



Inspection Report on

**Foster Wales Bridgend
Level 2 the Civic Offices
Angel Street
Bridgend
CF31 4WB**

Date Inspection Completed

13/11/2023

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About Bridgend County Borough Council Family Placement Team

Type of care provided	Local Authority Fostering Service
Registered Provider	Bridgend County Borough Council Adults and Children's Services
Language of the service	English
Previous Care Inspectorate Wales inspection	04/02/2016
Does this service promote Welsh language and culture?	The service provides an 'Active Offer' of the Welsh language. It anticipates, identifies, and meets the Welsh language and cultural needs of people who use, or may use, the service.

Summary

Foster Wales Bridgend comprises of a General Fostering and Placement Team, and Kinship and Permanence Team. An Interim Principal Officer (IPO) is the registered manager of the service, and each team has a team manager. The General Fostering and Placement Team, considers the needs of children, referred to the service and finds suitable placements, either in-house or externally. General foster carers are assessed and approved to look after children, providing respite, short and long-term care. The service has one parent and baby carer and one family link carer. The Kinship and Permanence team, assess and approve connected carers, and complete special guardianship order applications to promote children remaining with family or friends. At the time of inspection, there were approximately 77 approved general foster carers caring for 103 children and 71 approved connected persons carers, caring for 111 children.

Prior to inspection, the Local Authority provider had identified a number of areas of the service which require further development. This includes the recruitment and retention of a skilled workforce, and foster carers to meet children's needs. Shortfalls have been identified in standards of care and support, which includes the process for matching children with foster carers, safeguarding, policies and procedures and the requirements in relation to the provision of the service. The Local Authority provider has provided assurances action will be taken to address these shortfalls and improve outcomes for children.

Well-being

Children receive information about the care, support and opportunities available to them. A guide to the fostering service provides important information about their rights and entitlements, how their voices will be heard and how to raise a complaint. Further guides are being developed to meet the needs of children of different ages and needs.

Children have a variety of opportunities to express their views about the care they receive. Children are consulted as part of their child looked after reviews, and they are supported to attend where possible. Foster carers are strong advocates for children. Children's views are gathered as part of their foster carers annual review of fostering; however, children's views are not sought when relationships with foster carers have broken down and they have experienced disruption. Children are made aware of their rights to independent advocacy.

The Bridgend Youth Voice Forum, run by an independent charity, provides opportunities for children and care leavers aged 11-21 to be consulted and have a say in the development of the service. Members of the forum have been invited to be part of recruitment and selection processes for staff. The forum has been part of reviewing guidance for supporting children in managing their money. Members have provided positive feedback to the service regarding their involvement. This includes feeling their *'voice can make a difference'*.

Children are supported to be healthy and active. A number of events are held for children and their foster families during the year. This includes Christmas and Halloween parties; and a summer fete. Each foster home is provided a leisure card, which enables all household members to access a variety of free leisure activities including local gyms. Children are registered with health services and attend routine and specialist health appointments. Additional services are available to children with more complex emotional health needs. This includes support services, who assess children's needs and provide a range of interventions for children and their foster carers, to support them process past experiences. The Local Authority provider is developing further support services to meet the needs of care experienced children.

Children are supported to attend education and reach their potential. Their foster carers value the importance of education, promote attendance and advocate on their behalf during education meetings. Additional support is provided by an educational engagement co-ordinator, who liaises with all professionals involved in children's lives, to ensure their educational needs are met. The exact number of children, supported by the service who are not accessing statutory education is not known. We were told by foster carers and staff, some children are not accessing statutory education, which impacts children's outcomes and is placing additional pressure on the fostering household.

Children are supported to have healthy, safe relationships with their families and people who are important to them. A number of children are remaining with their foster families

after they reach adulthood and are being supported to achieve positive outcomes via 'when I'm ready' arrangements.

Foster carers understand their role, are trained in safeguarding, and provide support to reduce risks to children's well-being. However, safeguarding procedures are not consistently followed. Where allegations have been made against foster carers, information sharing between teams, consideration of risks and decision making is not robust. Children cannot be assured that all risks have been considered and mitigated when they are matched with foster carers. Some children have experienced high levels of disruption in their care, with a number of moves, which further impacts their stability and outcomes.

Care and Support

The service does not have sufficient numbers of foster carers to meet the needs of children referred to the service. Just over half of care experienced children within the Local Authority, are provided care and support by the service. Demand on the service is high and many foster carers are often asked to care for more children than they are approved for. Additional resources are provided to try to support these arrangements. However, these are routinely used with carers who look after children with complex needs, without robust consideration of the impact and risks involved.

The service clearly sets out the standards of care and support foster carers must provide to children within its statement of purpose, policies, and procedures. Most children who are cared for by connected persons, have an established relationship and their carers who know them well. The suitability of these arrangements are fully considered as part of connected persons assessment. The service ensures these assessments are carried out quickly to avoid delay for children. When children require a foster home with general foster carers, the team considers referrals to the service and the matching of children's care and support needs with foster carers. The team is supporting colleagues who refer children to the service, to ensure paperwork is detailed, so the best possible matches can be made for children.

As part of the matching process key information is shared during a planning meeting. Consideration is given to how children's needs will be met, and transitions are planned, however, these meetings are not completed consistently. There are shortfalls in the service considering the needs of all household members and carers capacity, when matching children. Children who need long term care, are matched with carers, without a thorough assessment of their long-term needs, how these change over time, carers commitment and understanding of these needs. Some children have experienced many moves and breakdowns in relationships, contributing to further loss and trauma. Poor matching has been identified during internal quality assurance checks and the matching policy has been recently updated to ensure action is taken to address this.

Children are not effectively safeguarded. Risk assessments and decision making when foster carers are subject to safeguarding concerns are not robust. Foster care agreements and safer caring agreements are in place, but these are not completed thoroughly, considering children's individual needs and those of other household members. They do not provide clear guidance to foster carers on actions they should take to safeguard children and manage risks. We were told the service is implementing a more robust safer care process. When foster carers have been subject to safeguarding concerns, delays have occurred in completing annual reviews and presenting these to foster panel, which would support effective oversight and scrutiny of a foster carer's approval. Action is needed to improve safeguarding arrangements, to keep children safe.

Foster carers are supported through regular supervision, where the care and support needs of children are considered. Discussions are held on how carers have welcomed children and supported them to settle as part of the fostering family, and how they are being supported to achieve positive well-being. The service is reviewing how they can improve monitoring of children's personal outcomes. Most carers told us they have positive relationships with their supervising social worker. Some foster carers have been impacted by a number of changes within the team resulting in inconsistent support at times.

Supervising social workers spend time with children, observe and seek their views on the care they receive. Unannounced visits are completed at least annually, which provide further opportunities to observe family life and how children's needs are met. Children have provided positive feedback to the service regarding the care they receive. Following an internal quality assurance review, recent improvements have been made to support provided to foster carers, when relationships are at risk of breaking down. Meetings are planned with foster carers and other professionals regularly and consider any additional support which can be provided. These meetings are having a positive impact on improving relationships and promoting stability for children. The service is developing their support services for children. We were told a behaviour analyst will be based at the service within the next few months, who will support the teams understanding of children's behaviour, their needs and how best to respond.

Foster carers are committed to children they care for and want what is best for them. A Foster Carers Charter has recently been implemented within the service, which sets out the roles and responsibilities of the service and foster carers to achieve positive outcomes for children. The emphasis is on foster carers being seen as professionals, working in partnership, information sharing, clarity around decision making and support available to carers to meet the needs of children. Feedback from foster carers has been mixed regarding its implementation. Some report they feel well supported by the service to meet the needs of children, others say they feel they are not seen as professionals, report multiple changes in children's social workers, impacting the relationships formed and information sharing and decision-making needing to be improved.

Environment

The office premises is large and open plan, suitable and fit for purpose. The fostering service has its own designated area. There is enough distance between the service and other teams to maintain confidentiality. There are a number of meeting rooms available which provide privacy for the supervision of staff. Records are stored securely, including password protected electronic records, in line with legislation. Access to the office is secure via keycards. Access to members of the public is restricted to the main reception area, where a number of meeting rooms are available. Events which are arranged by the service, including coffee mornings and training are held in venues across the borough.

Foster carers' homes are assessed when they are recruited to determine their suitability in meeting children's needs. Supervising social workers visit fostering homes during announced and unannounced visits, which provide opportunity to monitor the environment. Children's bedrooms are routinely seen, as part of visits. Action is taken to address any concerns with foster carers as soon as these arise. Standards of health and safety in foster carers' homes are considered as part of the formal annual review process, together with pet assessments which consider risks. Children have a say in how they want their bedrooms to be decorated and personalise these, to their taste. The suitability of the environment children live in, is further monitored during reviews of their care and support plan. The Local Authority has supported children's families to make suitable adaptations to their homes, to support children remaining with their families and ensuring the environment meets their needs.

Leadership and Management

The Local Authority provider has identified areas which require improvement, and we were told, action is being taken to address shortfalls. A number of policies and procedures have been updated prior to inspection, to reflect the changes needed. The service is not currently operating in line with these policies and procedures which is impacting children's outcomes. The current recording systems do not support effective oversight and smooth operation of the service. Tracking of key information is being completed manually, which is time consuming. Some key information, including the DBS checks for foster carers support networks are not monitored effectively. The service is looking at ways to better utilise the database system to provide this information and has increased the number of business support staff, to provide an additional resource. Not all records were accessible to CIW during the inspection.

The service has experienced a high turnover of staff in all areas, including management. The senior management position is currently vacant. This has impacted consistency of support provided and the development of the service. The Kindship and Permanence Team is mostly staffed by agency supervising social workers. Team managers are spending time inducting new staff and have been unable to delegate to senior staff within the team. Foster carers report changes in staff has been a concern. The Local Authority provider is aware of these issues and a recruitment strategy has been developed to support improvements in recruitment and retention. The service has ensured there are appropriate numbers of staff who are suitably fit and have taken action by terminating contracts, if concerns arise. Safe recruitment checks are carried out on all staff; however, evidence of updated DBS checks needs strengthening. Staff told us they feel supported in their role through regular supervision and training. The Local Authority is currently implementing a new model of practice called 'signs of safety', and staff are receiving training. We found examples of 'signs of safety' being used within records. The service has plans to imbed this model into practice via workshops and team reflections.

There are arrangements in place for the oversight of the service and quality assurance processes, which review the standards of care and compliance with regulations. The Interim Principal Officer (IPO) has completed a quality-of-care review which identifies strengths and areas for development. Their quarterly reports identify patterns and consider actions to be taken by the service to improve outcomes for children. Staff review their carers and meet weekly to discuss the current needs of those who require additional support. The service introduced a quality assurance and learning framework in March 2023, which details how audits should be completed. This has not been implemented consistently across the whole team, due to competing demands within the service.

Feedback from carers regarding the support they receive is mixed. Almost half report feeling they receive good levels of support while almost half feel, improvements are needed. Most carers told us they feel communication from the service has improved in the past year, since permanent team managers have been in post. The introduction of social media to communicate with carers is valued. Carers are invited to consultation events twice

a year and their views are captured in their annual reviews. Most carers told us they have positive relationships with their supervising social workers, who are very supportive. However, some report they are not confident if they raise concerns, that these are taken seriously. The service has five liaison carers who are involved in recruitment, answering out of hours queries and provide peer support. They receive support monthly, by the general team manager. Foster carers and staff told us the liaison carers are a huge asset to the service. The service is considering how it can further support carers out of hours. Many foster carers told us staff are already providing this and are dedicated to their roles.

The service has recently appointed a recruitment and retention officer, whose role is to increase and support the recruitment of foster carers. Family link carers provide short breaks for children with disabilities. This area of the service has reduced in numbers considerably. Foster carers told us they value the events which are held during the year for children and their families. Many of these are arranged with the support of foster carers. Events which celebrate foster carers achievements also support their well-being and retention. The Local Authority is looking at ways it can be creative and continue to host these events.

Not all prospective foster carers have received the information and training they require prior to their assessment. We were told the service will take action to address this. Assessments of prospective foster carers are detailed and are presented to foster panel to determine whether they should be approved. Foster panels, scrutinise the content of assessments and ensure these are thorough, detailed and all checks are complete. The service's process for completing annual reviews, includes presenting these back to panel every three years or sooner if concerns arise. This has not always happened within reasonable timescales. Annual reviews are detailed and consider whether carers are competent in meeting children's needs. They consider the views of children, household members and key professionals including social workers and school. When relationships between children and their foster carers break down, a review of the reasons for this does not always include the views of children and foster carers, which would help the service reflect and identify learning.

Approved foster carers, receive training and advice to support them in their role. A mixture of online, face to face and e-learning is offered which cover a range of topics. Most carers told us they prefer the opportunities for face-to-face training. Some foster carers report training does not meet their needs fully as they care for children with more complex needs. Monthly coffee mornings are held, which offer opportunities for peer support and guest speakers. The service is developing a group for foster carers in the evening, to ensure all have opportunities to attend. Foster carers receive regular supervision, where their well-being and needs of children are considered. The information foster carers are provided at the time children are matched, including risks and how they can safeguard, needs improvement.

Summary of Non-Compliance

Status	What each means
New	This non-compliance was identified at this inspection.
Reviewed	Compliance was reviewed at this inspection and was not achieved. The target date for compliance is in the future and will be tested at next inspection.
Not Achieved	Compliance was tested at this inspection and was not achieved.
Achieved	Compliance was tested at this inspection and was achieved.

We expect those responsible in the local authority to take immediate steps to address and rectify any areas identified for improvement. These will be followed up at the next inspection.

Area(s) for Improvement

Regulation	Summary	Status
3	The Local Authority service provider must have clear arrangements for the oversight and governance of the service in order to establish, develop and embed a culture which ensures that the best possible outcomes are achieved for children using the service and to meet the requirements of the regulations.	New
10 (4)	The Local Authority service provider must put arrangements in place to ensure that the service is provided in accordance with its policies and procedures.	New
13	The Local Authority service provider must ensure foster carers give care and support to a child placed with them in a way which maintains, protects and promotes the safety and well-being of the child.	New
15	The Local Authority service provider must have effective arrangements in place to monitor and	New

	review the obligations placed upon foster carers as set out in the foster care agreement.	
19	The Local Authority service provider must put arrangements in place to ensure that children placed by it are safe and are protected from abuse, neglect and improper treatment.	New
20 (3)	The Local Authority service provider must ensure that its safeguarding policies and procedures are operated effectively.	New
41 (1)	The Local Authority service provider must ensure foster carers receive the support, training, and information necessary to enable them to provide care and support to a child they foster.	New
41 (3)	The Local Authority service provider must ensure prospective foster parents receive such training, information and advice as is considered necessary.	New

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