

Gateshead 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

Gateshead Council fostering service provides a number of different types of placements to meet the assessed needs of the young people requiring care and accommodation. The service recruits, assesses and supports foster carers to provide placements to children and young people with a wide range of needs.

The service has a number of mainstream carers who provide care to pre-adoption children, mainly infants. These carers also provide emergency placements as well as short, medium and long term placements for young children.

The service also has a number of carers who are paid a fee and are known as contract carers. Contract carers provide care to emergency placements, remand placements, task focused placements that aim to return the young person home or prepare them for independent living, mother and baby placements, long-term and shared care for disabled children.

The service also provides respite care, for example through their Home from Home Carers. A Treatment Foster Care scheme has also been developed since the last inspection.

At the time of the inspection visit the staff team at the service were supporting 151 fostering households providing placements to 218 children across these various areas of work.

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. Arrangements to help children achieve economic wellbeing are not key standards and were not inspected on this occasion.

The managers, staff and foster carers are committed to maintaining good standards, whilst working to further improve the range and quality of service provided.

The service is good at promoting children's health and children receive good support to ensure their health needs are met. The service work closely with the Looked After Children (LAC) Health Team to monitor the attendance of children and young people at their annual health reviews. Although nearly all children had benefited from these in the last 12 months, their individual care files did not always contain clear written

confirmation of their attendance.

The service is good at keeping children safe. It ensures that foster carers' homes are safe and that children are well matched with their carers. Staff are very experienced and suitable and the arrangements to vet staff to ensure that children and young people are protected are generally good. However, in one instance the service had not made telephone enquiries to check the accuracy of written references received and parts of the previous employment history were not presented very clearly. Some fostering panel minutes did not contain sufficient information to confirm that each panel meeting was quorate.

The service works closely with the other services to promote and recognise both educational and non-academic achievements. Children receive good help and support in this. There are very good arrangements in place to ensure that children are consulted about their care. The service is continuing to work to ensure that children's views are gathered and presented to carer review meetings. Support for children's contact with their families is good, however one individual contact record had not been fully updated.

The service is well organised with effective management structures and processes in place. The assessments of new foster carers are thorough, however the record of the visits to the applicants referees do not include the original notes from these meetings. One example of confusion surrounding the process to provide a formal exemption for one carer was noted. The current foster carer agreements are compliant with Schedule 5 of the Fostering Service Regulations 2002, but do not highlight the change of responsibility for regulation from the Commission for Social Care Inspection to Ofsted. Case files and carers records are generally well presented and comprehensive but in some examples the Looked After Children (LAC) documentation was incomplete or not up to date. A central register of children placed is maintained, however individual records of this are not currently kept within each carers' file.

Improvements since the last inspection

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.

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 'not changed' or had got 'better'. Most social workers who had placed children see good communication and the knowledge and experience of the fostering manager and staff as particular strengths of the service. Some carers did feel that the service had got 'worse' in some areas and highlighted recent changes to allowances and the number of available social workers within Gateshead as reasons for this. Children themselves spoke very positively regarding the qualities of the service overall with a

number highlighting the individual skills of their carers. One said that Gateshead Fostering is good at 'listening to me and my views and acting on it'. Another highlighted 'Listening to us, respecting our views'.

There are some difficulties with LAC documentation, but the service continues to work with placing social workers to improve the quality of information needed to both 'match' children successfully and fully inform carers of their ongoing care needs. There is also better evidence from children that they are being visited regularly by their own social worker and asked for their opinion about the care they receive.

Health and safety checklists, safe caring policies and risk assessments are generally being signed and dated to provide evidence of when they were completed and subsequently reviewed, but there are minor inconsistencies. The arrangements for the presentation of carer review reports to the fostering panel have been improved.

To ensure that children continue to be safely cared for, an internal monitoring system has been introduced which confirms that routine, three yearly, Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks for their carers are undertaken. This system also ensures that necessary medical checks for their carers are also routinely updated.

The arrangements to store and archive carer records have been reviewed to ensure that these are more efficient. New administrative processes have been introduced which are improving the timescales for the presentation of carer review reports to the fostering panel.

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. Most foster carers see the support received from the fostering service as either 'good' or 'satisfactory'. One described how 'The health assessor/Looked after Nurse is very good. She ensures any issues we have are addressed and the children have regular health assessments and check ups'. Another carer gave their view that 'Every Child Matters is at the heart of our fostering service and much emphasis is placed on healthy living'.

The service has a strong relationship with the LAC Health Team and has access to specialist health support where needed. One social worker placing children through the service described how 'The system ensures that health professionals are notified and there is a designated nurse and psychologist. This works well and every assistance is given to carers'.

Foster carers normally receive full details of the health needs of children in advance. 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. One carer commented that 'Fostering service guide us to

health issues and we the carers follow these guides through'.

Through close working with the LAC Health Team the service monitors the attendance of children and young people at their annual health reviews. Almost all children had attended these in the last 12 months. However, individual care files do not always contain clear written confirmation of this.

The questionnaires received from young people were very positive. Nearly all of these children felt that they are receiving the right support and advice regarding their own health needs from their foster carers. One young person described how the fostering service 'give us leaflets with information' another highlighted their 'five a day varied diet' whilst another simply stated 'I have a very healthy lifestyle'.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The service completes routine three yearly renewals of police checks for their carers and staff and keeps these up to date. Staff files are well presented and contain most required information. However, in one there was no evidence that telephone enquiries had been made to verify the written references received. It was also noted that the employment history had not been completed in full detail.

Safety in homes is monitored through initial health and safety checks which are updated through regular subsequent inspections. Some examples examined appeared to have been reviewed and updated but did not always include confirming signatures and dates. Family safe care agreements and individual risk assessment documents are used to help keep children safe. Some had minor inconsistencies. One placing social worker said that carers were 'excellent' at keeping children safe. Another described how any steps necessary to ensure the safety of children were 'agreed at the placement meeting'.

The service is working to improve the matching process for both children and carers. Information provided when children are first placed is good and carers receive help and guidance and regular reviews of the placements. Moving on from placements is done in a planned way in most instances. Despite some limited placement choice, visits to carers illustrated good matching procedures. When the service is busy, foster carers can be asked to exceed their normal agreed fostering limit for the number of children who live with them. These are called 'exemptions'. In one example examined, some minor confusion surrounding the process to provide a formal exemption was noted. Although the service is currently very busy, the overall number of exemptions that have been required in Gateshead in the past 12 months is very low.

Arrangements for safeguarding children and young people from abuse are good. There are robust systems for monitoring any referrals and incidents, however the documentation in use is not currently signed by the manager. Training for carers is

provided. Young people questioned feel confident in discussing issues with their carers teachers and social workers. One young person described how if they were worried 'the first thing I would do is talk to my foster carer about my worries and I'm sure they would help me sort it out'.

Assessment of carers is thorough. The panel is well administered and induction training is provided to new members. In some examples, previous panel minutes did not clearly describe the role of each person in attendance, particularly with regard to the attendance of independent panel members. This makes it difficult to confirm that meetings are quorate.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The service values and promotes diversity and equality for children and young people. This is enhanced through training and participation in the regional Sahara Project. Some foster children participate in equality and diversity training, facilitated through Gateshead Youth Assembly. The service has supported the formation of the Black and Minority Ethnic Youth Forum. As well as training, staff and carers receive written guidance. Carers feel that the service addresses issues of equality and diversity such as culture, ethnicity and disability well. They also feel that they are given good support to help children use activities in the community.

Educational needs are prioritised and young people are supported to think about their future. Systems are in place to ensure participation by social workers, school staff and carers in school reviews. Specialist educational support is available to children through the Raising the Educational Achievement of Looked after Children team (REALAC). One carer described how 'REALAC are a very good support to us'. The team directly monitor the provision and effectiveness of Personal Education Plans (PEP's) for young people in foster care. Improvements have been made in the provision of personal education tutors, learning resources and the direct support provided to children in school. They also have strong links with initiatives such as 'Teenagers to Work' and are supporting local schemes aimed at recognising and valuing the non-academic achievements of looked after children. The fostering service has a system in place to monitor educational attendance and achievement and were pleased to report that nearly all of the children undertaking their GCSE examinations in the last 12 months have been successful, with a quarter of them achieving five passes.

The service have appropriate policies, procedures and guidance ensuring that where 'short break care' is provided to children and families the arrangements positively recognise and support parents in their role as main carers to the children.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Contact arrangements for the child or young person are promoted and monitored through the policies and procedures in place. Better use is being made of the local dedicated contact service to improve co-ordination of transport, venue, support and supervision around contact arrangements for young people.

Children have good networks with their own family and friends. Contact arrangements are agreed and recorded within care files when children are placed with their carers. Contact is closely monitored, with only one recent example of poor recording.

Children are regularly consulted and are able to raise and discuss any concerns they may have regarding the care they receive. Children told us that they could make their views known, know how to make a complaint and that they were able to have a say in what happens in Gateshead Fostering. One young person simply stated 'I've got a lush social worker' another described how their social worker 'listens to us and takes in complaints'. One concern regarding the absence of an allocated social worker and the use of a team manager to provide cover for this for an extended period of time was highlighted to the fostering team manager for their review. The Children's Rights Officer visits children in foster care and gives them guidance and support around consultation issues. The 'One Voice' consultation forum for looked after children is promoted. Approximately 80 young people currently in foster care are active members of this. The views and comments gathered are used by the service to promote good outcomes for looked after children.

Carers rate the service as 'good' at involving children in decisions about their day to day lives, and about how the service overall is run. They described how children are involved in their reviews, and are asked for their views, opinions and ideas. Some carers did raise some concerns around poor ongoing contact and lack of availability of the social workers of children placed with them.

Children are encouraged to participate in their own care reviews and those of their carers. The 'Viewpoint' electronic consultation system is used and revised consultation documents are also being introduced to improve participation. Children were complimentary when they spoke about their reviewing officers, one described how 'I get invited to everything' and added 'I can say what I want'.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The Statement of Purpose has been recently reviewed. It provides a clear description of the aims and objectives of the service and has been given to each foster carer. Social workers who place children through the service also have access to it for their information. The children's guides to the service, including the guide to the 'Springboard' treatment foster care scheme have also been reviewed and re-issued to children.

There is an effective management structure in place with agreed areas of responsibility and delegation. Management processes are well organised and are used effectively by the experienced administrative staff team. Line management arrangements for the administrative team lie outside the fostering service. It was previously recommended that the service review this, however at the time of this inspection this was un-changed. Improvements have been made in the administrative support available to the fostering panel. This contrasts with the reduction in the overall administrative support available to other areas of the fostering service.

Carers are recruited steadily to replace those who have retired or moved on to other forms of care provision. Carers gave good examples of why they chose to foster for this service. Some described the good levels of support provided and highlighted the excellent approach, standards and training in place. Others described their respect for the manager and the link workers, and being part of a pro-active local service which values them.

Foster care assessments are generally comprehensive and thorough with good panel processes. Some of the assessment documentation does not include original notes from referee interviews or referee signatures on the typed up accounts of these interviews which are presented to panel. Clear notices of initial approval and any subsequent changes to them are maintained within the foster carers' files. Approval letters are also used to confirm delivery of the foster carer handbook and foster carer agreements. In one example, there was some confusion surrounding the process to provide a formal exemption for the carer where a number of siblings had been placed with them. A small number of inconsistencies between initial approval letters and current approval recorded in foster carer agreements were also highlighted. Although foster carer agreements are compliant with Schedule 5 of the Fostering Service Regulations 2002, they do not highlight the change of responsibility for regulation from the Commission for Social Care Inspection to Ofsted.

The service ensures that carers are supported effectively through regular supervision visits and these are normally recorded and maintained for reference within foster carers files. However, in one example although the carer could describe the good additional support they had received from the service, the case recording on their file did not reflect this. Carers feel the service provides good support to them in caring

for children. Staff were described as always available to talk things through, one carer highlighted the 'excellent communication and link worker'. To help them look after children and young people carers told us that the service provides them with information and support, equipment, respite, access to training, financial assistance, specialist support and help in communicating with placing social workers where needed.

Work is continuing to ensure that foster carer annual review documentation demonstrates clearly when previous reviews have occurred and that safety checks, police and health checks have been updated as necessary. Review reports are comprehensive and presented in good detail, however the views of children themselves were not always clearly presented.

Good communication exists between social workers placing children through the fostering service and the service itself. One said that 'This is a shared responsibility but support workers are excellent at keeping social workers advised'.

The service encourages and reviews overall participation by carers in training, a new central recording system allows better monitoring of this. Attendance at training is also recorded within foster carers' own files and is noted in annual review reports. The manager highlighted the recent new intake of foster carers onto National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) training. Currently, over one third of the approved fostering households include carers who currently hold or are working toward this qualification at level three or it's equivalent.

Case files for children are generally well presented and contain comprehensive information. However, there were some examples of LAC documentation being only partially complete or in need of update. The overall administrative systems are well organised, records are in place containing all significant information relevant to the running of the service and these are regularly monitored by the manager. A central register recording the placement of children with carers is maintained, however, some carers' files do not include an individual record of the placement of children made with them. The arrangements to store and archive carer records have been reviewed, dedicated space and secure cabinets are provided to ensure that arrangements are efficient.

Appropriate policies and procedures are in place to assess, encourage and support the care of children and young people by family members and friends. These carers have access to support group meetings and ongoing training opportunities.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Recommendations

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

- make sure that children's care files contain written confirmation of their annual LAC medical (NMS 12)
- review the processes to provide formal exemptions to foster carer approval numbers with fostering staff to ensure that these are used consistently (NMS 8)
- ensure that staff files include an indication that telephone enquiries had been made to follow up the written references received and that previous employment histories are completed in full detail (NMS 15)
- ensure that fostering panel minutes clearly describe the role of each person in attendance, particularly with regard to the attendance of independent panel members (NMS 30)
- ensure that children's contact records are kept up to date (NMS 10)
- continue the work to improve the process by which children's views are gathered and presented to carer review meetings (NMS 11)
- maintain records of visits to the referees of applicants to foster within the carers' file (NMS 17)
- amend Foster Carer agreements to highlight the change of responsibility for inspection and regulation from the Commission for Social Care Inspection to Ofsted (NMS 21)
- ensure that LAC documentation is fully completed and updated as necessary (NMS 24)
- maintain a record of the placement of children within each carers' file (NMS 25).