



Arolygiaeth Gofal a Gwasanaethau Cymdeithasol Cymru
Care and Social Services Inspectorate Wales

Care and Social Services Inspectorate Wales

Care Standards Act 2000

Inspection Report

Neath Port Talbot CBC Fostering Service

Type of Inspection – Focused

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Summary

About the service

Neath Port Talbot County Borough's fostering service undertakes the recruitment and assessment of foster carers and provides fostering placements for children 0-18 years. Children may be placed with foster carers approved for mainstream or family and friends (kinship) fostering. The service includes a "Foster Plus" scheme which aims to provide foster placements to children with more complex needs and parent / baby placements.

The fostering service is based at Neath Civic Centre, Neath, and is jointly managed by Helen Jarvis and Joanne Goodwin. The responsible individual for the fostering service is Delyth Berni, Principal Officer, Children Services.

At the time of inspection the fostering service had 185 approved foster carers supporting 232 children. 97 children were in placements with other fostering providers (Information taken from the local authority's self assessment of service).

What type of inspection was carried out?

A focused inspection was undertaken as part of the Care and Social Services Inspectorate Wales (CSSIW)'s routine schedule of inspections. The announced inspection looked primarily at the quality of life experienced by the young people living with agency foster carers.

The following methodology was used:-

- Examination of the annual data collection form (ADC) and self assessment of service statement (SASS) information
- Inspection planning meeting with the responsible individual and one team manager
- Discussion with a group of foster carers
- Discussions with the responsible individual
- Discussions with both team managers of the service, the deputy team manager and consultant social worker
- Discussions with staff in the service
- Discussions with staff of one area social work team
- Discussion with the participation and engagement officer
- Discussion with the chair of the fostering panel
- Discussion with the performance and quality assurance manager
- Attendance at an admissions & planning panel
- Examination of seven foster carers' files
- Examination of five children's files
- Examination of the LAC children's guides
- Examination of the annual quality of care review
- Examination of a range of additional service documentation, including children's guides, the team's business plan, service development strategies, quality assurance tools and training programmes.

What does the service do well?

- The (principal officer / responsible individual) and team managers have an excellent understanding of the service, including its strengths and the areas requiring development. Their understanding has been acquired through good quality information gathering / analysis and ongoing close monitoring / evaluation of the service, and has been used to inform / target service development planning.
- The service works well with the department's training officer to ensure that good quality training is provided, to meet the needs of both new and experienced foster carers.
- Foster carer support groups meet regularly, within the county, and they benefit from additional support and advice from an active county foster carer association,
- The service provides out of hours "on call" support to foster carers during evenings and weekends alongside the out of hours social work team.
- The service run events and activities for the children of foster carers which enables them to meet together, for fun and support.
- Foster carers are provided with free leisure passes to enable the whole family to access activities.

What has improved since the last inspection?

- The service now has two full time team managers (these were previously part time / job share posts) and an additional supervising social worker post. This has had a positive impact on previously identified capacity issues within the service.
- Action is being undertaken, to provide foster carers with the necessary knowledge, skills and support they require, to better meet the changing needs of children becoming looked after.
- The service is participating in work being undertaken by the local authority to move towards service user led outcome measures.
- Carer profiles have been drawn up to provide additional information for "matching" purposes.
- New audit tools have been developed, to ensure that practice accords with policies and procedures, in order to drive forward service improvements.
- Learning journals have been introduced for foster carers to demonstrate learning activity, including learning undertaken outside the formal training sessions.
- A children's participation and engagement officer has been employed, to increase children's involvement (including those who are looked after) in the local authority's decision-making processes.
- An "independence checklist" has been developed for foster carers to refer to (looking at every day life skills for children of different ages / stages of development throughout their childhood).
- A report template has been created for foster carers to provide a clear and consistent format for children's LAC reviews.
- Action has been taken to improve the timeliness of foster carer reviews.

What needs to be done to improve the service?

The following good practice recommendations were made:-

Mechanisms (and where necessary additional support) to be put in place to enable more children to effectively put their views across within their LAC reviews and within the annual

foster carer review process.

- Annual reviews of foster carers should be presented to the fostering panel within a shorter timescale to ensure that the information being presented is still up to date and accurate.
- Further work is required to ensure that all foster carers access appropriate and regular training to enhance their professional development and enable them to better meet the needs of children becoming looked after.
- Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) renewal checks should be consistently completed within timescale.
- Foster carers to be provided with further information about the independent advocacy service and how this could be accessed.
- Where it is recognised that children in placement have specific cultural needs, foster carers and supervising social workers would benefit from additional information being provided, to ensure that they can effectively support them.

Quality Of Life

Overall, we (CSSIW) found that practice within the service was child centred and evidenced based, and therefore promoted the welfare and well-being of children placed with local authority foster carers.

The individual needs of children are recognised and, in general, catered for, though this is not the experience of all looked after children. We noted that a weekly multi-agency admission and planning panel was held to consider placement requests and we saw evidence in children's files and admission panel minutes of planned placement admissions / moves. During our observation of one panel meeting, the knowledge and experience of the different agency representatives was effectively used to consider the needs of the children, what was required from potential foster carers and whether additional services would be needed to support the child and / or placement. We noted that where admissions were agreed, further discussions regarding matching considerations then took place within the fostering service's team meeting the following day. In discussion, supervising social workers knew their carers well, and we saw that this information, together with foster carer profiles had been used to inform the matching process. Examples of well-matched placements were seen, which had resulted in very stable placements. Documentation viewed and discussions with foster carers evidenced that there had been a reduction in the number of "out of hours" emergency placements being made, and we were informed by foster carers that they had received better quality pre-placement information over recent months. Despite the matching process, however, it was evident on inspection that, in reality, placement choice was sometimes limited, particularly for children who had specific or more complex needs (e.g. language, cultural or behavioural). We noted that foster carers and supervising social workers had made significant efforts to meet language and cultural needs. However, it was evident that both foster carers and supervising social workers would benefit from additional information being provided, to enable them to effectively support these children. The lack of available placements and level of placement disruption, especially for older children and children whose behaviour was seen to be challenging, was recognised by the service, and we saw that consistent efforts were being made to recruit new foster carers, with regular monthly recruitment events and local / social media advertising undertaken. Consideration was also being given to additional recruitment and retention strategies, including a review of the support provided to foster carers, to better maintain placement stability and improve outcomes for children.

In general, children have a voice and are encouraged to express their views, though further work is required to ensure that the views of all children are consistently heard. We saw that children's guides were available for looked after children (two versions, to cover younger and older age groups), and were informed that looked after children had been involved in their development. The guides included useful responses to some of the questions children might ask when becoming looked after and provided brief details about independent advocacy and the children's complaints service. Additional information / support would need to be provided to most children, however, to enable them to access either service. We found, during our discussion with foster carers, however, that some carers were unclear how to access these services. We therefore advised the responsible individual and team managers that a reminder to foster carers

might be beneficial. We saw that children were encouraged to attend their LAC reviews and found some good examples within children's files of their views being listened to, and acted upon (e.g. in relation to contact with family members, where they wanted to live and future planning). We also noted comments made by children in sampled files - that they knew they could talk to their foster carers if they were "worried" or "unhappy". We noted, however, that the extent of children's participation in decision-making about their care was variable. We saw that, although arrangements were in place for children to contribute to foster carer's annual reviews, the degree to which they had participated was also variable. We were informed by the local authority's participation and engagement officer and the performance and quality assurance manager that action was being taken to involve children in the local authority's wider decision-making processes. For looked after children, this had included a recent consultation event in respect of the local authority's proposed "When I'm Ready" arrangements, and being part of the interviewing process for several senior appointments within the department. We also saw that looked after children and foster carers had been produced a dvd about their experiences of being fostered / fostering for a staff event aimed at promoting good social work practice with looked after children.

Children experience warmth, opportunities to develop attachments, and a sense of belonging. In discussion, foster carers demonstrated an understanding of the needs of the children they cared for, and spoke positively about their role in providing good outcomes for them. We were advised that training was readily available and saw that some carers had attended training sessions on "attachment", "helping children to build trust" and "life story work" to enhance their skills. Children's and foster carers' files provided evidence of stable placements and some very positive outcomes for children. Comments within LAC review minutes and foster carer annual review reports included "___ is loved and cherished", "I feel safe", and "they (foster carers) provide a stable, secure and nurturing environment" We also found evidence in sampled files of foster carers establishing good relationships with birth family members, facilitating contact between children and significant people in their lives and helping children to develop a positive sense of their own identity (both in relation to their birth families and within their foster family). For some children, their sense of belonging was enhanced through the use of "delegated authority" arrangements which enabled their foster carers to make day to day decisions about their care (e.g. regarding consent for school day trips, haircuts), but this documentation was not seen in all sampled files. We noted that the local authority's arrangements for young people to remain with their foster carers after their 18th birthday ("When I'm Ready") were underway, though we were advised by foster carers that greater clarity was required, particularly in relation to financial matters.

Children are supported to follow interests, develop skills and to experience a sense of achievement. We saw that children's views were sought regarding their interests and activities they might enjoy and we saw that, in general, where they had expressed an interest in a particular activity (e.g. swimming, fishing, kickboxing, drama, netball), arrangements had been made and assistance given to enable them to attend. Sampled files evidenced that foster carers supported children's educational progress by encouraging children to complete homework, supporting their participation in the "letterbox" scheme (to improve reading and numeracy skills), attending parents' evenings and relevant meetings, maintaining regular communication with school staff and advocating for the children in their care, when specific and / or additional services were needed. We saw that age-banded "independence checklists" had been developed for

foster carers to assist them in their efforts to promote children's self-care and independence skills. In discussion with fostering team managers and staff, it was clear that they were motivated to achieve positive outcomes for looked after children, and we noted that, at a broader level, within Children & Young People's Services, children's achievements, (together with those of foster carers) had been celebrated at awards ceremonies within the previous twelve months.

Quality Of Staffing

This inspection focussed on the experience of young people using the service and their quality of life at the setting. CSSIW did not consider it necessary to look at the quality of staffing on this occasion because:-

- The service benefitted from a stable staff team whose qualifications and experience were commensurate with their role and responsibilities
- Staff received regular supervision and appraisals
- Staff evidenced a strong commitment to progressing their professional development, and opportunities taken up during the previous twelve months had included training on “family dynamics”, “attachment” “risk analysis” and “safer caring for traumatized children”
- Staff knew their foster carers well, and used this knowledge to inform the matching process between children and carers
- Feedback from foster carers indicated high levels of satisfaction with the level of support received from supervising social workers.

However, this theme will be considered during future inspections.

Quality Of Leadership and Management

This inspection focussed on the experience of young people using the service and their quality of life at the setting. CSSIW did not consider it necessary to look at the quality of leadership and management in depth on this occasion because:-

- Quality assurance mechanisms provided a series of “checks and balances” to maintain standards. An annual quality of care review had been undertaken, together with a service business plan for the current year
- Research data and good practice information was effectively used to inform the service’s outcome focused improvement agenda
- The managers of the fostering service were seen to be suitably qualified and experienced individuals
- A well-established fostering panel, chaired by an experienced individual was in place to effectively carry out panel business

However, we noted that, although annual reviews of foster carers were generally undertaken within timescale there was sometimes a significant time delay (e.g. two to five months on sampled files) between the review taking place and then being presented to panel,. We advised the responsible individual and managers, therefore, that annual reviews of foster carers should be presented to the fostering panel within a shorter timescale to ensure that the information being presented was still up to date and accurate.

We saw that DBS checks were undertaken prior to approval on foster carers and relevant household / family members, and sampled files generally evidenced that checks had been renewed. However, we noted that there was a gap on one file between the expiry date of the previous DBS certificate and the renewal date. We advised therefore that DBS checks should be consistently completed within the required timescale.

This theme will be considered during future inspections.

Quality Of The Carers

This inspection focussed on the experience of young people using the service and their quality of life at the setting. CSSIW did not consider it necessary to look at the quality of foster carers on this occasion because:-

- Foster carers received regular supervision from their supervising social workers
- Foster carers were provided with an interesting and accessible training programme, which was relevant to their roles and responsibilities
- A number of foster carers had achieved National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) or Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) diplomas.

However, although documentation and discussions with staff and foster carers evidenced a strong emphasis on training, we noted that the number of training courses attended by individual carers varied considerably. Some carers were seen to consistently evidence high levels of attendance, but we saw from annual review documentation that other carers had not undertaken any training within the previous twelve months. Efforts to address this issue were seen to be ongoing, with evidence of good partnership working between the service and the department's training section. We saw, therefore, that bespoke training was offered to carers attending a range of support groups designed to meet their specific needs (e.g. male carers, carers working to help children move on, single carers and family and friends carers). Evening and weekend training sessions were also delivered. In recognition that learning could be broader than training course attendance, individual learning journals had recently been introduced so that foster carers could document this learning and include it in their training portfolio. We were also advised by foster carers that they really valued the proactive approach taken by the training officer (e.g. directing them to online learning opportunities and texting them when relevant television programmes were being shown).

This theme will be considered during future inspections.

How we inspect and report on services

We conduct two types of inspection; baseline and focused. Both consider the experience of people using services.

- **Baseline inspections** assess whether the registration of a service is justified and whether the conditions of registration are appropriate. For most services, we carry out these inspections every three years. Exceptions are registered child minders, out of school care, sessional care, crèches and open access provision, which are every four years.

At these inspections we check whether the service has a clear, effective Statement of Purpose and whether the service delivers on the commitments set out in its Statement of Purpose. In assessing whether registration is justified inspectors check that the service can demonstrate a history of compliance with regulations.

- **Focused inspections** consider the experience of people using services and we will look at compliance with regulations when poor outcomes for people using services are identified. We carry out these inspections in between baseline inspections. Focused inspections will always consider the quality of life of people using services and may look at other areas.

Baseline and focused inspections may be scheduled or carried out in response to concerns.

Inspectors use a variety of methods to gather information during inspections. These may include;

- Talking with people who use services and their representatives
- Talking to staff and the manager
- Looking at documentation
- Observation of staff interactions with people and of the environment
- Comments made within questionnaires returned from people who use services, staff and health and social care professionals

We inspect and report our findings under 'Quality Themes'. Those relevant to each type of service are referred to within our inspection reports.

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