

# Stockton Borough Council Fostering

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

Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council fostering service is located within the authority's department of Children, Education and Social Care. The service provides placements in respect of short term and temporary, long term and permanent, bridging, parent and child, short breaks and sharing the caring children with disabilities, respite care, emergency care and family and friends care. At the time of the inspection there were just over 120 children placed with foster carers, most of whom live within the boundaries of the borough.

### 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. Carers are provided with regular training in health and first aid. They also receive more specialist advice and training where necessary to meet the individual needs of the children they care for.

To keep children safe, the service ensures that each foster home is a safe place for them to live and that they are properly matched with their foster carers. There are systems in place which closely monitor safe care arrangements for children and help ensure that they are properly protected. Staff and carers are very experienced and suitable. The fostering panel meets regularly and helps monitor arrangements to keep children safe.

The service works with its carers to both support and recognise the achievements of children and young people. It is continuing to improve the ways in which children's views are gathered and presented.

The service is well organised and there are effective management structures and procedures in place. The current Statement of Purpose (SOP) does not include details of the numbers of carers recruited and the number of children placed through the service in the last year. The arrangements to assess, train and support carers are

good. However, the written records of referee interviews are not currently signed in confirmation by the referees themselves. The current foster carer agreements are compliant with Schedule 5 of the Fostering Service Regulations 2002, but do need slight amendment. The agreements used should also 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.

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

The service has responded positively to the previous recommendations made. When children need to attend health and other care appointments, their carers and staff from the service work with the schools to minimise the impact of these appointments on their daily education.

To help demonstrate that the care needs of children and young people are being met, their placement information record forms are completed as fully as possible as placements are made. The service has improved its process for seeking children's views about their foster carers, so that they can be given full consideration at foster carers' reviews. Foster carers' files now show clearly their approval history, with the dates and reasons for approval changes included. Arrangements to record confidential information about children have been improved, to ensure that confidential information about one child cannot be recorded in the file of a sibling.

### **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 describe the support received from the fostering service as 'good'. Social workers who have placed children through Stockton Fostering provide good evidence that the service is working well with its carers, to ensure that children and young people keep themselves healthy. Examples of how they do this include carers adhering to specific diets, their good knowledge of medication and its administration, and good communication generally regarding health issues. One social worker describes how, 'Carers make a concerted effort to ensure that children are taken to all necessary health appointments'. The service monitors the attendance of children and young people at their annual health reviews, eight months into the current reporting period the service confirmed that three quarters of children have so far attended these. Details of all health appointments are recorded within their care files. The service is further improving the way that medical information about children is gathered and recorded. The Looked After Children's nurse is taking a lead role in this.

Foster carers receive full details of the health needs of children in advance and also receive additional training and specialist support where necessary. Carers know their role in registering the children with doctors, dentists and opticians. Carers support children with their health appointments, diet and personal hygiene and work closely with a variety of specialist medical staff. The questionnaires received from young

people are very positive. All of these children feel that they are receiving support and advice regarding their own health needs from their foster carers.

### **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. These are monitored through a central system to make sure that they are kept up to date.

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 social worker comments that, 'I have always found that there exists a high degree of supervision for the children both within their placement and when on outings'. Another describes how children are being kept safe through the 'risk assessments completed by the fostering team'.

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 gather and share the information needed to properly match children with their carers. A resource panel meets regularly to monitor the quality of the placements made. A visit with one carer and the children placed with them illustrated the good matching procedures in place. There have been few unplanned endings of placements.

When children do have to move, carers describe the support they receive from the service as good. They are equally positive when describing the quality of the matching of children with them, and described the good information they are receiving to help achieve this. Placement agreement meetings to formally agree and record care arrangements for the children take place promptly. One foster carer describes how the service 'always try not to unsettle and maintain placements for the children'. Another described how placements are 'always well thought out and done one step at a time'. A standard exemption letter is used to record when a carers original terms of approval are exceeded in emergencies, however the letter does not clearly demonstrate who has approved the decision. All of the children who wrote in confirmed that they are always well cared for where they are living now. Some gave examples of why they felt this was true. One described how their carer treated them as though they were her own children, they continued 'she trusts us and makes us feel welcome into the home and family'. Another described how 'I know when I come home I am well cared for'. A third simply stated 'I feel safe'.

Arrangements for safeguarding children and young people from abuse are good. Carers receive training to help them keep children safe. There are systems in place to allow managers at the service to monitor any referrals and incidents. The questionnaires received from young people are very positive, they feel that they are

protected and can speak to someone if they are unhappy. One young person described how 'if I have a problem I tell my carers or social worker and they help me sort it out'.

The fostering panel ensures that the assessments undertaken on any new foster carers are thorough and that their ability to care safely for children is regularly reviewed. Panel members are also provided with training to help them with their responsibilities.

### **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 good and in some cases, outstanding. Carers and staff receive regular specialist training in dealing with diversity issues and carers can obtain individual advice as they need it. Carers are also given good support to help children use activities in the community. One carer describes how, 'I am constantly asked if I need anything help wise', they continue 'If I did need any assistance I know it would be available'. One placing social worker describes how, 'Hobbies are always maintained and children are encouraged to participate in new activities'.

The service works to ensure that the educational needs of children and young people are prioritised and they are supported to think about their future. Carers describe the good support provided to them in meeting the educational needs of the children they care for. One describes that 'We have found the fostering service to be outstanding in this area - we have found the schools excellent and very supportive and helpful'. Care files contain good examples of the quality of support provided to young people to ensure that their educational needs are met. Children are given specialist support with their education where needed. Every child who wrote to us confirmed that they always get the right help to be successful in their education, and all are helped to think about their future. One young person described comprehensively how their carer 'attends parents evenings, checks for homework, talks to teachers at school, talks to deputy year head'.

The policies and agreed procedures put in place by the service, ensure that during short-term breaks in foster care the parents of the children placed continue to be recognised as their main carers.

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

The provision is good.

Policies and procedures are in place which both promote and monitor contact arrangements for each child or young person. Carers are supported to help children maintain contact with their birth families and friends. Arrangements are agreed and recorded in advance and when contact occurs, it is recorded by carers and shared

with the children's own social worker. Carers describe children overall as having good networks with their family, friends and the local community. One placing social worker described how 'carers assist with all contact arrangements ensuring that children are ready on time'. Additional independent support staff are also used to help facilitate contact. This arrangement is monitored by the fostering service to ensure that children benefit fully from it.

Children are regularly consulted and are able to raise and discuss any concerns they have regarding the care they receive. All of the children who wrote to us feel that their carers listen to them and take notice of their opinions. One young person said of their carers that 'If I need to talk they listen to what I have to say and then advise me'. Children also know who to speak to if they are unhappy, and nearly all know how to complain formally if necessary.

Staff members have reviewed and continue to improve the documentation used by the service to consult with looked after children and young people. Carers rate the service as good at involving children in decisions about their day-to-day lives and involving them in how the service is run. One carer comments that, 'The young person's needs and wishes are always taken into account plus care plans are put in place and regularly reviewed'. Another describes how 'They explain to the children the situation they are in to help them through it'. Children are encouraged to participate in their own care review meetings as well as their carers' annual reviews. Children who move on from a placement are encouraged to write down their views on the quality of the care they have received. Any written comments they make are maintained on file for reference and are shared at review meetings.

### **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is not judged.

### **Organisation**

The organisation is good.

The SOP is reviewed annually and provides a clear statement of the aims and objectives of the service. It does not currently include details of the numbers of carers recruited, and the number of children placed through the service in the last twelve months. Foster carers are provided with a copy of the statement. Children and young people are also given their own 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. Data systems are used to ensure that carer reviews are completed to schedule and that initial applications are processed efficiently.



The processes to check, assess and train new carers are effective, but the records of the interviews held with their nominated referees do not include the signature of the referees themselves. 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 give good examples of why they choose to foster for this service. One said 'It is well run and the workers make sure that the wellbeing of children is their top priority.' Others describe the good help and support provided to them by staff.

Regular supervision visits, including occasional un-announced visits, are undertaken by fostering staff to help ensure that their carers are supported effectively. Records of these visits are maintained within files for reference. Carers are 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 states simply, 'They are seriously always there'. Others highlight the regular support visits, access to training and access to specialist advice. One carer states, 'they listen'.

Foster carer annual review meetings are scheduled in advance and are monitored to ensure they take place at the required frequency. The documentation used for reviews is comprehensive and 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. One describes the 'excellent communication with all foster carers and their link workers.' Another states 'I have always experienced a good level of communication with link workers and foster carers alike.' Placing social workers are routinely requested to provide their written views to the carers review meetings.

The service encourages and regularly reviews and records 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 staff from the fostering service, health and education. Carers' individual training needs are discussed regularly in their own supervision meetings and in their annual review meetings.

Case files for children are generally well presented and contain comprehensive information and files are audited regularly by fostering service team managers. The overall administrative systems are well organised and records are in place which contain information relevant to the running of the service. These are regularly monitored by the manager.

## **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 exemption letters clearly indicate who has approved the decision (NMS 8)
- ensure that the Statement of Purpose for the service includes the numbers of foster carers approved and the number of foster children placed (NMS 1)
- ensure that the records of reference interviews undertaken during foster carer assessments include a written indication of agreement from the referee themselves (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 22)
- ensure that foster carer agreements indicate clearly the obligation to comply with the terms of any foster placement agreement (NMS 22)