



Inspection Report on

Powys County Council Fostering Service

**1 High Street
Llandrindod Wells
Powys
LD1 6AG**

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Description of the service

Powys County Council fostering service provides foster placements for children who are looked after by the local authority. Services provided include short and long term placements, respite, short breaks and connected care placements. There is a nominated individual to represent the authority and the team manager is Lisa Hocking, although she was due to move to a new role following the inspection. At the time of inspection there were 113 children in placement with local authority foster carers, 7 short break placements and 30 with connected person. In addition there were 35 children placed with Independent Fostering Agencies.

Summary of our findings

1. Overall assessment

We found that children who live in stable, planned placements are cared for by foster carers who provide them with good opportunities and they experience positive outcomes. A lack of placement opportunities has resulted in some children not having a choice of foster carers who are able to meet their needs. As a consequence some children have had to move away from their home area resulting in a change of school or experience significant daily travel. Some of these placements have been successful but for others a number of moves have been required until a suitable placement can be secured.

Powys fostering service had benefitted from consistent leadership with the same manager in post for a number of years. The responsible individual had been in post since 2016, however, had worked for the authority for a number of years prior to that appointment. There had been some staff absences and changes during the preceding 12 month period and feedback indicated that this had impacted on the quality and consistency of support received by some foster carers. At the time of this inspection, all staff vacancies had been filled. We received mostly very positive feedback from foster carers about their support however; the feedback on training was mixed.

The implementation of the Public Law Outline (PLO) has placed an expectation upon the local authority to conclude care applications within the 26 week timescale. There has also been an increase in the number of children being looked after with a demand for placements. Consequently, the fostering service has been placed under pressure with a greater focus on connected person assessments. This has impacted upon recruitment activity. Further action is required to ensure the effectiveness of the service's quality assurance systems in order to ensure the development of the service.

2. Improvements

Improvements had been made to the arrangements to provide support to foster carers.

3. Requirements and recommendations

Section 4 of this report sets out the areas where recommendations are made to improve the service. These are in relation to the Statement of Purpose, Quality Assurance, recruitment of foster carers to allow choices of placements, safer caring agreements, staffing issues and team structure and supervision recording.

1. Well being

Summary

We found that children are encouraged to have a voice and express their views in their day to day lives and care planning. Placements that are planned and some emergency placements children's well-being is generally promoted through foster carers who are matched to meet their individual needs.

Our findings

Information about their placement and rights is provided to children. All young people are given a children's guide upon admission which contained details and advice about how to complain, along with details of advocacy services. Young people had been involved in the development of this guide which was bilingual. Advocacy is provided by Tros Gynnal service. Children were contacted independently by the staff in Tros Gynnal to remind them of their right to advocacy and this was supported by the Looked After Children (LAC) Boo newsletter. There was evidence on file of advocates acting on behalf of children and also instances when children had decided they no longer wished to have contact with an advocate. Children were encouraged to attend their LAC reviews and there was evidence of children speaking to their allocated independent reviewing officer. Children have been involved in the Junior Local Safeguarding Children's Board, the Project Management Board and the editorial group for the LAC magazine BOO. It is clear that young people have opportunities to have their voice heard.

The matching of children and foster carers is constrained by the limited number of foster carers available in each of the geographical areas of the local authority. We saw evidence that the authority had gone outside of their in-house provision, to provide a suitable match with foster carers in an independent fostering agency. However, some social workers spoken to were more confident of being able to gain the option of an independent fostering agency placement. Social workers spoke about their concerns that some of the best matches left conflict when they were in a different geographical area and led to decisions about the best situation for the child. On other occasions the placement offers were very limited and resulted in moves quite quickly, due to the incompatibility or the need to maintain school attendance. Foster carers spoken to were clear that they would be able to say 'no' if they felt that the placement was not appropriate. Clearly when placements had been planned and matching completed appropriately very stable placements had been made following phased introductions. We saw from records viewed that a number of successful placements had been made with children remaining with foster carers throughout their childhood. Foster carers also spoke about children who remained in contact with them into adulthood. Some social workers shared concerns about the limited number of emergency placements available, with an example of only two for the whole county the weekend prior to inspection causing difficulties for the emergency duty team. Workers also gave an example of a suggestion that a young person settled in placement be asked to move for a weekend to accommodate a new placement which workers refused to agree to. In order to meet the needs of children the service needs to develop their placement strategy and target recruitment in geographical areas.

Generally foster carers told us that they received sufficient information to make decisions prior to accepting a placement and even with emergency placements some basic information was shared. Discussions with the staff and manager confirmed that they knew their foster carers well and their strengths and acknowledged areas for improvement in caring for children. We saw that delegated authority agreements were in place on the files we viewed. However, there was a inconsistency in relation to the safe care agreements, with some reviewed being generic rather than looking at the individual child's needs. Placement Plans for children also presented a mixed picture, with some good examples of placement plans being drawn up in advance and signed off following a period of introduction. However, the other extreme was a plan drawn up as the child was moving in without any prior planning. The service needs to improve the opportunity of choice of placements for children to ensure proper matching; also the required care planning documentation should accompany children to the placement. In order to ensure that foster carers are equipped with the information required to meet children's needs. We conclude that the service cannot fully demonstrate that it promotes the well-being of children at all times because of the lack of documents, which would provide clear guidance for foster carers regarding the individual needs of children.

Children are able to enjoy a range of leisure activities and have the opportunity to gain new experiences. Typically they include sport, attendance at local community clubs and involvement in the arts. All young people were entitled to a leisure passport providing unlimited access to a local leisure centre. There was also evidence of foster carers promoting play and visits in the community to both enjoy days out and also promote educational development e.g. teaching about stars and planets. The children were often included in the family holidays of foster carers and these included those both in this country and also in travels abroad. Foster carers were seen to have been proactive in children having their own bank accounts to learn to save to have additional pocket money for holidays and activities. Children's well-being and self-esteem is promoted through participation in activities.

2. Care and Support

Summary

Children receive care from families and individuals who are robustly recruited. Foster carers provide stability for children who experience care which promotes their health, education and well-being.

Our findings

The recruitment and assessment of foster carers is thorough. The increase in court directed assessments of connected persons and the timescales for completion of this work had impacted upon service delivery and development. During the period from April 2017 to January 2018 only five mainstream foster carers had been recruited along with five respite foster carers and twenty one connected persons. However, recruitment activity had improved with three mainstream foster carers approved in the month prior to inspection. Further work was required to meet the demand for placements in each geographical area with the increase in the number of looked after children. This had been acknowledged and raised as the first point in the 'Placement Service Action Plan' dated 23 November 2017. A new strategy had been produced and signed off by the senior management team. To support this, the local authority intranet site had some useful information for anybody considering fostering. Children are supported by a service that promotes safe recruitment, however, the level of recruitment and the provision of foster carers in all areas of the authority needs to be improved to better meet the needs and experiences of children.

Children have opportunities to learn and develop as the service promotes educational attendance and attainment. On the files examined all of the young people had Personal Educational Plans. Educational achievement was reported to the corporate parenting group. Evidence from files and talking to foster carers confirmed that education was supported and promoted. In order to maintain established school attendance some children were required to travel considerable distances when the foster placement was in another part of the authority. Consideration was given to the balance between maintaining existing provision with travel and moving schools with the needs of the child prioritised. We saw evidence of children gaining positive educational outcomes. Foster carers were also in contact with schools regarding the children placed and attended parent's evenings. Some of the comments we noted from annual reviews were:

- *“view education attendance, attainment and development as an important aspect”*
- *“value school as important and can provide opportunities”*
- *“.....has been successful in his GCSEs and is now studying for his 'A-levels'”*
- *“....continues to be very active in encouraging them to reach their potential and is pleased that Is attending university”*

- *“.. has always had regular communication with the school whenever necessary and has positive, constructive relationships with the staff there”*
- *“She supports their formal education, such as making space for and encouraging homework as required, helping them prepare themselves for school”*

Children are supported to reach their educational potential with foster carers advocating for children in their education provision.

Children have their primary health care needs attended to and support is provided to manage any additional needs. We saw that the health care needs of children were considered at matching including the use of an independent foster agency and children were registered with local primary health services and attended regular check ups. We saw from records that many foster carers promoted a healthy lifestyle in regard to diet and exercise as far as possible, although some recordings could improve as they made little reference to diet. Foster carers were also asked about diet and healthy options during their annual reviews at panel. Records confirmed that there was delegated responsibility to administer medication for foster carers. Some foster carers had demonstrated commitment to the children placed with them attending regular hospital appointments. Other foster carers also sought advice for specialist health care needs and/or support for substance misuse. Some of the children placed had significant health care needs and there were reports from medical advisors indicating that they had been stable since placement with their foster carers. If required the foster carers could access psychology support, however, therapeutic support was mainly accessed through community based services. Some foster carers were also seen to have contributed to life story work alongside the child’s social worker and support worker. There was also evidence of foster carers purchasing a ‘worry monster’ to support a child in their care and work on words to express emotions to help them to self regulate. Foster carers were also seen to have pursued an alternative educational placement which had provided a therapeutic environment for the individual in which they had excelled. Children are encouraged to adopt healthy lifestyles and their health care needs are attended to promptly.

Children are supported to maintain contact with their family members and other people who are important to them. The service managed arrangements for contact carefully, with foster carers fully informed about whom it was appropriate for children to maintain contact with and what restrictions, if any, were placed upon this contact. There were numerous examples of foster carers transporting young people to contact and also making the direct arrangements via telephone or in some instances through the child’s social worker. There was also an example of a relative being reluctant to maintain contact and the carer made contact through social media messenger, which was confidential, to encourage meetings to take place. The well-being officers were also able to offer support with contact. Children are able to maintain contact with the people who are important to them through the pro-active actions of foster carers.

Foster carers are supported to maintain the stability of placements through respite breaks and out of hours contact. Some children receive a regular break with specific foster carers to ensure their needs were met or to enable the foster carers to have a break. Different arrangements were in place and examination of records confirmed that these arrangements were beneficial to all concerned and prevented placement disruption especially when young people had more complex needs. We saw that specific respite foster carers were identified for specific children whilst others provided a service for several children. A respite carer told us that they were given full information about the child in their care, however, considered that they were not included in meetings about the future plans for the child when they considered they had information to share. Foster carers accessed the emergency duty team when they had any issues at night. The response from foster carers to the service was on the whole positive with some concern when workers had not been available. Children are provided with care and support which helps to maintain stability in placement.

Children are safeguarded when living with foster carers as they were aware of their duties. Foster carers had received training in safeguarding through the skills to foster initially and refresher training was provided annually. Many foster carers had also attended additional training to support children with specific needs and risk taking behaviour. Foster carers were able to share information about their role in reporting children as missing and contacting social workers and the emergency team. Foster carers were aware of the need to report a child as missing and follow procedures taking account of individual care plans. Foster carers ensure children placed in their care are safeguarded.

3. Leadership and Management

Summary

The service had experienced a difficult year prior to inspection as a result of staffing shortages and competing demands upon the work of social workers through the increase in connected person assessments. The agency had robust systems to recruit staff and whilst agency staff, were recruited by the authority they had been slow to cover a long term absence. The service had stable management, however, the manager had an unrealistic task in supervising the whole team and developing the service and the management of the team needed to be strengthened. Foster carers are on the whole well supported and provided with support to undertake their role in caring for children.

Our findings

Children, foster carers and professionals involved in the service are clear about what the service sets out to deliver, but in practice the experience can be quite mixed. There was a clear statement of purpose dated April 2018, which outlined the aims and objectives of the service and described the service being offered. The service did not include its position on the 'active offer' of the Welsh language and it was recommended that the service updated the statement of purpose taking account of Welsh Government's *'More Than Just Words follow on strategic guidance for Welsh language in social care'*. Children were found, on the whole, to have experienced a placement as described in the statement of purpose when the placement was planned. However, a number of emergency placements made when limited choice was available gave a different picture with a move to a different geographical area or a number of placement moves until stability was achieved. The outcome for children was a change of school or travel to both school and contact. Whilst the statement of purpose sets out the aims of the service clearly, they are not always able to operate as planned due to placement restrictions.

The fostering service has strength in the experience of key staff but has suffered from staff shortages in the last year and would benefit from a restructure to strengthen the management of the team. The team consisted of a team manager, deputy, senior practitioner, six full time equivalent social workers, two part-time placement officers, three support officers, a marketing and recruitment officer (0.8 of a post) and two part-time supported lodgings officers. At the time of inspection, they had recruited new staff and held one part time supported lodgings vacancy and one full time social worker was on long term absence. The manager of the service was moving on to another post within the authority and an agency manager had been appointed with a period of overlap. The service team was based in two locations within the authority, one in the North of the county; Newtown and one in the South of the county; Brecon. During the last year the north team had been under pressure with two vacancies out of four which had been resolved by the inspection. The south team was under pressure at inspection with a long term absence leaving a senior practitioner, a newly qualified full time worker and an experienced part-time worker. To add to the difficulties, the team had managed a significant increase in the assessments of connected persons and also a 30% increase in the looked after children population. The three staff had shared the cases of the absent worker in the south which resulted in high caseloads. It was recommended, to support the manager in the two areas, that a deputy position was established in each area and that absence arrangements are covered

promptly. This would improve direct support of the team, foster carers and improve development.

The fostering panel promotes safe, secure placements through robust operation and rigorous quality assurance. We observed a foster panel in operation, met separately with the panel chair and read panel papers and minutes which included annual reviews and Form F assessments. Observation and information we read indicated that the service had established the fostering panel in accordance with regulations and national minimum standards. The service had appointed an independent chair who had extensive experience and knowledge of chairing panels. The panel was well conducted with the chair ensuring that all panel members contributed in the discussions. The panel agreed questions in advance of the prospective foster carers and approved foster carers being invited into the room and also agreed who would ask them. It was the practice of the service to invite foster carers to attend their annual reviews at panel and there was a take up of about 90% in feedback from the panel chair. This was viewed as positive practice as panel members clearly recognised foster carers and they could directly ask some questions e.g. attendance at training, healthy eating. Due to the pressure on the team in the previous year some assessments for panel had been commissioned out and the quality assurance monitoring had highlighted some practice not up to the required standard resulting in assessments being deferred. The manager informed us that they had settled on a group of assessors who they could rely upon to provide robust assessments and would not use other independent staff again. Children are provided with safe secure placements because foster panel ensures that rigorous checks have been undertaken on foster carers approved by the local authority.

The local authority ensures that foster carers who look after children are provided with on-going training; however, improvements could be made. There was a mixed picture in terms of attendance, with some foster carers pro-active and attending all available, whilst there was some reluctance on the part of others. It was good to note that training attendance was followed up at annual reviews. Foster carers spoke positively about the training courses provided but were critical of the number of places available, with one carer quoting that a course had been fully booked by 10 am on the day they received the information. Many courses were held twice a year and this only allowed for attendance of half of the foster carers. Foster carers were also critical of the timing of the courses which did not take account of child care arrangements, travelling requirements and any work commitments. The local authority 'Placement Service Action Plan' had identified a need to develop and implement a training programme for foster carers and following consultation with foster carers a needs analysis had been submitted to the training unit. The team were awaiting confirmation from the training unit of the agreed programme for the coming year. Foster carers are able to access training; however, improvement is needed to the planning of venues, capacity and timing. In order to fully meet the needs of children being cared for the service needs to have all foster carers fully trained.

Foster carers receive support from their allocated supervising social workers. With a return to almost full compliment within the team the frequency of direct 1:1 supervision had improved. During periods of staff shortages and competing demands due to time limited assessments, staff stated that some supervision had been via telephone. It was also noted that some staff had achieved their direct supervision by working beyond their contracted hours. Examination of the computer system found that a number of supervision logs had been uploaded on the same date for one carer covering several months, having been

signed by them on that date. The foster carers need to have copies of their supervision notes without delay. Some of the supervision notes read were comprehensive and of good quality whilst others needed improvement. Foster carers spoke positively about the support they received from their supervising social workers especially given that many of the children had experienced little stability from their own social workers with the turnover and use of agency staff. Unannounced visits had been undertaken but some had been when children were not at home, which is not in line with legislation. However, it was noted in supervision notes that supervising social workers regularly spoke to children in placement, but this does not replace the requirement of a statutory placement visit to see the child in placement. Foster carer support groups operated and it was clear from discussion with foster carers that some more established foster carers also met independently. We viewed the details of the meetings held since October 2017 which were held in three locations, Newtown, Llandrindod Wells and Brecon. They listed the people present and the topics covered but did not give any outcomes but did give some comments from foster carers. A selection of the comments made included:

- *Communication is an on-going issue*
- *Need to attract foster carers but make it attractive like IFAs do*
- *Have lost 16+, LAC Education co-ordinators – impact upon the young people and the support available to foster carers*
- *Need a stable workforce*
- *Retention of staff inc management is important*
- *Continue to foster for Powys as we value the LA ethos*
- *Need crisis support teams for foster carers*
- *Need to explore the development of foster carers as worker*

The well-being officers provided additional support for new foster carers; however, the feedback from some workers included their concerns about undertaking work that was not in their job description. Foster carers had been invited to staff roadshows for the first time and whilst some foster carers were less enthusiastic the feedback from one was: “*never felt so proud, so professional*”. It was stated by some foster carers that they considered positively that the Head of Service had listened to them and taken on board some of their thoughts. It was planned that all foster carers would receive Powys ID badges to make them feel more a part of the organisation and that Powys e-mail addresses would be considered in the future to ease communication. The team had discussed the introduction of peer mentoring to make the most of the experience some foster carers could share with newly approved foster carers. There had already been an example of experienced foster carers sharing the most important questions to be asked when considering a placement. A great frustration for foster carers had been the new telephone system introduced by the authority. Many were avoiding this by contacting their supervising social workers on their mobile phones and also using this to ask them to contact the child’s social worker. This was clearly having an impact upon the quality of communication. Foster carers have support systems in place which are at times fragile due to staffing and there are plans to improve them in the future.

The fostering service undertakes annual quality assurance reports. The latest report covered the period from April 2017 to January 2018 and this was provided to the Operations Management Team, Senior Management Team and Corporate Parenting Group. A placement service action plan had also been introduced in November 2017 with many of the actions outstanding at the time of inspection. The quality assurance report had

not identified the failure of the computer system to fully meet the needs of the fostering team nor were the difficulties with foster carer training identified. The authority had replaced their computer system and it was disappointing to see that it was not fully functional for the fostering team. As a consequence they were not able to collate statistics relating to breakdowns and movements and these had to be collated manually. This needed to be attended to for the fostering service to operate effectively. Quality assurance systems are in place but do require some improvement.

4. Improvements required and recommended following this inspection

4.1 Areas of non compliance from previous inspections

None

4.2 Recommendations for improvement

During this inspection, we advised the registered person that improvements are needed in order to fully meet the legal requirements in relation to:

- Training for foster carers: (Regulation 17 (1)).
 - There needs to be improvement in the training attendance of foster carers.
 - There needs to be improvement in the opportunities for training for foster carers.

Further recommendations:

- The fostering service should consider Welsh Government's *More Than Just Words* follow on strategic guidance for Welsh language in social care. All social care providers should include information on their level of Welsh language service provision in the statement of purpose and young person's guide and reflected in the annual review of the quality of care. The statement of purpose needs to be amended taking account of Welsh Government's *'More Than Just Words follow on strategic guidance for Welsh language in social care'*.
- Some of the supervision notes for foster carers were comprehensive and of good quality whilst others needed to see improvement.
- The service needs to improve the choice of placements to ensure proper matching
- Safer care plans should be reviewed and individualised
- The service should ensure that staff vacancies are covered without delay.
- A restructure to provide a deputy manager in both locations would strengthen the operation of the service.
- Quality assurance reviews need to cover all aspects of operation.
- The IT system should be fully implemented to support the work of the fostering service

5. How we undertook this inspection

This was a full scheduled inspection and took place on March 15 between 10.30 and 17.00, March 16 between 10.00 and 16.30, March 19 between 14.00 and 17.00 & March 20 between 9.30 and 16.45. Two inspectors were involved in the inspection.

The following methods were used:

- Consideration of information held by CIW; including the previous inspection report and notifications of significant events.
- Meeting with foster carers, service social workers and children's social workers
- We observed the fostering panel, met with the chair of the fostering panel and read the last three minutes of panel
- We met with the manager and the responsible individual.
- We examined recruitment files for 4 staff members and looked at a range of records
- We examined the statement of purpose and children's guides
- We examined the files for eight children placed with foster carers
- We examined the annual quality of care review

Further information about what we do can be found on our website www.cssiw.org.uk

About the service

Type of care provided	Local Authority Fostering Service
Date of previous CIW inspection	12/01/16 & 13/01/16
Dates of this Inspection visits	15/03/18, 16/03/18, 19/03/18 & 20/03/18
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. It does not anticipate, identify or meet the Welsh language needs of people/children who use, or intend to use their service. We recommend that the service provider considers Welsh Government's <i>'More Than Just Words follow on strategic guidance for Welsh language in social care'</i>.	