

West Sussex LA Fostering Service

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

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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

West Sussex LA Fostering Service provides a range of placements for children and young people. These include emergency, respite, short term, long term, permanent, short breaks, remand and parent and child placements. West Sussex County Council assesses, approves and supports a range of placements for children. In addition, it provides occasional long term placements for children with disabilities. The fostering service consists of three teams in the north, south east and south west of the county. The service benefits from a diverse workforce with a wealth of experience and skills, as well as an experienced and strong leadership team. The fostering service also benefits from collaborative working relationships with education and health colleagues.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

The first day of this key announced inspection took place on 4 August 2008 and lasted one week. The requirement and recommendations from the last inspection in 2006 have largely been implemented. The purpose of this inspection was to generally focus on assessing the service against the key National Minimum Standards and to check the requirement and recommendations from the last inspection. This is the first inspection of the service by Ofsted.

West Sussex LA Fostering Service provides good quality placements that offer consistent care for children. The service pays close attention to the matching process. Child protection and safeguarding is important in the service. There are excellent systems in place for listening and responding to the views of children. Children are placed if possible with their own extended families, with support provided. Carers are well supported and have access to very good training opportunities.

Some shortfalls have been identified at this inspection. There are delays in making notifications to Ofsted, a policy is not held on young people and independence, working relationships between family placement social workers and children's social workers are not always smooth and carers and staff are not provided with written information about the children they work with. The Statement of Purpose has not been reviewed and updated and remand foster placement agreements do not contain the required information. There is a persistent shortfall in relation to training foster carers in first aid. These deficiencies have not as yet impacted on the outcomes for children and young people.

Improvements since the last inspection

The minor shortfalls identified at the last inspection have largely been corrected. The service is carrying out at least one unannounced visit to carers per year. Copies of foster care agreements are held on files. Criminal Records Bureau (CRB)/Protection of Children Act (POCA) checks are undertaken as part of the process of carers transferring from other agencies. Police checks and training for foster carers living abroad are attended to. Statistics are being kept on the educational achievement and exclusions of young people. Personal education plans are located on the computer system and carers are given copies. Outstanding foster care agreements are in place and the foster carers register has been reviewed. The policy on foster carer accreditation has changed which includes moving from a four tier system to a three tier system in line with government policy.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

The health of children and young people in foster care is promoted. Health care assessments are completed by a team of looked after children's nurses. Since the last inspection, the number of specialist nurses has increased from one to four. Health care plans are reviewed annually. The service ensures good monitoring of children's health needs through child care reviews and ongoing supervision of carers. The Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) Looked After and Adopted Children (LAAC) Team is a good resource to ensure appropriate access to mental health advice and services. Work undertaken by the LAAC team includes working with attachment issues, placement planning, risk assessments and a consultation service to social workers and carers. Training for foster carers about children exhibiting sexualised behaviour is delivered by CAMHS.

Records show that children and young people are supported to attend any health, CAMHS, dental and optical appointments. Records are not held by the family placement social workers; children's records are maintained by the placing social workers and carers are given copies. All staff can access the records electronically. Some information does not exist however, either in paper or electronic formats. Medical consents are in place. Carers are well supported to provide a healthy environment. Disabled children, whether placed full time or for short breaks, have their medical and health needs well looked after.

The multidimensional treatment foster care service has been established, with the first carers awaiting placements. This project is an exciting development and is aimed at children aged between three and six with complex emotional and behavioural difficulties, who require highly structured placements. The project is staffed by a multi-disciplinary team of appropriately experienced and qualified staff who are particularly enthusiastic about starting the service. The assessments completed on carers wishing to work in this area are well written and detailed.

The agency offers foster carers a full compliment of medical training which is

reflected in the training manual. The courses range from basic first aid to specific subjects such as rectal diazepam. The specific training is offered to relevant carers where young people need individual health care. Further training courses include personal relationships and sexual health of children in care, understanding autism and cerebral palsy awareness. The United Foster Carer Association (UFCA) first aid course is a mandatory course, which needs to be completed by new carers as soon as possible after being approved and is required to be updated every three years. Despite extra sessions of the course being held, some carers have yet to do this training and some carers also need the refresher training. Failing to do this could mean that the health of children may not be safeguarded.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The manager has not changed since the last inspection, he is an experienced and qualified professional, who is well liked by staff and carers. Although removed from day to day contact with carers and children, he takes an active role whenever possible. The solid organisation of the service ensures that it is rigorously monitored.

Family placement social workers are suitably experienced and qualified to ensure children are provided with good, safe fostering placements. All staff demonstrate in-depth knowledge of the cases they manage. Foster carers undergo a thorough assessment process to ensure their suitability for the fostering task. The homes are inspected at least annually as part of the annual review process. Homes are suitable for children and young people, with each child's needs taken into account when making placements. The service ensures the physical safety and suitability of households through initial assessments and subsequent checks. Fostering staff undertake unannounced visits to foster carers on an annual basis as a safeguard on the care provided to children.

The service has child protection and safeguarding procedures in place, which are supported by training opportunities for carers and staff. The service manager maintains a good overview of key concerns and incidents. Good advice, training and guidance is provided to help carers understand and manage children's behaviour in safe and appropriate ways.

The service pays attention to matching considerations when making placements. Matching is completed with care and close attention is paid to the child's needs. Foster placement agreements refer to elements of matching. Assessed racial, ethnic, religious and cultural needs are considered along with all the assessed needs. For planned respite placements for children with disabilities, systems are in place to involve children, parents and carers in detailed matching and information sharing before placements are made. Any additional support is provided to carers on areas of diversity as needed, to ensure children and young people have their needs met.

Recruitment checks of staff and carers ensures children are protected from abuse and neglect. A new system ensures Criminal Records Bureau renewals are flagged up

in advance to enable them to be carried out before the existing checks expire. The system also recognises when General Social Care Council checks need to be renewed on social work staff. Since the last inspection, recruitment files for staff have been re-organised and are very clear, as well as containing up to date documentation.

Records are clear with conclusions of how any child protection investigations have been conducted and the outcomes reached. Child protection and safeguarding is given high priority in the service. Notifications have been reported to Ofsted, although with a significant time delay. The fostering service has good links with the local authority designated officers.

Safe caring guidelines and information on behaviour management are produced for foster carers. Carers are knowledgeable on the vulnerability of looked after children to being bullied and of the procedure to follow if the foster child goes missing. Good quality foster placements and staff who are suitably qualified and experienced for their roles help to ensure children and young people are safe in foster care.

Fostering panels have suitable independent members. Three panels are held throughout the county and add a safeguard to the service by recommending whether foster carers are suitable to provide foster placements to children and young people. The current system of having more than one decision maker is in the process of changing to having one decision maker for all three panels. One panel observed during the inspection was inquorate. The panel chair decided to proceed with the panel as some applicants were attending. An appropriate resolution was found on this occasion. Panels have received training since the last inspection on Care Matters, short breaks, child protection and the role of the local authority designated officers.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The fostering service values diversity and promotes equality. The local authority has a framework of policy, guidance and strategies in place to address diversity issues across the range of services, including those relating to fostering provision. The fostering service does not have a wide base of carers from black and ethnic minority communities, but this is indicative of West Sussex. Where possible, placements are matched on the basis of race and culture, but where this is not achievable, the service provides additional support, training and guidance to ensure children's needs in these areas are able to be met by their carers. Staff and carers ensure children are provided with services which promote equality. Building confidence and self-worth of foster children is considered important. Good training looks at discrimination, oppression, equality, identity and diversity issues. The Introduction to Islam and the Muslim Culture training course has been particularly well received by carers.

Placement plans indicate where children have specific welfare and health needs linked to cultural, religious and ethnic needs. Foster carers confirm they are made aware of any needs the young people and children have prior to placement. Carers confirm social workers and family placement workers are supportive in ensuring that

individual needs are met.

Educational progress is monitored by carers and family placement social workers, as well as the child's social worker and the statutory review process. Educational achievement is promoted. When undertaking the matching process, the agency takes into account the children's schooling and wherever possible, children are enabled to remain at their original schools. Carers are expected to help meet the child's educational needs. Some carers travel outside their areas to enable foster children to continue their education at their original schools. Personal education plans are accessible via the shared computer system with foster carers having a paper record of the personal education plans. Information systems are in place to demonstrate educational achievement and numbers of exclusions. A training course for carers is helpful in considering how to encourage young people to enjoy and achieve in education and learning. One young person commented about being helped with school work; 'My carers are always there to help.' The fostering service works with colleagues from Education and children's social workers in promoting effective practice and to ensure the best possible educational outcomes for these children. Figures provided by the fostering agency for 2007 show 70.6% of children achieved GCSE's grades A-C and satisfactory numbers of fostered children are in full time education.

Foster carers facilitate activities and hobbies for the children and young people. Carers are encouraged to support their foster children to participate in activities in their local communities. UFCA provides activities for children and young people during school holidays. A recent example is a residential activity break and family days out. An annual awards ceremony is held to celebrate the success and outstanding achievements of looked after children and young people.

When a young person or child needs to be placed within the county a clear assessment is made of their needs. If they have a disability, they are placed with dedicated foster carers and managed by family placement workers who are experienced in the needs of a child or young person with disabilities. The disability team ensures that foster carers who choose to foster young people/children with disabilities either on a long term basis or for short breaks are fully trained. They are offered both the general fostering training and specific training related to disabilities. The agency also offers a range of communication training to the foster carers. Short-term breaks are well managed. Policies and procedures are implemented to meet the particular needs of children receiving short breaks. Birth parents remain central to the promotion of their child's welfare. One foster carer said, 'I have always been well supported by a family placement worker when needing to meet the needs of the children I foster with disabilities.' The service provides good support and guidance to help ensure the needs of children with disabilities are fully addressed.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

Children are supported to sustain consistent arrangements. Contact is arranged with the birth family as well as previous carers through the children's social workers and is supported by the family placement workers. Contact is reviewed at statutory reviews. Where appropriate, foster carers are given expenses relating to contact. Staff and carers understand the importance of maintaining family contacts and friendships. This is emphasised in the assessment, supervision and training of carers. Family placement social workers provide support to carers in dealing with any difficulties around contact. Foster carers are trained in working with birth families.

The fostering service ensures that children's opinions, and those of their families and others significant to the child, are sought over all issues which are likely to affect their daily lives. All significant people are invited to reviews. The children and young people are given the opportunity to be part of their reviews and complete consultation forms. There is a participation group who regularly discuss issues of the 14+ age group of young people in care, with suggestions made on what can be offered to make the move to independence easier. Children who returned questionnaires to Ofsted, feel their carers listen to them and give them time. They confirm carers consult with them about day to day arrangements and future plans. Children are able to access an independent advocacy service contracted to provide advice and support to the county's looked after children. Fostered children's views are sought as part of the carer's annual review process and as part of their own statutory reviews. Birth children are consulted as part of the initial assessment and as part of the carer's annual reviews. Workshop and activity days are held in the school holidays for birth children. These provide support in a fun environment to promote and enable their voices to be heard. The fostering service is good at listening to children. A clear example of where the service has listened to children, is where a decision not to allow paintball was overturned, when children and young people presented a clear argument.

A Children in Care Council is in the process of being established, which will enable regular dialogue and involvement in delivering services. The fostering service works with the Participation, Advocacy and Rights (PAR) project, to promote the rights of looked after children and to give them a say in decision-making. PAR provides advocacy, independent visitors and a participation project. The Total Respect training programme is delivered by looked after young people from PAR to foster carers and staff. It encourages participants to explore their values and attitudes, considers the importance of hearing the child's voice, identifies ways to develop practice in working with children and identifies ways to promote the participation of children in decisions that affect them. Children with communication difficulties are provided with suitable means to make their wishes and feelings known. Carers are able to attend two Makaton courses to assist them in communicating with some children. The Rant 'n' Rave magazine gives young people the opportunity to share their views and experiences with other young people. It also gives young people the information needed if they are seeking help or advice, including help line numbers and PAR's

freephone number. Young people are involved in all aspects of the magazine from the articles to the design.

The process of complaining is described currently within a leaflet and is not produced in a format for children with a learning disability. The leaflet can be produced in different languages. A new DVD is being introduced which will be given to each young person/child in care; being produced in a range of different formats. Children with disabilities are supported by social workers, family placement social workers and carers who are specially trained in communication skills to enable the children and young people to make their wishes known. The fostering service ensures that children in foster care know how to raise any concerns or complaints, and that they receive prompt feedback on any concerns or complaints raised. Two dedicated complaints officers within the local authority ensure they are dealt with effectively. Records of complaints made since the last inspection have been dealt with according to the specified timescales.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

The Local Authority established a total of four 14+ teams across the county in 2007. These teams deal with looked after young people aged 14 and over. One team works with unaccompanied asylum seeking young people who arrive at Gatwick. The new teams replace the leaving care teams, in order that the young people receive specialised support at an early stage.

Young people are assisted with the transfer to independent living. A good section in the carer's handbook identifies the need to assist young people develop skills, competence and knowledge for adult living. A preparation for adult life course for foster carers assists them in developing skills for working with young people to support their transition to adult life and looks at ways to encourage young people to develop skills and confidence. The service does not have a policy on preparing young people for adult living. West Sussex fostering service has a supported lodgings scheme whereby young people live as a stepping stone towards independence. The local authority is developing links with local housing associations to provide suitable independent accommodation for care leavers.

Each young person preparing to move to independence is consulted about their future and encouraged to be involved in the decision making process. The 14+ teams are looking at independence issues as a part of the reviewing system for each young person. Pathway plans are started at 14 to start working towards independence with an appropriate plan in place. The new 14+ teams aim for seamless transition through to independence. Changing foster placements into supported lodgings placements are a popular way young people are enabled to stay in their placements.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The Statement of Purpose outlines the aims and objectives of the service and what facilities and services are provided. The document is accessible on the website, but it has not been reviewed and revised on an annual basis. The fostering service has Children's Guides which are suitable for children and young people. The Guides are designed by looked after young people.

Staff are well managed and organised effectively. Systems are in place to determine, prioritise and monitor workloads. Family placement social workers have been stretched, particularly in one team. An innovative solution to this has helped to relieve the pressure on staff. Staff recruitment records are good, with appropriate checks and renewals being undertaken. Since the last inspection, the system is more efficient and effective, with documents and information easier to locate. Staff are provided with regular supervision and feel well supported in their teams. Personal development plans reflect upon performance, objectives and training undertaken as well as future training needs. Some family placement social workers remarked that communication with children's social workers was sometimes strained.

A range of placements are available and include respite, short-term, long-term and remand. The development of a recruitment team is a strength and should enable a consistent focus to be placed on this important aspect of the work. Fostering assessments are comprehensive and of a good standard. An excellent training programme is in place for staff and carers. The service has started implementing the Children's Workforce Development Council Fostering Standards with a pilot group of carers. Carers receive regular supervision by a named, qualified social worker. Carers sign a supervision agreement and benefit from having a comprehensive handbook. A supervision agenda document with dedicated headings has been developed by the manager and is a good document which ensures supervision remains focused.

Practical support for carers includes out of hours support, insurance cover, respite care where appropriate and membership of UFCA. Support to carers is provided by UFCA, as well as a varied programme of activities and events for the foster children, birth children and foster carers to enjoy. UFCA provide support in the case of allegations and complaints. Carers and staff benefit from being able to access an employee assistance programme. This includes a confidential helpline for counselling, advice and information.

Staff know the strategy for working with and supporting carers. Carers confirmed this is effective. Supervision and support is available to all carers. A foster carer commented, 'Staff are always quick to respond to any requests for support'. The service provides good levels of support to carers in a variety of ways. Family placement social workers visit regularly and telephone contact and new system for better focused and documented supervision of carers have been introduced. Carers have access to regular support groups and excellent training opportunities. Carers who have undertaken training are very positive about the quality and benefits of

training received. However, take up of training is inconsistent with some carers not completing what the service regards as mandatory. The planned database should record shortfalls of training by individual carers, which should assist the service to obtain a clearer view of what is outstanding and enable solutions to be found.

The remand foster care service has specially developed placement agreements which are good documents, but they do not meet the requirements of Schedule 6. The service aims to store placement information records electronically. Carers are not routinely getting copies of all the necessary children's information. Some documentation is given to foster carers and not received by family placement workers and visa versa. In some instances, information is on the computerised system, but not in every case. Administrative records are stored securely.

Family and friends carers are valued and provided with support and training opportunities. A dedicated worker takes the lead in arranging the assessments on these prospective carers. Once approved, they transfer to a family placement social worker who provides ongoing support.

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
1	review the Statement of Purpose and Children's Guide regularly and make any amendments as necessary (Regulation 4)	11/01/2009
24	ensure remand foster placement agreements meet the requirements of Schedule 6 (Regulation 34 (3))	11/11/2008
12	ensure training for foster carers includes health, hygiene, first aid and safety (Regulation 15 (1))	11/11/2008

Recommendations

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

- endeavour to develop better working relationships between family placement social workers and children's social workers (NMS 16)
- ensure foster carers and family placement social workers are provided with appropriate written information about the children and young people they are working with (NMS 24)

- develop a policy on what is expected of foster carers in terms of preparing children and young people for independent or semi-independent living (NMS 14)
- ensure notifications are made to Ofsted without delay, in relation to incidents or concerns that meet the relevant criteria of Schedule 8 (NMS 9)