

# Darlington Local Authority 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

Darlington Borough Council Fostering Service recruits, assesses and supports foster carers to provide foster placements to children and young people with a wide range of needs including long term and short term foster placements. At the time of this inspection the service was supporting over eighty foster placements across these areas of work. A number of these children and young people participated in the inspection through a group discussion and during visits to their homes. Carers are supported and monitored by the foster care team, the administrative support workers and the manager for the service.

### 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 and their progress in relation to previous recommendations. 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 the 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 works closely with the Looked After Children (LAC) Health Co-ordinator to monitor the attendance of children and young people at their annual health reviews and nearly all children have benefited from these in the last 12 months. Carers are provided with first aid training, however a clear record of this is not always maintained within their files.

To keep children safe, the service ensures that they are properly matched with their foster carers. They also make sure that each foster home is a safe place for them to live. Staff are very experienced and suitable and there are good arrangements to vet new staff to ensure that children and young people are protected. However, education and employment histories are not completed in full detail on each occasion, and a record is not always kept of the follow up telephone calls made to verify written references. The minutes from the fostering panel do not clearly indicate the role of each person attending. The service manager attends the panel as its fostering social worker representative. They also oversee the preparation of the reports presented to the panel, therefore compromising the independent nature of their role.

The service works closely with the LAC Education Co-ordinator to both support and recognise the work and achievements of children and young people. It ensures that children's views are gathered and presented both to their own and their carers review meetings. Dedicated staff are employed to consult regularly with looked after children and young people.

There are effective management structures and processes in place and the service is well organised. 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 very well presented and comprehensive. However, records do not show if any action has been required when children's files were audited.

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

The service has responded positively to the previous requirements set and recommendations made. To better meet the health care and education needs of children they have improved the links between the LAC Nurse, the LAC Education co-ordinator and foster carers through their direct participation in carer training events. To keep children safe health and safety checks are being regularly updated and are being completed by staff with carers at least annually. Child protection training is provided to carers during their initial induction with subsequent 'refresher' training provided at regular intervals. Safe care agreements are reviewed and updated as the placements of children change.

To demonstrate good consultation young people are signing the documents which contain their comments on the quality of care they have received. Data systems have been improved to ensure the efficient monitoring of foster carer reviews and initial assessment processes. Foster carer supervision records are being signed in confirmation on each occasion by the carers and their social workers. Meetings of the foster carers support group are now routinely publicised to all carers. Additional training opportunities and specific support is provided to carers to ensure that they can meet any special needs that children placed with them may have. Records have been improved and now provide a more detailed account of training undertaken by carers. These improvements have led to better outcomes for children placed through the service.

Children, their carers and their placing social workers were unable to highlight any major common areas in need of further improvement. One carer described the 'excellent lines of communication – with whole team knowing carer & child & everyone willing to support you (not just your worker)'. Another stated that 'Darlington are an excellent, close, professional team who support child and carer well'.

Social workers who had placed children described the communication between teams

as 'excellent'. They highlighted how LAC Health and Education co-ordinators attend their team meetings to support good outcomes for children in foster care. They described the fostering service as providing 'stable' foster placements. One commented that the 'fostering service ensures good matches for best outcomes' and 'is excellent at working with all professionals to ensure child's needs are met'. One foster child simply stated 'I am very happy with my foster carer'.

## **Helping children to be healthy**

The provision is good.

Children and young people benefit from good health care services that meet their overall physical, emotional and social developmental needs. Foster carers described the support received from the fostering service as 'good'. One described how 'lots of information and booklets are left by the LAC Nurse following the yearly check-up on the children'. Another described how support 'appears to be well structured with each department feeding relevant information to relevant individuals'. A third described the 'free swim and sports centre access for each child and carer, first aid training course' and 'links to sports centre activities' as examples of the support provided to them.

The service uses their links with the LAC Health Co-ordinator to maintain strong relationships with local children's health services. Social workers who have placed children through the service provided good examples of these good links. They highlighted the healthy eating training programme along with regular first aid training, designated Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS), robust carer reviews, training to promote health needs, initial and ongoing foster carer training, annual medicals and regular eye and dental checks. They also highlighted how the LAC Health Co-ordinator works to ensure that immunisations and medicals are kept up to date for every child. The service monitors the attendance of children and young people at their annual health reviews. Almost all children have attended these in the last 12 months. Details of these and other health appointments are recorded within their care files.

Foster carers normally receive full details of the health needs of children in advance and also receive regular training with their attendance recorded. However, in one example confirmation of the carers attendance at required first aid training was not available. The LAC Health Co-ordinator is directly involved in the provision of carer training. Carers also know their role in registering the children with doctors, dentists and opticians. They advocate for children and support them with their health appointments, diet and personal hygiene. The questionnaires received from young people and the comments they made in group discussions were very positive. Almost all of these children feel that they are receiving the right support and advice regarding their own health needs from their foster carers. One described how 'we eat brown healthy bread and fruit and veg'.

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

The provision is good.

To help keep children safe, suitability checks are undertaken on carers and staff, and are kept up to date. Staff files are well presented and contain most of the required information. However, when staff transfer across the department, telephone enquiries are not made to verify the written references provided and the chronologies of previous full time training/employment are not always completed in full detail.

Health and safety checklists are used to help ensure that homes are safe places for children to live. These are used when foster carers are first assessed and are routinely updated during subsequent visits to their homes by staff from the fostering service. Individual risk assessments and family safe care agreements are also used to help keep children safe. One carer commented that 'having recently undergone foster care training we feel confident that high standards of procedures are in place to facilitate 'staying safe'.

The service works to ensure that the systems used to match children with carers are as effective as possible. Agreed procedures and standard documentation are used to both gather in and then share the information needed to properly match children with their carers. Visits with carers and children further illustrated the good matching procedures in place. The unplanned ending of placements is also rare.

When children do have to move, carers describe the support they receive from the service as 'outstanding'. They are equally positive when they describe the quality of the matching of children with them and the good information they are receiving to help achieve this. Placement agreement meetings to formally agree and record care arrangements for the children are taking place promptly. Children who wrote in told us that they are 'always' well cared for where they are living now. One explained that this was true as 'they love me and take care of me' another stated 'there are nice cosy beds and they take really good care of me'.

Arrangements for safeguarding children and young people from abuse are good. Carers receive training to help them keep children safe. There are robust systems to allow the manager to monitor any referrals and incidents, however, the main documentation is not currently signed by them.

The fostering panel ensures that the assessments undertaken on any new foster carers are thorough and that their ability to care safely for children are regularly reviewed. To help the panel with their responsibilities, members are also provided with training. The minutes from panel meetings do not clearly indicate the attendance of its independent members. This makes it more difficult to confirm that meetings are quorate. The fostering service manager attends the panel as its fostering social worker representative. They also oversee the preparation of the

assessment reports which are presented to panel by the service. This compromises the independence of their panel role.

## **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. Foster carers see the support received from the service in addressing these issues as 'outstanding'. Carers and staff receive regular training in dealing with diversity issues and carers can obtain individual advice as needed. The service has developed good links with the regional Sahara Project which it uses to promote the recruitment of carers from a range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Carers are also given good support to help children use activities in the community. One described how the service 'try to encourage children to join clubs + sports teams – we have received a 'free-pass' to the dolphin centre leisure centre for our child'.

Children and young people are supported to think about their future and their educational needs are prioritised. The service has strong links with the LAC Education Co-ordinator who works in partnership with carers and social workers to promote and support the overall educational needs of all looked after children in Darlington. Carers described the 'outstanding' support provided to them in meeting the educational needs of the children they care for. One gave examples of the support received from the LAC Education Co-ordinator. These included 'liaison with school – looked after reviews – always have time to hear piano/recorder playing + show a genuine interest in the child's activities/hobbies'. Another carer described how 'we feel well supported in meeting the educational needs of a child in our care'. Other examples of the work undertaken by the LAC Education co-ordinator included: liaising with the educational psychologist, providing direct support when children are not in school and attending education and care review meetings.

Children themselves confirmed that they 'always' or 'usually' get the right help to be successful in their education and to think about their future. One commented 'we do homework, spellings, timetables and after school clubs'. Detailed records of children's educational achievements are kept by their carers and staff. The service was able to report that of the young people undertaking their GCSE examinations in the last 12 months half had achieved five passes.

Social workers placing children through the fostering service were also very complimentary regarding the quality of the support provided to children in meeting their educational needs. They highlighted how personal education plans (PEPs) are completed, shared with carers and maintained within care files. Carers also support homework, encourage young people to achieve good academic results and attend parents evenings. Children have 'computer access and laptops' and the Education Co-ordinator works to promote inclusion and celebrate achievements in school.



## Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Policies and procedures are in place which help ensure that contact arrangements for the child or young person are promoted and monitored. Carers are supported to help children maintain contact with their birth families and friends. Arrangements are agreed in advance and when contact occurs, it is recorded by carers and shared with the children's own social worker. Volunteer drivers are also provided by the fostering service to help facilitate contact. Carers describe children overall as having 'good' networks with their family, friends and the local community.

Children are regularly consulted and are able to raise and discuss any concerns they have regarding the care they receive. Most children feel that their carers 'always' listen to them and take notice of their opinions. One young person said of their carers that 'when I talk they listen'. Another described 'If I have problems, I talk to my carer, she listens to me and my opinions, she helps me to sort problems out'. Children also confirmed that they know who to speak to if they are unhappy and nearly all know how to complain formally if necessary.

Children's Services also employ dedicated staff who consult regularly with looked after children and young people on their behalf. There is a Looked After Children's participation group. Members of it were involved in the recent interview and appointment process for the Assistant Director, Children's Services.

Carers rate the service as 'outstanding' at involving children in decisions about their day-to-day lives. One carer described 'They always listen to the child and try to put their needs first, if practicable'. Another confirmed that the service is 'very positive on including the child's own views – lots of effort in listening and responding to them – support on behaviour good – support given to link into outside agencies'. Children are encouraged to participate in their own care review meetings as well as their carers annual reviews. Their written comments are maintained within their care files. Social workers placing children through the fostering service spoke highly of the efforts made by the review officers both to advocate for and ensure proper representation of young people's views.

## Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

## Organisation

The organisation is good.

The Statement of Purpose (SOP) has been recently reviewed and provides a clear statement of the aims and objectives of the service. Foster carers are provided with a copy of the statement as are placing social workers. Children and young people are given their own age appropriate guide to it.

Management arrangements within the service are effective and individual areas of responsibility and delegation are clearly agreed. The administrative support is well organised and is provided by very experienced staff. Improved data systems help to ensure that carer reviews are completed to schedule and that initial applications are processed efficiently.

Ongoing local publicity campaigns ensure that the service is promoted and new carers are regularly recruited. Processes to check, assess and train new carers are effective. 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. Details of the terms of each carer's approval are maintained and amended as their circumstances change. The foster carer agreement documents currently used are compliant with Schedule 5 of the Fostering Service Regulations 2002, but do not reflect the change of responsibility for regulation from the Commission for Social Care Inspection to Ofsted. Carers gave good examples of why they choose to foster for this service. It is seen by them to be honest, open, supportive and to value its carers. One carer said of the service 'it is local and well respected'.

Fostering staff undertake regular supervision visits to ensure that their carers are supported effectively. Comprehensive records of these visits are maintained within files for reference with carers provided with their own signed copy. Carers feel that the service provides good support to them in caring for children, including the support provided outside office hours. One described how 'They advise me and are always there to help, no matter how trivial the problem. They make regular trips to our house to support us and our foster child'. The service supports foster carer group meetings which are facilitated regularly. The arrangements put in place to publicise and encourage participation by carers have been improved.

The service operates a robust system which ensures that foster carer annual review meetings take place as scheduled. The meetings are chaired by independent review officers. The documentation in use is comprehensive with examples seen to be prepared in good detail. Documentation overall is being used to demonstrate that routine safety, police and health checks for carers, are being updated as necessary, and that their ongoing abilities to provide good standards of care to children are being properly considered. Good communication exists between social workers placing children through the fostering service and the service itself. Placing social workers are routinely requested to provide their written views to the carers review meetings.

The service encourages and regularly reviews the overall participation of carers in training. An annual programme is arranged in advance and shared with carers. These include opportunities for joint training with fostering service staff and placing social workers. Carers' individual training needs are regularly discussed in their supervision. Attendance at training is recorded within foster carers' own files and is noted in their annual review reports. Opportunities for carers to further develop their skills through National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) are available. A carers working group is currently reviewing national fostering standards in detail on behalf of the service. The standards are being matched to specific training opportunities for carers which will reflect the training and support standard for foster carers established nationally by the Children's Workforce Development Council.

Case files for children are generally well presented and contain comprehensive information and files are audited by social work team managers. However the examples noted did not include detail of the outcome of the audit. 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.

Appropriate policies and procedures are in place to assess, encourage and support the care of children and young people by family members and friends. Some of these assessments are carried out by social workers who are not part of the fostering team. The fostering panel have been provided with additional training to help them monitor the quality of these assessments and provide feedback to social workers and their managers on any issues arising.

## **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):

- obtain written confirmation of the participation of foster carers in first aid training and maintain this within their files (NMS12)
- ensure that staff files contain confirmation that telephone enquiries had been made to follow up the written references received and that previous education and employment histories are completed in full (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)
- improve the independence of the fostering panel by reviewing current fostering social worker representation (NMS 30)

- 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)
- include an indication of any action required when children's files are audited (NMS 24)