

Redcar & Cleveland Fostering

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

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Inspector	Stephen Smith / Stephen Graham
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Setting address	Grosmont Resource Centre, 20 Grosmont Close, REDCAR, Cleveland, TS10 4PJ
Telephone number	01642 495910
Email	
Registered person	Redcar & Cleveland Borough Council
Registered manager	
Responsible individual	
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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

Redcar and Cleveland Borough Council fostering service is based at Grosmont Resource Centre in Redcar. The service currently provides support to approximately 110 children in foster placements with around 80 foster carers. The service provides and supports long and short term placements as well as placements with foster carers under shared care, family support, teenage and specialist fostering schemes. The service also assesses and supports kinship foster carers, where children are fostered by family or friends. The fostering service staff team comprises the manager, seven supervising social workers and a team clerk. In addition, foster carer support workers are employed to provide extra support to foster carers.

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 of 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. Very good arrangements are made to ensure that children with complex health needs are looked after by trained and competent carers.

The service works very hard to keep children safe. It checks foster carers and their homes rigorously to ensure that children are placed with carers who can care for them safely. Redcar and Cleveland is outstanding, in the context of a local authority fostering service, in the way it is able to match children with suitable carers for them. The great majority of children are placed with carers on a planned basis and this helps the quality of care provided to them. However, in some emergency situations placement agreement meetings do not happen soon enough. 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.

The fostering service and the authority's wider services provide children with good help and support with their education and for activities in the community. The authority promotes and recognises children's academic achievement. The local authority and the fostering service are very good at seeking the views of fostered children about their own care and the running of the service. Children are enabled and encouraged to participate in decision making processes that affect them.

The service provides its foster carers with very good support and management. Assessments and reviews of foster carers are extremely thorough, but the process for seeking children's views for foster carers' reviews is not robust enough. Children benefit from living with very well trained and supported carers. The authority keeps good records relating to foster carers and the overall management and monitoring of the fostering service. Some records of unannounced visits to foster carers and visits to children by their social workers are not evidenced well enough. 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.

It has improved the quality of its staff recruitment records so they clearly record an applicant's full employment history with an explanation for any gaps and the reason for leaving any previous position involving working with children. It has also ensured that telephone enquiries are made to follow up written employment references received for staff. The manager has developed a more detailed and thorough method of recording the monitoring of matters set out in Schedule 7 of the Fostering Services Regulations 2002.

The service has developed a focus on supporting life story work with fostered children including providing foster carers with training. It has also worked with carers to revise their safe caring policies so they are individual to the needs of the child in placement and agreed with the child's social worker. The frequency of formal supervision provided to foster carers by their supervising social worker has also been increased.

The authority has implemented the Integrated Children's System (ICS) of children's records. This has improved the quality and detail of information held in children's files.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Redcar and Cleveland fostering service works effectively to ensure that children and young people receive good health support. Fostered children are registered with doctors, dentists and opticians in the community and foster carers and professionals help children to attend any appointments necessary. The service provides foster carers with good information about children's health needs and specialist advice is provided to carers about health issues where necessary.

The service is good at ensuring that annual health checks for fostered children are carried out. A very high proportion of children receive these checks. There is an effective system in place to monitor whether medical checks take place. The service

has developed, with the Looked After Children (LAC) nurse, creative and flexible methods to encourage young people to accept these checks. The arrangements regarding who has the authorisation to consent to children's medical treatment are clearly identified at the time placements are made.

Specialist support for children in areas, such as psychology and psychiatry is available and access to these services is good. The service ensures that children are referred to the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service and other therapeutic services if necessary. The service works well with a range of health services to ensure that fostered children receive the healthcare they need. Particularly good links with the LAC nurse exist that help promote children's health.

The service provides foster carers with training to help them meet children's health needs. For example, foster carers undertake first aid training and health and hygiene training is also provided. The service provides foster carers with specific health training where necessary. For example, very specific training in complex health procedures was provided to the carers of a child with extremely complex health needs to enable his placement. This training also extended to two carers identified to provide specialist respite care for the main carers. This training was done as part of some very effective multi-disciplinary work coordinated by a worker within the fostering team. The high quality of this work allowed a planned discharge from hospital into foster care that improved the child's quality of life while allowing his special health needs to be met safely.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

The local authority has a staff recruitment process in place that has received attention since the last inspection and ensures 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. At the time of this inspection the service was recruiting a new manager and strong interim arrangements were in place including the input of the previous manager until the new manager was appointed.

The service provides children with suitable and safe foster homes. Health and safety checks are carried out when carers are assessed and these checks are regularly updated. Pet safety questionnaires are completed where necessary. The service ensures that foster carers' cars are suitably taxed, tested and insured. Carers are given health and safety information in the foster carers handbook. Health and safety training is provided by the service.

The service provides well matched foster placements for children who need them. It is effective at recruiting foster carers that can meet children's needs. The authority's placement planning process ensures that a placement panel considers all requests for foster placements either before placements are made or, in emergency situations, very soon after. This panel considers whether other avenues for the child's care have

been considered and whether foster care is the appropriate plan for the child. As a consequence, placements are generally well planned and the proportion of emergency placements of children with carers is very low. This helps ensure that foster carers get good information about the children being placed with them. The service makes sure that placement agreement meetings happen either before or, in an emergency, after the placement is made. However, in some situations placement agreement meetings do not take place until two weeks after the placement has been 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. Placement Information Record documents are well completed and detailed.

The service maintains good control of the use of exemptions from the usual fostering limit. The service rarely needs to use exemptions and they are well monitored when they take place. The service provides foster carers with very good ongoing support and the level of placement breakdowns is low. Foster carers are very satisfied with the support provided to them by the service to help them care for children's welfare. The service gives carers good support to help them deal with any difficulties they are experiencing with fostered children. A range of specialist foster care schemes are provided including a specialist scheme, teenage foster carers and support carers who work with young people and their families to divert children from becoming looked after. The service also has a strong and well developed shared carer foster care scheme for children with disabilities. These services help ensure the authority it can meet the varying needs of children fostered. The authority has a clear commissioning strategy regarding the use of Independent Fostering Agencies (IFA). Placements are made with IFA's carefully on the basis of children's needs and tend to be for long term matched placements.

The fostering service places a high priority on children's safety. Carers have safe caring policies in place that are specific to the needs of the children placed and reviewed and updated regularly. Suitability checks on staff and carers are thorough. The service undertakes checks on carer's family members or friends who have regular contact with fostered children. 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. One young person said 'I feel safe because there are borders, rules and an adult is always around.' Another said, 'My carers love and care for me and that's enough.'

The service provides its carers with very good training. Carers complete training in child protection, behaviour management and dealing with bullying.

The fostering service has an effective system of recording and monitoring any complaints or allegations made about carers which helps keep children safe. It 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. Panel meetings are well attended and only consider matters when properly quorate. The

panel considers matters presented to it carefully and rigorously. It 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 and a recent audit of the skills, experience and development needs of panel members has been carried out.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The area served by the local authority is largely white British with only a 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. However, carers get good support to help them if they have to care for children from different ethnic backgrounds. The service provides foster carers with good information about promoting equality and diversity within the foster carer handbook. Training is provided for foster carers in ethnicity and diversity during their assessment and is updated in the authority's ongoing foster carer training programme. 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 very good support from the service and its foster carers. Carers working with children with disabilities are provided with individual training 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. For example, very good multi-disciplinary working, planning and training took place to allow a child with very high support needs to be discharged from hospital into foster care.

The authority provides fostered children with good support for their education. The authority is working hard to make sure that fostered children have Personal Education Plans in place. The authority maintains good records about children's educational achievement and the support provided to them in their files. Placement Information record forms contain information about children's educational arrangements and this information is considered when placements are made.

The authority provides special help and resources to help foster children with their academic achievement. Support is provided to children to help them maintain and improve their school attendance. Educational equipment is provided where necessary and additional educational help is sought where appropriate. The authority holds events to celebrate children's educational achievements.

The service provides carers with training about promotion of children's education. For example, training in education for looked after children, computers and information technology and 'Helping Young People Succeed in the 21st Century' has been provided in 2007. 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. The service provides foster carers with support for transporting children to school where necessary and supports them in educational meetings.

The fostering service operates an effective shared care foster carer scheme for children with disabilities. This scheme provides carefully planned, individualised placements for children with complex needs that recognise the role of their parents as the main decision makers. The scheme is particularly successful and is continuing to develop further.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

The fostering service makes sure that the arrangements for children's contact with their family are identified and agreed when placements are made. Contact arrangements and plans are taken into consideration when children are matched with suitable carers. The responsibility for arranging and supporting contact is clearly agreed. Foster carers receive support for transporting children to contact where necessary and carers often support contact in their own homes where this is appropriate. 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.

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. For example, one foster carer regularly welcomes a child's parent into the foster home to help the parent learn the skills necessary to care for the child.

The local authority and its foster carers support 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. Children told inspectors of the range of activities they undertake.

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 authority uses the Viewpoint system effectively to seek children's views for their reviews and is able to expand the use of this further. Children's views are also sought, and form a key source of information, for the reviews of their foster carers. Children know how to complain and who to speak to if they have a problem. Young people consulted all say that their carers take notice of their opinions. For example, one said, 'Every time I tell them something they always listen about what I am saying and do something about it.' 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. They are consulted in various ways about how the service should develop. For example, children are involved in a number of consultation and participation groups including a consultation on education matters, children's rights and a 'Youth Voice' participation event. Larger scale events take place periodically, including education achievement celebration awards. Fostered children are involved in the authority's music and football groups.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The fostering service has a Statement of Purpose that provides a clear description of the aims and objectives of the fostering service. This is kept up-to-date and is approved annually by the local authority. The service's young person's guide to the fostering service is given to all children when they are placed with foster parents. This guide is attractively presented and accessible to children.

The fostering service is 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. Very good interim arrangements are in place while the service is appointing a new fostering manager. Staff members are managed and supervised effectively and have appropriate training opportunities. The service is sufficiently well resourced and staff are able to do their jobs well. 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. Where difficulties exist between foster carers and children's social workers the fostering service acts to resolve these difficulties. The authority provides joint training for field social work staff, fostering social workers and foster carers.

The local authority is successful at recruiting new carers. It 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 rigorous in the way it assesses prospective foster carers. Very thorough checks are made regarding applicants' suitability. These include checks with the CRB and local authorities. Checks are also made with children's schools, birth children, previous partners, employers and other referees. Applicants are assessed on their competency to look after vulnerable children as well as their background and experience. Assessing social workers visit and interview applicants frequently as part of their preparation process. Assessments include preparation

training provided by fostering staff, other professionals from the authority and foster carers.

The fostering service provides its carers with very good 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. The service employs foster care support workers to provide carers with additional support. Foster carers are generally very satisfied with the support provided to them. For example one carer said, 'We've received support, friendship and training to allow us to meet the demands of our new career.'

The fostering service also has effective arrangements for undertaking foster carers' annual reviews. Reviews take place annually and consider how well the carer meets children's needs and monitors any checks carried out or due and the quality of support and training provided to the carer. The fostering service seeks the views of fostered children and their social workers for the reviews of their foster carers. Reviews contain comments sheets from social workers and children that are considered alongside the foster carer's comments and those of the supervising social worker. However, as the forms for children's comments for their carers' reviews are usually returned to the service by their foster carer the service cannot be sure that comments reflect children's real opinions. Clear recommendations are made regarding the ongoing terms of the carer's approval and reviews identify any additional support or training needed.

Foster carers receive supervision on a three monthly basis with good records being maintained and agreed with the foster carer. Foster carers receive visits in between the 'formal' supervision and supervisory visits are often more frequent as agreed or needed. Discussion within supervision is child focussed and records clearly identify any actions or support needs and these are followed up at the next meeting. Recording in foster carers' files did not provide enough evidence that unannounced visits to carers are taking place frequently enough.

The service completes a foster carer agreement with carers when they are first approved and this is updated when any changes in approval take place.

The service provides foster carers with a very good range of high quality training. Training is provided 'in-house' by supervising social workers or accessed through the local authority, the Local Safeguarding Children Board or other external agencies. Foster carers consulted spoke very positively about the quality of their initial training and of the ongoing training provided to them. A large proportion of the authority's foster carers attend training events which include training in: health; education; child protection; safe caring; bullying; behaviour management; life story work; and equality and diversity. 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. Specific training is provided to individual carers based on the nature of the young person placed with them.

The service has a strong National Vocational Qualification level 3 training programme for its foster carers. This helps ensure that carers have the skills needed to carry out their role and promotes their sense of professionalism, 31 foster carers have completed this training and a further 12 are working towards the qualification.

The local authority has recently implemented the use of ICS documentation within children's services. Although in the early stages of use, the information contained in children's files is detailed and comprehensive and shows an improvement over the quality noted at previous visits. Children's files contain all necessary documentation and show that regular care plan reviews are taking place. In some cases, where more than one child is placed with the same foster carer, recording about children is not clearly separated and as a result, confidential information about one child is retained on the file of another young person.

The fostering service works hard to ensure that carers receive sufficient information about the young people placed with them. Risk assessments are developed alongside placement agreements and updated as necessary. Foster carers receive training and support regarding carrying out life-story work with children and maintain a record of children's life events.

Monitoring sections in children's files include the monitoring of social workers' visits to children placed with foster carers. Although these sections state that social workers have visited children appropriately the ongoing contact record in the file does not always record that these visits have taken place. Consequently, the evidence that children are visited with sufficient frequency is not strong enough.

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 a specific staff member responsible for assessing and supporting families and friends carers. Effective processes are in place to ensure that assessments take place promptly in line with the timescale set out in the regulations. Work with kinship carers recognises their distinct status and the specific difficulties that can arise in this role and good support 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):

- make sure that foster placement agreement meetings take place promptly when emergency placements are made (NMS 8)

- seek children's views for the reviews of their foster carers in a way that ensures they are able to express their real opinions (NMS 21)
- ensure that records demonstrate that unannounced visits to foster carers take place with sufficient frequency (NMS 22)
- ensure that confidential information about one child is not retained in other children's social work files (NMS 24)
- ensure that clear records are maintained of every visit a placing social worker makes to a child in foster care (NMS 24).