

Sunderland City Council Services for Looked After Children 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

Sunderland City Council Children's Services fostering service is based at Penshaw House in Penshaw near Sunderland. 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 and short-term placements. The service also provides foster carers for young people with disabilities within a shared care scheme and supports a growing number of family and friends foster carers. A specialist fee paid foster care scheme is also provided to care for children who need additional support.

At the time of the inspection the service was supporting approximately 210 foster carers with around 285 children in placements. The service has a staff team comprising 10 fostering social workers responsible for assessing and supporting foster carers as well as administrative staff. The fostering service manager is supported by two team managers who line manage the fostering social workers.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This was an announced key inspection for the fostering service which was undertaken to assess how the service is complying with the key National Minimum Standards and regulations relating to fostering services.

The service is good at promoting children's health. Children receive good primary health care and access to specialist and therapeutic health support is good. Foster carers receive training in health matters but not all carers have an up-to-date first aid qualification

The service is good at keeping children safe. It ensures that foster carers' homes are safe and that children are placed with carers who are well matched to their needs. The management of exemptions for placements with foster carers over the usual fostering limit has not always been robust enough. However, in a recent situation arrangements were satisfactory. The authority provides good support to help maintain children's placements with their foster carers but some children are not being visited by their own social worker often enough. Foster carers have safe caring policies but not all are sufficiently detailed.

Children are provided with good help and support with their education. Academic success is promoted and recognised. The service provides foster carers with training about promoting education and works well with the other services involved.

The service makes good arrangements for children to be consulted about and involved in their care and the running of the service. However, not all foster carers are aware of the consultation taking place. Support for children's contact with their families is good.

The service is good at managing and supporting its foster carers. Assessments are thorough and support for carers is generally good. Some of the service's recording in this area is not as accurate or detailed as it could be. The fostering service is working to make foster carers' reviews more thorough but it does not include the views of fostered children and their social workers well enough in this process.

Good training is provided for foster carers but not all carers are able to access this training at the time it is provided.

The authority keeps good records relating to children and their carers.

Improvements since the last inspection

Since the last inspection, the authority has carried out a lot of work to develop the service.

It has improved the quality of information made available to carers about children before they are placed. It has also made sure that foster placement agreement meetings take place before a child is placed with carers or very soon after if the placement is made in an emergency.

Children now have more information about how to make a complaint and the great majority of children now say they know how to do this. The service has recruited new social workers to reduce the number of changes of social workers experienced by some children at the last inspection but some children say they do not see their social worker enough.

The authority has undertaken a significant amount of work to improve the quality of Looked After Children (LAC) documents in children's files. The quality of information in the files seen is now good.

The service is working hard to promote foster carers' training and is recording this work within supervision and review records. Carers are provided with information and guidance to update the health and safety training they receive during their assessment. Work to increase the numbers of carers with NVQ Level 3 is ongoing. The service also ensures that Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks are carried out at an appropriate level for all foster carers and updated as necessary.

Work has also been done to make some of the fostering service's recording systems more detailed. Panel minutes now specify the panel's quoracy for each item of business, foster carers' records are better at showing the support provided and health and safety checklists and safe caring policies are recorded better.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

The fostering service is good at ensuring that fostered children have their health needs met. Children say that they receive good support and advice regarding their health. One child said, 'my carers are always buying fruit for me to eat' and another said, 'my foster carer takes me to the doctors, dentists and opticians.'

Access to primary and specialist health care is effective. Children are registered with doctors, dentists and opticians in the community and receive health support in a way that does not mark them out as different. Specialist support for children in areas such as psychology and psychiatry is available. The service ensures that children are referred to the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) and other therapeutic services as required. A very high proportion of fostered children have received an annual health check in the last year.

Foster carers are provided with training to help them meet children's health needs. For example, training in healthy eating entitled 'Feeding the Bairns' has been provided in the last year. Not all the authority's carers have completed first aid training and no training for foster carers in first aid has taken place in the last year. However a date has been planned for this training to take place for some carers. Good information is provided to carers on matters such as drugs, alcohol, smoking and sexual health.

The service supports foster carers to help children access medical appointments. For example, one foster carer said 'the service takes me to all my young person's health appointments as I cannot drive'. The service provides equipment, resources and support for carers looking after children with disabilities based on their individual needs.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The local authority has an effective process for ensuring the suitability of staff working for the fostering service. No new staff members have been recruited to the fostering service in the last year but examination of recruitment practices at previous inspections shows them to be stringent. CRB checks on staff and foster carers are updated every three years.

The fostering service makes sure that foster carers' homes are suitable for the children placed. Carers receive health and safety training when they are assessed. They are also provided with information and guidance in the foster carers' handbook and from time to time. Links with the local fire service are in place to provide carers with information, equipment and advice. Foster homes are inspected as part of the carer's assessment and checks are updated at foster carers' reviews. The service ensures that foster carers' cars are suitably taxed, tested and insured and dog safety

questionnaires are completed where necessary.

The service has an effective system in place to match children with appropriate foster carers. A placement panel considers all requests for foster placements either before placements are made or, in emergency situations, retrospectively. This panel considers the appropriateness of a foster placement and whether other avenues for the child's care have been considered. This process is effective in keeping the proportion of foster placements made in an emergency low as the fostering service is alerted early to the possible need for a placement.

The authority has a clear and robust commissioning strategy regarding the use of independent fostering agencies. The service works very hard to ensure it uses independent agencies effectively. Placements are made with agencies to ensure that children's needs are met rather than because of a lack of capacity within the authority's fostering service. Consequently the authority has a much lower proportion of fostered children placed with independent agencies than many comparable authorities.

However, the fostering service has not been as effective at managing the use of exemptions of the usual fostering limit but it is now working hard to address this. Earlier in the year 50 children were living in foster places subject to an exemption but this has been reduced significantly to a figure of around 14. The authority now has a clear process for taking requests for exemptions to its fostering panel for consideration and recommendation to the decision maker. A recent exemption granted was well managed and monitored. However an earlier one had not been clearly agreed or monitored with support for children during the period of the exemption not being as good as it should. The service has plans in place to ensure that historic exemptions are handled in the same way as newer requests.

Generally, the service provides good quality information to foster carers before a child is placed. The service is rigorous in ensuring that all foster placement agreement meetings, even those where children have been placed in an emergency, take place very soon after children are placed. Foster carers said things like, 'very good, information is shared by all professionals' and 'information is satisfactory unless it is an emergency placement where little or no information is known'.

The authority provides good support to children and foster carers to help prevent placement breakdowns and unplanned moves for children. The authority's own monitoring shows this support is being effective. The majority of carers are very satisfied with the support in this area. One said, 'every effort is made to maintain placements'.

Children are supported to feel safe in their placements. Virtually all children consulted said they always feel safe with their foster carer and the great majority know how to make a complaint and who to speak to if they have a problem. Children's comments about feeling safe included, 'I always get the love and feel really cared for', 'my carers are great and look after me in the best way' and 'I am happy where I am and I get lots of support'. The overwhelming majority of foster

carers feel satisfied with the support they receive to care for children's welfare. However, some children and a number of carers feel that fostered children are not visited by their social worker frequently enough.

Training for foster carers in child protection, bullying and behaviour management is provided and good multi-agency support is available to help carers deal with any difficulties they are experiencing with fostered children.

An effective system is in place and monitored by the manager to record any complaints or allegations made about carers and the service takes robust action to investigate and respond to these. Records of accidents, illness and other significant events are also maintained and monitored.

Foster carers have safe caring policies in place. However, while some are comprehensive and specific to the individual child placed, not all are sufficiently detailed or robust. For example, one policy noted contained a summary of how well the foster carer knows the young person's care needs but did not set out exactly how safe care is provided.

The fostering service has a rigorous and experienced fostering panel in operation. Recently a new panel chair with appropriate skills and experience has been appointed. Panel records show that panel meetings are well attended and quorate. Questioning and consideration of matters presented to it are robust and clear specific recommendations are made to the decision maker. Arrangements are in place to ensure that panel retains its expertise and that panel membership changes in a gradual way rather than all members coming to the end of their terms at the same time.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Foster carers get good support to help them care for children with different needs and from different ethnic backgrounds. The service is working to improve its provision in this area. The service provides foster carers with good information about promoting equality and diversity within the foster carer handbook and issues surrounding this are covered in foster carers' approval training.

The population served by the local authority is predominantly white British and the make up of foster carers and children that the service works with reflects this composition. The service has developed good links with an organisation to help support the recruitment of foster carers from black and minority ethnic communities. This organisation also provides advice and support regarding individual situations.

Children with disabilities receive good support from the service and its foster carers. Specialist carers are available and the service also provides a shared-care foster care scheme to support children with disabilities and their families. Particularly careful matching takes place between children with disabilities and their carers based on

good information sharing between foster carers, the fostering service and the children with disabilities social work team. Good individual training is available for carers working with children with disabilities based on the children's specific needs and circumstances. Access to specialist equipment to meet children's needs is good.

The authority provides fostered children with good support for their education. Young people all have up-to-date Personal Education Plans (PEP) in place and the great majority of children aged 15 years and over have pathway plans in place. Records relating to children's education are well maintained and the authority records and monitors statistics relating to children's education. The authority maintains a record of children who change schools but does not record the number of foster children for whom school moves were as a result of a change of foster home.

Fostered children's academic achievement is promoted with special help and resources being available. Achievement is recognised at formal events where success is celebrated. Children made comments including, 'I get plenty of help at home and school' and 'I am doing fine at school and I am hoping to go to further education.' Children's educational progress is considered in their LAC reviews which can be held at children's schools or foster homes as appropriate.

The foster carers' handbook makes clear that foster carers should support and promote children's education. Foster carers receive training in educational matters and say that they generally receive good support from the service in this area. One carer said, 'the links are all there, I have accessed the LAC education team and Teens to Work'.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Children are well supported, where appropriate, to have contact with their family members. Contact arrangements are set out in the foster placement agreement and the foster carers' handbook informs carers of the importance of contact and their role in promoting it. Children's files contain records of contact meetings with their families and the outcomes of these meetings. Foster carers' daily records include information about the child before and after contact. This information is used in developing and reviewing the young person's care plan. Young people feel they are listened to and that their views are taken into account regarding the care they receive. One said, 'my problems are always listened to, I had a problem with contact last year but it was sorted as soon as I told my social worker'.

Support for contact can be provided by foster carers, social workers or social work assistants. The authority tries to make sure that the same worker will support a child's contact with family although this is not always possible. Foster carers generally think that children have networks with their own families that are satisfactory or better. They say that any difficulties are because of difficulties between the child and their family rather than a failing in the support provided.

Generally, children have good networks with friends and within the wider community and support from foster carers to maintain and develop these networks is good. The level of support from the fostering service for children's activities in the community is seen by carers to vary but the majority regard this support as good or satisfactory.

Although foster carers think that children are not always listened to about the care they are receiving, children generally say they are always listened to. One child said, 'I am always involved in everything and my opinions are taken on board.' However, not all young people feel that they are visited by their social worker often enough and a significant number of foster carers also expressed this view.

Children know how to make a complaint and who to speak to if they have a problem. Complaints leaflets and the young person's guide are given to children and this information is reinforced in their LAC reviews. Support is provided, by foster carers and professionals, for those children who are unable to access written information. Young people are encouraged to attend their own reviews. The service monitors this attendance and is able to show that the vast majority of children do engage in this way.

The authority seeks the views of fostered children about the way the service is run. A formal children's consultation group meets regularly and young people's views contribute to the authority's planning including Sunderland's Children and Young People Plan. Events take place periodically at which children can get together and make their views heard. The fostering service has recently started to run a support group for the children of foster carers.

However, a significant number of carers are not aware of the various consultation and involvement initiatives for fostered children and this limits the opportunities for some children to be involved.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

Sunderland fostering service has structured foster carer payment arrangements in place. These include a fee paid fostering scheme as well mainstream foster carers who receive fostering allowances at different levels based on their training, experience and the age of children being cared for. Information about payment levels and the system of payments is contained in the foster carers' handbook. Foster carers consulted are satisfied with the level of foster carer payments and the system for making these payments.

Financial support for special circumstances and the provision of any necessary specialist equipment is good. The budget for more general equipment, clothing and foster carers' mileage is held within the children's social work teams and not the fostering service. A number of carers said that, arrangements for paying expenses varies from team to team and that the authority can be very slow in reimbursing

them for expenses that they have incurred from their own money.

The authority has effective arrangements in place to support the transition of fostered children into adulthood. Input from the leaving care team, known as the young people's service, begins in good time and transition plans are in place for the great majority of young people aged 15 years and over.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The fostering service's Statement of Purpose is up to date and provides a clear description of the aims and objectives of the fostering service. The children's guide is produced in two formats, for older and younger children. Children receive copies of this guide when they are placed with foster carers.

The fostering service is effectively managed and there are clear lines of delegation and accountability. Staff members are managed and supervised effectively. Work is allocated appropriately among suitably qualified social work staff who also take on specific additional development or training roles. Administrative arrangements are appropriate and the manager effectively monitors and manages the quality of work undertaken.

Communication between the fostering service and its carers is good and, although some carers report difficulties in communicating with children's social workers, the fostering team works to improve this communication. Social workers from the fostering team and children's social workers communicate effectively with each other.

The assessment process for new foster carers is robust and thorough. Careful checks are made regarding applicants' suitability including checks with: CRB; local authorities; Ofsted; children's schools; birth children and previous partners. Written referees are taken up from people unrelated to the applicants and these referees are visited with a written record of the visit made. However, these records are not agreed with the referee so their accuracy can not be confirmed.

Assessments of new foster carers include a detailed consideration of their experience, background and competence to foster. The assessment process includes preparation training frequent visits and an assessment of the support networks available to the applicant. In the case of a recent assessment examined, the 'ecomap' used to identify informal networks of friendship and support included only people's first names. Therefore, this document was of little use in identifying the nature of the relationship and support available.

The fostering service has effective arrangements in place to support and manage foster carers and a number of carers say this support is the 'best thing' about the service. Carers are visited regularly by their fostering social worker, although some isolated examples of infrequent support visits were identified by carers. Good arrangements are in place to provide respite care. The service provides carers with

support and advice, and foster carer groups take place regularly. An 'out of hours' duty system is provided by nominated foster carers in addition to the authority's own arrangements. These carers contact new foster carers after their approval and are alerted to any potential difficulties that carers may have so that they can offer telephone support. The service also works to help carers liaise and develop links with other support services for fostered children including education and health support services.

Foster carers' supervision takes place very regularly with good records being maintained and agreed with the foster carer. Unannounced visits take place appropriately.

Foster carer reviews take place annually with every third review being taken to the fostering panel for consideration. Until recently some foster carers reviews have not been taking place with this frequency but the service is now working to address this. Reviews have also become more structured and comprehensive. Foster carers' reviews monitor health and safety issues, safe caring and the carer's ongoing suitability. They also consider the quality of care provided and the training and support provided to the carer. Reports from reviews make clear recommendations regarding carers' ongoing terms of approval and any additional training or support needed. The report from one foster carer review examined was unsigned so it was not possible to determine who was present at the review.

Effective systems are in place to collate written views of foster carers and their social workers for their reviews. Although there is a process for seeking the views of fostered children and their social workers for foster carers' reviews this system is not robust. Reviews, therefore, often take place without the vital information that reports from these key people may contain.

The service provides foster carers with a good range of training some of which, including first aid and protecting children, is mandatory. The service is promoting NVQ Level 3 training for carers though the proportion of carers with this qualification is still comparatively low. Foster carers speak positively about the quality and range of training provided and individual training is provided for foster carers working with children with specific needs. However, the great majority of training is provided between 10.00 and 15.00 and this makes it inaccessible for some carers because of the need to care for children or take them to and collect them from school.

Children's files are well maintained and contain comprehensive information which would help them understand the things that have happened to them. Files contain useful summary sheets with good information about the child, family and any professionals involved. Children's legal status is clearly identified and explained and chronologies are in place. Files contain comprehensive and generally well completed LAC documentation. Foster carers keep records as appropriate and training is provided in life story work to assist them to build up a record for the child. The overall administrative systems are well organised with records in place containing all significant information relevant to the running of the service. These are regularly monitored by the manager.

The service continues to recruit family and friends foster carers who represent a small but growing proportion of the service’s carers. Specific policies and procedures are in place to ensure that work to assess family and friends carers takes place within set timescales.

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
8	ensure that all exemptions, including any already in place, are formally considered by the decision maker on the basis of a recommendation from fostering panel and that a clear record of the exemption, its intended timescale and arrangements for review are made clear to the foster carers and recorded on their files (Children Act Section 63(12), Schedule 7)	24/11/2007
21	ensure that all foster carer's reviews take place within their 12 months timescale and that the views of fostered children and their social workers are sought and given sufficient weight in the review considerations (Regulation 29(2) and (3)).	24/11/2007

Recommendations

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

- continue to work to ensure all carers have an up-to-date qualification in first aid (NMS 12.5)
- make sure all safe caring agreements contain detailed information relating to the specific young person in placement (NMS 9.3)
- work with managers responsible for the children's social work teams to ensure that children are regularly visited in placement by their own social worker (NMS 11.5)
- maintain a record to monitor the numbers of children who have to change schools because of a change of foster home (NMS 13)
- ensure that all foster carers are aware of the range of initiatives for consultation with children about the running of the service so that they are able to encourage children to take part (NMS 11)
- verify the accuracy of records of visits to the referees of applicants to foster with

the referees to ensure that they are accurate reports of their views (NMS 17)

- ensure that information contained in the 'Ecomap' of applicants to foster contains enough information to be meaningful for consideration by panel and the decision maker (NMS 17)
- make sure that all parties present at foster carers' reviews sign the review record to confirm their agreement with it (NMS 21)
- continue to work to offer foster carer training at a range of times and venues that will allow foster carers to attend (NMS 23.3).