. Children and young people feel safe and foster carers are aware of their responsibility to keep them safe. Education and leisure activities are promoted to a high quality and children and young people are encouraged to aspire in life. Children and young people are enabled to develop their self-esteem, identity and social inclusion. They are supported to develop independence skills and can remain in foster placements beyond the age of 18 years old. Children and young people are actively engaged in decisions about their care and their wishes and feelings and can influence the organisation at the highest level; this is an example of exceptionally high quality practice. All adults working for the fostering service are subject to rigorous vetting and young people are on the recruitment panel. The fostering service is well led and managed and both staff and foster carers are well trained and knowledgeable about the children and young people placed. The fostering panel is good and there is a child in care representation among the members; this is valued. The promotion of equality and diversity is integral to the services provided to children and young people. This ensures that their individual needs are well nurtured and met.

However, the fostering service has not included in the policy for the protection of children, information about the measures to be taken to protect them following an allegation of abuse or neglect against a foster carer. There is no information relevant to foster carers, which makes clear how they will be supported in the event that an allegation is made against them. Fostering panel minutes do not routinely include panel members discussion of the positive and negatives of the applications and

assessments. Panel members have not had an opportunity to further enhance their awareness by attending relevant training. The current out of hours service does not effectively meet foster carers requirements when they need support in relation to placements. These aspects of practice fall short of the required standard but have no impact on outcomes for children and young people's experiences.

### **Improvements since the last inspection**

The registered provider was asked to ensure that foster carers understand what information they are expected to keep and what information needs to be passed on to the fostering service. Positive action has been taken to address this matter. This practice ensures that foster carers have a clearer understanding of expectations and promotes transparent child care practices.

### **Helping children to be healthy**

The provision is good.

Children and young people benefit from good physical, emotional and psychological support. Primary and specialist healthcare services meet children and young people's individual needs and they have a good insight into their health issues. Foster carers have medical consents, which enable them to ensure children and young people receive the health services they need. A large percentage of children have current health needs assessments and health plans are followed and reviewed. The services provided by the looked after children's nurses are integral to this process. They promote positive engagement with young people to ensure their health needs are addressed. Services for children and young people with a disability are well organised and ensure their individual needs are met and that foster carers are appropriately trained and supported. Children and young people who are cared for outside of the area benefit from very good co-ordinated arrangements made between the local authority and health authorities. This ensures that children can access health services without undue delay.

The support that children and young people receive from the looked after children's child and adolescent mental health service is valued and their involvement has a direct impact on improving mental health outcomes. Children and young people confirm they are supported to be healthy. One young person said 'I get support and advice off my carers and my social workers.' Young people may access a range of other services in relation to sexual health, drug and alcohol and teenage pregnancy issues.

Foster carers are sufficiently trained about health and hygiene issues; these include medication administration and first aid. Foster carers confirm the benefits of this training. Foster carers routinely record medicines they administer to children and young people. This practice is closely monitored by the fostering service. Children and young people benefit from good health because foster carers promote healthy, balanced diets and encourage them to live healthy lifestyles. Children and young people said 'I have learned to eat lots of different things and I love corn on the cob

and pineapple' and 'I get healthy eating advice from my foster carers.' Children and young people are encouraged and supported to participate in a wide range of physical exercise that they enjoy. All foster families receive leisure passes to enable them to access community leisure facilities within the area including free access to swimming pools in the area. Children and young people have improved health, gained or lost weight, ceased bed wetting and have developed improved sleeping patterns. The fostering panel has health representation and health issues are actively explored in this arena.

Young people live in safe, healthy environments. Foster carers' homes are suitable and can comfortably accommodate all who live there. Regular checks are carried out by the fostering service to ensure the environments are safe and free from hazards.

### **Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe**

The provision is good.

Children and young people confirm that they feel safe and are always well cared for. Some children and young people said that they have been bullied in school. This is promptly addressed by foster carers and they are supported by the fostering service. Information about bullying is routinely followed up in foster carer and childcare statutory reviews. This information is maintained by the safeguarding department and is a good safeguarding measure that protects children and young people. Foster carers clearly understand their safeguarding responsibilities. They take their role seriously and promote safe practices. This is particularly well demonstrated in the safe practice involving parent and child placements. Good and effective early planning for unborn children ensures their protection. Creative support packages are developed to ensure each child's safety enabling support to be given to parents to help them learn how to care for their child effectively. Clear recording and decision making, through supervision and legal gate keeping, ensures that placement plans are monitored. Safeguarding training is mandatory for all foster carers. They also have related training, such as working with young people who display sexually harmful behaviour or self-harm and internet safety training; this training raises their awareness of these issues and promotes the protection of children and young people.

Safe care plans are implemented in foster families. Children and young people's behavioural activities are risk assessed. However, they do not always clearly identify risk reduction strategies. There has been no impact on outcomes for children and young people and the fostering service is addressing this issue.

Foster carers understand the procedure for reporting significant incidents to protect children. Management systems are in place to collate, respond to and investigate information about complaints, allegations and disclosures of abuse. Child protection concerns are promptly reported to the local safeguarding team and action is taken to ensure the safety of children and young people. Children and young people know how to complain. They have access to the complaints procedure and are supported to make a complaint. The children in care council, with senior management support,

is working on raising awareness about how to complain. This enables children and young people to feel confident about making complaints and compliments without facing any negative consequences.

Young people who go missing from home are protected by clear systems that promote their safe return. The fostering service has a protocol with the local police force which underpins the agreed expectations. Foster carers are familiar with the action to take when children and young people are missing. Children and young people missing for more than 24-hours are offered a return to foster care interview. This is carried out by an independent person on behalf of a voluntary childcare organisation. Young people who present with risky behaviours are subject to multi-disciplinary agency risk management meetings. The outcome of these meetings are reported to senior management. This ensures that missing children and young people are given high priority and positive steps are taken to reduce the risk to their safety and well-being.

### **Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do**

The provision is outstanding.

Foster carers have high expectations of the children and young people they care for and promote positive role models. Foster carers have specific training which supports them with the appropriate knowledge and skills. They promote positive behaviour to enable effective management of challenging and anti-social behaviours. Children and young people have developed excellent, positive relationships with their foster carers. These are based on very good matching processes and the development of positive attachments. Young people said that they enjoy life with their foster carers. Typical comments from children and young people include, 'because people don't fight and don't swear' and 'I thank social services for putting me with my foster carers.' Foster carers are well informed about the needs of the children and young people they care for and effectively liaise with relevant professionals. This includes support from the children and adolescent services that helps them understand and manage children and young people's behaviours. Foster carers have developed clear boundaries that children and young people understand. Children and young people are actively informed about their rights and responsibilities; this ensures that children and young people's rights are promoted and they learn that there are consequences to their behaviours.

Children and young people who encounter bullying behaviour and discrimination are well supported. Foster carers are well attuned to these issues and, in conjunction with other agencies, strive to protect children and young people when they are subjected to this treatment. These practices help children and young people develop personal confidence and emotional resilience.

Children and young people have opportunities to participate in risk assessed activities; these are arranged through the children in care council, the foster carers and community organisations. Children and young people lead active lives. They are taking part in leisure activities and hobbies of interest to them, such as holidays,

outdoor pursuits and a range of school holiday activities. Foster carers receive leisure passes, which enable young people to benefit from a range of sports and leisure activities. Children and young people have developed friendships within their own social circles. They are provided with a broad range of experiences, that promote social inclusion and are improving their social skills.

Children and young people benefit from excellent opportunities to develop their educational potential and significantly improve their life chances. Education is highly valued and is strategically supported by the Director for Children's Services. The director has written to the head teacher for each looked after child to enquire about their progress. This demonstrates how seriously the director takes the issue. Foster carers encourage school attendance and attainment. Children and young people have 100% school attendance and no permanent exclusions. Foster carers attend personal education planning meetings and liaise directly with schools and the looked after children education services. This means that they are fully involved in education planning for the children and young people they foster.

The looked after children's education services has delivered a range of support services in schools that enhance the education of looked after children. Examples include, volunteer reading scheme for younger children, a letterbox club and training for designated teachers. Children and young people confirm that they are helped to be successful in their education. One said 'My foster carer helps me with my reading and writing.' Another said their carer 'helps me when I have problems at school, (their carer) helps me with my homework. At home I have to try on my own.' A number of children and young people are making significant improvements in their academic achievements, from their starting points, particularly when they are in stable foster placements. A number of young people have completed their formal education and are looking to extend their educational attainment by applying to attend college, university or training schemes; some are already attending further education. Children and young people's achievements, educational or otherwise, are positively celebrated at annual award ceremonies. This positively enhances children and young people's self-esteem and confidence.

### **Helping children make a positive contribution**

The provision is outstanding.

The children in care council is strategically supported and led by the children's participation officer and cultural inclusion officer. It provides a highly effective and stimulating means for children and young people to make representations about life in foster care. Children and young people's wishes and feelings are listened to, are taken seriously and are respected. Children and young people are making a real impact on organisational decisions. They actively work with the social care workforce and partner agencies to develop services and oversee the arrangements. This ensures the needs of children and young people are heard and acted on. For example, young people are involved in policy and procedure changes in the fostering service, including the complaints process. Young people, including care leavers, are members of: the local safeguarding children's board; the fostering panel central list

and the corporate parenting group. They also undertake presentations at social care conferences and lecture student social workers. Children and young people have also been involved in the production of a DVD, My Ideal Social Worker and My Ideal Foster Family, as a training resource for staff and foster carers. The children in care council have also made representations to the Member of Parliament with respect to the pupil premium agenda. Children and young people in the council are currently looking into how they can better engage with children and young people from minority communities and children and young people who have a disability.

Individual children and young people are regularly consulted by foster carers who may also advocate on their behalf and listen to what they have to say. Children and young people's views are ascertained in other ways. For example, by independent reviewing officers before their statutory reviews, foster carer reviews, independent visitors and the children in care council. Children and young people say that their foster carers listen to them. One said 'My foster parents are like my mum and dad. I have lived with them for two years and they are amazing and have helped me though so much. If you need to speak to them, they are always there for you.'

Children and young people are aware about their contact arrangements and foster carers are actively supportive. Contact arrangements are clearly defined and appropriately facilitated. Foster carers are aware about the impact that contact may have on children and young people and communicate this information to the fostering service.

Children and young people benefit from very good matching arrangements that take into account their needs, views and foster carers ability to meet these. The fostering team has in-depth knowledge about foster carers with respect to their experience and skills and ensure that they are appropriately informed. Young people are encouraged and supported to have a positive self-image, make a positive contribution in the community and foster carer treat children and young people as their family. One carer said 'My supervising social worker always fills me in with information about young people she is wanting to place with me. I have a very good rapport with her and can ring her anytime, day or night.'

The local authority is actively monitoring emergency placements.

### **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is good.

Young people benefit from good arrangements that promote their independence. Young people say that they are helped to think about their future, irrespective of their age and ability. One young person said 'carers help me to understand and make my decisions with my room and clothes. They tell me to be good in school and if I don't I will not get the job I want because I want to work with children.' The fostering service has positive links with the pathway team. This team is moving into the same building as the fostering service which has potential to further enhance their working relationship. Pathway plans for young people, including young people

with a disability, are implemented and foster carers are well informed and trained. This ensures that they can appropriately support and advocate on behalf of young people.

The local authority is committed to reducing the high number of young people who are not in education, employment, or training. A recent multi agency development day profiled this issue and managers have responded positively; a young person has secured an apprenticeship as a result of these interventions. However, this is in its early stages but there is positive potential. A number of young people are remaining with their foster carers post eighteen years old. This provides them with stability and reduces the pressure for young people to move on when they are not, for whatever reason, ready.

## **Organisation**

The organisation is good.

Leadership and management are good. The fostering service is aware about its strengths and acts on areas for improvement through monitoring and reflection on practice. The fostering service demonstrates the delivery of child-focussed services that are not compromised by resource demands. For example, as previously noted, matching of children and young people with foster carers is a strength of the service. This has resulted in high levels of placement stability and children, and a number of young people, are making positive improvements from their starting points. The fostering service has clear systems to monitor children and young people who are waiting for placements and does not compromise by making a placement just because there is a vacancy.

The Statement of Purpose has been recently reviewed. It contains factual information about the service provision and includes Ofsted's contact details. The Children and young people's guide has been developed in consultation with the children in care council. This ensures that stakeholders, children and young people are well informed about the services that they can expect to receive.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Children and young people's individual needs are well met by foster carers. Their wishes and feelings are listened to and some of their views are represented at a strategic level and these inform policy and practice. Equality and diversity awareness is promoted through activities, such as e-learning and a recent equality and diversity event which led to the development of a draft equality and diversity strategy and pledge. This ensures that children and young people continue to have equal access to positive experiences and opportunities to develop to their full potential and minimise further disadvantage, irrespective of their identity, ability and background. The area of Wirral is predominantly white British and there is a small and increasing number of minority ethnic and unaccompanied asylum seeking children and young people who need placements. Children and young people who are not placed with foster carers who reflect their cultural and ethnic background are matched with foster carers who can meet their needs. Foster carers are resourceful and ensure that the quality of care

provided by them supports children and young people's cultural, ethnic and religious heritage. Foster carers demonstrate, in their care practices, that equality and diversity issues are understood and respected. One foster carer said 'We are all individual and our roots are very important, we all deserve to be treated equally and our background etcetera should always be taken into account'.

The fostering service recruitment strategy is clear and targeted. It has participated in recruitment campaigns in recent months and has moved to a call centre model to enhance the quality of service to callers who enquire about fostering. This is an effective means of recruiting new foster carers. Foster carers who have experienced the assessment process describe it as positive and thorough. While they understand the reasons for the high levels of scrutiny, they felt the approach of the fostering social worker assessors placed them at ease. All appropriate checks are carried out prior to approval and assessments are presented to panel without undue delay.

The fostering panel is efficiently operated and is quorate. It provides a good quality assurance mechanism and carries out reviews of foster carers. The panel chair is experienced and the central list of panel members includes two members who were children in care. The fostering panel has access to medical and legal advice and approval recommendations are appropriately specific in terms of ages and numbers. Approval minutes contain a detailed summary of the case. However, they do not consistently include panel members discussion of the positive and negatives of the applications and assessments. It is not clear how recommendations can be understood by the agency decision maker when these are not recorded. Panel members have not had an opportunity to further enhance their awareness by attending relevant training.

The fostering service is suitably managed by a child focussed person who understands their role and responsibilities. They have good experience and knowledge of legislation and are committed to driving up improvements in the fostering service. The fostering team is well established and staff retention is good. Staff are made up of a diverse, very experienced, skilled and qualified social work professionals who have a range of transferable skills and abilities. Fostering social workers are well supported by their immediate and senior managers, are regularly supervised and experience good morale. The fostering team is highly valued by foster carers. They are committed to ensuring positive outcomes for children and young people.

The fostering service is highly committed to the development of foster carers prior and post approval. This helps them to effectively care for children and young people. Foster carers have attended a range of training courses and drop in training sessions. Some foster carers have completed national vocational qualifications and some have completed or are commencing the Children's Workforce Development Council's standards. Some foster carers are proactive with respect to their training and development and some are resistant. Fostering social workers continue to support foster carers and explore creative engagement, helping them to make positive associations with their learning and practice. Foster carers are supervised at the required intervals and more frequently if required, including unannounced visits.

Foster carers feel very well supported and respected as part of the team around the child. Foster carers are invited to attend support groups and foster carer representatives attend the partnership group with senior managers. However, some foster carers do not feel that the out of hours service is responsive or effective. Payments to foster carers are clearly linked to each foster carer's skills level.

Allegations against foster carers are thoroughly investigated. The fostering service proactively works with the Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) and strategy meetings are appropriately convened. These practices safeguard children and young people. However, the allegation policy does not fully support practice. For example, it does not set out what measures are to be considered to protect children and young people when an allegation of abuse or neglect is made against foster carers; whether or not independent support is provided; who supports carers during an investigation into an allegation; whether children need to be removed or if placements should be suspended or if future learning and future reviews are needed for foster carers who are the subject of an allegation. Although there is no known negative outcome for children and young people, the current system is not clear.

Records provided by the fostering service are securely stored. Children's records are in particularly good order. Foster carers, children and young people's files are held electronically and are regularly updated. This provides an ongoing record and a clear understanding of children and young people's progress.

Family and friends as foster carers are well supported. They are competently assessed and approved and are provided with the appropriate training and information. This enables them to meet the needs of children and young people and to promote their potential and worth.

Children and young people's placement plans are compatible with their needs. They are made available to foster carers. Any delays in the receipt of these documents are pursued by the fostering service. Foster carers confirm that they are actively involved in the review of placement plans. Children and young people are actively encouraged to express their wishes and views or be represented by an advocate. Information is promptly updated following statutory reviews, which supports effective planning for children and young people.

## **What must be done to secure future improvement?**

### **Recommendations**

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

- ensure the policy for the protection of children provides, in particular for consideration to be given to the measures which may be necessary to protect children placed with foster parents following an allegation of abuse or neglect

(Regulation (12)(3)(e))

- ensure that written minutes of panel meetings are accurate and clearly cover the key issues and views expressed by panel members and record the reasons for its recommendation (NMS 14.7)
- ensure there is an effective out of hours advice and support service for foster carers (NMS 21.3)
- ensure there is written guidance for foster carers and staff, which makes clear how they will be supported during an investigation into an allegation including payment of allowance and any fee to foster carers while investigations are ongoing (NMS 22.11)
- ensure each person on the central list has access to appropriate training and skills development and is kept abreast of relevant changes to legislation and guidance. (NMS 23.11)