

# Stoke on Trent City Council Fostering Service

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

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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 outcomes for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and the relevant National Minimum Standards for the service.

## 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

This local authority fostering service has approximately 189 general foster carers including 21 respite carers, and 34 family and friends foster carers who together care for approximately 217 children. The management of the Children's and Young Peoples Services by an independent strategic partner has recently ceased after about three years.

The fostering service is divided into two main generic teams that are based in one office alongside children's social workers. Staff and carers benefit from a well-located and attractive building that meets its purpose well. Fostering services are also obtained from independent foster agencies whose carers are predominantly located within the city.

### Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

This key announced inspection finds that the overall quality rating is outstanding. This is a substantial achievement since the last inspection three years ago when there remained significant concerns. Over 20 recommendations were made then, all of which have now been addressed.

Since 2007 the organisation as a whole has experienced significant changes as a result of being the subject of special measures, put in place because of concerns about services across the authority. The fostering service is now effectively managed and its activities are properly monitored. Changes are made where shortfalls are identified or anticipated. The service is resourced appropriately and benefits from strong networks with partner agencies and services. All areas were inspected this time and no recommendations are made.

### Improvements since the last inspection

The last inspection occurred in 2007 and over 20 recommendations were made. It is an indication of the substantial progress made under the leadership of the independent strategic partner that no recommendations are made this time.

Policies are now clear and up-to-date. Their currency is maintained by providing them on line rather than by printing hard copies. Suitable benchmarking of procedures occurs with similar fostering services, for example regarding the recruitment of carers from minority ethnic groups. The policies include clear guidance about physical contact with children and physical restraint of children is rarely used. Safeguarding processes have been brought up to date. All checks of foster carers are

now completed before approval is granted by the panel. This is safer and more effective practice. Policies are also effectively integrated with training, which is of a high standard and is available to staff and all carers.

The substantial organisational changes include improvements to monitoring. This means that long-term vacancies, conversion rates and many other indicators are collected, assessed and acted upon on a regular basis. Recruitment of carers is a high priority that is focussed and properly monitored. The service itself is more coordinated and effective, for example because it is located in one building now under a single management team, and there has ceased to be a parallel service operated under a service level agreement.

A key improvement is to the coordination of services in the local authority to meet the corporate parenting responsibilities. This is now a clear thread throughout all the partner services and agencies, such as education and health. Communication has also improved immensely at all levels but is a particular benefit to carers who now feel properly supported. The results are evident in improved educational outcomes and in other areas that have a direct impact on children in foster care. There are now effective procedures in place to consult all children whatever their communication system.

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

The provision is outstanding.

The fostering service promotes the health and development of children particularly well. The service is significantly improved by the greater liaison between agencies facilitated by the named nurse, for example between the fostering service and school nurses and paediatricians. The named nurse is also able to promptly visit to assess and support the more vulnerable children who would otherwise miss screening and advice. Advice is provided on matters such as sexual health and drug awareness. Closer monitoring means that health assessments occur as soon as possible thereby reducing risks. Carers and children also benefit substantially from direct access to psychological assessment and support. This means there are fewer delays and children with complex needs such as eating disorders are engaged and supported more thoroughly.

Additional staff support is provided by the placement support team when annual assessments of children's strengths and difficulties indicate; this is excellent pre-emptive work. This work helps to ensure children are healthy and are encouraged to pursue healthy life styles; it also reduces the risks associated with placement breakdowns. The close inter-agency working is highly regarded by professionals and carers. A professional observed that one consequence is that service social workers are able to translate quite complex ideas into a language that remains true to theory but that carers can understand and implement with children.

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

The provision is outstanding.

The fostering service effectively provides suitable foster carers, whether from in-house carers or independent foster agencies. The individual needs of children are given a high priority by the whole authority. Recruitment of carers is also well managed in terms of the staff allocated to it and the monitoring of its effectiveness. For example, excellent attention is paid to ensuring households are operating to their greatest reasonable capacity. This attention to detail has led to significant improvements to the recruitment of carers and the conversion of initial interest into approved carers. Monitoring has led to competitive payment rates, for example, and standards are set regarding the accommodation provided to children. External services receive regular quality assurance visits and are used to provide carers who have more specialised experience, for example of a minority ethnic group. Children with disabilities are usually placed with in-house, local, respite carers with whom they and their families can establish positive relationships.

Effective matching is also facilitated by weekly meetings to plan for new developments, such as unborn children. Monitoring has led to new initiatives such as approving adoptive families as foster carers. This facilitates sibling placements, reduces the number of placements that children experience, and helps to keep them in permanent placements. Of particular significance is the close scrutiny and management of households that have children outside their approval or outside the usual fostering limit. The number of households and the timescales involved are appropriate. This helps to avoid children being disrupted and their placements threatened. Effective matches are also achieved by the high proportion of carers who are from extended family or friends.

The clear corporate focus on outcomes for individual children also helps to ensure the fostering service protects each child from abuse and neglect well. Procedural guidance is up-to-date and readily available on line to carers; this, and their accredited training, cover risks such as bullying very thoroughly. Any safeguarding issues that arise are addressed well and routinely take into account the interests of the various stakeholders, including birth parents. Risk assessments are in place and extra support is provided to reduce any developing concerns. In the event of concerns being identified, extra time may be provided by the placement support team to engage children in constructive activities in the community. Foster carers feel that they are given as much information as is available on the backgrounds of children. The provision of independent reviewing officers for foster carer review meetings and safeguarding meetings serves as an additional level of monitoring in this area. Safeguarding is also supported by excellent and thorough staff recruitment procedures. There is a clear process for checking references and scoring interviews for example, and the Criminal Record Bureau checks of all staff are repeated every three years.

The fostering panel is well organised by an experienced chair person, a panel adviser and administrative staff. There are clear lines of accountability and decision making.

Panel members bring considerable knowledge to the assessment and review processes, including expertise in health and education. Procedures are in place for panel guidance and each member receives an annual appraisal, which is good practice; training is also provided. The ability of panel to address the volume of work is kept under close review and panel meetings are always quorate. Panel also provide an important element of quality assurance, for example in the regular review of exemptions and extensions; identification of gaps in procedures, and in challenging delays. Foster carers noted that their assessments occurred reasonably swiftly and were handled as sensitively as possible. These features are an important contribution to the high quality of service provided to carers and therefore to children in foster care.

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

The provision is outstanding.

Since the last inspection the organisation has substantially improved the level at which it values and addresses diversity. Individual needs arising from race, religion or disability, for example, are carefully considered by all the services associated with fostering. This is reflected clearly throughout the records and in the thorough approach of staff to ensure that issues of diversity are addressed as well as possible. As a result of detailed monitoring of the needs of children, especially those from minority ethnic groups, the organisation is extending the range of carers it has in-house. All carers are fully familiar with the organisation's procedures relating to equal opportunities, which are also reflected, for example, in their induction training. The placement support team and children with disabilities outreach team each provide a range of leisure activities in partnership with youth, play and outdoor education services. A leisure card ensures that a foster child, and the foster family accompanying them, gain free access to leisure activities operated by the local authority. This provides recreational opportunities to children as well as support to foster carers.

The fostering service promotes educational achievement through excellent attention to detail and effective coordination of other agencies by the virtual school's headteacher. Education plans are in an improved format that reflects best practice nationally. Each plan is given special attention so that the work with every child is as effective as possible. High levels of monitoring, of school attendance for example, help to ensure that school placements are supported and that appropriate advice is given to carers so that foster placements are sustained. In particular, there is constructive work undertaken to training partners (the 'team around the child') to be able to support educational achievements more effectively themselves.

The short-term break service is now integrated into the foster service but has direct input from the children with disabilities team. This provides a critical support to families with children in need. Relevant policies and training are in place and allowances reflect the complexity of the work; a support group is also in place for carers benefit. Staff and carers are able to use dedicated resources, such as My Health action plans, to communicate more effectively with those children with

communication difficulties. Requirements for wheelchair accessible transport or special equipment are identified and addressed well.

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

The provision is outstanding.

The fostering service ensures that contact arrangements for children are addressed consistently. Excellent staffing arrangements are in place to ensure that the contact requirements described in individual files are met. This challenge has been positively met by the allocation of a specific member of staff to oversee family contact. The quality of contact is kept under review with the children's social workers and carers understanding the importance of supporting birth families in this way. Specific training allows carers to develop their understanding of related emotional and practical issues.

The organisation promotes consultation strongly by setting a high standard of expectations regarding corporate parenting. There is a strong sense of local identity and responsibility for local children, which is combined with a drive to be effective. This is represented, for example, by ensuring that nearly all children participate in their reviews; that reviewing officers are independent; by consulting children individually and collectively, and by supporting a children in care council. Children understand how to make complaints to adults outside their placements and can use an advocacy service. One child said, 'They look after you very well; I know who I can speak to'. Excellence is exemplified by the contract with a separate organisation to engage children in consultation and advise on and improve communication with children with disabilities.

### **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is outstanding.

The fostering service is part of the organisation's integrated emphasis on supporting local children who are in need or in care. There are many examples of excellent practice in the area of supporting young people into independence and adulthood. For example, the large scale of the organisation is being used to offer a wide range of apprenticeships. Also, every care leaver is provided with suitable accommodation. These important initiatives are on top of routine attention to detailed plans for each individual to which the fostering service contributes well. Carers help develop young people's independence skills and progress is monitored alongside partner agencies. A transition strategy group ensures that all disabled children and young people have a person-centred transition plan so that they continue in further education, employment or training. Systems are also in place to allow young people to remain with their foster carers whilst they are in education and this is an important feature of good parenting. One young person said, 'I got help to come to college so I can do well'. Many foster carers also continue to provide informal support after young people have moved out.

## Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. The Statement of Purpose says, 'We are committed to identifying, understanding and eliminating all barriers that prevent access to services, information and employment'. In practice, managers do identify shortfalls and create ways of solving them to the benefit of children. Foster carers confirm that this occurs with their foster children. The need to place children who are of dual heritage led to a project to address ways to meet their needs and those of their carers. Steps are now taken to forecast the demand for carers from specific minority ethnic groups and set appropriate recruitment targets.

This position is reflected in an excellent, up-to-date Statement of Purpose and in children's guides that are also available in alternative formats. It is to the credit of management that the Statement of Purpose not only shows how specific outcomes are achieved but also uses current evidence. This document also summarises the staffing arrangements. Good staffing levels are in place under a clear system of managers. Duties are clearly allocated and different types of care are spread amongst the teams. The team is fully staffed with permanent appointments, which is a substantial improvement as well benefit to carers and children. Recruitment and retention policies are effective and appropriate arrangements are made to address any shortfalls.

Of particular note is the excellent and extensive monitoring that is not only undertaken but acted upon. It is clear that this method is now embedded in practice so that the service is not only reactive but more able to target children at risk. There is extensive use of research and ongoing benchmarking against other local authorities. Feedback is obtained from a variety of sources too, including carers following their assessments. Spot checks on particular themes and consultations also occur to the extent that managers feel confident they understand the journey of the child through their care and can act to address shortfalls. The organisation asserts that it has made significant progress in working with partners. This is borne out in practice and in the evidence of continuous improvement.

The high standards described in this report arise in large part because of effective and efficient management. Excellent leadership led to previous discrepancies in the structure being removed. Kinship care, for example, is integrated into the main team; the children's social workers are located in the same building, and the placement support team has been established. The office relocation makes communication substantially easier, which was a concern previously; it also contributes to effective coordination of staff. The office itself is particularly well suited to its purpose. Staff feel they have been 'professionalised' and take pride in being able to ensure better outcomes for children even in a quickly changing environment. Several staff commented positively on the rigour imposed by adhering to timescales and the opportunities to increase their skills. Staff also receive excellent support, in terms of both their professional development and their training. There are extensive training opportunities that are advertised in advance. Again, there is

effective leadership which means that training is assessed in terms of its effect on learning outcomes. Training is also adapted to reflect changing needs.

Support for carers is also outstanding. Carers are extremely complimentary about the support they receive from the service social workers. They also benefit, for example, from support groups; 24-hour telephone support, and access to established foster carers who can provide support and advice. Assessments are thorough and undertaken in an efficient way. Carers feel that pre and post approval training is excellent and they are clear about the amount of training they are expected to undertake every year. New carers benefit from training from experienced carers, which is good practice. Of particular benefit is the on-line training that allows carers to undertake certain courses in their own time. This is particularly useful for carers who have other jobs or find attendance at courses difficult. Service social workers also provide training, for example on signing to children who have communication difficulties. The children of carers are also able to attend a support group and have free access to the authority's leisure centres. As a result of feedback from children of carers, a training course is now available for new children of carers as part of pre-approval training, which is a very positive development.

The recording systems for case records as well as for complaints and allegations are comprehensive. Thorough procedures are in place to ensure that the public can easily raise issues of concern or access relevant information. Monitoring is strong and includes, for example, monthly checks of a sample of files by senior managers.

Family and friends carers make up a substantial proportion of the total number of carers. The service is effective in ensuring these families contribute significantly to providing permanent homes for children. This service provides further evidence of the benefits arising from excellent cooperation between various groups of staff. Effective integration also means that family and friends carers experience minimal delay and receive appropriate advice. The foster service panel too, is familiar with the intricacies of this specialised area of fostering.