



Inspection Report

Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council Fostering Service

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Description of the service

At the time of the inspection, Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council fostering service was providing placements for 52 children, including two children placed by two separate neighbouring local authorities. No 'child and parent together' placements were being provided and one exemption was in place in respect of more than three children in one fostering household. The team manager is Angela Allen and the fostering service is located in Pentrebach, Merthyr Tydfil.

Summary of our findings

1. Overall assessment

The service benefits from experienced and resilient foster carers and an enthusiastic and experienced fostering team and manager. Efforts to recruit new and support existing foster carers were well coordinated. The resourcing of the service had been strained and not all feedback provided by foster carers about the support of senior managers was positive; although there was evidence that the authority was committed to the provision and ongoing improvement of the service.

Of the files viewed we found that some supervisory visits to foster carers had not been made; and there were a number of errors and inconsistencies in foster carers' records in relation to their approval status.

A register of children placed by the fostering service had not been established and recruitment records did not fully evidence that all necessary checks had been undertaken.

Whilst the fostering services has systems for reviewing the quality of the service this needs to be further developed, to ensure the service meets legislative requirements and the needs of children requiring placements.

2. Improvements

- The service is working with neighbouring local authorities to improve service delivery through regional collaboration.
- The service has improved its foster carer recruitment and retention strategy.
- The service has developed a number of initiatives with 'partners' including 'Merthyr Sport' and 'Groundwork Wales' to improve access to activities to support children's physical and mental health.

3. Requirements and recommendations

Section four of this report sets out our recommendations to improve the service and areas where the service is not meeting legal requirements. These include the following:

- Establishing a system for monitoring the educational attendance, progress and attainment of children.
- Establishing a record in the form of a register in respect of children placed within the fostering service.
- Maintaining staff recruitment records that include evidence that all necessary checks have been undertaken.
- Establishing systems for monitoring, reviewing and improving the quality of care provided by the service.

1. Well-being

Summary

Children live in stable and sustainable placements and develop positive attachments with their carers. They are supported to participate in social and leisure activities and have access to education and therapeutic services to promote their well-being.

Our findings

Children are welcomed in their placements. There were two 'children's guides' for children of different ages who used the service, which included comprehensive information which emphasised their rights. In addition, some foster carers had created 'welcome books' which conveyed a warm welcome for children in need of reassurance. Foster carers told us they did everything they could to help children to settle in their placements.

Children are placed with foster carers with the skills and experience to meet their needs. We heard from staff, managers and foster carers that children were only placed with foster carers who had the skills and ability to meet their needs. The manager said that if a suitable 'match' for children could not be identified within the service, that a wider search was undertaken with independent fostering agencies. They also told us that considerable effort was made to place siblings together. We saw evidence of this in files and heard from foster carers and staff about one sibling group that had been placed together and, despite very difficult circumstances, were making good progress. A small group of foster carers told us that some placements had been planned although most children were introduced on an 'emergency' basis. They acknowledged why emergency placements were sometimes necessary and confirmed that they were able to express their views about the suitability of any proposed placements. However, some carers said that they felt they would be '*penalised*' if they said '*no*' to any proposed placements and that this could affect any proposals for future placements. The manager told us that the circumstances around children being placed often meant that pre placement planning was not possible but the fostering social workers made sure that children were only placed with carers with the skills and experience to meet their needs. They said that foster carers were not '*penalised*' if they did not feel that any children proposed for placement were a suitable match but acknowledged that some foster carers felt they might be and said this should be discussed within their supervision. We conclude that the authority is committed to placing children with suitable foster carers and to placing sibling groups together.

Permanence is promoted and children are provided with constructive opportunities to support their learning and development. We met with four children and they told us that their hobbies and interests were encouraged; that their views were taken seriously and they had the support of independent advocacy. They said they felt a sense of belonging and security in their placements and that they had been told about their ability to remain with their carers after the age of 18 under the arrangements of the 'When I am Ready' scheme.

They said they were involved in a range of activities which included sports, music and dance lessons and one of them said they attended the Cadets. One said that they had support from the National Youth Advocacy Service (NYAS) to ensure their views were heard at their review meetings and all of the children said their reviews were held at their placements as they did not want them held at their schools. They told us that their carers were able to make decisions on their behalf and that they did not have to wait for them to seek 'permission' from their social workers in relation to day to day decisions about their lives. We conclude that children feel positive about their care and receive continuing support as they become young adults.

Children develop attachments with their foster carers and have access to educational and therapeutic support to promote their well-being. Foster carers and social workers told us that children received good support from local schools and from services providing therapeutic support. We saw evidence that foster carers had undertaken training in relation to 'life journey work' to help children to understand their circumstances and to compile memory boxes during their placements. The manager told us that a number of initiatives had been developed with partners including 'Merthyr Sport' and 'Groundwork Wales' to improve children's physical and mental health through access to activities.

We saw positive feedback provided by ten children to inform their foster carers' annual reviews which included the following comments:

- *'I feel at home with her and if I need help or advice, she is there.'*
- *'Nothing needs to be changed, everything is good.'*
- *'I am encouraged to be independent as I can be.'*
- *'Since living here, I have turned myself around, but I still have a little way to go.'*
- *'What could we have done better? Nothing.'*
- *'What do you not like? Nothing.'*
- *'Is there anything that you would like to be changed? Nothing.'*
- *'How do you get on with the family? Absolutely ok.'*
- *'Is there anything that you would like changed, no nothing, everything is the way I want.'*
- *'They have helped me when I need help and when I am good they take me for a treat somewhere and we get to have lots of fun on holidays.'*
- *'Helps me with homework, starting to do home chores and make food and xx is there to talk to me when I need to.'*
- *'Get on with everyone.'*
- *'Makes me feel a part of her family.'*
- *'xx is very funny and welcoming and makes you feel comfortable.'*
- *'I only wished she lived nearer but that can't be changed.'*

One questionnaire included less positive comments but these were in relation to a child's feelings about not being able to live at home and not concerning their foster carers. A questionnaire completed on a child's behalf by their social worker for their carers' review included the following comments:

- *'Everything is good.'*
- *'xx is supported supervised appropriately both at home and in the community which considers their learning difficulties.'*
- *'xx has been involved in all activities and holidays with the family and is provided opportunities to engage in events in the community.'*
- *'xx had limited opportunities to engage in positive activities previously but enjoys the promotion of social inclusion.'*
- *'xx is very happy and speaks positively about the other family members.'*
- *'The carers gauge their communication with xx at an appropriate level.'*

The manager told us that the authority was selected in 2016 to pioneer the 'When I am Ready Scheme' and they were committed to promoting permanence and providing support for young people after the age of 18. They said that eight young people were living within 'When I Am Ready' arrangements and that plans were in place to develop 'apprenticeships' within the council to support the prospects of 'looked after' and former 'looked after' young people. The quality of care review included the following comments about these young people:

- *'xx achieved a carpentry apprenticeship and drives.'*
- *'xx is completing a foundation degree and drives.'*
- *'xx is actively seeking employment.'*
- *'xx works full time, drives and is saving for a car.'*
- *'xx is in full time training.'*
- *'xx is doing A levels.'*
- *'xx has significant mental health problems and is well supported by his kinship carers.'*
- *'xx suffers anxiety and is well supported by his carers.'*

We conclude that a limited range of evidence indicates that children experience a sense of belonging and permanence in their placements and that their well-being is positively promoted during their childhood and as young adults.

2. Care and Support

Summary

Children are cared for by foster carers that are well trained and supported and clear about the needs of children as well as their own roles and responsibilities.

Our findings

The service is committed to recruiting and supporting foster carers and improving placement choice for children. A recruitment officer had been appointed since the last inspection and they told us there had been a net increase in the number of foster carers since their appointment. They said that fees had been made available for foster carers that introduced new carers to improve their recruitment and that a series of recruitment events were planned during the pending 'fostering fortnight'. The '2018-19 Foster Carer Recruitment and Retention Strategy' document and 'Recruitment Activity Calendar' provided evidence of the authority's commitment to improving placement choice for children.

Children are cared for by foster carers who are generally well supported. A small group of foster carers we met with told us that they were well supported by the fostering service and that most children's social workers were also supportive of them. However, some also said that their views were not always valued or listened to at review meetings. The manager said they had opportunities to raise these issues within their supervision and support groups and acknowledged the need to ensure that foster carers' views were heard and that they felt valued. They told us that a 'carer celebration' event was planned to enable the Mayor and head of children's services to express their appreciation of their dedication to children and included the support of children who had formerly been looked after by the authority.

Children are cared for by foster carers that are clear about their responsibilities but do not always have authority to make decisions in relation to their day to day care. The '2018 Foster Carer Handbook' included a comprehensive range of policies and procedures. Foster care agreements were in place as well as foster placement agreements to make clear the purpose and objectives of children's placements and 'safe care agreements' were in place to minimise risks associated with children's care. Foster carers told us they were not always provided with delegated authority agreements and that this had the potential to delay decision making, for instance in relation to them going on school trips. They said that a key message from children was that '*they did not want to be seen as different from other children*'. We found that some but not all foster carers' files had 'delegated authority agreements' in place and we were with the manager when they received a telephone call about a foster carer needing a delegated authority agreement at short notice. They said that this should already have been provided and acknowledged that improvement was needed in this area.

Children are cared for by foster carers who receive good support but not all unannounced supervisory visits have been made. Foster carers told us that the support they received from the fostering team had been very good and that they appreciated the consistency they provided. They said that a range of support groups took place with some led by the fostering service and some led by foster carers. The manager showed us records that a total of 22 support groups had been held in 2017 and that six had been held so far in 2018. Nine had been held in the West Wales area; seven had been held in other areas and 12 had been led by foster carers. In addition, informal coffee mornings had been held to provide opportunities for foster carers to develop peer support networks. The manager told us that the agreed frequency of planned foster carer visits had been maintained but a significant number (about 50%) of unannounced supervisory visits had not been made. They said that this had been due to increased demands resulting from undertaking assessments of kinship foster carers and that these visits would be given priority.

Children are supported by foster carers that are well trained. The manager told us that foster carers had access to a wide range of training via a joint training department and the 2018 -19 Cwm Taf training calendar provided evidence of that. They said that foster carers' commitment to training was good and that all core training had been completed and was monitored within their annual reviews. They said that 18 foster carers held NVQ and QCF qualifications and that a further two were undertaking them. 'E learning' had been introduced to improve access to training and arrangements had been made with Carmarthen local authority to provide training for foster carers living in the West Wales area. The manager said that the 'Confidence in Care' twelve week training programme and the 'Fostering Well-being project' facilitated by 'The Fostering Network' had been well received and that some foster carers were training as 'Fostering Pioneers' to provide support, advice and training to other carers.

We conclude that children are supported by foster carers that are well supported and trained and clear about their roles and the needs of children. However, improvement is necessary in relation to unannounced supervisory visits to foster carers and in relation to the provision of delegated authority agreements.

3. Leadership and Management

Summary

The fostering service has an experienced team manager and a motivated and experienced staff team although the resourcing of the team has been strained. Information about the service needs improvement as well as the systems for consultation with children and others and for monitoring the effectiveness of the service in supporting well-being and education outcomes for children. Concern was expressed by staff and foster carers about the effectiveness of communication by senior managers, although there was evidence that measures were being taken to support improvement. Staff and managers had received one to one support and supervision but no annual appraisal. Systems for addressing the issues raised about the impact on the service resulting from connected persons' assessments and placements had not been fulfilled effectively and these include the appraisal of 'employees' and the quality of care review process.

Support and training available to foster carers was good. Records regarding children and foster carers need improvement.

Our findings

The vision for the service is clear but information for stakeholders could be improved. The statement of purpose included the information required and made clear the operation and resourcing and the aims and objectives of the service. However, information relating to complaints in the document incorrectly implied that these can be made to CIW and there was no information about the quality of care review process and how its reports can be accessed or about providing fostering services in the Welsh language.

Records do not fully meet legal requirements. A record, in the form of a register, had not been established in respect of the children placed within the fostering service. The manager said that children's records for all 'looked after children' were held within the authority's database but confirmed that no separate record or register was maintained for children placed within the fostering service. It is necessary that a record is established in the form of a register in respect of each child placed within the fostering service in order to fully meet legal requirements.

Information within the files viewed was inconsistent and some children had been placed with foster carers outside their terms of approval. We found varying statements in foster carers' files about their specific terms of approval as well as evidence that two 'unrelated children' had been placed with a foster carer whose approval was for two 'sibling children'. The manager acknowledged that an error had been made in placing these two children and

said that this had been an isolated case and that no other such errors had been made. They said these matters would be addressed as a matter of priority.

Evidence of recruitment checks need improvement. We looked at a sample of four human resources (HR) files and found that the records for one staff member and a panel member did not include their photograph; although a written record had been made that a photograph of one of them had been seen during the recruitment process. No application form had been completed by the panel member; no written references had been requested and there was no evidence of their relevant qualifications. The manager said this was because the panel member was employed by the authority in another role and that they had not retained a photograph of the staff member because they had confirmed they were registered with Social Care Wales and had made reference to their registration number in their recruitment records. It is necessary that recruitment records include evidence that all necessary checks have been undertaken to fully meet legal requirements.

Staff members are positively motivated and work well together. The fostering team's social workers told us they worked well together as a team and with other children's services teams but said that the resourcing of the team had been '*strained*'. This was due to additional demands of completing 'connected persons' assessments and staff shortages within the wider children's services. We were informed that had impacted on the level of support they had been able to provide to foster carers; that they had not made all necessary unannounced supervisory visits and that the assessments of generic foster carers had been undertaken by external independent assessors.

The manager told us that during the period from April 2017 to March 2018; a number of assessments had been undertaken in relation to connected persons, however, this had resulted in just three had been approved. The head of service acknowledged the impact and demands of connected person assessments on the fostering team and said that they were planning to develop support services for children subject to special guardianship orders (SGOs) to reduce some of their responsibilities. We conclude that the resourcing of the fostering service has been impacted by work associated with connected persons assessments and staff shortages in other teams but senior managers are addressing this.

Staff are provided with support and supervision but no appraisals had been undertaken. The manager told us and we saw in records that team meetings had been held regularly; that staff had received one to one supervision but no annual appraisals had been completed. We were advised that the authority were introducing a new appraisal scheme intended to cascade from senior managers to staff members but its implementation had been delayed. It is necessary that staff members receive regular appraisal in regard to their roles to fully meet legal requirements.

The chair of the panel told us they were satisfied with the rigour and scrutiny employed by panel members and that their expertise was developing well. However, they said that they were concerned about what they described as '*a lack of clear parameters*' in relation to their

role in making recommendations about connected person's assessments. They said that this created dilemmas when considering the suitability of prospective 'kinship' foster carers that did not meet the requirements of 'generic' foster carers and that some cases brought to panel appeared to be presented as a 'fait accompli' as children were already 'placed' with them. When asked if they had addressed these issues, for instance, with the panel adviser or agency decision maker (ADM) they said that the only opportunity they had for discussion about their role was during their annual appraisal. We found that the records of their most recent appraisal was more than a year previously (February 2017) and made no reference to the issues raised about connected person assessments. We conclude that suitable arrangements have not been made to undertake appraisal of the panel chair to ensure the effective consideration of any issues relating to the fostering panel; including any issues or dilemmas relating to connected person's assessments.

The panel adviser and ADM said that training had been provided to the panel in relation to connected person's assessments and that further training and written guidance was to be provided in the near future. They said this was being drawn up as part of the work the authority was contributing to in developing a national fostering framework. We saw that the records of the three most recent panel meetings confirmed that their proceedings had been quorate and included the reasons for their recommendations. The fostering manager / panel adviser told us that the constitution of the panel met legislative requirements; that all members had attended 'panel training' and that they had been subject to annual appraisal. The 'panel report' dated 2017 /18 did not provide evidence that the panel had fulfilled any quality assurance functions.

Systems for consultation with children and to scrutinise the effectiveness of the fostering service are poor. A 'Looked after Children Education Support Plan' dated 2014 -16 set out the arrangements made to support children's education and included some evidence of their outcomes. However, this information was out of date and did not provide information that specifically related to children placed within the fostering service. As such, the service is not meeting legal requirements in this regard.

The quality of care review report dated April 2018 did not provide evidence of the monitoring of all required areas. In some instances the report simply described the processes employed, for instance, in relation to unauthorised absences of children. It described processes for reporting missing children but made no reference to the number of instances where children had been missing or any analysis of the reasons or the risks they may have been exposed to. There was no evidence in the report to demonstrate 'compliance with foster placement agreements and or children's care and support plans' so no evaluation could be made of the effectiveness of the service in supporting children to achieve intended placement or well-being outcomes. The report included some evidence of consultation with children although this was very limited and in relation to all children looked after by the authority. On that basis, the report did not provide any measure of the effectiveness of the fostering service in supporting well-being outcomes for children and we conclude that improvement is necessary in this area.

Information was provided for the inspection on children's views that had been sought to inform the annual review of foster carers (as referred to earlier in this report) but these had not been collated or included in the quality of care review report. Despite issues raised by staff and managers about the impact on the service of work associated with connected persons' assessments and placements, no reference was made to this in the quality of care report review report. We found some information in the quality of care review report that had the potential for children to be identified and suggest that this matter is considered by the authority. We conclude that suitable arrangements have not been established for monitoring, reviewing and improving the quality of care provided by the fostering service to fully meet legal requirements.

There was a lack of evidence available at the inspection for us to make evidence based judgements about the effectiveness of the service in meeting the objectives of its statement of purpose or in supporting placement and well-being outcomes for children. In addition, none of the twenty questionnaires we sent to foster carers and children were returned and only a small number of children and foster carers were able to meet with us. We conclude that systems to understand the views and the experience and progress of children in their placements are not well developed and that improvements are necessary in this area.

4. Improvements required and recommended following this inspection

4.1 Areas of non compliance from previous inspections

No areas of non compliance were identified at the last inspection.

4.2 Areas of non compliance identified at this inspection

We advised the authority that improvements are needed to fully meet legal requirements in relation to:

- Systems for monitoring the educational attendance, progress and attainment of children. (Regulation 16 (2) (a)).
- Systems for monitoring, reviewing and improving the quality of care provided by the fostering service. (Regulation 42)
- A record in the form of a register in respect of each child placed within the fostering service. (Regulation 22 (a) (b) (c) (d) (e) (f) (g)).
- Recruitment records that include evidence to demonstrate that all necessary checks have been undertaken. (Regulation 20).
- The appraisal of the appointed manager, the fostering team members, the panel chair. (Regulation 21 (4) (a)).

4.3 Recommendations for Improvement:

- Information is included in the statement of purpose about CIW 'concerns' processes and about the quality of care review process and how its reports can be accessed.
- The local authority considers Welsh Government's 'More Than Just Words' strategic guidance for Welsh Language in Social Care and that information is included in the statement of purpose, children's guides and quality of care review report about any provision of fostering services in the Welsh language.
- Information in foster carer files about their terms of approval is consistent and accurate.
- Quality assurance functions of the fostering panel are fulfilled; in particular in relation to connected persons assessments, and to monitor the range of foster carers available in comparison with the needs of children.
- That data and analysis of the intended placement and well-being outcomes of children placed within the fostering service is included in future quality of care review reports.
- Information regarding the education of children placed within the fostering service is included in future quality of care review reports.
- Consideration is given to the risk of 'identifying information' being included in future quality of care review reports.
- Any issues raised by foster carers and staff about the impact of communication with senior managers are discussed within existing systems for foster carer supervision and support meetings and within staff supervision and team meetings.
- Arrangements are made to ensure that any necessary unannounced supervisory visits are made to foster carers.
- Arrangements are made to ensure that any necessary delegated authority agreements are provided to foster carers.

5. How we undertook this inspection

This was a full announced inspection and was undertaken concurrently with an inspection of the local authority's children's services department. The inspection was carried out by two inspectors over six days.

The information used for this inspection was obtained by the following methods:

Consultation with:

- A group of 7 foster carers.
- A group of 4 children.
- The social workers of the fostering team.
- Children's case responsible social workers.
- The chair of the fostering panel.
- The fostering Team Manager / Panel Adviser and Head of Service / ADM.

We viewed:

- Case files of 8 children and 8 foster carers-linked.
- Recruitment records for four staff / panel members.
- Records of the three most recent panel meetings.
- Records of team meeting records.
- Records of the appraisal of staff and the chair of the fostering panel.
- The statement of purpose.
- Quality of care review report.
- Panel report.
- Data relating to foster carers' training.

We attended the fostering panel.

Questionnaires were sent to:

- 20 foster carers and children placed with them. None were returned.
- All panel members. 4 were returned.
- All members of the fostering team. None were returned though they shared their views with us in person.

Further information about what we do can be found on our website:

www.careinspectorate.wales

About the service

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|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|
| Type of care provided | Local Authority Fostering Service |
| Date of previous Care Inspectorate Wales inspection | 22nd and 24th February 2016 |
| Dates of Inspection visits | 23, 24, 25, 26, 27 and 30 April 2018. |
| Operating Language of the service | English |
| Does this service provide the Welsh Language active offer? | No |
| Additional Information: This is a service that does not provide an 'Active Offer' of the Welsh Language. | |