

# Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council Fostering Service

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

---

<b>Unique reference number</b>	SC041234
<b>Inspection date</b>	15/02/2008
<b>Inspector</b>	Jeffrey Banham
<b>Type of inspection</b>	Key

---

<b>Setting address</b>	Conway Building, Conway Street, Birkenhead, Wirral CH41 4HD
<b>Telephone number</b>	0151 6664696
<b>Email</b>	
<b>Registered person</b>	Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council
<b>Registered manager</b>	Simon Fisher
<b>Responsible individual</b>	Simon Garner
<b>Date of last inspection</b>	08/01/2007

---

© Crown copyright 2008

Website: [www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk)

This document may be reproduced in whole or in part for non-commercial educational purposes, provided that the information quoted is reproduced without adaptation and the source and date of publication are stated.

You can obtain copies of The Children Act 2004, Every Child Matters and The National Minimum Standards for Children's Services from: The Stationery Office (TSO) PO Box 29, St Crispins, Duke Street, Norwich, NR3 1GN. Tel: 0870 600 5522. Online ordering: [www.tso.co.uk/bookshop](http://www.tso.co.uk/bookshop)

## 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

The fostering service of Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council is based in Birkenhead and provides a range of services to children and young people looked after by the local authority. The primary responsibility of the service is to recruit, assess, train and support foster carers who can provide short term, long term and respite care placements throughout the borough. The manager of the fostering service leads the family placement team consisting of team leaders, supervising social workers, support workers and administrative staff. The service works with other social work and education teams of the local authority's Children and Young Person's Department to provide foster care placements and support foster carers in meeting the needs of children.

### Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

This was an announced inspection during which all key NMS and outcome areas have been assessed.

The fostering service is working to improve all aspects of its functioning, to improve its management systems and strategic direction to ensure that the support provided to children and foster carers is effective. Foster carers are well supported by supervising social workers. The local authority is reducing the numbers of children and young people coming into the care system and has approved more new carers to improve placement choice.

The impact of continuing changes in social workers responsible for children's placement continues to be felt and commented on by staff and carers. In particular the provision of information to carers, the completion of effective foster placements agreements and arrangements for the consent to medical treatment for children are subject to significant variations in practice. The role of the supervising social worker is not sufficiently robust within the structures and responsibilities of the Children's and Young Person's Department.

Practices in relation to the recording of a child's progress undertaken by foster carers and to the approval and support of family and friends as carers are also inconsistently applied.

### Improvements since the last inspection

The management structure of the fostering service has been improved and a new permanent manager is now in post.

The fostering service is working to improve the effectiveness of placements by ensuring that information on children to be placed is provided to foster carers in a timely and effective fashion. The safety of children is promoted by ensuring that Criminal Record Bureau checks are taken out on all adults who live in a foster carer's household and that foster carers receive at least one unannounced visit a year.

The fostering panel is implementing more robust procedures and practices to provide effective and objective scrutiny of the practice of the fostering service. The fostering panel has a more effective 'gate keeping' procedure to monitor the quality, consistency and format of information placed before it.

Staff have received training in foster carer approval and assessment. The foster carer Independent Reviewing Officer is presenting an annual report on the fostering service. Foster carers receive effective support out of hours from the supervising social workers.

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

The provision is satisfactory.

The fostering service ensures that it provides carers who are able to help each child in foster care to receive health care which meets her or his needs for physical, emotional and social development. Carers themselves are supported by the social workers of the fostering service and by other health care professionals. They are given an understandable health care plan based on a health care assessment completed by qualified health staff. The fostering service has good links with health care agencies and helps the foster carer to secure services for the child when these are required. Foster carers are clear about their responsibilities in helping to promote the health care needs of any child in their care. Carers are given training in health and hygiene issues and are able to assist those children who are able to take responsibility for their own health care.

The local authority has clear procedures for ensuring that foster carers are provided with as full a description as possible about the health needs of any child placed with them, and clear procedures for governing consent for the child to receive medical treatment. These procedures are not always implemented by social workers responsible for the placement of children. Not every foster carer is provided with the written information, normally contained within the standard 'Looking After Children' (LAC) documentation, at the time of placement or as soon as possible after the placement has been made. The lack of appropriate documentation means that carers do not always have clear procedures providing for medical consent to treatment for the child in placement.

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

The provision is inadequate.

The safety of children placed in the fostering service is supported by the selection, recruitment and approval procedures that the local authority implements for staff and carers. Staff selection procedures include obtaining references but telephone enquiries are not always made to validate written references. Application forms include a full employment history but there is not always a satisfactory written explanation of any gaps in employment. The authority renews Criminal Record Bureau checks on staff every three years but does not renew them on staff who transfer to a new post within the authority before that time.

Professionals and carers are aware of the effects of bullying on children and ensure children are protected by implementing agreed procedures if children are the victims of bullying. The fostering service has good links with the safeguarding board. Foster carers are provided with training in child protection and are aware of their responsibilities to keep children safe. Allegations against carers are monitored and investigated by the Independent Reviewing Service and this practice helps children to be protected from abuse.

Children are placed with foster carers who are assessed, approved, trained and supported to meet their needs. A range of policies and procedures is in place, including training in health and safety and independent advocacy, to ensure children are given help in accordance with their individual needs. Carers are approved to take specific types of placement. Children are not always placed with carers approved to take them. For example carers approved according to their foster care agreement to take only a long-term placement look after children on a respite basis.

The lack of the appropriate LAC documentation for some placements means that the quality of information available to foster carers can be insufficient. The specific support required for some children is therefore potentially compromised. The fostering service and foster carers are aware that information is not always provided and take action whenever possible to try and ensure it is obtained as soon as possible. The procedure for matching carers with children is implemented inconsistently. Responsibility for the process is unclear and therefore effective foster placements agreements are not always in place.

The fostering panel demonstrates good outcomes for children. It is well managed with effective membership who understand the needs of children. The panel is able to maintain independent scrutiny of the fostering service and challenge the fostering service where appropriate. The quality and consistency of information being presented to the panel in order for it to approve and review carers is being improved.

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

The provision is good.

The fostering service ensures that children in placement are given support that values diversity and promotes equality. Foster carers provide care that respects each child's ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic background. They work cooperatively with other professionals to enhance a child's confidence and feelings of self worth. Staff and carers receive training on diversity issues, and attitudes to diversity are considered as part of the initial assessment and approval process for foster carers.

Carers are aware of their responsibilities to ensure a child's educational needs are met. A range of policies and procedures is in place. Specialist resources such as the 'Looked After Children Education Service' (LACES) team provides individual educational support to children and carers. Promoting educational achievement is further evidenced by the creation of the 'Virtual School' and the 'Enjoy and Achieve Group' both of which have development plans to increase the educational achievement of looked after children. Each child has a Personal Education Plan (PEP) and progress of this is monitored through carers' supervision and the Looked After Children statutory review system. Monitoring of the attendance of children in Wirral shows fewer children in foster carer have missed significant periods of education than the national average of all children.

The leisure interests of children are actively promoted in order that they can maximise their educational and personal achievement. A general programme of activities organised by the Children's Inclusion Officer, the 'Step into Leisure' scheme, provides activities at weekends and school holidays. The 'Access to Swim' programme promotes swimming-based activities for all the family including birth children of foster carers and siblings of children in care to promote contact, inclusiveness and healthy activity.

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

The provision is satisfactory.

Foster carers are active in promoting family contacts and friendships for children in placement. The significance of family contact is emphasised through the training and support given to foster carers. Children's views and wishes about contact arrangements are central to the care plan and are specified in placement agreements. The impact of contact arrangements is regularly reviewed by supervising social workers and the statutory review process. Foster carers are aware of their responsibilities and will, for example, supervise contacts in their own homes or take children to contact arrangements. Foster carers do not always have copies of the legal orders to which the children in placement are subject. The legal status of contact arrangements can be unclear and carers can be unaware of the actions they are permitted to take when, for example, there is a restriction of contact for a child.

The fostering service works with other parts of the local authority to ensure

children's involvement in all aspects of their lives is promoted through its policies and procedures. Foster carers and social workers are clear about the importance of listening to the views of children in their care and that the opinions of children are obtained regularly and their views are taken into account in so far as they are compatible with their level of understanding and safety.

The fostering service works in partnership with parents. The parents of children who receive short breaks are central to the planning for the care of their children. Parents, staff and carers work together to ensure children's needs are met.

### **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is satisfactory.

Young people are supported to develop skills, competence and knowledge necessary for adult living. There are clear written requirements of what is expected of foster carers in preparing young people for independent living. The local authority works in partnership with other agencies to ensure that young people approaching adulthood have access to accommodation and supported tenancies as required. Young people have the opportunity to participate in work-based learning experiences.

The fostering service provides payments and allowances to foster carers to enable them to support young people. The service has implemented a new payment structure and has worked with the Wirral Foster Care Association to ensure maximum consultation with foster carers. Systems for organising payments have changed with some initial difficulties that have now been remedied. The new payment structure covers the fees, allowances and progression through the payment bands for all foster carers. The skill-based payment procedure is linked to new induction, training and support standards for which pilot schemes are in operation within the fostering service. The fostering service does not yet implement the recommended National Minimum Allowances for foster carer payments.

### **Organisation**

The organisation is satisfactory.

The values and objectives of the fostering service are set out in the statement of purpose. Managers provide good leadership to the staff team and a clear programme of service development has been set out. The monitoring of performance and developing quality assurance systems provide evidence of management action to address identified areas of improvement. Managers are experienced and approachable and committed to the continuous development and improvement of the service.

The fostering service is well staffed to meet the needs of its carers. Good levels of support continued to be provided during past periods of staff sickness, and the fostering service has recruited and assessed a high number of new carers to improve placement choice.

There is a commitment to regular and structured supervision and training for all staff. Staff and carers are involved with the development and implementation of policy and practice developments. The fostering service has a clear strategy for working with foster carers. Foster carers are well supported and are given assistance by the fostering service to meet the needs of children placed with them. The supervising social workers provide a continuity for and availability to foster carers who have to deal with changes in the allocation of the child's social workers. Foster carers are subject to an annual review conducted by the Independent Reviewing Officer. Reports of the annual review are presented to the fostering panel for further independent scrutiny.

Foster carers do not always receive the appropriate documentation from the placing social workers on children placed with them. The fostering service has recognised this issue and has developed plans with other managers to improve the process of information being made available to carers in a timely and effective fashion. Supervising social workers do not always check that foster carers have the correct written information on children placed.

Carers have access to a structured training and development programme. The new framework of the Children's Workforce Development Council is being introduced to provide a more comprehensive and robust strategy for improving the skills and accountability of foster carers.

Children's progress is monitored through case records. Foster carers record significant issues relevant to a child's life and progress of their care plan, but recording practice is unclear and varies between carers.

The fostering service has a strategy for supporting kinship carers. The practices involved in supporting family and friends foster carers differ from those required of mainstream carers. For example foster carer recording, or access to training may not be of the same standard expected of carers who support children from outside their family.

## What must be done to secure future improvement?

### Statutory Requirements

This section sets out the actions, which must be taken so that the registered person/s meets the Care Standards Act 2000, Fostering Services Regulations 2002 and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider(s) must comply with the given timescales.

Std.	Action	Due date
12	ensure that each foster carer is provided with appropriate information regarding the arrangements for giving consent to	31/03/2008

	the child's medical or dental examination or treatment (Reg. 17(3)(b))	
3	ensure that staff recruitment and selection procedures include a full employment history together with a satisfactory written explanation of any gaps in employment history (Reg.5 Schedule 1)	31/03/2008
8	ensure that the terms of a foster carer's approval are consistent with the proposed placement (Reg. 34(b)).	31/03/2008

### Recommendations

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

- ensure that staff selection procedures are supported by telephone enquiries to validate written references (NMS15)
- review the procedure for matching children with carers and the production of written foster placement agreements (NMS 8)
- ensure that carers are provided with clear documentary information about restrictions of contact and that their responsibilities are clear (NMS 10)
- ensure that supervising social workers check that the foster carer has access to all the relevant information on each child placed with them (NMS 24)
- review the policy and procedure for foster carer recording of significant life events of each child in placement(NMS 24)
- review the application of standards and practices relevant to carers who are family and friends of the child (NMS 32).