

Northumberland Fostering Service

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

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| Unique reference number | SC039860 |
| Inspection date | 14/09/2009 |
| Inspector | Stephen Smith / Shaun Common |
| Type of inspection | Key |

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| Date of last inspection | 12/10/2007 |

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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

Northumberland County Council fostering service provides a range of foster carers for children and young people looked after by the authority. The service recruits, assesses, trains and supports foster carers to meet the needs of these young people. Children are placed with foster carers on a short-break, time limited and long term basis. The authority places children with relative carers and operates a short-break service for children with disabilities and a specialist fostering scheme known as New Start.

Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

This is an overview of what the inspector found during the inspection.

This was an announced inspection of Northumberland County Council's fostering service. The purpose of the inspection was to assess the service's compliance with the fostering National Minimum Standards and regulations. All the key standards were inspected under the five outcome areas of being healthy, staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution and economic wellbeing. The effectiveness of the service's organisation was also inspected as was its effectiveness at promoting equality and diversity. Being healthy, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution and economic wellbeing are rated as good. Staying safe and organisation are judged to be satisfactory. The authority is good at promoting equality and diversity.

The fostering service provides children with good support with their health and education. Children are well consulted and supported to maintain contact with their families where this is appropriate. The authority promotes equality and diversity effectively and provides foster carers with very good support. Arrangements for fostering assessments and reviews of foster carers are not sufficiently robust and panel minutes are not good enough to fully support the decision making process. Some elements of the assessment of the safety of foster carers' homes and safe caring arrangements are not detailed enough. Arrangements for the drawing up of foster placement agreements are not always fully effective. However, the service works hard to match children with foster carers who are suitable and appropriate to meet their needs.

Improvements since the last inspection

The service has addressed all the recommendations made at the last inspection. It has ensured that clear arrangements are made regarding the consent for children's medical treatment that is delegated to carers. It has also made arrangements for fostering panel to provide quality assurance feedback to the service about matters

presented to it. A number of other procedural and recording arrangements have also been improved.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Children's health is promoted well. Foster carers receive first aid training on a mandatory basis and other training is provided relating to children's general or specific health needs where this is needed. The authority provides foster carers with support and advice about healthy eating and healthy lifestyles as part of their preparation to foster training and on an ongoing basis.

Arrangements for consent to medical treatment are clearly identified. Children's needs for routine and emergency medical treatment are identified and arrangements for delegated consent are made plain to foster carers. This ensures that children are able to receive any treatment they need promptly. Children are registered with the primary health care services they need and they receive very good support for any specialist health needs they have. The authority provides support for children, as needed, in areas such as healthy lifestyles, drug and alcohol and sexual health. Children's health is well monitored. The authority has effective arrangements in place for children to receive annual medical checks as children 'looked after' by the local authority.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is satisfactory.

The authority's fostering workers visit foster carers' homes regularly and ensures that they are appropriate and homely places for children to live. Health and safety checklists, used to monitor the physical safety of foster carers' homes, are completed and updated annually. However, these are not sufficiently wide ranging and are not completed in sufficient detail. Where safety matters are identified checklists do not always show whether these have been addressed. As a consequence the physical safety of carers' homes is not assessed well enough.

The authority has arrangements that are generally effective for placing children with foster carers who are well matched to their needs. Despite a pressure on placements arising from some foster carer resignations and an increasing number of children needing foster placements, matching is carried out in an appropriate manner. The authority has good information sharing systems that support the making of planned placements. Where emergency placements are made the authority usually ensures that the information it knows about children is passed onto their new carers quickly. Exemptions from the usual fostering limit are used rarely. The service has developed a foster placement agreement which is separate from the electronic children's recording system being implemented by the authority. The implementation of electronic recording has created inconsistencies in drawing up foster placement agreements. Some are not fully completed and appear to rely on other documentary

information. Some workers are drawing up agreements on superseded looked after children documentation and, in other situations, full information is only available by reference to a number of documents which, on occasion, contain conflicting information. As a consequence full foster placement agreements are not always completed, and made available to carers promptly enough.

Placement stability is good with high levels of support being provided to foster carers and children from the fostering team, social workers, Children's Support Team and other avenues.

The authority provides children with foster placements that are well monitored. Fostering social workers visit regularly and meet with children and children's social workers carry out their duty to visit children with diligence. Children are visited very regularly in their foster placements and, as such, are able to raise any concerns they have. Children feel safe and well cared for in their placements and know who to speak to if they are worried. They say they are treated, by their foster carers, as 'one of the family'.

The fostering service provides mandatory training in child protection and behaviour management to its foster carers so they are able to care for children safely. Foster carers develop safe caring policies relevant to the children they are caring for but these are not always sufficiently detailed or realistic. Some do not make clear the specific arrangements to be put in place by carers and others are very vague or inappropriate for the age of the child concerned. This means that children are not as protected by clearly identified safe caring practices as they should be.

The authority has a clear procedure for responding to any complaints, allegations or significant events and for notifying the relevant people.

The authority has procedures for the safe recruitment of staff in place that clearly set out the information required in respect of new applicants. The authority is robust in undertaking Criminal Records Bureau checks and is careful to verify each reference received. However, full employment histories with explanation of any gaps are not always sought for each member of staff. As a consequence, the authority cannot be certain that some staff do not have periods of employment that have not been declared. This means that staff members' suitability to be employed working with children cannot be sufficiently assured in every case.

The authority's fostering panel is correctly comprised in line with the National Minimum Standards and only meets to consider assessments and foster carer reviews when it is appropriately quorate. Panel is thorough in its consideration of cases presented to it and receives full information on which to base its deliberations. On occasions the panel makes 'in-principle' decisions subject to additional information being received but its procedures do not cover these situations. These situations are not subsequently followed up well by panel though the fostering service is robust in ensuring any outstanding matters are completed.

The records of panel meetings are not good enough. They do not provide a full and

accurate record of key discussions and deliberations undertaken by panel. Consequently, they do not reflect panels' work and could leave any future consideration of panel's rigour in question. Additionally, panel minutes do not record the reasons for the recommendation made as is required by the regulations. This means that they do not provide the decision maker with sufficient guidance about the panel's deliberations.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The authority's fostering service is committed to providing a service that meets children's individual needs. As such children and their families receive a service that values them and supports their diverse needs. Foster carers' preparation training covers equality and diversity. The attitude and ability to reflect diversity and promote equality of applicants to foster is assessed before they are considered suitable people to care for children placed by the authority. Ongoing support and management of carers promotes anti-discriminatory practice. Valuing diversity training is provided to carers as part of the service's annual training programme for foster carers.

As far as possible children are placed with carers who are matched to their individual needs. The authority works hard to ensure that children are able to retain their cultural identity and retain links with their communities even when placed with carers who, because of the authority's size, are placed at a distance from these. A very low proportion of the authority's population come from black or minority ethnic backgrounds. As a consequence a similarly low proportion of the authority's foster carers and children needing care are from these backgrounds. Despite this when challenged by the need to find an emergency long-term placement for a young person with extremely specific needs the agency succeeded in meeting the young person's needs very effectively.

Children with disabilities are well served by the authority's short-break fostering service. This provides children with disabilities and their families with support packages based on their individual needs.

The authority also provides children with good support for their education. It monitors educational achievement closely and uses the information to direct the services provided. Foster carers are provided with an educational handbook which gives them detailed information about educational arrangements, how to help children and the support available to them. The authority's Education Support for Looked After Children (ESLAC) team provides carers and children with very good support. This team helps ensure fostered children are able to access the best schools for them and also that they receive the correct support. This team works hard to reduce the number of changes of school experienced by foster children and the authority and its carers effectively promote and support school attendance.

Personal Education Plans (PEP) are developed promptly for all children looked after by the authority and these are then updated regularly. Foster carers support children

with homework and attend meetings at school. Records are kept of children's academic achievement and educational equipment can be provided for children where needed.

The authority's short-break service provides good and flexible support to children with disabilities and their families based on their individual needs. An experienced worker is employed to work in this area and good training is provided to support this work. This allows children to experience a positive lifestyle whilst promoting the involvement of families as the people central to their children's lives.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The authority and its fostering service supports and promote contact between children and their families. These arrangements are taken into account when matching children with carers. The authority endeavours, wherever possible, to place children with foster carers locally. Where this is not possible contact arrangements are clearly identified and arrangements are made to support these. Information for foster carers regarding contact issues is provided and carers record outcomes of contact arrangements. Foster carer supervision ensures that any issues relating to contact are identified and addressed.

Children are well consulted about the care they receive. Foster carers listen to and take notice of children's opinions and ensure that these are reflected in care planning discussions. Effective arrangements are in place to consult children prior to their Looked After Children (LAC) reviews and to involve them in considering their own care plan and how things are going for them. However, children's views are not sought well enough for the reviews of their foster carers and as such their views are not given sufficient weight in considering carers' ongoing suitability to foster.

The authority involves children and encourages wider participation in the authority's provision of services. A children's participation service works with children to support them, seek their views and promote their wider involvement. This service operates young people's groups. Award and celebration nights take place and a young person's council is in place.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

The authority continues to work to ensure that the planning to assist children to leave care effectively supports children's moves into independence. Foster carers are provided with support and advice regarding the promotion of independence. Such matters are covered in foster carers' supervision and support sessions where appropriate. Foster carers work with children to help them learn some of the skills they will need to live independently, such as cooking, washing and handling money. However, the foster carer's handbook does not contain enough information about the

expectations of carers regarding preparation for independent living and the wider arrangements made for children.

Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The service and its carers provide placements that reflect children's culture wherever possible and provide additional support where this is not the case. Where children are placed away from their local communities work is done to ensure they are able to maintain contact and retain their cultural backgrounds. Children with disabilities are well served by the authority's short-breaks service. Training and advice is provided for carers, staff and panel members. Equality and diversity is a focus of foster carer assessments and preparation training. The service has provided very good care and support in an emergency situation for child that ensures his specific needs are met. This good planning and provision was made despite the authority's lack of experience in this area of work.

The fostering service has a clear statement of purpose that accurately sets out its approach to working with foster carers and the service it provides. This is updated and agreed by the council at least annually. The authority has two children's guides to fostering; one for younger children and one for older. These include pictures and are well presented. However, neither guide gives children sufficient information about how they can expect to be treated by foster carers. This means that they may not be able to identify and report inappropriate care. Both guides contain the name, address and telephone number of the previous regulatory body rather than Ofsted. This could prevent children from contacting Ofsted regarding any matter that concerns them.

The fostering service is effectively controlled and monitored by its manager and senior managers in the authority. Clear performance information is produced and managers monitor the work carried out to ensure its quality. There are clear lines of communication between the fostering team, foster carers and children's social workers. Staff members are appropriately trained, supervised and supported and workload management systems are in place to ensure they can do their jobs effectively.

Foster carer recruitment is effective with the authority being successful in attracting people interested in fostering. Despite this however, the service has reduced in size because of the number of carers who have resigned or retired. The service is robust and careful in the way it recruits and screens foster carers. Preparation training is good and thorough suitability checks are undertaken.

The service assesses applicants' competence to foster as well as considering their background and experiences of child care. Recent assessments are recorded and reported on in a new format. Not all these assessments are suitably robust. For example, one contained detailed evidence but there was only a very limited

evaluation of the implications of this for the fostering role. Additionally, significant facets of the applicants' lives and history were not fully explored in terms of how this may affect their ability to foster. This could mean that children are placed with carers whose suitability is not fully assured. The fostering staff team are well experienced although most have not had assessment training for a number of years and none have yet been trained in the new assessment format being used.

The fostering service provides its carers with effective support and supervision. Supervising social workers visit and supervise foster carers regularly. They work effectively to ensure that support is always available to carers. Foster carers speak very highly of the support provided to them. For example, one carer said 'I have had excellent support over the years, their standards have never slipped.' Support groups are provided for foster carers based on the type of care they provide and their geographic location within the county. These groups also contain a training element by which specific topics can be covered based on the needs of the group. Supervising social workers carry out unannounced visits annually to monitor the work of foster carers.

Arrangements for foster carers' reviews to take place are good. Reviews happen annually with the first review being taken to panel for its consideration. Subsequently any reviews at which the carers' terms of approval change are also taken to panel along with a random sample of other reviews. Reviews of carers consider their ongoing suitability to foster and monitor that CRB checks, health and safety checklists and safe care policies have been updated. Foster carers and their supervising social workers provide reports for the review which is then chaired by an independent reviewing officer. However, arrangements for seeking the views of fostered children and the social workers of any children placed with the carer since the last review are not effective enough. Views of children and their social workers are rarely obtained for foster carers' reviews and consequently reviews their views cannot be considered sufficiently well. This means that reviews are not as robust as they should be. The service is, however, rigorous in ensuring that carers' terms of approval are monitored and changed where necessary and appropriate to ensure they are up-to-date and reflect the care provided.

The authority provides its carers with good mandatory and developmental training. Training is provided on a rolling programme but also specific training can be provided based on carers individual needs or the circumstances of the children they are looking after. The authority's arrangements to train people to the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) National Occupational Standards for foster carers are well very well developed. A high proportion of carers have completed or are undertaking their work for these standards. The authority is also committed to providing National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) level 3 training for its carers. Over 50% of the authority's carers now have this qualification which represents a massive growth in number since the last inspection.

Children's records are generally well maintained. The authority is implementing electronic recording systems to replace its previous paper based system. As a consequence, records are at times confused and lack detail. The authority is aware

of this and is working to address matters. Generally records about children are appropriate to assist planning and act as a reference for children in future should they wish to look back at their history.

Arrangements to assess and support family and friends carers are very effective. This is a growing area of the authority's work and is well managed. Assessments of family and friends carers are carried out on a three stage basis that ensures the essential and legally required checks are carried out promptly before a more thorough consideration of suitability is made. Applicants being considered for a long-term care arrangements are then subject to a third stage assessment. Relative carers are fully included in support groups and training arrangements and receive effective individual support that recognises their specific situations.

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 foster carers' homes are free of avoidable hazards that might expose a child to risk of injury or harm; specifically that health and safety checks are sufficiently wide ranging and ensure that matters identified are addressed (NMS 6.6)
- ensure a consistent approach to the recording of foster placement agreements is developed that ensure all required matters are considered and fully recorded in every case (breach of regulation 34(3) of the Fostering Services Regulations 2002)
- ensure safe caring guidelines are provided, based on a written policy, for each foster home; specifically that guidelines are sufficiently specific and realistic (NMS 9.3)
- ensure that all information required in Schedule 1 is obtained for all staff members before they commence employment with the fostering service; specifically that a full employment history with a satisfactory written explanation of any gaps is obtained (breach of regulation 20(3) of the Fostering Services Regulations 2002)
- ensure that the written record of panel's proceedings is an accurate reflection of the discussion and that the reasons for its recommendations are recorded (breach of regulation 25(2) of the Fostering Services Regulations 2002)
- ensure there are clear written requirements of what is expected of foster carers in terms of preparing children and young people for independent or semi-independent living (NMS 14.2)
- ensure that the children's guide contains the address and telephone number of Ofsted and appropriately summarises the statement of purpose; specifically that it provides children with information about how they can expect to be treated by foster carers (breach of regulation 25(2) of the Fostering Services Regulations

2002)

- ensure that fostering assessments assess and fully evaluate applicants' qualities, competencies and aptitudes for fostering (NMS 17.7)
- ensure that, when undertaking a foster carer's review, the service seeks and takes into account the views of (subject to the child's age and understanding) any child placed with the foster parent and any social worker who has within the preceding year placed a child with the foster parent (breach of regulation 29(3)(b) of the Fostering Services Regulations 2002).