

# North Tyneside Fostering Service

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

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<b>Unique reference number</b>	SC041537
<b>Inspection date</b>	17/10/2007
<b>Inspector</b>	Stephen Smith / Stephen Graham
<b>Type of inspection</b>	Key

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<b>Date of last inspection</b>	15/01/2007

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## About this inspection

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

This report details the main strengths and any areas for improvement identified during the inspection. The judgements included in the report are made in relation to the 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

North Tyneside Fostering Service recruits, assesses and supports foster carers to provide a range of placements for children and young people. The fostering team places children with long-term foster carers as well as short term and mainstream carers. The service includes an immediate placement scheme, a short break care service for children with disabilities and assessment foster carers.

The service comprises the manager and deputy in addition to the supervising social workers, support workers and administrative staff. At the time of the inspection the fostering service was supporting approximately 150 children and young people in around 140 foster families.

### Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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 general and specialist health care provision and support. They get good support and encouragement to have an annual health check. The arrangements for ensuring that authorisation to consent to medical treatment for children are not always clearly identified when placements are made.

The service works very hard to keep children safe. It is rigorous in ensuring that foster carers' homes are safe and that children are placed with carers who can care for them safely. In the context of a local authority fostering service, North Tyneside is outstanding in the way it responds to the need for foster placements and matches children with suitable carers for them. The authority provides very good support and training for carers to help maintain children's placements with their foster carers. The authority's fostering panel is careful and robust in its consideration of matters presented to it and this helps keep children safe.

Children are provided with good help and support with their education and for activities in the community. Academic achievement is promoted and recognised. The authority places a real commitment on seeking the views of fostered children regarding their own care, their views of their foster carers and the running of the service. Support for children's contact with their families is good.

The service provides its foster carers with outstanding support and management.

Assessments and reviews of foster carers are extremely thorough. Children benefit from living with well trained and very well supported carers. The authority keeps good records relating to foster carers and the overall management and monitoring of the fostering service. Children's records are comprehensive, provide evidence of the work being done with them and contribute to an understanding of their life events.

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

Since the last inspection the service has continued to work to improve the service it provides and has addressed the issues identified at that inspection...

Among the work carried out it has continued to work to recruit more foster carers and further develop its matching process. Progress has been made ensuring that carers only care for the number of children they have the space and ability to care for. It has also ensured that pet safety questionnaires are completed for any pets of foster carers. This helps promote the welfare of fostered children.

The authority has stabilised the staffing levels and changes in children's social work teams so that children experience fewer changes of social worker. This work has also helped make the staffing of young people's supervised contact with their families more consistent. This has improved children's support during contact.

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

The provision is good.

Children and young people receive good support with their health from their carers and the fostering service.

Fostered children are registered with doctors, dentists and opticians in the community. The service provides foster carers with good information about children's health needs. Foster carers and professionals help children to attend any appointments necessary. Children's health needs are considered as part of the service's process for matching children with foster carers and specialist advice is provided to carers about health issues where necessary.

Specialist support for children in areas, such as psychology and psychiatry is available. Access to these services is good. The service ensures that children are referred to the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) and other therapeutic services if necessary.

The service is very good at ensuring that annual health checks for fostered children are carried out. An extremely high proportion of children receive these checks. There is a very effective system in place to monitor whether medical checks take place. The arrangements regarding who has the authorisation to consent to medical treatment at the time placements are made are not always clearly set out. For example, in one file the medical consent section of the child's Placement Plan was not completed and in another file there was no evidence that medical consent was in place.

Foster carers are provided with training to help them meet children's health needs. For example, training in health care is provided and carers undertake first aid training as part of the service's mandatory training for foster carers. Specific training is provided to foster carers where necessary. For example, in-depth training in autism was provided, on request, to one carer. Information is provided to carers on matters, such as drugs, alcohol, smoking and sexual health. Children's health is discussed and monitored within foster carers' supervision meetings.

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

The provision is outstanding.

The local authority has a rigorous staff recruitment process to ensure the suitability of staff working for the fostering service. It carries out thorough checks including a verification of candidates' full employment history. Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks on staff and foster carers are updated every three years.

The service provides children with suitable foster homes. Health and safety checks of carers' homes are carried out when carers are assessed and regularly updated. Checks ensure that foster carers' cars are suitably taxed, tested and insured and pet safety questionnaires are completed where necessary. The service provides carers with health and safety information in the foster carers' handbook. Carers receive health and safety training when they are assessed and this is updated regularly.

The service makes very effective arrangements to provide well matched foster placements for children who need them. The service is effective at recruiting foster carers that can meet children's needs. It operates a robust placement procedure that assists good planning for children. 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 very effective and ensures that children are placed with foster carers in a planned manner wherever possible. The proportion of emergency placements of children with carers is low and this helps ensure that foster carers get good information about the children being placed with them. The service is rigorous in ensuring that placement agreement meetings happen either before or, in an emergency, very soon after the placement is made. Where children are placed in emergencies with little information available about them, the service makes sure that information is passed to carers as soon as it becomes known.

The service is effective at managing the use of exemptions from the usual fostering limit. Exemptions are used rarely and well monitored when they take place. Support to carers and children to maintain placement stability once placements have been made is very good and levels of placement breakdown are low. The authority has a clear commissioning strategy regarding the use of Independent Fostering Agencies (IFA). Placements are made with IFAs carefully on the basis of children's needs.

Fostering panel considers long term placements of children with foster carers to ensure that the match is appropriate for the child. This ensures that long term placements are well planned and able to meet children's needs. However, in one situation a young child commenced introductory visits to a foster carer before the fostering panel had considered and made recommendations about the suitability of the match. This could have been upsetting for the child if the match had not been approved.

Children's safety is a high priority for the fostering service. Children feel safe and well cared for in their placements. They know how to make a complaint and who to speak to if they have a problem. Foster carers are very satisfied with the support provided to them by the service to help them care for children's welfare. Carers have safe caring policies in place that are developed during their assessment and reviewed regularly to be specific to the needs of the children placed.

The service provides its carers with training in child protection, safe care and health and safety. Training is also available in dealing with children's behaviours. For example, carers have undertaken attachment training which, they say, has helped them understand why children behave in certain ways and to deal with these behaviours. Good support is available to help carers deal with any difficulties they are experiencing with fostered children.

An effective system of recording and monitoring any complaints or allegations made about carers helps keep children safe. The service acts effectively to investigate and respond to these. Records of accidents, illness and other significant events are also maintained and monitored.

The fostering service has a very experienced fostering panel in operation. This panel gives careful and rigorous consideration of the matters presented to it. Panel meetings are well attended and only consider matters when properly quorate. The panel makes clear and specific recommendations to the decision maker and good records are maintained. The panel members are carefully recruited and checked. Panel members' training and development sessions take place.

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

The provision is good.

The demographic make up of the local authority area is largely white British. There is only a very small proportion of residents from other ethnic or cultural backgrounds. The make up of the service's foster carers and the children looked after by the council reflect this composition. Despite this, foster carers get good support to help them if they have to care for children with different needs and from different ethnic backgrounds. 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 service has 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. Good individual training is available for carers working with children with disabilities based on the children's specific needs and circumstances. Foster carers are provided with any specialist equipment needed by children. The service matches children with foster carers effectively to ensure their individual needs can be met. Educational support for fostered children with disabilities is good.

The authority provides fostered children with good support for their education. All fostered children have Personal Education Plans (PEP) in place and the authority is working to make sure that children aged 15 years and over have Pathway Plans developed with them. Children's files contain good information about their educational achievement and the support provided to them.

The authority provides special help and resources to help foster children with their academic achievement and recent GCSE achievement levels for children leaving foster care were good. The authority's 'Raising the Health and Education of Looked After Children' (RHELAC) team provides foster carers and children with educational support and works alongside schools, carers and social workers to support children.

The service provides carers with training about promotion of children's education and information for carers is available in the foster carers' handbook. Foster carers receive good support to promote children's educational achievement and to undertake activities in the community. Educational equipment is provided for children in foster care where needed and additional educational help is sought where appropriate. The authority holds events to celebrate children's educational achievements.

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

The provision is outstanding.

The fostering service makes sure that arrangements for children's contact with their family are made clear to foster carers. Contact arrangements and plans are taken into consideration when children are matched with suitable carers. The authority ensures that arrangements are set out in foster placement agreements and discussed when placements are made. Children's files contain clear information about any arrangements for contact and any legal basis for the arrangements. Children receive good support to have contact with their families wherever this is appropriate.

The fostering service works with carers to supervise contact where this is needed. Supervision of contact is provided either by foster carers or staff from the local authority. Foster carers record children's reactions to contact and this information is used when developing and reviewing children's plans. The fostering service gives its carers guidance about the importance of contact and information about working with children and their families. Training in 'life-story' work is provided to carers. This stresses the importance of children having positive contact with their families where



possible.

The authority supports children to have good networks with friends and within the wider community. Support for children from their foster carers, to have friendships and take part in activities in the community is good.

The service is excellent at consulting with children about the care they receive and wider aspects of the authority's work. Children are listened to and their opinions sought about matters concerning them. The service provides encouragement and support so that all fostered children are able to express their views in their reviews. Children's views are also sought for the reviews of their foster carers and form a key source of information for these reviews. Children who are, or have been looked after present training to foster carers and are involved in foster carers' assessment and approval training along with children of foster carers. Children know how to complain and who to speak to if they have a problem. Information about the fostering service is provided to children in a format accessible to them. Children have access to advocacy services.

Children and young people are involved in the local authority's development of policies and plans. Children are consulted in various ways about how the service should develop. The 'Have Your Say' group of looked after children has developed a website for looked after children and is a source of information for the authority's planning and development. For example, fostered young people from this group have been involved in providing corporate parenting training to elected members and officers of the authority. Children are involved in a range of other initiatives including research and wider children's consultation and involvement activities. Larger scale events take place periodically at which children can get together and make their views heard.

The fostering service runs an innovative and well developed group for children of parents who foster.

### **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is good.

Foster carers are provided with guidance and training to help them prepare young people for independence. The service provides carers with very good support to help maintain and support placements as children become older. An exceptionally high percentage of fostered children stay in their foster placement beyond their 16th birthday and a significant proportion remain after they become 18.

The service has an effective system of making foster carer payments. A structured scheme of allowances is in place. Carers receive a fostering allowance based on the age and needs of the child. All carers apart from family and friends carers receive a fee for fostering payable 52 weeks of the year. Carers are well informed about the levels of allowances and how they are paid and arrangements for paying foster

carers' expenses are clear. Financial support for special circumstances and the provision of any necessary specialist equipment is good.

## Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

The fostering service's Statement of Purpose provides a clear description of the aims and objectives of the fostering service and is kept up-to-date. The service has a young person's guide to the fostering service which is given to all children when they are placed with foster parents. This guide is attractively presented and accessible to children. The children's 'Have Your Say' website includes full information which reflects and supports the information in the children's guide.

The fostering service is very effectively managed. There are clear lines of delegation and accountability within the team and the fostering service has strong links and working arrangements with the children's social work teams. Staff members are managed and supervised effectively and have appropriate training opportunities. Staff are suitably qualified and experienced and the service is sufficiently well resourced to allow them do their jobs well. The fostering service has particularly strong administrative and management information support. This supports the quality of the service's work with children and foster carers. The fostering team communicates effectively with foster carers. Carers, their supervising social workers and those of fostered children work well together and this helps the service to support fostered children well.

The local authority runs successful recruitment campaigns and continues to recruit enough carers to gradually increase its number of carers each year. This helps the service to offer a range of carers to match children's different needs.

The service is extremely thorough in the way it assesses prospective foster carers. Very rigorous checks are made regarding applicants' suitability including checks with CRB, local authorities, children's schools, birth children, previous partners, employers and other referees. Applicants to foster are assessed on their competency to look after vulnerable children as well as their background and experience. They are visited and interviewed frequently as part of their preparation process. Assessments include preparation training provided by fostering staff, other professionals from the authority and children who are, or have been, in foster care.

The fostering service provides its carers with excellent support and management. Carers are visited regularly by their supervising social worker and 'out of hours' and telephone advice and support is readily accessible. Foster carer support groups take place and newsletters are produced for carers. A number of carers provide additional telephone support to other carers. Foster carers' supervision takes place on a monthly basis with good records being maintained and agreed with the foster carer. Discussion within supervision is child focussed and records clearly identify any actions or support needs and these are followed up at the next meeting. Unannounced visits take place appropriately.

The arrangements for undertaking foster carers' annual reviews are, similarly, very effective. Reviews take place annually and consider how well the carer meets children's needs in line with the five outcomes for children set out by the Government in 'Every Child Matters'. They also consider the quality of support and training provided to the carer. Recording in foster carers files includes a 'periodic summary' carried out every six months that brings together key issues and events that have occurred in that period. This is a very useful tool for ensuring that reviews focus on the relevant matters. The fostering service places a high priority on getting the views of fostered children and their social workers for the reviews of their foster carers. Reviews contain detailed reports from children and social workers that are considered alongside the foster carer's comments and those of the supervising social worker. Clear recommendations are made regarding the ongoing terms of the carer's approval and reviews identify any additional support or training needed.

The service completes a foster carer agreement with carers when they are first approved and this is reissued after each review. This agreement does not set out the terms of the foster carer's approval in terms of the ages of children sufficiently clearly although the information is made clear to carers elsewhere.

The service provides foster carers with a good range of mandatory and optional training. A significant number of foster carers attend training events which are provided during the day and on an evening. The service is promoting National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) level 3 training for carers with 14 carers having completed this training and a further 20 working towards the qualification. Foster carers speak positively about the quality and range of training provided. For example, one carer said that when some specific training was requested the service arranged access to some very high quality training near to the carer's home. Mandatory training, including child protection, safe care first aid and health and safety must be completed by carers to maintain their approval. Training is discussed and encouraged in supervision and foster carers' review meetings and training in a wide range of topics is provided based on carers' wishes or needs identified by the service. The fostering service has recently moved into much larger premises that enable training to take place at more flexible times and improves the training facilities that can be offered to carers.

Children's files contain all the necessary documentation required by the Looked After Children system. In general these documents are completed well and they are supported by other information which would help children understand the things that have happened to them. The fostering service works hard to ensure that carers receive sufficient information about the young people placed with them. Children's reviews take place as required and monitor how well foster placements continue to meet children's needs. Foster carers receive training and support about carrying out 'life-story' work with children and maintain a record of children's life events.

The fostering service has very effective administrative systems to ensure that records of foster carers, children and miscellaneous matters are well maintained. Records are in place containing all significant information relevant to the running of the service.

These are regularly monitored by the manager.

The service has specific policies and procedures relating to placement of children with families and friends. Effective processes are in place to ensure that assessments of prospective kinship carers take place within the six weeks timescale set out in the regulations. The service ensures that assessments are careful and thorough despite the short time available. Work with kinship carers recognises their distinct status and the specific difficulties that can arise in this role and good support and training is offered.

## **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):

- ensure that arrangements regarding who has authorisation to consent to medical treatment for children are clearly identified when placements are made (NMS 12)
- consider the age of the child or young person before commencing introductory visits to foster carers prior to panel recommending the suitability of the proposed match (NMS 8)
- ensure that foster carer agreements contain specific information about carers' terms of approval (NMS 22).