



Inspection Report on

Foster Wales Monmouthshire

**Monmouthshire County Council
County Hall
The Rhadyr
Usk
NP15 1GA**

Date Inspection Completed

21/05/2024

Welsh Government © Crown copyright 2024.

You may use and re-use the information featured in this publication (not including logos) free of charge in any format or medium, under the terms of the Open Government License. You can view the Open Government License, on the National Archives website or you can write to the Information Policy Team, The National Archives, Kew, London TW9 4DU, or email: psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk
You must reproduce our material accurately and not use it in a misleading context.

About Monmouthshire County Council Fostering Services

Type of care provided	Local Authority Fostering Service
Registered Provider	Monmouthshire County Council Adults and Children's Services
Language of the service	English
Previous Care Inspectorate Wales inspection	7 April 2016
Does this service promote Welsh language and culture?	This service is providing 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 Monmouthshire considers the needs of children and finds suitable placements, either in-house or with external providers. General foster carers are assessed and approved to look after children, providing short breaks, respite, short and long-term care. Connected person carers are assessed and approved, supporting children where possible to be cared for by family or someone they have established links with. At the time of inspection, there were approximately 39 generic foster carers, caring for 41 children and 18 connected person carers, caring for 33 children. The service also supports a number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

Children are supported to achieve positive well-being. The leadership team, staff and carers are committed to ensuring children achieve the best possible outcomes. Assessments of carers are robust and they receive appropriate support and training to assist them in their role. Local Authority support services are available to children, to support their ongoing relationships with their carers and people who are important to them. Children are supported to understand their history. Prior to inspection, internal quality assurance processes have identified areas of the service which require further development. Task and finish groups are currently working on a range of priorities and driving forward plans for improvement. Additional resources have been made available within the team to support the recruitment of general foster carers.

Timescales of internal audits and assessing the quality of care provided to children do not meet regulation. Improvements are needed in the information provided to children about the service. The Local Authority provider told us action will be taken to rectify this.

Well-being

Children's voices are heard and listened to. They are supported to attend their children looked after reviews and have access to independent advocacy. Most children are consulted as part of their carer's annual reviews. Children receive a guide with information about the service. The guides are currently being reviewed to ensure they provide children with all the information they need about their rights and entitlements. After children have been looked after for twelve months, Monmouthshire Local Authority contributes to their savings, which they can access when they turn eighteen. The Local Authority provider has identified improvements are needed to increase consultation with children when reviewing and developing the service. A children's consultation group is being developed and met for the first time, the week prior to inspection.

Children's physical and emotional well-being is supported. They are registered with universal health services and attend routine and specialist health appointments. Health and well-being are discussed with children's carers regularly. Prompt action is taken when any needs are identified, to ensure they receive the right care and support, as early as possible. Children are supported to partake in activities with their foster carers, including hobbies, sports, family days out and holidays, which support positive well-being. Children and fostering household members have access to free swimming. There are additional services for care experienced children, which supports them to understand their life journey and stability with their carers.

Children are supported to learn and develop to their full potential. Their carers value the importance of education, promote attendance and advocate on their behalf during education meetings. The Local Authority Education Inclusion Lead has recently been appointed, to ensure children's educational needs are met. Carers have high aspirations and support children to attend further education and training. Some 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. Information regarding the education attainment and attendance for children, was not available at the time of inspection.

Children are supported to see people who are important to them, in line with their care and support. When this cannot be supervised by carers, the Local Authority provider has a family time service, which operates seven days a week and provides a consistent supervisor. This is a valuable service for children.

Foster carers understand their role, are trained in safeguarding, and provide support to reduce risks to children's well-being. Action is taken to safeguard children when concerns are raised. Discussions are held with carers about how best to safeguard children and promote healthy relationships during each supervision support visit.

Care and Support

The service does not have sufficient numbers of foster carers to meet the needs of children referred to the service. The Local Authority relies heavily on external providers to meet demand. Action is being taken to recruit and retain suitable foster carers to meet the needs of all children referred to the service. Assessments of foster carers are of good quality and contain all the required information and checks to ensure their suitability to care for children.

The team considers referrals to the service and the matching of children's care and support needs with foster carers. Staff know their carers well and consider their strengths and any potential vulnerabilities. Foster carers are consulted and they are provided information on children's needs, prior to their arrival. Planning meetings occur before or shortly after children arrive and introductions are planned, where possible. Foster care agreements are in place and consider how children's needs will be met. Carers receive specialist training prior to caring for children, to ensure they can meet their specific needs.

Almost half of children accessing the service are cared for by connected person carers, who know children well and usually have an established relationship. The suitability of these arrangements is fully considered as part of a connected person assessment. The Local Authority Family Group Conference Team supports families to identify the most appropriate prospective carer and consider plans, for how they may support these arrangements. The Local Authority provider use independent social workers to undertake connected person assessments to avoid delay for children.

Staff regularly visit carers and consider the extent to which children are provided with care and support which promotes positive well-being. Prompt action is taken when concerns or additional needs are identified. There are additional support services available to care experienced children and their carers. Children can be referred to the My Support Team (MyST) and Building Attachment, Security and Emotional Wellbeing (BASE) service which aim to improve the emotional and psychological well-being for children in care. These therapeutic support services offer carer and social worker consultations, direct therapeutic work, training and multi-agency meetings. Children are benefitting from the services on offer, as they are supported to gain a better understanding of their life journey. Carers and professionals around them have improved understanding of their needs and how best to respond. Carers told us they value this support. The number of children experiencing breakdowns in relationships with their carers is low. The Local Authority provider is aware it needs to strengthen consultation with children and gathering their views on their care, when they have experienced disruptions and have moved from their carers.

Safeguarding of children is robust. Vulnerabilities are fully considered during assessments, supervision visits and annual reviews of carers approval. Risk assessments and safety plans consider actions needed to reduce risks to children's well-being. When safeguarding concerns are highlighted, action is taken to ensure there are appropriate safeguards in place to protect children from risks of harm. Carers are provided support through this process and following the conclusion of any investigation, are returned to panel, to consider their approval. Supervising social workers are currently supporting children who have remained with connected people, in unregulated placements. The Manager and Head of Service, have oversight of these arrangements to ensure any delay in achieving permanence for children is avoided.

Carers are committed to the children they care for and advocate in their best interest. Carers feel well supported by the team and told us they have developed positive relationships with their supervising social workers. Carers are clear on their roles and responsibilities and have access to a detailed fostering handbook which provides them with information they need to fulfil the role. A Foster Carers Charter has recently been developed, 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. We were told there has not been any formal complaints made about the service. The service reviews comments children have shared, as part of their carer's annual reviews, regarding the care and support they receive. Comments include '*we get treated like family*', '*they are good, we do fun things together*' and '*my foster family is amazing*'.

Environment

Foster Wales Monmouthshire operates from a large office which is suitable and fit for purpose. The fostering service has its own designated area, but works alongside other children's service teams, which supports positive multi-agency working. There are meeting rooms available which provide opportunities for private discussions. 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 meeting rooms are available. Events which are arranged by the service, including support groups and training are held in meeting rooms at the office and across venues in Monmouthshire.

The suitability of carers' homes, in meeting the needs of children is considered during their assessment. Staff visit carers' homes during announced and unannounced visits, which provide opportunity to monitor the environment. Some unannounced visits have not always happened annually. 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. Fire risk assessments are completed with carers, which consider escape routes and discussions with all household members, to ensure they understand what to do in an emergency. Additional support is offered to families if their current living arrangements do not meet the long-term needs of children, so children can remain with their connected person carers.

Leadership and Management

The statement of purpose provides information about the service's aims and objectives. This requires updating, to reflect current management structures in the team. The service has policies and procedures in place to support managers and staff to achieve the aims of the service and support children to achieve their personal outcomes. Several policies are currently being updated. The leadership team are committed to ensuring children accessing the service, receive the best outcomes. The Local Authority provider has identified areas of the service which require development and have plans in place for how these improvements will be achieved. There are nine focus groups which are driving forward areas for development including foster carer recruitment, retention, support, data and policy. Additional management support has been provided, to support its implementation. Recruiting foster carers is a key priority and several new posts have been created to support this. Regular recruitment events are held. The service is engaging with community groups to raise the profile of fostering in Monmouthshire and to better support the specific needs of children referred to the service. 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. However, these are not being undertaken in accordance with regulation. Reports have been completed annually, not quarterly. Quality of care reviews have been carried out annually, rather than every six months. Audit systems are being developed, to enable easier access to data. This includes the system for monitoring the educational attainment, progress and school attendance of children accessing the service. We have identified this as an area for improvement.

A strength of the service is the stable staff team who are skilled, experienced, and committed to their roles. They know children and carers well. The Local Authority provider has a rigorous selection and vetting system in place to enable them to make an appropriate decision on the appointment of staff. Team meetings are pro-active, providing all staff opportunities to contribute to discussions and the development of the service. Staff told us there are good opportunities to learn and develop. They are provided a range of training opportunities, relevant to their role. Additional support is provided through the therapeutic services available. Most staff told us they feel valued and supported in their role. The team works well and support each other through difficult periods. Staff spoke of some of the challenges of supporting connected persons who are awaiting assessment or do not meet fostering competencies. They feel supported by managers within the service, but report they are not always available due to their competing demands. We were told a rota is in place to ensure senior leadership is always available on-site to respond to urgent queries, in the absence of the manager.

Carer assessments are of good quality and robust, ensuring all strengths and vulnerabilities have been considered. Carers receive information and 'skills to foster' training prior to their assessment, to ensure they understand the role and their responsibilities. Carers' participation in this training, forms part of their assessment. Assessments and carers' annual reviews are presented to the Local Authority's fostering panel for consideration and they make recommendations for approval and any actions required. The panel chair is recently new to post, has a wealth of knowledge, experience and is working with managers to make further improvements to the service. The panel is providing a good mechanism for quality assurance and great care is taken to ensure recommendations are well thought out and evidenced based.

Annual reviews are detailed and consider whether carers are competent in meeting children's needs. The service provider has identified not all annual reviews have been completed in timescale and is taking action to rectify this. Feedback from carers, household members, health, education, and children's social workers are gathered and inform the review. Most reviews include children's views. When relationships between children and their foster carer break down, a review of the reasons for this does not always include the views of children, which would help the service reflect and identify learning.

Carers receive a range of training, both in person and online. They feel this supports them in their role. When lessons have been learnt, training has been adapted, to ensure it provides the most up to date, accurate advice and guidance to carers. Carers have been provided additional support, to develop their IT skills and access online training. Staff work closely with the training and development team to ensure training is meeting the needs of children and their carers. Carers receive regular supervision, where their well-being and needs of children are considered. Carers learning and development is also considered during these visits. Reflection of how training has supported carers in their roles, needs strengthening.

The service currently has two 'pioneer carers' who offer additional support to carers. Their roles include being a mentor to new carers and attending skills to foster training. The Local Authority provider has incentives which encourage carer retention. This includes, council tax reduction, discount cards, free swimming and theatre tickets. Regular support groups are held and funding is provided for a support group run by carers. Foster carer appreciation events and whole family events are held, in venues across Monmouthshire, throughout the year. An out of hours support phone service has recently started for a few hours in the evening and weekend. This is managed by supervising social workers in the team. Carers told us they have not needed to use this yet but are pleased it is offered and can speak to someone in the team if needed.

Carers told us communication is good. They receive regular updates from emails and newsletters. Carers feel able to contact managers directly if they have any concerns. Carers told us they feel supported and have positive relationships with their supervising social workers. They report they do not always have the same experiences when working with other teams in the Local Authority. The Local Authority provider is aware this is an area which requires strengthening and action is being taken to improve the culture and partnership working between teams.

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 respond to non-compliance with regulations where poor outcomes for people, and / or risk to people’s well-being are identified by issuing Priority Action Notice (s).

The provider must take immediate steps to address this and make improvements. Where providers fail to take priority action by the target date we may escalate the matter to an Improvement and Enforcement Panel.

Priority Action Notice(s)

Regulation	Summary	Status
N/A	No non-compliance of this type was identified at this inspection	N/A

Where we find non-compliance with regulations but no immediate or significant risk for people using the service is identified we highlight these as Areas for Improvement.

We expect the provider to take action to rectify this and we will follow this up at the next inspection. Where the provider has failed to make the necessary improvements we will escalate the matter by issuing a Priority Action Notice.

Area(s) for Improvement

Regulation	Summary	Status
12	The Local Authority provider has not ensured there is a written guide to the service, which includes all information as required by regulation.	New
27	The Local Authority provider has not established a procedure for monitoring the educational attainment, progress and school attendance of children placed with foster carers.	New
46	Reports on the adequacy of resources have not been completed quarterly.	New
52	Quality of care reviews have not been carried out every six months.	New

Was this report helpful?

We want to hear your views and experiences of reading our inspection reports. This will help us understand whether our reports provide clear and valuable information to you.

To share your views on our reports please visit the following link to complete a short survey:

- [Inspection report survey](#)

If you wish to provide general feedback about a service, please visit our [Feedback surveys page](#).

Date Published 11/07/2024