

# Cornerstone North East Adoption & Fostering Service

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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<b>Date of last inspection</b>	5 March 2007

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## About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to assure children and young people, parents, the public, local authorities and government of the quality and standard of the service provided. The inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000.

This report details the main strengths and any areas for improvement identified during the inspection. The judgements included in the report are made in relation to the outcome for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and relevant National Minimum Standards for the establishment.

## The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding:	this aspect of the provision is of exceptionally high quality
Good:	this aspect of the provision is strong
Satisfactory:	this aspect of the provision is sound
Inadequate:	this aspect of the provision is not good enough

## **Service information**

### **Brief description of the service**

Cornerstone (North East) Adoption and Fostering Service is an independent fostering agency based in Thornaby. The agency provides long-term and permanent family placements, that may lead to adoption, for children with foster carers who have a practicing Christian faith background. The agency employs a full time manager, two part time social workers, a play therapist and administrative staff. At the time of inspection the agency had six approved foster carers with seven children in placement.

### **Summary**

This was an announced inspection of the fostering agency. The purpose of the inspection was to assess how the agency complies with all the key National Minimum Standards and to consider whether actions and recommendations made at the last inspection had been addressed. The agency is good at working with carers to meet children's health needs. Foster carers all receive first aid training and the agency employs a therapist to work directly with children. The service is very good at providing children with foster carers who are well matched to their needs. Very careful arrangements are made to match children with long-term or 'forever' families but foster placement agreements are not always detailed and specific enough. Good health and safety and safe caring arrangements help keep children safe but the agency does not monitor the occurrence of any restraints that may occur to children effectively enough. The agency's fostering panel is properly constituted but records of its meetings do not identify panel members and those people attending panel as advisers or observers sufficiently clearly. The agency ensures that each child's individual needs are identified and supported on an ongoing basis. It clearly sets out how children's diversity will be respected within its Christian ethos.

Disadvantaged children receive very good support from the agency and its well trained and well supported carers. Children receive good support with their education and are encouraged to take part in activities of their choosing in the community. The service consults with children well and ensures that they are able to express their views about their care and their foster carers. The agency is thorough in the way it recruits and assesses prospective foster carers. Carers receive very high levels of support and management from the agency but it does not seek the views of fostered children and their social workers effectively enough for foster carer's reviews. The agency provides carers with good training and the agency is working to develop this further. Foster carers are provided with very good support and supervision. The agency makes foster carers' terms of approval very clear. However, foster carer agreements are not always updated to reflect changed terms of approval. The agency works closely with children's placing local authorities and communication between all parties is good. Detailed information is retained about children to help ensure that their needs are properly met.

The overall quality rating is good.

This is an overview of what the inspector found during the inspection.

### **Improvements since the last inspection**

At the last inspection actions were required of the agency in relation to some aspects of its recording. It now keeps better records of foster carers' supervision sessions and foster carers' motor insurance and driving licences. A requirement was also made regarding the seeking of references for new staff members. The agency has responded to this and, as a result, has improved its arrangements for keeping children safe. The agency has also put in place a policy

stating how it will support children with issues around their sexual orientation in response to a recommendation made at the last inspection. This helps ensure that children's diversity is supported and respected.

### **Helping children to be healthy**

The provision is good.

The fostering agency provides children and young people with good health care and support. It works well with children's placing authorities to provide foster carers with good information about children's health needs when they are placed. It also supports carers to make sure that fostered children are registered with doctors, dentists and opticians in the community. Foster carers and professionals help children to attend any appointments necessary. The agency and its carers consider children's needs carefully and make sure that any specialist help required by children is provided. For example, the foster carers of a child with disabilities have done some excellent work to seek medical help to improve the child's quality of life. Children's health needs are carefully considered as part of the process matching children with foster carers. The arrangements regarding who has the authorisation to give consent for children's medical treatment are identified and made clear to foster carers. The agency liaises closely with placing authorities to ensure that children have annual medical checks and arranges regular health reports for children. The agency provides its foster carers with training in first aid and provides training in health issues within 'Every Child Matters' training. Specialist training and advice is available to carers, where needed, for particular children. The agency ensures that foster carers have access to any specialist equipment needed to care for children. It employs a therapist to work directly with children and to support carers and staff in planning for and working with children. Specialist support for children in areas, such as psychology and psychiatry, is available.

### **Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe**

The provision is good.

The agency makes sure that foster carers' homes are suitable and safe places for children to live. It carries out health and safety checks of carers' homes when they are assessed and updates these regularly. Checks include motor insurance and foster carers' driving licences. Carers receive health and safety training when they are assessed. The service provides carers with health and safety information in the foster carers' handbook. The agency aims to provide children with long term or permanent fostering placements that may lead to adoption. It only places children with foster carers on a planned basis and makes very effective arrangements to match children with the right foster carers for them. The agency makes sure that foster carers receive very good information about the child being placed with them. The matching process is careful with full information about the carers and children being shared. The agency takes great care to ensure that foster carers are appropriate before it will agree to a placement being made. Foster carers are fully involved in this process. Children have introductory visits to carers and the agency makes sure that careful decisions are made before children are placed. One foster carer said, 'Cornerstone's achievement as a permanent placement organisation is, in my opinion, exceptional.' Placement agreement meetings take place but the signed foster placement agreement records do not always contain all the information required by the Regulations and National Minimum Standards. This means that arrangements for consent are not always identified clearly enough and this can negatively affect the quality of care provided to children. The agency keeps foster carers informed of any information it receives about children. The agency places a high priority on children's wellbeing. It is rigorous in checking carers during the

assessment process and updates Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks every three years. Children feel safe and well cared for in their placements. They said things like, 'I love where I am living, it's my life. Where I live I feel I'm being loved' and 'I am very happy where I am, thank you.' Children know how to make a complaint and who to speak to if they have a problem. Foster carers are extremely satisfied with the support they receive to help them care for children's welfare. All carers have safe caring policies in place that are developed during their assessment and updated regularly. These relate specifically to the children placed with them and are used on an ongoing basis to ensure that children are kept safe and well cared for. Carers receive training in child protection, behaviour management and bullying. Information about staying safe is produced for carers and children, including information on matters such as internet safety. The manager has a system for recording and monitoring any complaints, incidents or allegations made about carers and the agency takes appropriate action to respond to these. Records of other significant events are also maintained and monitored. Incidents of restraint of fostered children by their carers are very rare. Nevertheless, the agency's arrangements to record and monitor these incidents are not effective enough. This limits the agency's ability to ensure that foster carers and children are properly supported and potentially places children at increased risk. The agency has not appointed any new staff since the last inspection. The process for seeking references from two previous employers has been revised since the last inspection but has not been implemented because of the lack of staff recruitment. The fostering agency has an effective panel in operation. This panel is correctly constituted with members with suitable backgrounds. It gives careful consideration to the matters presented to it and makes clear and specific recommendations to the agency's decision maker. Training for panel members is provided, including joint training with foster carers and staff members. Records of the minutes of panel meetings do not make sufficiently clear whether people present during panel meetings are a member of panel, observing, acting as an adviser or presenting a case. More specifically, the agency's decision maker sometimes attends panel. The manager told the inspector that this attendance is only as an observer but this is not made clear in the records of panel meetings. As a consequence the evidence of the objectivity of the agency's decision making process is not sufficiently robust.

## **Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do**

The provision is good.

Cornerstone operates within the context of the Christian faith and requires all its foster carers to be married couples as part of the belief that this is the best environment for children to grow up in. The agency has a clear statement of faith and has taken advice to ensure, as far as it can be certain, that it complies with the Sexual Orientation Regulations 2007. The agency has a policy in place regarding how children will be supported with any issues relating to their sexual orientation. The agency's policies also make clear that children will be valued regardless of their faith, background or sexual orientation. The service provides foster carers with good information about promoting equality and diversity within the foster carer handbook. Issues surrounding this are covered in foster carers' approval training. The agency is thorough in its assessment of potential carers to ensure that they are able to meet children's individual needs. It considers the diverse needs of each child at the point of matching and gives very high levels of information, support and training to carers to help them meet children's needs. Good individual training is available for carers based on the specific needs of the children being looked after and children with disabilities receive very good support. The agency works well with placing authorities to ensure that the educational needs of fostered children are met. It liaises with all professionals involved with children to ensure that they receive the educational

support they need. The nature of placements arranged by the fostering agency and the good work done to ensure that placements are stable allows children to settle into school and their education. Foster carers and the service promote children's educational achievement and support them in school. One carer said that the agency has 'helped in the transport to and from school and they attend meetings and school concerts.' Children all have Personal Education Plans (PEP) in place and the agency works with placing social workers and carers to ensure that these are up-to-date. Children said things like, 'I am getting help with my GCSE grades' and 'We talk about my future at reviews and whenever I see the people who work at Cornerstone.' The agency provides carers with information about the promotion of children's education and provides foster carer training in educational matters. Educational equipment is provided for children in foster care where needed and additional educational help is sought where appropriate. Children are encouraged and supported to undertake activities in the community. The agency arranges regular activities for children involved with the agency, whether they are fostered or the birth children of foster carers. Children's files contain good information about their educational achievement and the support provided to them.

### **Helping children make a positive contribution**

The provision is good.

The agency works with placing authorities to make children's contact arrangements clear to foster carers. Contact arrangements and plans are taken into consideration when children are matched with suitable carers. For example, an adoption placement plan drawn up for the long-term fostering placement of one child contained detailed consideration of contact arrangements. Contact arrangements are discussed and agreed when placements are made. Children's files contain clear information about any arrangements for contact and any legal basis for the arrangements. Children receive good support to have contact with their families wherever this is appropriate. For example, one carer has taken a lead in promoting sibling contact for a fostered child. The agency supports foster carers to manage contact arrangements and to deal with any difficulties arising from contact. Foster carers record children's reactions to contact and this information is used when developing and reviewing children's plans. Training in attachment and resilience is provided to carers. This helps them work with issues relating to contact. The agency and its foster carers support children to have good networks with friends and within the wider community. Children are supported to make and keep friends and to take part in activities in the community. The agency is good at consulting with children about the care they receive. Children all feel that their carers listen to them and take notice of their opinions. Supervising social workers work closely with fostered children as well as their carers and get to know them well. One foster carer said, 'Our support worker has seen our children separately from us to discuss their wishes and feelings in different circumstances.' The agency and its carers help children to express their views about what is happening to them in their reviews. End of placement evaluations take place after respite care placements have ended and children are able to comment on the care provided by their foster carers. Children know how to complain and who to speak to if they have a problem. The agency provides children with a young person's guide telling them about being fostered. The fostering service runs activities for children and their families including 'pamper days', outings and barbeques. Children are consulted about these activities and the activities themselves are used as an opportunity to consult with children. Periodically, questionnaires are used to seek children's views. The use of these is currently being reviewed as children have said they do not like this method of consultation.

## Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

## Organisation

The organisation is good.

The fostering agency has a Statement of Purpose in place that is given to foster carers. Children are given a young person's guide to the agency. The agency's staff team is made up of the manager, two part-time supervising social workers, a part-time play therapist and two part-time administrative staff. Staff supervision and appraisal systems are in operation and the manager and supervising social workers are able to access the training they require. The team is effectively managed and the agency has very good links and working arrangements with the local authorities that place children with them. Joint visits to foster carers take place as appropriate and there is good joint planning when placements are made and in children's reviews. These good working relationships help promote good outcomes for children. Joint training for staff and foster carers is provided with panel members also attending relevant training. Cornerstone is rigorous in the way it assesses prospective foster carers. Careful checks are made regarding applicants' suitability including checks with CRB, local authorities, children's schools, birth children, employers and other referees. Foster carers are visited frequently as part of the assessment process and views of their suitability are gained as part of the preparation to foster training they undertake. Referees are visited as part of the process of checking on applicants' suitability. Detailed records are made of these visits. However, as the accuracy of the records of these visits is not verified with the referees, their value is reduced. Assessments include an assessment of applicants' competencies relating to fostering. Cornerstone provides its carers with very good support and management. Foster carers are very satisfied with the help provided to them and their fostered children. Supervising social workers visit foster carers and children regularly and provide very good 'out of hours' support and telephone advice. For example, one carer said, 'They consistently promote long term sustainability and support us to "weather" the difficult and testing changes our family experience.' The agency runs monthly foster carer support groups that include a training element. Foster carers are provided with regular supervision that covers topics such as placement issues, personal and professional matters and development as well as a review of the young person's care. Supervision also monitors any sanctions given to young people to ensure that they are appropriate and contribute to the child's care and wellbeing. Unannounced visits to foster carers' homes take place appropriately. The fostering agency completes a foster carer agreement with carers when they are first placed. Although this agreement is usually updated as changes in carers' terms of approval take place this is not always the case and, consequently, not all agreements are accurate. The agency ensures that foster carers' annual reviews take place within their set timescales. Reviews consider how well carers continue to carry out the fostering role and meet children's needs. As part of the preparation for foster carers' reviews the agency seeks the views of the foster carer and a detailed report is written by the supervising social worker. Reviews monitor the appropriateness of the foster carer's terms of approval and ensure that any updates to the original assessment or changes in terms of approval take place. Foster carers' reviews are presented to the agency's fostering panel for consideration before being agreed by the decision maker. Although the agency has a process for seeking the views of fostered children and their social workers for foster carers' reviews, the process is not clear within the agency and has not been used consistently or reliably. Consequently, the process of reviewing foster carers' suitability does not safeguard children as well as it should. The service provides foster carers with a good range of training. Training

is discussed and encouraged in supervision and foster carers' review meetings. The agency provides carers with training in a wide range of topics based on carers' wishes or needs identified by the service. For example, recent training has included: child protection; behaviour management; attachment; adolescence and mental health; filial therapy; education; and equal opportunities. The agency is developing its training programme in line with the new National Occupational Standards for foster carers. The agency ensures that it has full and up-to-date information regarding the children placed and liaises effectively with local authorities to gain information it needs about children. Children's files contain all the necessary documentation required by the Looked After Children system. Children's records held by the fostering agency help support the care provided. The agency supplies good information for children's reviews and monitors how well foster placements continue to meet children's needs. The agency has administrative systems that effectively ensure that records of foster carers, children and miscellaneous matters are well maintained. The manager regularly reads foster carers' and children's files to monitor their quality and identify any work required. Records are in place containing significant information relevant to the running of the service. Although monitoring of the rare incidents of restraint is not always good enough, other significant incidents are monitored well.

## What must be done to secure future improvement?

### Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions, which must be taken so that the registered person meets the Care Standards Act 2000, The Fostering Services Regulations 2005 and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider must comply with the given timescales.

Standard	Action	Due date
8	ensure that, before making a placement, the responsible authority shall enter into a foster placement agreement with the foster parent relating to the child, which covers the matters specified in Schedule 6 of the Fostering Services Regulations 2002 (Regulation 24(3))	4 April 2008
9	ensure that the use of any measures of control, restraint or discipline in respect of children accommodated in a foster home are monitored by the registered person (Regulation 42(1)(a))	4 April 2008
21	ensure, when undertaking foster carers' reviews, that the agency takes into account the views of any child placed with the foster parent (subject to the child's age and understanding) and any responsible authority which has within the preceding year placed a child with the foster parent (Regulation 29(3)(b)).	4 April 2008

### Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further the registered person should take account of the following recommendation(s):

- ensure that, on the occasions that the decision maker attends fostering panel, records show clearly that attendance is as an observer and not a panel member (NMS 30.1)
- ensure that records of visits to referees are verified as an accurate record (NMS 17.6)

- ensure that foster care agreements reflect foster carers' current terms of approval (NMS 22.2).

## Annex

## Annex A

### National Minimum Standards for independent fostering agency

#### Being healthy

**The intended outcomes for these standards are:**

- the fostering service promotes the health and development of children (NMS 12)

**Ofsted considers 12 the key standard to be inspected.**

#### Staying safe

**The intended outcomes for these standards are:**

- any persons carrying on or managing the service are suitable (NMS 3)
- the fostering service provides suitable foster carers (NMS 6)
- the service matches children to carers appropriately (NMS 8)
- the fostering service protects each child or young person from abuse and neglect (NMS 9)
- the people who work in or for the fostering service are suitable to work with children and young people (NMS 15)
- fostering panels are organised efficiently and effectively (NMS 30)

**Ofsted considers 3, 6, 8, 9, 15 and 30 the key standards to be inspected.**

#### Enjoying and achieving

**The intended outcomes for these standards are:**

- the fostering service values diversity (NMS 7)
- the fostering service promotes educational achievement (NMS 13)
- when foster care is provided as a short-term break for a child, the arrangements recognise that the parents remain the main carers for the child (NMS 31)

**Ofsted considers 7, 13 and 31 the key standards to be inspected.**

#### Making a positive contribution

**The intended outcomes for these standards are:**

- the fostering service promotes contact arrangements for the child or young person (NMS 10)
- the fostering service promotes consultation (NMS 11)

**Ofsted considers 10 and 11 the key standards to be inspected.**

#### Achieving economic well-being

**The intended outcomes for these standards are:**

- the fostering service prepares young people for adulthood (NMS 14)
- the fostering service pays carers an allowance and agreed expenses as specified (NMS 29)

**Ofsted considers none of the above to be key standards to be inspected.**

#### Organisation

**The intended outcomes for these standards are:**

- there is a clear statement of the aims and objectives of the fostering service and the fostering service ensures that they meet those aims and objectives (NMS 1)
- the fostering service is managed by those with the appropriate skills and experience (NMS 2)
- the fostering service is monitored and controlled as specified (NMS 4)

**Annex A**

- the fostering service is managed effectively and efficiently (NMS 5)
- staff are organised and managed effectively (NMS 16)
- the fostering service has an adequate number of sufficiently experienced and qualified staff (NMS 17)
- the fostering service is a fair and competent employer (NMS 18)
- there is a good quality training programme (NMS 19)
- all staff are properly accountable and supported (NMS 20)
- the fostering service has a clear strategy for working with and supporting carers (NMS 21)
- foster carers are provided with supervision and support (NMS 22)
- foster carers are appropriately trained (NMS 23)
- case records for children are comprehensive (NMS 24)
- the administrative records are maintained as required (NMS 25)
- The premises used as offices by the fostering service are suitable for the purpose (NMS 26)
- the fostering service is financially viable (NMS 27)
- the fostering service has robust financial processes (NMS 28)
- local authority fostering services recognise the contribution made by family and friends as carers (NMS 32)

**Ofsted considers 1, 16, 17, 21, 24, 25 and 32 the key standards to be inspected.**