

# Hartlepool Borough Council Fostering

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**

Hartlepool Borough Council fostering service is based in Aneurin Bevan House in Hartlepool. The service recruits, assesses and supports foster carers to provide placements to children and young people with a wide range of needs including long term foster care, short term foster placements for teenagers and also provides foster carers for young people with disabilities within a Shared Care scheme. In addition the service assesses and supports kinship carers and provides remand foster carers. At the time of the inspection visit the service was supporting 77 foster placements across these various areas of work. At the time of the inspection the family placement team included a staff team of eight people including the manager and an administrative support worker.

### **Summary**

The overall quality rating is good.

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

Information and evidence in this report was gathered by two inspectors over a three day period through talking individually with children, carers and staff, visiting two foster carers' homes, and holding group discussions with staff and carers. The inspectors also spoke with the managers of the service, read some children's, carer's and staff files, policies, procedures and records. The inspectors also received 13 questionnaires from children, 10 from their carers and three from their social workers. They also talked with the chair of the fostering panel.

Throughout the course of this visit the inspectors noted the commitment both from managers, staff and foster carers to maintain good standards, whilst working to further improve the range and quality of service provided.

Inspectors found that the service has responded positively to the previous requirements set and recommendations made. The views of children, their carers and placing social workers received during the inspection further endorsed this. Very positively, those carers visited as part of this inspection were prepared to be interviewed and co-operated fully with the inspectors during each of the home visits undertaken.

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

Children, their carers and their placing social workers were unable to highlight any major common areas in need of further improvement. When asked what had changed in the last 12 months most carers felt that the service had got better. Most social workers who had placed children saw good communication as a particular strength of the service.

The service has improved the system of minute taking at fostering panel meetings so that they are produced much more promptly. They have further improved the representation of the fostering panel by recruiting additional members, including a person who has been previously fostered.

The training needs of foster carers have been reviewed. Amongst other training, the service is ensuring that they are provided with training in both recognising and responding to the potential abuse of children, bullying, behaviour management, first aid and health and safety.

To ensure that children are cared for safely, signatures and dates of completion of safe care agreements are routinely added, providing better evidence that these have been reviewed and updated at regular intervals. Written confirmation of Criminal Records Bureau disclosure numbers are now maintained within each staff file.

Staff have worked to raise awareness of the Sahara Project and promoted its potential to provide advice and support on equality and diversity issues to social workers, children and carers.

To ensure that the service continues to be effectively managed and administered, the manager has obtained their required qualification. The arrangements to support the team clerk have also been reviewed and improved.

To further ensure that children's views about the care they receive are heard, the service has reviewed and improved the processes by which children's views are gathered and presented to carer review meetings.

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

The provision is good.

Young people benefit from health care services that meet their overall physical, social and emotional developmental needs.

Foster carers described the support received from the fostering service as either 'good' or 'outstanding'. One described how 'the young people are encouraged to exercise and eat healthy as well as have regular dental checks'. Another confirmed that 'medical appointments are regularly reviewed' whilst a third stated 'I have strong views on children being given access to a healthy diet' and added 'I have always been fully supported in this view'.

Very positively, one social worker placing children through the service described how 'All children and young people who are Looked After Children (LAC) are subject to annual health assessments. Good health is promoted via family placement link workers, foster carers and social workers. Individual children's health needs are also taken into account when searching for an appropriate placement for a child.' Another

social worker confirmed that 'foster carers ensure that young people attend their annual LAC medicals. Nurse with responsibility for LAC offers ongoing advice and training to carers and young people. Carers offer a varied and healthy diet. Young people have commented on a number of occasions about how good the food is in placement.'

Evidence from the care files examined and direct discussion with some of the foster carers suggested that they would normally receive full details of the health needs of children in advance, and that they know their role in registering the children with doctors, dentists and opticians, supporting children with their health appointments, diet, personal hygiene and advocating for each child. Placement agreements included agreed actions aimed at ensuring that health needs are met. One carer commented positively that although the placement had been arranged quickly, the initial medical information provided to them had been good. They also said that when they had requested additional advice from other health professionals involved in the care of that young person, it had been provided. The recording of the administration of medication to young people was not consistent with each carer. However, the manager confirmed that the service is in the process of reviewing medication policy and that this would be addressed as part of that review.

Very positively, the manager reported that almost all children had attended their annual health assessment in the last 12 months. Equally positively, nearly all of the children responding by questionnaire felt that they 'always' or 'usually' received the right support and advice regarding their own health needs from their foster carers. It was noted that one young person had been helped to access a dentist with expertise in seeing anxious patients, to ensure that their dental health needs continued to be met despite their own anxieties.

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

The provision is good.

There have been no changes to the management arrangements at the service since the previous inspection. The manager has now obtained their required management qualification. An examination of the personnel file of someone newly appointed confirmed that all required information and personnel checks had been obtained. However, there was no evidence that as recommended in the guidance to the regulations, telephone enquiries had been made to follow up the written references received.

The service monitors the safety of each home environment through initial health and safety checks which are monitored and updated through regular subsequent inspections. Some positive examples of the work undertaken to keep children safe were noted. In one example additional safety equipment, better suited to meeting the needs of one particular child had been provided with modifications to the

physical safety of their home also being introduced. One social worker said 'I have found the homes of carers to be safe and the carers to be knowledgeable about safety issues'. Another described how 'the fostering service promote their safe caring policy with all their carers who in turn implement this with their young people'. This view was supported by the evidence seen within care files including safe care agreements, completed and updated where necessary.

The service has clear procedures in place to ensure that children are appropriately matched with their carers. A good indication of their effectiveness was reflected by the relatively low number of un-planned endings to placements. When carers were asked 'How good is the fostering service at supporting you in maintaining placements, so that children only move in a planned way?' nearly all described this as either 'good' or 'excellent' with only one raising a concern at the 'timeliness' of information shared during moves. One carer stated 'I feel that the child's well being is paramount. He has recently moved to us from another foster carer where he was asked where he would like to go. There was also a follow up meeting for him to discuss any issues he had by his social worker. His recent review indicated how settled he is now, his behaviour at school has improved. There is a good strong back-up there if needed'. Further evidence of good matching was also received from carers who, when asked 'How good is the service at ensuring that you can meet the needs of the children and young people placed with you?' described this as 'good' or 'outstanding'. Nearly all carers were positive about the information received about children when they were placed with them, although one did highlight some concerns regarding poor information provided to them when they had accepted a 'Friday evening placement'. More positively one placing social worker highlighted the 'inclusive meetings with regard to placement planning for newly LAC'.

Nearly all children said that they 'always' feel well cared for where they are living now. Placement agreement documents included good matching information. One placing social worker described how 'choices can be limited but the placement team work very well to get good matching'. They also described the 'good work to ensure the right placement'. In group discussion, nearly all carers felt that the support received from the family placement team had been good, even with emergency placements. They also highlighted how they had been able to request additional training from the service to help them match better with children placed on remand.

As previously recommended carers are now being provided with necessary training to ensure that children are protected from abuse and neglect. Additional opportunities for carers to undertake child protection training are being provided. Anti-bullying training is also scheduled to commence this year. In one example it was noted that the child protection training provided to the carer had been designed specifically around the special needs of the children placed with them.

The manager maintains robust systems to ensure that any allegations of abuse toward children are collected and monitored. Very positively, most children had no concerns around bullying. A small number did raise concerns regarding bullying at school, and their details were provided to the manager to further ensure that they were being supported in dealing with this. Examination of care files provided good

examples of the additional support provided to young people who had previously experienced bullying.

It had been previously recommended that the service review the process by which they produced panel minutes to ensure their prompt availability. The chair of the fostering panel and the panel administrator were each able to confirm that this had been achieved. In one example where panel had met twice in one week, the minutes from the first meeting had been available for review at the second. To further improve the overall experience and expertise of the fostering panel the service has recruited new members ensuring good representation from education, health and those with direct experience of providing and receiving foster care themselves. Written guidance is available to panel members and the chair confirmed that additional training opportunities continue to be provided, including induction for new members.

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

The provision is good.

The service works to ensure that children and young people are provided with foster care that values diversity and promotes equality. The service has strengthened its links with the regional Sahara Project initiative and has contracted with it to help to promote the recruitment of black and multi-ethnic foster carers. This project is also contributing directly to the foster carer training programme.

When asked 'How well does the service address issues of equality and diversity?' carers described this as either 'good' or 'outstanding'. One described how 'everyone must keep up to date on these issues and courses are always on offer'. Another confirmed that they had 'attended a mandatory course on equality and diversity'. Carers also described the service as either 'good' or 'outstanding' at helping them to support children to undertake activities in the community. One described how 'our foster child has been given lots of opportunities to undertake activities from beauty, music to general activities'.

The service gives a high priority to ensuring that the educational needs of each child and young person are met, and young people spoke very positively regarding the support they receive from their carers with school issues and their general education. One described how their 'foster carers always ask me if I have got any homework and need any help', another highlighted how 'my foster carer is always telling me to stick in and try my hardest. And if I need any help or support with anything I could ask my personal advisor for advice and support'. Young people were equally positive when asked 'Are you helped to think about your future?', one described very positively how 'My foster carer takes a real interest in what I want to do in my future - and she also gives me advice on what will help me succeed in my future. It really helps me and I am more confident about starting college in September'. Another



described how their carers 'always keep asking what I want to do and they say they will support me all the way but I don't know what to do yet in the future'.

Overall, carers saw the support received from the service in meeting the educational needs of children as either good or outstanding. Carers confirmed that additional educational tutorage and equipment is provided by the service to the benefit of children. Through discussion with carers and children and examination of care files a number of good examples of close joint working were noted. One carer described how they have 'close contact with the teachers, we all try to work together and it seems to be working'. Another confirmed that 'Personal Education Plans (PEP) are often sent and updated. Schools are always invited to meetings'. Comprehensive educational records are kept on files for reference, the examples examined were up to date and well presented and positively, included information on non-academic as well as academic achievements. Very positively, the manager was able to confirm that all children entered for GCSE examinations in the past 12 months had obtained at least one pass, with one young person confirmed to have obtained five.

One social worker placing children with the service summarised how 'children's educational needs are met and encouraged through regular PEP meetings and school which foster carers attend. Hobbies and after school activities are also promoted by link workers and foster carers and can be financed'.

The manager confirmed that the service continues to maintain an agreed policy regarding foster carers providing short-term breaks for children. This policy ensures that the parents continue to be recognised as remaining the main carers for the child.

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

The provision is good.

The service has an agreed policy in place to ensure that contact is both promoted and monitored. Carers receive specific training and arrangements are agreed in advance and recorded. One carer described how 'The children I have cared for can phone or visit family and friends at anytime. This is always encouraged'. Most carers described children's networks with family, friends and the local community as either good or outstanding. One described how 'The social worker does all she can to promote contact with the child and his family. The child sees his mum once a month and gets great joy out of his visits. He also has contact with other family members. The child also gets involved in community activities'.

The service ensures that children are regularly consulted and are able to raise and discuss any concerns they may have regarding the care they receive. All of the children who responded to our questions were able to confirm that they could speak to someone if they were un-happy and knew how to make a complaint if necessary. They also responded positively when asked 'Do your carers listen to you and take notice of your opinions?'. One described how 'I always get asked about my opinion

on things and I always get listened to by my foster carer and her friends and family'.

Most carers rated the service as either outstanding or good at involving children in decisions about their day to day lives and about how the service overall is run. One carer described how they 'send out questionnaires to the child, they offer them the chance to participate in decision making and listen to their comments'. Another carer said that 'Children are invited to share their views on what they want and their needs are carefully met. Meetings are held on a regular basis with the children. Questionnaires are given regularly too'. Most carers spoken with felt that the children's own social workers maintained good contact with them and would visit regularly, however one concern regarding infrequent visits was fed back to the service manager for their review.

The service continues to encourage children and young people to get involved with the user groups facilitated to their benefit. They also organise a celebrating success event that encourages and rewards the achievements of children and young people. One placing social worker described how 'All looked after children have the opportunity to be part of the participation group and their feedback is valued and often used to enhance the services offered. Multi- Agency working is carried out on an ongoing basis. Complaints, comments & compliments are facilitated by children's access to leaflets to inform them of their rights & how to go about the process if they choose to'. Discussion with staff involved directly in the further development of children's participation highlighted ongoing plans to further improve the involvement of younger children as well as the Viewpoint electronic consultation system. Some concerns regarding the current processes to gather in children's questionnaire responses for both their own and their carers reviews were noted and are reported within the Organisation section of this report.

## **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is not judged.

## **Organisation**

The organisation is good.

The current Statement of Purpose has been subject to recent annual review, it continues to provide a clear description of the aims and objectives of the fostering service. A children's guide is also provided and young people spoken with during home visits were able to confirm that they had received this.

An effective management structure is in place with agreed areas of responsibility and delegation. As previously recommended, the level of administrative support available

to the fostering team has been reviewed and improved. The service has continued to recruit new carers steadily from those responding to local advertising or word of mouth recommendation. Carers responded very positively when they were asked why they chose to foster for this service, with a number highlighting the approach and support provided to them by the fostering team. One carer stated 'I find everyone very helpful and down to earth. Always had no problems whatsoever'. Another described how they had 'read a fantastic article in the local newspaper requesting foster carers. Telephoned straight away and case opened and we have never looked back since'.

The foster carer assessments examined were comprehensive and thorough. Foster Carer profile documents are kept on file and regularly updated to ensure that information about their approval remains accurate and up to date. In discussion some carers raised concerns about the length of time taken for statutory Criminal Record Bureau checks to be completed. A review of this with the service confirmed that although their own requests for these checks had been timely, unfortunate delays in their return had occurred with the Criminal Records Bureau themselves.

To effectively manage and support it's carers the service ensures that they are visited regularly and supervised thoroughly by their own social worker. Records of the supervision provided are thorough and focus clearly on good outcomes for children. Carers were asked how well they felt the service supported them in caring for the children they looked after, and nearly all described this support as either good or outstanding. One described how 'problems are solved as quickly as possible and always professionally. There is always someone to talk to at the other end of the telephone'. Another reported that 'If there are any wobbles I know I can call my social worker and she is very good at contacting people concerned'.

Carers were equally positive when asked 'What does the fostering service do to help you look after the children and young people in your care?' those responding highlighted information, transport, allowances, respite, training and support meetings. In one typical response the carer described how 'the fostering service give me support and training to help me give the young people in my care the best opportunities available'.

Annual carer review reports are prepared and are available to the fostering panel. Those reports examined were thorough and provided good evidence of the overall consultation undertaken regarding the quality of care provided. They also gave evidence that routine safety checks on people and premises are monitored and renewed as necessary. Some examples of original review documentation being absent from files were noted and acknowledged by the service, who also confirmed that possible reasons for this are being monitored to bring about improvement.

Social workers placing children through the fostering service were happy to confirm the good communication in existence between the fostering team and themselves. One simply stated that 'communication between the family placement team and social workers is good', whilst another described how 'the service involves me in all aspects and dimensions of the young person's life and help me to empower young

people to make life choices for themselves'. Some carers did raise concerns regarding delayed responses from placing social workers, but were equally positive that where this occurred, staff from the fostering team would assist them.

At the time of the previous inspection, the service was in the process of reviewing and improving its training programme to ensure that it's carers training needs were being met. Examination of the central training record as well as individual carers files confirmed that a comprehensive training programme had been agreed and put in place. The reviewing system for carers monitors the training attended and recommends additional training where necessary. Placing social workers described the foster carers they had worked with as 'knowledgeable, well trained and motivated'. The service operates a banding system for carers which acts to recognise their individual training and development. Currently, approximately one third of carers either hold or are working toward a National Vocational Qualification at Level 3 or it's equivalent.

The case files for children examined were well presented and generally comprehensive. There was good evidence that staff were regularly monitoring these and were acting promptly to fill any gaps in information that existed. The overall administrative systems are well organised with records in place containing all significant information relevant to the running of the service, which are regularly monitored by the manager. The service had previously been asked to improve their children's and foster carer registers, to ensure that all information required by regulation and schedule were included and presented through their electronic data base. It was confirmed that although the planned implementation of this had been unfortunately delayed, this would be achieved in the forthcoming months.

The family and friends as carers policy remains in place with assessment, approval and training processes designed to encourage their consideration as carers. The manager acknowledged that since the previous inspection this had become an increased area of work for the fostering team, planning has been put into place to help better manage it's overall impact.

## 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/s meets the Care Standards Act 2000, Fostering Services Regulations 2002 and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider(s) must comply with the given timescales.

Std.	Action	Due date
25	develop the foster carers register to include all the information set out in the Fostering Service Regulations (Regulation 31)	31/03/2008

25	develop the children's register to include all the information specified in the Fostering Services Regulations (Regulation 22 Schedule 2).	31/03/2008
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## Recommendations

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

- ensure that the review of the medication policy for the service is completed and that carers receive clear guidance regarding the recording of the administration of medication to young people (NMS 12)
- ensure that staff files include a written indication that verbal confirmation of references have been obtained through follow up calls to the referees themselves (NMS 15)
- ensure that consultation questionnaire responses to foster carer and childrens review meetings are maintained on file for reference (NMS 21).