



Walsall Fostering Service

Statement of Purpose

June 2016

“Better together for children”



Walsall Council

Index

<i>Section</i>	<i>Information</i>	<i>Page</i>
	Executive Summary	3
1	Introduction	5
2	Aims and Objectives	6
3	Role of the Fostering Service	9
4	Services Provided.....	11
5	Staffing.....	13
6	Recruitment, Assessment and Approval Process	15
7	The Fostering Panel	18
8	Support for Foster Carers	19
9	Training for Foster Carers.....	20
10	Listening to Foster Carers	20
11	Review of Foster Carers.....	21
12	Support from Partner Agencies	21
13	Protecting and Safeguarding Children and Young People.....	23
14	Listening to Children and Young People	23
15	Systems in Place to Monitor the Effectiveness of the Service.....	24
16	Complaints Against the Service	24
17	Service Development.....	27

Executive Summary

This statement of purpose sets out the key aims and objectives of Walsall Council's Fostering Service. It explains the range of services available to children, prospective foster carers and foster carers. Walsall Children's Services aims to provide a service that is user friendly, welcoming and non discriminatory. The vision of Walsall Council's Fostering Service supports the overriding vision contained in our Children and Young People's Plan 2013 to 2016.

http://www.childrenspartnership.walsall.org.uk/walsall_cyp_plan_2013-2016.pdf

Our vision of 'Better Together for Children', recognises that Walsall children face significant disadvantage during their early years, particularly in relation to financial hardship, high levels of child poverty, poor employment prospects and high infant mortality rates. It is for these reasons that a multi-agency approach is required in striving to achieve better outcomes for children.

Walsall Council believes that a child is best brought up within his or her own birth family wherever possible. If a child is unable to live with their birth family Walsall Council is committed to finding a foster family who can offer safe and stable care in line with their care plan. This may be a short stay with foster carers whilst work is undertaken so they can return home, respite and short term breaks to support a family, through to permanence into adulthood.

In all circumstances we will seek to find high quality local placements within a family setting. Walsall Fostering Service provides alternative care arrangements and offers family environments for children and young people up to 18 years old (and in an increasing number of occasions beyond 18 years), either on a temporary or permanent basis.

Values

We respect all children, young people and their families by listening carefully to their views and acting on them wherever it is possible and appropriate to do so. We are open and trustworthy by making decisions transparently, involving others and doing what we say we will. We are ambitious for our children, believing in the potential of all children and doing all we can to support their development and talents. We are caring and responsible by acting as good Corporate parents and going the 'extra mile' in our supportive approaches to all children. We will protect vulnerable children and young people by taking firm urgent action when needed, sharing information and not tolerating oppressive behaviour. We engage with children and young people, helping to empower them through supporting their aspirations and giving them responsibility. We celebrate and support cultural diversity and children's sense of identity.

All workers have monthly supervision and an annual appraisal. The service actively seeks feedback from those who attend training from those attending panels. This feedback alongside the feedback from panel members and colleagues both in the service, and from wider Children's Services, contributes to service development.

The service is working jointly with other organisations and particularly with the Black Country Authorities to develop services where it is clear that doing so will provide benefits for children requiring fostering in the Borough of Walsall.

In November 2013, Ofsted introduced a new framework for the inspection of services for children in need of help and protection; children Looked After and care leavers. This includes the fostering service.

Walsall's Fostering Service was judged as 'Good' following the most recent inspection in September 2010, and is continually striving to improve service delivery through continuous professional development.

1. Introduction

It is a requirement of the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services that each fostering agency produces a Statement of Purpose, including its aims and objectives, a description of the service and the facilities that are provided. This Statement of Purpose gives an outline of these requirements, and details how the service is managed and its fitness to provide fostering services. The information in this document will apply to all Walsall children who are fostered. It also provides information on what systems are in place to recruit, train, supervise and support foster carers and also what the areas are for future development which will seek to enhance and improve the services on offer.

The Statement of Purpose also links with the Children's Guide which is provided to all children, subject to the child's age and understanding at the point of placement. This statement is available to all members of staff, foster carers, children and birth parents and is publicly available on our fostering website. The statement is updated and amended annually.



2. Aims and Objectives

Walsall Children's Services aims to provide a service that is warm, welcoming and non discriminatory. The aims of the Fostering Service are underpinned by and encompassed in the Children and Young People's Plan 2013 to 2016, which recognises that Walsall children face significant disadvantage during their early years, particularly in relation to financial hardship, high levels of child poverty, weak employment prospects and high infant mortality rates. It is for these reasons that a multi-agency approach is required in striving to achieve better outcomes for children.

2.1 Our Vision

Walsall Council believes that a child is best brought up within its own birth family wherever possible. If a child is unable to live with their birth family, Walsall Council is committed to finding a foster family who can offer safe and stable care in line with their care plan. This may be a short stay with foster carers whilst work is undertaken so they can return home, respite and short term breaks to support a family, through to permanence into adulthood.

In all circumstances we will seek to find high quality local placements within a family setting. Walsall Fostering Service provides alternative care arrangements and offers family environments for children and young people up to 18 years old and beyond as part of a Staying Put arrangement, either on a temporary or permanent basis.

Collectively, with all partners, parents and carers, Walsall Council believes that we are Better Together for Children

2.2 Values

We respect all children, young people and their families by listening carefully to their views and acting on them wherever possible. We are open and trustworthy by making decisions transparently, involving others and doing what we say we will. We believe in the potential of all children by doing all we can to support their development and talents. We are caring and responsible by acting as good Corporate Parents and going the 'extra mile' in our supportive approaches to all children. We will protect vulnerable children and young people by taking firm urgent action when needed, sharing information and not tolerating oppressive behaviour. We engage with children and young people, helping to empower them through supporting their aspirations and giving them responsibility. We celebrate and support cultural diversity and children's sense of identity. As Corporate Parents we have high aspirations for our children who are Looked After.

To put this into practice the Fostering Service strives to promote the following principles:

- choice and flexibility to ensure the service meets the individual needs of all children who are being Looked After by the Local Authority
- a creative approach to service delivery and problem solving
- planning based on clear processes and partnerships to maximise its effectiveness

- commitment to ongoing improvement against National Standards, legislative framework and internal service standards
- commitment to promoting a trained workforce, whose skills are fully utilised and who are able to develop a sense of pride and achievement in their work
- values of respect, quality and equality
- seeking foster carers who reflect our local population
- The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010 as amended by the Care Planning and Fostering (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2015.

Based on these principles, Walsall Children's Services aims to provide a comprehensive fostering service for all those who need it ~ whether children and young people who need a foster home or the adults providing the placement. The service offered is based on prescribed National Minimum Standards, statutory requirements, sound principles, and evidence informed practice and comprehensive policies and procedures. The Fostering Service will continuously quality assure service provision within the framework for the inspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children Looked After and care leavers. The service actively seeks feedback from those in receipt of a service, from those who attend training and from Panel members to inform service development and practice. All workers receive monthly supervision.

Walsall Fostering Service provides a service to children and young people that adhere to statutory requirements and nationally recognised standards of care and codes of practice which include:

- The Children Act 1989 and 2004
- The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 as amended by the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review and Fostering Services (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2013
- The Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005 as amended by the Adoption Agencies (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2013,
- The Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 and accompanying schedules 1-8
- The Data Protection Act 1998
- The Care Planning Placement and Case Review Regulations 2010, contributing to Walsall Council's Sufficiency Duty through our Recruitment and Retention Strategy
- Working Together to Safeguard Children 2013
- The Children and Families Act 2014

We seek to exceed the National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services and other good practice standards, for example, Care Planning and Placement and Case Review Regulations 2010

Judgements in relation to our success in adhering to these standards and code of practice will come from our self assessment, and from inspections, and will be based upon:

- the overall effectiveness of services for children in need of help and protection, children Looked After and care leavers
- the experiences and progress of children who need help and protection
- the experiences and progress of children Looked After and achieving permanence including graded judgements on adoption and the experiences and progress of care leavers
- leadership, management and governance

Contributing to Walsall's Sufficiency Duty will require us to:

- target recruitment to those prospective foster carers most likely to meet the needs of children who are Looked After by the Local Authority
- ensure that Walsall Council meets its duties under the Equality Act 2010 with regard to prospective foster carers. Recruitment will be based on an analysis of the age profile, location, and ethnicity of the current foster carers and an analysis of demand and requests where the Service has been unable to provide a placement
- ensure that the recruitment process is respectful, fair and timely
- through the commissioning team for placements work closely with the independent fostering agencies to ensure a range of placement choice



3. Role of the Fostering Service

Whenever a child is unable to live with their parents, social workers will first seek to place them with family and friends carers, but where this is not possible, the fostering service will identify a suitable foster placement with a foster carer approved by Walsall.

In doing so we will:

- provide high quality alternative care in a family setting which enables children and young people to explore and reach their full potential
- respect and promote children and young people as individuals
- ensure that the preparation process prepares foster carers as well as possible for the care of children in care
- engage in child focussed matching, introduction to and support to the foster carer
- develop working partnerships that are inclusive of children and young people, their families, foster carers, children's social workers, and colleagues in partner agencies, including health, educational and alternative providers of foster care as appropriate

To achieve the delivery of high quality, child focused placements that support our contribution to meeting Walsall's sufficiency duty we will:

- ensure that all foster carers, including family and friends foster carers are aware of both the role and support function of supervising social workers
- commit to continuous professional development for foster carers and supervising social workers
- ensure that all staff across Children's Services work together to provide the best possible service that is child-centred and supportive of families and foster carers, using a creative approach to service delivery and problem solving, and ensure planning is based upon clear processes and partnerships to maximise the effectiveness of service delivery
- offer a payment structure that enables carers to develop their fostering careers by recognising and rewarding their skills, experience and ability to care for a broad and diverse range of children
- review and update policies, procedures and processes to ensure they meet statutory requirements and reflect best practice

3.1 Principles and standards of care

Walsall Fostering Service is underpinned by the following Standards:

- children are best cared for in a stable and caring family setting which encourages and promotes continuing links with their own family and community.
- children have the right to be safe, secure and protected. Walsall Fostering Service has a clear policy against corporal punishment, including no smacking, slapping, shaking and all other humiliating forms of treatment or punishment.

- children have the right to be listened to and treated equally and fairly. Walsall Fostering Service will actively engage children and young people in decisions affecting them and in the general operation and development of our services.
- every child is valued for who they are. Walsall Fostering Service will make every effort to provide children with suitable placements and carers will support and promote a child's sense of identity, self respect and diversity.
- children's physical and emotional growth and development will be safeguarded within a robust care plan.

This means that foster carers, supervising social workers and children's social workers will work together in partnership with other agencies as appropriate, to enable children to reach their full potential.

Foster carers are valued as part of the professional network that supports and protects the child and Walsall Fostering Service will provide appropriate levels of support and supervision. Walsall Fostering Service is committed to the ongoing professional development of carers and will review training provision on a regular basis.

Walsall Children's Services will make every effort for children to remain in the same school where this is identified in their care plan.

Based on these principles, Walsall Children's Services aims to provide a comprehensive Fostering Service to all those who require or request it. The service offered is based on prescribed National Minimum Standards, statutory requirements, and uses an evidence informed approach to service improvement.



4. Services Provided

Walsall Fostering Service is committed to ensuring the best possible permanent outcome for a child which will enhance life chances and promote a sense of safety, security and well-being.

The Fostering Teams contribute to the delivery of the Fostering Service and the Adoption Service. Social workers and foster carers are highly motivated and committed to providing a quality service to children in care.

4.1 Mainstream Foster Placements

The two fostering teams provide the whole range of placements, including emergency, temporary and long term/permanent placements for children and young people aged between 0 and 18 years or 21 if part of a Staying Put arrangement. In addition, the service offers short breaks for disabled children.

4.2 Family and Friends

Family and Friends (or connected persons) foster care, is when close relatives, or one or more people connected to the child, such as grandparents, aunts, uncles, sisters, brothers, step-parents or friends come forward to care for that child, when he or she is no longer able to live with his or her birth parents, and there is a need for the child to be in public care to meet the child's needs and to safeguard welfare.

Being a Family and Friends carer also helps children and young people keep in contact or remain with their wider family. 'Connected people' will have a pre-existing relationship with the child and young person. Children tell us they prefer to be cared for within their own family or by a 'connected person' when they can't live with their parents. They feel more secure and feel they belong.

Family and Friend carers have the same access to supervision, support and training and development opportunities as other foster carers.

4.3 Short term break carers

Short Term breaks carers provide regular stimulating breaks for disabled young people away from their home; usually one weekend per month. All carers for disabled children are assessed and attend pre-approval training before being presented to Walsall Fostering Panel for recommendation. Short term break carers receive household fees on a pro-rata basis and have the same access to supervision, support, training and development opportunities as other carers.

4.4 Private fostering

A privately fostered child is one who is under the age of 16 (under 18 if they are disabled) and who is cared for and accommodated for 28 consecutive days or more by someone other than a parent, other person with parental responsibility or a close relative (such as a grandparent, brother, sister, uncle or aunt).

The safeguarding and family support service undertakes the assessment of private foster carers. Following assessment, and once the arrangement has been accepted by the Local Authority the support and supervision of the placement is the responsibility of the child's social worker.

4.5 Staying Put

The Staying Put policy is designed to ensure that young people do not experience sudden disruption to their living arrangements on their 18th birthday, that educational achievement and continuity are promoted, and that vulnerable young people make gradual transition from care to independence when the time is right for them.

The Staying Put Policy sets out the circumstances by which a former fostering arrangement may be extended beyond a young person's eighteenth birthday and provides guidance on the associated financial implications, the social care requirements associated with extending former fostering arrangements and any resulting Income Tax, National Insurance and Welfare Benefit issues.



5. Staffing the Fostering Service

The social workers currently employed in the service have a wide range of experience of working in the field of childcare and family placements, and the Fostering Service benefits from a stable staff group. The qualifications held are wider ranging and include the Certificate of Social Services, the Certificate of Qualification in Social Work, the Diploma in Social Work and BA or MA in Social Work. Through supervision and training, Walsall Council Children's Services ensures that all staff have the skills and knowledge to work effectively within the Fostering Service. The training available is reviewed regularly to make sure that it remains in line with practice and legal developments. Annual Appraisals are an integral part of staff development and progression.

The service ensures that appropriate written procedural and practice guidance is available to staff and that this is updated regularly in light of practice and legal changes. All policies and procedures pertaining to the delivery of the Fostering Service are included in the children's services procedures manual. This is accessible by all staff at <http://walsallchildcare.proceduresonline.com/index.html>

The Fostering Service is structured as follows:

5.1 Group Manager-Strategic lead for Provider Services

The primary objectives of this role are to be responsible for the service planning and management of all Local Authority Children's homes and adoption and fostering services in Walsall.

5.2 Recruitment and Assessment Team

This team is responsible for all marketing, recruitment, and training and assessment activities for all foster carers including family and friends. The team comprises of 1 team manager, 1 practice manager, 7 social worker posts, 1 recruitment and promotions worker and 1 customer services officer. The team undertake the assessments of mainstream foster carers. There are an additional 3 social workers who operate as a satellite unit to the team who complete family and friend assessments and SGO assessments in accordance with court timescales and the implementation of care plans for children.

The team provides supervision and support to mainstream carers until their first review, which includes supporting them with completion of the TSD standards and other core training. The team also undertakes placement duty and assists with family finding for permanent placements with the support of the recruitment and promotions officer.

5.3 Support and Development Team

The team comprises 1 team manager, 1 practice manager, 9 social workers and 1 children's services support officer. Following the first year of approval, mainstream carers transfer to the support and development team. Family and Friend foster carers are supported by this team from the point of their approval. Family and friend carers are offered the same supervision and support as mainstream carers and they are also given the same opportunity to attend training which also includes support with the completion of TSD standards and other core training. In line with the regulatory requirement to consider permanence at a child or young person's second statutory review of placement, the review will consider the child's need for permanence and a decision will be made regarding an SGO application and the timescales by which this should be pursued.

The team also undertake placement duty, some family finding for permanent placements, permanence assessments and they contribute to the training programme for foster carers.

5.4 Professional advisor to adoption and fostering panels.

This post is occupied by a full-time Panel Advisor

5.5 Coordinator for foster Carer Reviews

The post holder undertakes all reviews of foster carers and is involved in aspects of service development and the delivery of some training. Through liaison with the Independent Reviewing Officers for children who are Looked After, together they ensure an integrated approach to the quality assurance of care plans.



6 Recruitment, Assessment and Approval Process

Any person contacting the Fostering Service, expressing an interest in fostering will be able to have an initial discussion with a member of the Recruitment and Assessment Team. Basic information will be required at this stage and following the discussion, if the enquirer wishes to proceed an information pack will be sent out the same day. An initial home visit will be arranged with the applicant(s) who are deemed to be suitable.

The Initial Home visit is undertaken to assess motivation to foster and to discuss the implications of fostering with the applicants and any other family members. A check list of home conditions will be undertaken and some further basic information will be collected to enable an initial evaluation of the application. If all parties agree that fostering could be suitable for the family and basic criteria are met, an invitation to a training and preparation group is given. The preparation group training is based upon the Fostering Network “Skills to Foster Programme”

All assessments are undertaken by qualified social workers using a competency based model; this assists in maintaining a consistent approach to agreed standards.

The approval process has been reviewed to comply with the new regulations which outline what needs to be undertaken during stage 1 and stage 2 of the assessment process. We will continue to keep this under review.



There are 10 steps into fostering for Walsall Council:

Step 1

- We put information out through various media about Fostering in Walsall

Step 2

- You make contact with Walsall Fostering Service

Step 3

- We send you the “Fostering Information Pack” and provide answers to any questions that you have

Step 4

- You return the “Fostering Offer” to us

Step 5

- We allocate a social worker, who makes an initial visit to you

Step 6

- You attend the “Skills to Foster” pre-approval training course

Step 7

- You complete an application to be assessed

Step 8

- The social worker undertakes and completes your assessment

Step 9

- You attend Fostering Panel with the social worker. The panel makes a recommendation about whether you should be approved as a foster carer

Step 10

- The agency decision maker decides whether you are approved as a foster carer

Congratulations! Once you are approved, you are ready to receive your first placement

To be approved as a foster carer you must evidence that you have the skills and abilities to foster. During the assessment and preparation process you will work with your assessing social worker to evidence your level of competence in relation to:

- caring for children from a wide variety of complex and diverse backgrounds
- providing a safe and caring environment
- working as part of a team
- your own development

With your co-operation we aim to complete this process in between six to eight months from receiving your fostering offer form.

6.1 Statutory Checks

During the assessment Walsall Fostering Service will undertake a variety of statutory checks to ensure the suitability of applicants and ensure children are protected. These checks will include:

- Disclosure and Barring Records (DBS)
- Local Authority
- Employer
- Education
- Health Visitor reports
- medical reports and assessment
- personal references
- overseas checks where appropriate
- ex-partners and children of an appropriate age will be contacted and where possible interviewed
- a health and safety inspection will also be undertaken

Applications to become a Foster Carer are welcomed from people in Walsall and the surrounding area, regardless of gender, marital status, sexuality, race, disability, religion, and culture or employment status. The timescale between the initial home visit to applicants and approval will be approximately eight months, unless there are exceptional circumstances. Any one over the age of 21 years may apply to become a Foster Carer. A welcoming and professional response is given to all enquiries.

There is immediate exclusion of any applicant who has been convicted of an offence against a child or any serious offence against an adult. There is no upper age limit for Foster Carers. Any applicant must be healthy and active, to enable them to care appropriately for a child. It is a minimum requirement that all prospective Foster Carers have at least one spare bedroom so that a Looked After Child can have his or her own bedroom. The only exception to this is for foster carers who are offering care to a sibling same sex pair, in these circumstances following a risk assessment children are able to share a bedroom.

A robust recruitment strategy is in place which utilises current data regarding placements and placement shortfall. More carers are always needed for Black and Asian children and for children with complex needs. The current recruitment drive is focused on recruiting foster carers for sibling groups, older children and for children and young people requiring the security of a permanent placement.

7 The Fostering Panel

Walsall's fostering panel is the basis for good decision-making and practice in this important area of children and families social work. The primary responsibility of the panel is to act in the best interests of children and young people placed in foster care by Walsall Children's Services.

The panel composition sets out to reflect the community that it serves and seeks to operate in a way that promotes equal opportunities and anti discriminatory practices. In summary the functions of the fostering panel are:

- to consider applications for approval and recommend suitability of applicants
- to recommend the terms of approval for those recommended to be suitable to act as foster carers
- to recommend continuing suitability and the appropriateness of the terms of approval on the first annual review or on any occasion that the fostering panel is asked to do so in accordance with the Fostering Service Regulations 2011.

The fostering panel also has a role in quality assuring the work of the Local Authority. It may advise on annual review procedures and periodically monitor the reviews as well as overseeing the quality of the assessments. The panel may also be asked to give advice and make recommendations on other matters referred to it by the panel advisor. Foster carers are expected to attend if their case is being presented to the panel. The supervising social worker will attend panel with the carer.

All recommendations made by the fostering panel are considered by the Agency Decision Maker (ADM) for fostering. This is a senior officer within Children's Services, who has the required qualifications, knowledge and skills. The ADM receives the panel's recommendations and makes decisions.

If the fostering service considers that someone is not suitable to be approved or continue to act as a foster carer, or proposes to change their terms of approval without their consent, then the service must give written notice to this effect. The applicant or approved foster carer can then submit written representations to the decision maker, or apply to the Secretary of State for a review of the determination by the Independent Review Mechanism (IRM). They cannot choose both options.

8 Support for Foster Carers

Foster carers who are approved as mainstream foster carers offering placements to a broad range of children, will remain the responsibility of their assessing social worker for their first year of approval. This worker will become the supervising social worker and will be responsible for supporting the foster carers to undertake the fostering task.

Foster carers who are approved as a family and friend carer to a specific child or children, will become the responsibility of the Support and Development team. They will be allocated a supervising social worker who will be responsible for supporting the foster carers to undertake the fostering task.

The Foster Carer Agreement is signed by the foster carers and the fostering service following approval. The supervising social worker will go through the agreement and the Joint Working Protocol, which outlines roles and responsibilities for all parties involved in a child's placement. Walsall Fostering Service values the important work foster carers do and the significant contribution they make to the lives of children and young people in their care.

Appropriate support for foster families is important to a successful placement. Walsall Fostering Service provides creative and flexible support arrangements for children and young people and their foster carers. Identifying and ensuring the necessary level of support occurs when a child or young person and foster family are 'matched' at the placement planning stage. This support is then monitored and adjusted throughout the placement.

Support arrangements currently include:

- Supervision and support from a qualified and suitably experienced Supervising Social Worker
- Visits and regular telephone contact from the Supervising Social Worker
- Individual membership of the Fostering Network
- Payment of a fostering allowance for the child that covers the cost of caring for them.
- Comprehensive post-approval training programme
- Access to support groups
- Carers are members of the Walsall Foster Carers Association who provide peer support, and "buddying" and advocacy
- Access to independent social worker support if required
- Foster carer handbook
- The opportunity for career development and a professional fee, which is paid on a household basis.

The payments to all foster carers are currently under review so that the service can respond to the ongoing demands of providing high quality placements to those children and young people who are unable to remain with their birth family. During this time, the service will continue with its current scheme. However, some slight amends have been added to reflect the need to increase our provision for more internal foster care placements and to ensure all foster carers have access to the same support and training opportunities. Further consultation will take place with foster carers prior to any changes in policy.

All foster carers currently receive a fostering allowance to enable them to meet the needs of the individual children they are caring for. The service currently offers four fee payment levels, progression through each level is dependent on the type of assessment completed, the requirement to complete the Training, Support and Development Standards, ongoing commitment to professional development, capacity and ability to meet the needs of a diverse range of Looked After Children, and commitment to support ongoing service development.

The criteria for progression through the fee levels are discussed with all foster carers by their supervising social worker. Whilst there is the potential to move up through the skill levels, there is also the potential to move down if it is assessed that carers are not fulfilling the expectations of their current skill level.

9 Training for Foster Carers

Walsall Fostering Service recognises that fostering has become increasingly demanding and complex. The service is committed to providing good quality training that is accessible and relevant to all foster carers. Training is viewed as an important element of support to foster carers and comprehensive pre and post approval training is available on an ongoing basis. Training is provided to:

- help foster carers to develop and improve their skills
- improve knowledge, develop and refine skills
- establish an explicit, positive framework of values which promotes equality of opportunity
- encourage foster carers to be aware of the effects of discrimination in all parts of the community, recognising that they care for children, many of whom face discrimination as a part of everyday life
- ensure that all foster carers are competent and confident in safer caring and in protecting children from harm
- help foster carers to promote the health and education of children and young people

Foster carers are encouraged and supported to take responsibility for their own professional development. This is practically supported through the creation and update of individual training development plans as part of the foster carer's annual review. Children and young people and their parents have the opportunity to feed back their views about their experience of being in care as part of the foster carer's annual review.

The training programme is reviewed annually. Foster carers also act as co-facilitators of some of the post approval training courses and the service is open to hearing from carers about their ideas for new training courses.

In addition to being expected to complete the mandatory core training, all foster carers must complete the Standards for Foster Carer Training, Support and Development Standards (TSD) within the required timescales.

10 Listening to Foster Carers

Walsall Fostering Service has a range of mechanisms designed to elicit feedback from foster carers. Regular foster carer consultation events give foster carers the opportunity to contribute to service development and meet with representatives from across the service. Foster carers are invited to join working groups on aspects of service delivery. We also obtain feedback through Fostering Panels, supervision and foster carer reviews. All feedback is collated and common issues and themes are discussed at the Fostering Managers Meetings.

11 Reviews of Foster Carers

The coordinator for foster carer reviews conducts the carer's annual review not more than a year following their original approval and at intervals of not more than a year subsequently. In addition, reviews may be required due to a change in the carer's circumstances or if there is an exemption, or if there is a need to re-consider their approval category.

The coordinator liaises with the carer and the supervising social worker to confirm the date for the review. The coordinator ensures that all the necessary feedback forms have been distributed, and to follow up those not yet received. Foster carer reviews follow an appraisal format, assessing the carer's ability to meet the needs of children, their ability to work with the agency and other people, and any development or training needs. Prior to the review, the views of Social Workers, Independent Reviewing Officers and young people in placement, their parent/s, foster carers and children who foster are sought. If any checks need to be renewed the supervising social worker will seek completion of the appropriate consent forms. Once the review has been completed and written up, a copy is circulated to the participants for signature. Once signed, the completed review is presented, either to the fostering panel or the review meeting, and the recommendation is considered by the Agency Decision Maker.

12 Support from Partner Agencies

12.1 Education

The Virtual School provide advice and guidance to children in care, care leavers, foster carers, social workers, residential staff and school in regard to the education of Looked After children.

The overall aim of the Virtual School is to help produce better educational outcomes and enhance personal and social development so that children who are Looked After have better life chances.

The Virtual School champions the interests and needs of students in the care of the Local Authority which is achieved through working in partnership with other agencies who are also involved with the children.

The staff from the Virtual School work closely with Walsall Fostering Service by liaising closely with foster carers and by putting on training sessions for new and established foster carers in how to support a child in education and providing 1:1 Personal Education Plan training sessions.

The Child/young person's school will always take responsibility for any issues relating to a student in the first instance, supported by the Virtual School. Walsall Fostering Service is available when a school really needs extra resources to be able to give the best possible provision.

Children who are Looked After have to receive the very best possible support if they are to move on to successful and fulfilling lives. They need special treatment and positive discrimination in their favour.

12.2 Health

The Looked After Children Health Team within Walsall Healthcare Trust (WHT) takes a central role to support the Looked After Children's Service to meet the health needs of children and young people in care, and via a service level agreement directed by Walsall Clinical Commissioning Group (WCCG). The Designated Nurse for Safeguarding Children and Looked After Children and the Designated Doctor for Looked After Children are employed within WCCG to maintain oversight and to support overall governance of local healthcare service provision to children in care, to effect robust working arrangements across the partnership and to drive forward initiatives and service developments.

The Looked After Children Health Team, WHT, is comprised of a Lead Nurse for Safeguarding and Looked After Children, a Named Nurse for Looked After Children and a Health Advisor for Transition and Leaving Care. Nominated Administration Officers support the functioning of the service; Nominated Paediatricians provide the medical service relating to initial statutory health assessments and clinical follow-up where required.

Statutory health assessments are provided to all children in care (excluding those on the short term breaks scheme). Children under 5 years of age are appointed for health assessments twice a year; Children aged 5 years and over are provided with an annual statutory health assessment.

The Looked After Children Health Team facilitates notifications to relevant health professionals when children become Looked After, or any change in circumstances thereafter; Links with local GP Services are maintained. The Team acts as a central point of contact when children are placed out of area and when children are moved into the area by other Local Authorities. The Team co-ordinates the work associated with all statutory health assessments, ensuring that they are timely and appropriate to needs, conducting, monitoring, and quality assurance activities as associated with oversight by the Designated health professionals. Clinical team members take responsibility to deliver direct care to a number of children Looked After and provide specialist advice and support to the most vulnerable children, their carers and to partner agents; engaging in individual care planning and review meetings in order to ensure that children's health needs are met and to facilitate timely, consistent access to healthcare services.

The provision of a Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) for children in care has oversight and governance by the Local Authority and WCCG and is locally provided by Dudley and Walsall Mental Health Partnership Trust. Children's Services lead on the use of Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaires and their completion by foster carers in order to gain an understanding of the emotional well-being and mental health needs of children in care and to support levels of need as identified. FLASH (Fostering, Looked After, Adoption Support Hub) is a new service for Looked After children and children subject to an adoption or special guardianship order. This service aims to promote placement stability and to provide a particular focus on the prevention of placement disruption by working on an attachment based model with carers and on occasion with children and young people.

12.3 Leisure

Foster carers are encouraged to enable children's use of the borough's sports and leisure facilities as part of their foster carer role, and promoting healthy lifestyles of children placed with them. Leisure services are engaged in schemes designed to allow free or increased access to many leisure opportunities for all children in foster care and their carers.

All foster carers are issued with a 'Maxcard', this is a national initiative and enables carers to obtain discounts at a number of leisure attractions up and down the country. The introduction of the Maxcard will enable carers to provide children and young people with exciting and stimulating opportunities at a reduced cost.

13 Protecting and Safeguarding Children

Walsall Fostering Service works hard to ensure that children in foster care 'Stay Safe' and are aware of their rights. The right to be safe, secure and protected and the right for adults to listen and for young people to be treated equally and fairly are fundamental principles.

Walsall Fostering Service has a robust system for checking prospective carers' backgrounds and their suitability to care for vulnerable children. Elements of child protection and how to provide a safe caring environment are reinforced throughout assessment, approval, training and supervision of foster carers. All carers have a Safer Caring Agreement in relation to the household and each individual child in placement as appropriate. Procedures are in place to ensure that foster carers have sufficient information about every child in their care, to enable them to keep children safe and meet all their needs

Walsall Fostering Service has a policy against corporal punishment including no smacking, slapping, shaking and all other humiliating forms of treatment or punishment. Walsall Fostering Service also has guidelines for the acceptable use of sanctions within the home.

Every complaint against a carer is treated seriously and is subject to Walsall Council's Complaints and Representations procedures. All allegations in respect of carers who are accused of abusing or ill treating a child in their care are subject to Child Protection Procedures, in compliance with the Children Act 1989, and Walsall's Safeguarding Children's Board (WSCB) policy and procedures. Allegations will be investigated in a timely and transparent manner and the Fostering Service will treat foster carers fairly, informing them in writing as soon as possible about how the allegations will be investigated. The Supervising Social Worker will continue to offer support to the foster carer through any process of investigation into an allegation, concern or complaint and the carer will be offered independent social worker support.

Foster carers are trained to recognise signs of abuse, incidents of bullying and to work with children and significant people such as their social worker, teachers or family to resolve any problems

14 Listening to Children and Young People

The matching process seeks to take into account the views of young people and their families when identifying a suitable placement. Carers' profiles are shared with placing social workers and children and their families (as appropriate) to help with this process. Children and young people's views about the standard of their care are sought as part of the carer's annual review. As standard practice, foster carers and supervising social workers are expected to attend and contribute to Looked After Children (LAC) reviews. Supervising social workers should prioritise attendance at LAC reviews for all new foster carers, where the placement is vulnerable and where the likelihood is that a change in a care plan will be made.

15 Systems in Place to Monitor the Effectiveness of the Service

All workers have monthly supervision. This focuses on the completion of key tasks but also equally important the growth of the reflective practitioner through an individual workforce development plan. All workers also have an annual appraisal, which measures performance and outcomes for individual children and foster carers and also provides a focus on the development of the reflective practitioner. Observations of practice are an integral part of the supervision and appraisal process, and all workers are observed as a minimum annually.

Supervision and appraisal standards are closely monitored by the agency for compliance with national and service standards.

All prospective foster carers are asked to provide feedback regarding their attendance at fostering panel. The panel are provided with this feedback through the annual report.

We regularly ask panel members for their feedback on the process of the panel and evaluate this to continuously improve the effectiveness of the panel

The Group Manager for the Family Placement Service provides an annual report to Cabinet in relation to their role as Corporate Parents delivering the Fostering Service and any issues relating to the development of the Family Placement Service are fed into the Council's Senior Leadership Team.

16 Complaints Against the Service

A complaint is a written or oral expression of dissatisfaction which requires a response. The Council's Complaints procedure which operates in accordance with the requirements of the Children Act 1989, provides a means of allowing a service user or their representatives to complain about the quality or nature of services provided or commissioned by Children's Services, as well as ensuring that complaints are acted upon and complainants are kept informed of the progress and outcome of their complaint.

A Children's Guide is available for all young people fostered through our service and includes details of our service and information for young people to help them get the best out of their care, including how to access an advocate and how to make a complaint.

If a Looked After Child is not happy with the service they have received, they should speak to their foster carer or social worker about making a complaint. They will be entitled to an Advocate to support and represent them in the process. It is an expectation that children using the complaints system are supported by their foster carers.

Advice on making a complaint can be sought from the Customer Care Team. Foster carers wishing to make a complaint can also contact the Customer Care Team.

Walsall Council Children's Services Complaints Procedure Process

Stage 1:

The expectation is that the majority of complaints should be considered (and resolved) at this stage. There is a 10 working day time limit for this part of the process and most Stage 1 complaints should ideally be concluded within this time limit.

Written acknowledgement of all complaints will be sent to the complainant or representative within five working days.

Where we cannot provide a complete response within 10 working days, we can implement a further 10 working days' extension.

The maximum amount of time that Stage 1 should take is 20 working days and in most cases the local manager responsible for the service will be able to resolve your complaint.

If necessary, to ensure that a young person who is making a complaint receives suitable support to do so, we may also suspend Stage 1 until an Advocate has been appointed.

Stage 2:

If the person complaining is not satisfied with the response at this stage, they can ask for their complaint to be independently investigated

This investigation will be arranged by the Customer Care Team and carried out by an independent person - someone who is not directly involved with this service. This investigating officer will prepare a report which, after being considered by Children's Services, is provided to the complainant.

In some instances it may be more appropriate for a complaint to move straight to Stage Two of the procedure. The Customer Care Team can advise further on this.

Stage 3

If anyone complaining is still unhappy then they have the right to ask for their complaint to be considered by the Complaints Review Panel. The Panel has three members, two of whom are local Councillors, and a third member who chairs the Panel and is entirely independent of Children's Services and the Council.

If the complaint reaches this stage, the Customer Care Team will maintain contact with those making complaints.

How long does it take?

An acknowledgement will be sent within 5 working days and a full reply within a further 15 working days depending upon the complexity of the issues raised. If the complaint is a complex one and needs more time to be investigated, this will be explained at an early stage. You will be told of any delay and advised of the timescale for provision of a full reply.. The Fostering Service is committed to learning from complaints and to use this learning to improve service delivery.

What if complainants are still not satisfied?

This is as far as complaints can go within Children's Services, but if you remain dissatisfied, you can complain to the Local Government Ombudsman.

The Ombudsman looks into complaints about local Councils.

The kinds of complaints they deal with are: If the Council

- does something wrong
- does something they should not have done
- fails to do something it should have done

Contact the Customer Care Team who will send you a copy of the Ombudsman's leaflet "Complaint about the Council."

Contact details for Customer Care Team

Council House
Lichfield Street
Walsall
WS1 1TW

Tel: 01922 650489

Fax: 01922 614210

Email: complaints@walsall.gov.uk.

Contact details for further information

Family Placement Service
106 Essington Road,
New Invention,
Willenhall,
West Midlands,
WV12 5EX

Telephone: 0300 555 2834

Contact details for Ofsted

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

Tel: 0300 123 1231

Website: www.ofsted.gov.uk

Contact details for Office of the Children's Commissioner

Sanctuary Buildings
Great Smith Street
London
SW1P 3BT

17 Service Development

Recommendations from any future Ofsted inspections will be completed without delay. Walsall's Fostering Service is currently judged as 'Good'. The priority for the service for the following year is as follows:

- Ongoing self evaluation and as a result of this, implementation of any identified key service improvements, such as the review of our scheme for payments to foster carers.
- To continue to work jointly with other organisations and particularly with the Black Country Authorities to develop services where it is clear that doing so will provide benefits for children requiring a fostering placement in the Borough of Walsall.
- To continue to embed 'Mosaic', Walsall's new data recording system for children and young people.
- The Group Manager will continue to be responsible for driving any identified service improvements. The key driver for this will be to ensure that the fostering service has an identified proactive 'footprint' onto the journey of any child or young person in the care of Walsall Council.

