



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

## Care and Social Services Inspectorate Wales

Care Standards Act 2000

# Inspection Report

Flintshire Fostering Services  
Flintshire County Council  
County Offices  
Chapel Street  
Flint  
CH6 5BD

Type of Inspection – Baseline

Date(s) of inspection – 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup> February & 6<sup>th</sup> March 2015

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## Summary

### About the service

Flintshire County Council's fostering service (FFS) is based in Church Street, Flint and provides a range of placements for children and young people aged 0 -18 years. (Children and young people will hereafter be referred to as children).

Placements may be long or short term, for respite or with kinship carers. The responsible individual is Craig Macleod, Senior Officer for Commissioning and Planning. The manager of the fostering team is Liz Byrne.

At the time of the inspection the service had 120 approved fostering households providing a variety of full time, respite and kinship care placements. In addition there were 3 assessments for general fostering and 1 assessment for kinship care fostering in progress. A further 4 assessments were in progress where children had been placed in an emergency under regulation 38. 123 children were in placement with approved Flintshire Fostering Service carers with another 46 in respite and 4 having short breaks.

### What type of inspection was carried out?

We (CSSIW) carried out an announced baseline inspection that addressed the quality of life for children and the other quality themes of staffing, leadership and management and carers. The inspection was undertaken by two inspectors by one and sometimes two inspectors over 7 days.

We attended;

- a matching meeting where the placement needs of children were discussed
- a fostering panel meeting

We read:

- the statement of purpose for the service,
- the children's guide
- children's electronic case files
- foster carer's electronic case files
- minutes of disruption of placement meetings
- minutes of the last three fostering panel meetings
- reports to the next fostering panel which took place shortly after the inspection
- statistical monitoring information

We spoke with:

- foster carers
- supervising social workers in the fostering team
- staff from the family and adolescent support service team (FAST), the family Intervention Team (FIT) and the Children and Younger Adults Support Team (CYAST).
- the fostering service team manager

•Service Manager (Resources)

•Chief Officer (Social Services)

We met with two children and their foster carers at their homes and we received questionnaires from four young people, two foster carers, seven fostering service staff and two panel members.

### **What does the service do well?**

- The service is very child focussed with all staff aware each child's needs and circumstances.
- The quality of the service is being maintained and some improvements have been made despite staff shortages in the last year.
- Information sessions for prospective applicants are held monthly by fostering staff enabling them to complete activities that would have previously have been done at individual meetings.
- The team had produced a DVD about fostering and some Flintshire foster carers and young people had participated giving their experiences of fostering.
- The recording of supervision with foster team staff was in a format which enabled discussions and decisions about placements to be easily transferred into foster carer files.

### **What has improved since the last inspection?**

- The connected person's assessment process had been introduced and embedded into the service offered.
- Disruption meetings are chaired by 3 independent co-ordinators utilised by FAST.
- The service is now located alongside other child care teams in an open plan office in Flint thereby facilitating easier communication between the teams.

### **What needs to be done to improve the service?**

We identified that there was one area of non-compliance with the requirements of the Fostering Services (Wales) Regulations 2003 (the regulations). The service was not compliant with regulation 24 (9) (b) which requires that the independent members of the fostering panel must not be appointed as such if they are employed by the fostering service provider. We found that two of the panel members identified as being independent members were employed in other parts of the county council.

We have identified areas where practice could be further developed to assist in improving the standard of the service provided. We found that:

- The service has not been able to recruit sufficient carers to be able to meet the needs of all the children referred to the service.
- Foster carers miss the informal networking that occurred at direct face to face training events.
- Foster carer reviews do not include feedback from the LAC education co-ordinator.
- Panel suggestions for improving their functioning were no longer being consolidated into revised policies and procedures through quality assurance and business planning events.
- The wording of questionnaires for children and young people about the quality of foster carers does not take into account the different circumstances of kinship carers.

## Quality Of Life

Children and young people supported by FFS can be confident that they will have their individual needs met and their welfare safeguarded and promoted and, as a result will make good progress so they are able to achieve as much as they can in all areas of their lives.

It is evident that children and young people are treated with dignity and respect, by foster carers, social workers and other professionals within the Authority. The notes provided by visiting social workers indicate that they have developed good relationships with the children and young people and children feel able to talk to them and receive answers which are age and developmentally appropriate. We talked to a group of foster carers who stated that they always listen to the children and feel that they are good advocates for them, liaising with social workers, schools and other professionals on their behalf. The foster carers have helped children to gain access to independent advocates where this was in the child's interests and we heard from a young person about their independent advocate. The children are encouraged to be part of the review of foster carers by completing a questionnaire, for which they receive a small reward, to give their own views of the placement. We saw that these views were included in the review of the foster carers that went to panel. We heard that a young person had refused to complete their questionnaire because they did not see it to be relevant to their kinship care. FFS had acknowledged the need to review their questionnaires. There is evidence on file that children have been involved in their own LAC review and have had the opportunity to discuss their views in private with the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO).

The Pride in Flintshire annual awards ceremony demonstrates the respect that the Authority gives to the achievements of children and young people who are looked after. Foster carers, members of the family placement team and senior management spoke with pride about how children had gained in confidence during their placement and had gained awards or taken part in the ceremonies. We heard from the Family & Support Team (FAST) that they were reviewing the timing and structure of the event to consider a whole day event to include the child and young people's wider support network. We spoke to the LAC Education Co-ordinator who was aware of the educational arrangements for and the progress of each looked after child. They had recently visited the proposed school for a young person placed with kinship carers in the south of England to ensure there were arrangements in place for the young person to have access to the welsh language which was important to them. Some of the budget available to the LAC education co-ordinator was used to provide extra tuition for children and young people to be able to achieve in education. Examples cited included language skills, GCSEs, army preparation courses and other specialised support. The fostering service also provided additional funds to support educational activities for children and young people.

Young people are able to follow interests, and develop skills. There was evidence in the files of children and young people of the opportunities that they had to participate in sports and other hobbies. One child showed a particular interest in sport and this was encouraged by attendance at a football club after school and cricket in the summer. Another child had developed an interest in drama and singing and this had been encouraged with attendance at drama club and choir. Another young person attended St

John's Ambulance and wanted to train to become a paramedic and yet another child was training as a brownie leader. There was also evidence on file of children taking part in school trips and having holidays abroad with their foster carers. Foster carers stated that following interests was actively encouraged and had enabled children to develop their confidence and self esteem and we saw how a particular activity for two young people was helping them to develop peer relationships. Additional funding was provided by FFS for particular activities.

Young people are supported to deal with difficult feelings and are helped to develop coping strategies where necessary. Foster carers stated that when support has been requested to assist in managing behaviour and difficult feelings, help has been provided. Foster Carers are able to access a number of training courses on line to help them to support children and have attended sessions provided by CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service). There are a variety of services available to support children and young people. These include Action for Children and CAMHS. There is evidence within the files for children and young people that they have had support from these services.

## Quality Of Staffing

Young people receiving a service from FFS can be confident that they will be supported by a stable and consistent staff team who are appropriately qualified, highly experienced and committed to providing a child centred service through their foster carers.

The main focus of the service is concerned with recruiting, assessing, training and supporting foster carers. We saw that there has been a year on year increase in overall activity with a 12% increase from April 2014 to February 2015. Staff have continued to build on undertaking viability assessments alongside child care social workers and from the 19 viability assessments for kinship carers completed between April 2014 to January 2015, 9 proceeded to connected person's assessments which were recommended for approval by the fostering panel. We saw that the connected person's assessments were comprehensive and thorough. Children and young people can be confident therefore that they will be placed with carers who will provide safety, security and attachment. We saw one connected person assessment where the young person had become much more calm and relaxed after placement with a relative but could not believe that it was really happening, and they were so pleased with the proposed long term plan for them. They were achieving well at school and despite having recently changed schools they had said that they felt they could now concentrate much better on their learning.

Young people can mostly be confident that there are sufficient staff within the fostering team to undertake their main tasks. However, the overall increase in activity with the rising number of kinship carers, matching meetings, permanency processes, special guardianship and applications for general fostering has placed extra demands on the team of 9 social workers (one of whom is a senior practitioner, one specialises in kinship care and one specialises in private fostering) and 2 children services assistants (CSA). A workload measurement and monitoring tool has recorded that the team is consistently working above the level of capacity. This has continued in the current year with the team carrying two vacancies, and one maternity leave cover. However, a qualified social worker who was working as a CSA covered one vacancy and subsequently secured the position of social worker so the vacancies remained at two. At the time of the inspection, one of the posts had been filled leaving one CSA vacancy.

Staff questionnaires mostly all indicated that vacant posts had caused additional duties for all members of the team and some expressed anxieties for the future with impending retirement of the team manager. One social worker felt that there was insufficient capacity to routinely support foster carers or in a crisis. The additional workload of the last two years had already caused some diminution of activities as priority had been given to court work, assessment and foster carer supervision. The result of this had been that joint support sessions with foster carers had not taken place in the last financial year and business planning for the team had been reduced to one session. Nevertheless, we learned that there was a positive culture of pulling together in the team and they felt well supported by the team manager and colleagues.

We saw that staff in the fostering team receive regular support and supervision from the manager and senior practitioner with team meetings usually held fortnightly. The recording of supervision with foster team staff was in a format which enabled discussions

and decisions about placements to be easily transferred into foster carer files and records showed comprehensive discussion and analysis. Evidence from four annual appraisals for staff demonstrated that staff were either fully competent in their roles or were exceeding expectations. Although it was acknowledged that training opportunities were limited for fostering social work staff we saw that they had continued in their professional development with the completion of attachment training, the ILM (institute of learning and management) award at level 3 and the practice teachers award. All the fostering team had undertaken training in the past 12 months. Children and young people can be confident that staff in the team are skilled and competent and they ensure that their knowledge base is continually up-dated.

## Quality Of Leadership and Management

Foster carers, children in placement, their families and social workers can be confident that this is a fostering service where achieving positive outcomes for children and young people is the primary focus for the service whose manager drives up continuous service improvement and excellence by building effective partnerships, consulting with others and responding quickly to changes, concerns and complaints.

We assessed that this is a service that continually seeks to improve outcomes for the children in placements because the manager is very experienced, and manages the service with due care and attention. Business planning is an integral part of the team's functioning let down only by the need to prioritise monitoring outcomes for children and young people, supporting foster carers and other core activities when there are staff vacancies and resource issues to manage. We saw evidence of a systems thinking approach to improving the service wherein the duty system had been changed and the way in which foster carer recruitment had changed with the latter being, in part, responsible for the increase in the number of foster families increasing. An analysis of the sources of enquires to foster demonstrated the higher numbers originate via the internet and the service holds monthly information sessions for those people expressing an interest in fostering. Children and young people benefit from a service prepared to actively challenge itself and which is 'customer driven' in its improvement plans.

Young people can generally be confident that they will be matched appropriately with foster carers because there is a range of foster carers and the service undertakes a matching exercise and any long term placement matching proposal is presented to the fostering panel for consideration and recommendation or otherwise. Staff told us the service did not always have the numbers of foster carers they needed and, as fewer general foster carers are now being approved, this would likely provide less choice in the future. We observed a matching meeting for small child for whom an adoptive placement had not been successful and for whom existing foster carers had come forward as long term foster carers. We saw comprehensive reports available to the meeting which was chaired by the senior practitioner (FFS) and involved the supervising social worker (FFS), the child's social worker and an independent person. The process was very thorough and examined how the proposed foster carers would meet the child's needs in the short and long term, what impact it would have on their family and what, if any support they would need. We saw this potential match being scrutinised by panel and the foster carers attending to answer any queries that panel had.

FFS continues to develop the sophistication of its matching process and holds disruption meetings where there has been a breakdown in placement to understand the factors that may have contributed to the breakdown, including the matching process, and whether sufficient support had been provided and what lessons had been learned. The meetings are arranged by the FAST team and are chaired by an independent co-ordinator who will liaise with relevant parties prior to the meeting especially where they could not attend thereby giving the opportunity for open dialogue and objectivity. The views of the children were gained from them in their end of placement questionnaires, their independent reviewing officer and their social workers. We read the minutes of 4 meetings which demonstrated substantial dialogue and views and culminated in conclusions and



recommendations which were specific to the child and more general for social services. An example we saw was the recommendation that the views of a child's educational psychologist should be formally included, if appropriate, during the matching process of a looked after child with a foster carer. The service manager told us that general recommendations from disruption meetings are considered and adopted if possible and we saw that the fostering panel received and discussed the minutes of disruption meetings.

FFS operates its own fostering panel. We read panel minutes, attended a panel meeting and received returned questionnaires from panel members. There was evidence of members scrutinising reports and highlighting both positives and areas for further scrutiny which was then addressed with the presenting social worker and applicants. We saw that for each case presented, there was a summary of the rationale for the recommendation and the agency decision maker considered the issues discussed before making their decision.

However, we noted that the constitution of the panel was itself somewhat flawed because it did not comply with regulation 24 (9) (b) which requires that the independent members of the fostering panel must not be appointed as such if they are employed by the fostering service provider. We found that two of the panel members identified as being independent members were employed in other parts of the county council in child care related fields. Having discussed this with the team and service manager, we were encouraged how quickly this was resolved with the team manager reviewing all panel meetings and devising a strategy to manage the items addressed in the 3 panels which had not been quorate.

The panel was very efficient with experienced members, some of whom are entering their final term of office of 3 years. We saw the team manager kept a log of all attendees and was able to show us the panel members' electronic files noting all the relevant documentation required and annual reviews. We saw the information leaflet sent out to prospective applicants / attendees at panel which gave a pen picture of the panel member and their photograph. We saw that panel meetings include allocated time for business matters, disruption meetings, part IV meetings of the all wales child protection procedures (AWCPP), and variations, exemptions and placements made under regulation 38 (kinship carers). In addition to the applications to foster, panel considered the foster carer annual reviews held 12 months after approval. We noted that whilst panel agreed to recommend one foster couple's annual review, they asked for the next review to also be presented to them because they felt there was insufficient evidence of their experience of fostering yet.

The panel we attended, not only diligently scrutinised applications, they showed a great deal of sensitivity in welcoming the applicants, their supervising social workers and the child's social worker to the meeting acknowledging the stress it created in the applicants. Following the meeting, they came up with suggestions to improve the process and whilst the chair of panel said that they would incorporate improvements when possible did say that there hadn't been any business planning events in the last year and that training was limited for panel members. As the service was looking to recruit a replacement independent member and an elected member they anticipated the training that would be required and acknowledged the need to review and quality assure the functioning of panel to incorporate and consolidate the improvements being suggested by panel

members and officers.

## Quality Of The Carers

Children, young people, their families and their social workers can be confident that the recruitment and preparation of foster carers result in a range of safe, skilled and thoroughly vetted foster carers who are able to meet the diverse needs of the children looked after by the authority. Foster carers can be confident that they will be well supported and trained throughout their careers but they cannot always be confident that their applications are processed in a timely way because of priority which has to be given to court directed work and the fact that staffing levels causes delays.

We found that overall the assessments of foster carers was accurate, focussed and analytical but there were delays in the process caused by the increase in recruitment of foster carers at a time of staff vacancies. The introduction of monthly information sessions for those people expressing an interest in fostering had resulted in increased numbers of people making applications and the increase in kinship foster carers resulting from the Public Law Outline process for viability assessments is likely to increase the overall workload.

Nevertheless, we found that overall the assessment and preparation of foster carers was thorough and to a good standard with applicants discussing the skills they would bring to fostering and relating these to the understanding of a young person's behaviour. Within case files we found assessments that were comprehensive and particularly in kinship carer assessments, a great deal of sensitivity had been used to enable an exploration of family issues. Within each of the files we saw there was a safe caring policy written to reflect and address household norms and we saw a review of these in response to issues that emerged. We saw there were foster carer agreements, delegated authority, matching minutes, dates of supervision, support visits and unannounced visits and training were recorded on the foster carers electronic record with an oversight by the FFS team manager during supervising social worker supervision.

The depth of the assessments undertaken, statutory checks made and the oversight by the team manager means that children can be confident they will be living with foster carers who can keep them safe and that immediate action will be taken should there be any doubt. We saw the minutes of a part IV meeting under the All Wales Child Protection Procedures (AWCPP) when an allegation had been made and a disruption meeting was subsequently held and other action was taken. The fostering panel considered all such minutes of meetings and thereby acted as another check in the process of safeguarding children as they did with any complaints made against the service.

The pre-approval training provided to fostering applicants is delivered by skills to foster and forms an important part of the assessment process. We saw the team members were either delivering some of the training or had received training for this to happen. An example we saw was the delivery of attachment training. Generally we saw a wide variety of on-line training that was available to foster carers and some took ample opportunity to participate. However some foster carers missed the direct face to face training opportunities because of the networking it gave. One foster carer called this 'coffee break training' and felt that for new foster carers it was hard for them to make contact with their assigned buddy/s when they had not met them informally on training or

in support groups. The group of foster carers we met made a similar point. We saw that foster carers had gained a number of qualifications in child development and health and social care for young people and had some requested specific courses to support their child in placement.

The amount and level of training undertaken by foster carers was included in the annual foster carer review, the first of which was presented to the fostering panel and thereafter to the service manager (resources) unless panel had requested a future presentation or circumstances, such as disruption or safeguarding concerns, warranted this. The process for the annual reviews of foster carers is well embedded with contributions from foster carers, supervising social workers, child care social workers and the children themselves. There is a financial incentive for children to complete a fostering service questionnaire. We heard that the LAC education co-ordinator was not asked for their contribution to a foster carer review but as we heard mostly positives from other services comprising the team around the child, this may be a missed opportunity. We heard from the FAST team how foster carers came up with creative solutions to issues and how they managed contact with a child's family to avoid disappointment for a child and ensure that, if contact did not happen as scheduled, the impact on the child was minimised. We heard how foster carers worked well with the child's mentors and other services provided with some foster carers excelling on working with schools and advocating for the child.

Foster carer support groups had not been as frequent in the last year because joint sessions with staff in FSS had not taken place. Support group events had been held and the support group for the foster carer's children, stepping stones, had continued. However, some foster carers told us that while they appreciated these fun / leisure activities they missed the sharing of information and learning from meetings with other foster carers. The reduction in foster carer support groups was because of the need to prioritise other work. We talked to the team manager about whether foster carers could, within the available budget, arrange more effective supports to meet their needs' to facilitate the informal support networks that they carers were missing. This was being considered.

## How we inspect and report on services

We conduct two types of inspection; baseline and focussed. 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. Focussed 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

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