

Redcar & Cleveland Fostering

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

Unique reference number	SC041572
Inspection date	20/10/2009
Inspector	Stephen Smith / Shaun Common
Type of inspection	Key

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Date of last inspection	29/11/2007

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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

Redcar and Cleveland Borough Council fostering service is based at the West Locality Base in Ormesby. The service currently provides support to approximately 120 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, 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 good.

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

This was an announced inspection of Redcar and Cleveland Borough 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 work to promote equality and diversity. Being healthy, staying safe, enjoying and achieving, economic wellbeing and organisation are rated as good. Making a positive is judged to be outstanding, as is the authority's promotion of equality and diversity.

The fostering service provides children with good support with their health and education. It is a well organised service that provides good support to foster carers and works well to keep children safe. Despite a significant increase in the numbers of children requiring foster care in the authority, the service makes placements carefully with carers who are as closely matched as possible. However, incomplete and insufficiently detailed foster placement agreements do not support this as well as they should. Arrangements for the review of foster carers are not effective enough to ensure they take place annually and that reports are promptly produced. Panel minutes are not good enough to fully reflect panel's deliberations although panel itself is rigorous and effective in its role. The authority's arrangements for undertaking assessments of family and friends carers when immediate or emergency placements are required are not timely enough. Assessments are thorough but take too long. The authority is outstanding in the way it involves children and consults with them. A real commitment to children is overtly demonstrated throughout the authority and this results in children in care having real power. The service provides excellent support for children in a way that values their differences and promotes their equality.

Improvements since the last inspection

The service has addressed the five recommendations made at the last inspection. It has improved arrangements for ensuring that prompt foster placement agreement meetings take place, and ensured that children's views play a significant part of the reviews of their foster carers. It has also ensured that foster carers receive unannounced visits at least annually and that all visits to children by their social workers are clearly recorded. These matters help promote children's safety and wellbeing.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

The service ensures that children's health is promoted well. It provides foster carers with 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. Very good training is provided where children have complex or specific needs arising from their disabilities or health. 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. The foster carers' handbook provides carers with a valuable reference point regarding children's health.

The authority gives foster carers good information about children's health needs when they are placed, particularly where any special health needs are present. The authority provides support for children, as needed, in areas such as healthy lifestyles, drug and alcohol and sexual health. The authority works closely with the Looked After Children's (LAC) Nurse, who provides support to children and ensures that children receive annual medical checks.

The service ensures that the arrangements for the delegation of responsibility to consent to routine and emergency medical treatment are identified and 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 ensures that children have prompt access to the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service if needed.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The fostering service undertakes health and safety assessments of foster carers' homes as part of their assessment. Home safety is monitored on an ongoing basis during supervision and unannounced visits and health and safety assessments are updated as necessary. However, the scope of the checklist used as a basis for these assessments is not sufficiently wide ranging. As a consequence the physical safety of

carers' homes is not assessed against all eventualities.

The authority has arrangements that are effective for placing children with foster carers who are appropriate to meet their needs. The service is facing significant pressure arising from some foster carer resignations and a large increase in the number of children needing foster placements. It is careful to approve carers with well considered terms of approval and works hard to place children with foster carers whose approval terms are an appropriate match. Where this is not possible and placements are made outside the carers' approval in terms of age or number, this is well monitored by the service and panel. The service protects placements where necessary and will not place children with carers where this is likely to unsettle children already in placement. Despite the increase in number of children requiring foster care the service uses exemptions from the usual fostering limit very rarely and this is also well monitored.

The increase in children in the care of the authority has led to a higher proportion of foster placements being made on a short-notice or emergency basis than previously. Despite this, the service is generally effective at ensuring that foster carers receive good information about children when they are placed. However, the service is not drawing up foster placement agreements for each placement that cover all the information and arrangements set out in the regulations. This means that information sharing with foster carers is not supported as well by documentation as it should be. Foster placement agreements do not set out the day to day arrangements and responsibilities for supporting contact, activities or transport well enough. Consequently there is a lack of clarity with some foster carers and social workers having differing views about who should be doing what. Similarly, the delegation of authority to consent to leisure and educational activities is not clearly identified at the placement agreement. This is, in some circumstances, resulting in foster carers and social workers misunderstanding arrangements. As a consequence, decision making regarding activities, at times, conflicts with the authority's policy. As such the desire to protect children could in some circumstances result in unnecessary restrictions being placed upon them.

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

The authority monitors and supervises foster placements very well and this helps ensure that children are kept safe. Fostering social workers visit carers regularly and meet with children. Foster carers are rigorously checked before they are approved and have Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks updated every three years. Children's social workers visit children in foster care very regularly and as such children are supported to express any concerns they may have. Good records are maintained of these visits which demonstrate that social workers are diligent in visiting and consulting with children. Children feel safe and well cared for in their placements and know who to speak to if they are worried.

Foster carers develop safe caring policies setting out how they will work with children placed with them to ensure that care is delivered in a way that is mutually safe.

These are considered when new foster placements are made to ensure they are relevant for the situation of the child concerned.

The fostering service has a clear procedure for responding to any complaints, allegations or significant events and for notifying the relevant people. It provides its carers with training in child protection and safe caring so they are able to care for children safely.

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 undertakes CRB checks for all applicants before they commence their employment and updates these on a three yearly basis. It ensures that it receives full employment histories for all applicants and seeks an explanation for any gaps. Written references are sought that include the applicant's most recent employer. Records of references include a section to record their telephone verification. However, this is not completed reliably and as such, the authority cannot demonstrate that it is robust enough in undertaking this additional check on applicants' suitability.

The authority's fostering panel is well constituted and ensures that it is quorate before it considers assessments and reviews of foster carers. The panel gives thorough and detailed consideration of cases presented to it. It ensures that it receives full information on which to base its deliberations and administrative arrangements are effective in supporting this. Panel makes clear recommendations along with a clear record of the reasons for the recommendation. It provides an effective quality assurance check for the service and is developing this role further. It monitors situations in which children are placed with carers outside their terms of approval and provides strong advice to the service about situations in which placements need to be protected.

The records of panel meetings are not as good as they should be. They do not always provide a clear record of recommendations made and are not always accurate in terms of attendance. Sometimes they are not appropriate in the tone and style of recording. Consequently, they could leave any future consideration of panel's rigour and appropriateness in question.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The authority's fostering service is highly committed to providing services to children and their families that are based on their individual needs and reflect and value their differences. Foster carers receive training in equality and diversity as part of their preparation training. 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. This is reinforced in ongoing supervision. The agency has links with an independent organisation that can provide support and advice to carers if they have children from different ethnic backgrounds placed.

The service works hard to match children with carers appropriate to their needs and gives close consideration to any cultural differences between the child's family and their foster placement. It ensures that children are able to retain their cultural identity and retain links with their families and friends.

Children with disabilities and highly complex needs receive very good support from the fostering service. The short breaks foster care scheme provides individualised care packages with carers who are highly trained to meet children's health needs.

The authority provides children with good support for their education. It monitors educational achievement closely and uses the information to direct the services provided. Personal Education Plans are developed promptly for all children looked after by the authority. These are detailed and comprehensive and provide a strong basis from which the educational support needed can be planned.

The fostering team has good links with the education for children in care service which provides carers and children with very good support. This helps ensure fostered children receive the necessary support and are able to access the most appropriate schools for them. Records are kept of children's academic achievement and the authority holds awards and achievement celebration events. Educational equipment can be provided for children where needed and all children in care are soon to receive a laptop computer to support their education.

Foster carers support children with homework and attend meetings at school. The service provides carers with good information about education within the foster carers' handbook and training is available in educational matters.

The authority's short-break service provides extremely good support to children with disabilities and their families. This is provided through individualised and flexible packages of care based on children's specific needs and circumstances. Careful work is carried out to ensure placements are well matched and support children and their families effectively. The service provides short-break carers with comprehensive training based on the needs of the children they are matched with. Close links are maintained with health professionals to ensure that appropriate care is available and any specialist equipment needed by foster carers is provided. This work ensures that children's families remain central to their lives and retain their role as main carers whilst allowing children to develop relationships and experience a positive lifestyle with the support they need.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

The authority and its fostering service supports and promote contact between children and their families. Contact arrangements are identified in the foster placement agreement although practical issues such as transport arrangements are not always made clear enough. Foster carers are supported to help children maintain contact with families and friends where this is appropriate. Arrangements to

supervise contact are made where necessary and foster carers or the authority's staff undertake this supervision as appropriate. The authority has arrangements to supervise contact at group sessions in venues where children and their families can undertake activities together. Carers are provided with information about contact and the issues it can raise. Foster carer supervision covers any contact issues and ensures that they are addressed.

Children in this authority are extremely well consulted. They are involved and listened to about their own care and have a real say in how the authority operates to support children in care. Foster carers listen to and take notice of children's opinions and ensure that these are reflected in care planning discussions. Very effective arrangements are in place to consult with children for their LAC reviews. The authority uses a computer based consultation tool very effectively to involve children in their own care plan and reviews. It also uses the information gained to assess how effectively it is meeting children's needs at a more general level. The fostering service ensures that fostered children's views are sought for the reviews of their carers and form a key part of the assessment of carers' ongoing suitability to foster.

The authority's arrangements to encourage children's participation in the wider operation of the authority are outstanding. It has a well developed and active children's participation group who are regularly consulted and who also undertake work to develop information and initiatives regarding children in care. For example, with support from professionals this group has developed an excellent DVD based children's guide to the fostering service and some very professionally produced complaints information for children in a colourful cartoon format. The composition of the participation groups changes over time as young people enter and leave care and is clearly representative of the authority's children in care. Young people have been involved in recruitment of senior personnel, the development of a range of new projects and have driven changes in patterns of service delivery within the authority. A children's council is in place. The authority employs a participation manager and a development manager who work closely to ensure children's views are central to the authority's planning.

The authority has developed 'The Pledge' which is an authority wide series of 45 promises to children in care covering all areas of their lives. This was developed by authority councillors, senior and junior staff and children. Processes are in place for children to report on whether individual promises have been kept for them and all staff, including senior directors will also monitor how their actions impact on this Pledge. This represents an exceptional commitment to meeting children's individual needs. It ensures the authority operates for their benefit and demonstrates how children in care are empowered in this council.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

Children receive good support to assist them to leave care that helps prepare them for independence. The service provides foster carers with good information and

advice in the foster carers' handbook about helping prepare children to be as independent as possible. Supervising social workers provide foster carers with ongoing advice and support. Foster carers work with children to help them learn some of the skills they will need to live independently. Social workers and the authority's leaving care and after care team (TARGET) also provide effective support and arrangements to develop pathway plans for children approaching independence are effective and timely.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. The authority has an excellent policy and procedure in place setting out how discrimination will be tackled, differences valued and equality promoted.

The service is open in the consideration and robust assessment of foster carers from a wide range of backgrounds and with differing lifestyles. Equality and diversity issues are covered during foster carers' preparation training. Their ability to work with children in a way that recognises and promotes equality and diversity is assessed prior to their approval as carers. The authority provides placements that reflect children's cultural heritage wherever possible and provides additional support where this is not the case. It has links with an independent organisation that can provide support and advice to carers looking after children from different ethnic backgrounds. It also considers wider issues of culture when considering children's care. Excellent information is produced for children and their families that is available in a range of languages. Important information for children such as the children's guide to the fostering service and complaints information is provided to children in easily accessible form that recognises potential difficulties in reading.

The service provides excellent support to children with disabilities, particularly through the short-break service which ensures that services are based round children's very specific and often complex needs. 'The Pledge' made by the authority to all children in care demonstrates the value it places on encouraging the empowerment of children in care.

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. It has produced an excellent children's guide, in DVD format, that was produced by children in care. This guide is given to children along with a journal in which they can record situations in which the authority has met, or failed to meet 'The Pledge'. However the guide and the journal do not contain the name and address of Ofsted; this could prevent children from contacting Ofsted regarding any matter that concerns them.

The fostering manager and senior managers in the authority manage and control the operations of the fostering service effectively. Clear performance information is produced and managers monitor the work carried out to ensure its quality. Reports relating to children in care, including those fostered, are presented to a meeting of

the full council every six weeks. The manager has a robust system to monitor and act on any significant incidents relating to the fostering service. File audits take place to ensure that recording is of good 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.

The authority continues to recruit and assess a steady number of applicants to foster. Despite this however, the service has reduced in size slightly because of the number of carers who have resigned or retired. Given the increase in number of fostering referrals this has placed the service under some pressure and new arrangements are being developed to endeavour to improve recruitment.

The service is robust and careful in the way it recruits and screens foster carers. Thorough suitability checks are undertaken and the service assesses applicants' competence to foster as well as considering their background and experiences of child care. Assessments are very thorough and detailed and result in very comprehensive reports being presented to panel. This ensures that those carers approved are suitable and well equipped to care for the authority's children.

Good support and supervision is provided to foster carers with supervising social workers visiting them regularly. They work effectively to ensure that support is always available to carers. Information for foster carers is good and unannounced visits take place at least annually to monitor the care being provided. Children's social workers visit children in placement regularly. The creation of a 'children in care' social work team has led to improving relationships between children and their carers and children's social workers which provides foster carers with additional support.

Reviews of foster carers are robust. Reviews are chaired by the authority's reviewing managers. They ensure that CRB and medical checks are up-to-date and monitor training undertaken. They consider carers' ongoing suitability to foster, take the views of foster children and any birth children of carers into account and are generally effective in gaining the views of children's social workers.

However, administrative arrangements for foster carers' reviews are not as good as they could be. The service clearly identifies when reviews are due but they do not always take place in timescale because of delays in paperwork and the pressures faced by reviewing managers. Similarly, after reviews have taken place reports of the reviews are often subject to significant delay. The service ensures that priority is given to carers' first reviews and those where a change of approval is necessary so that reports can be submitted to panel promptly for consideration. These are not usually subject to delay. However, in other situations examples were noted of a review being delayed as the paperwork from the previous year's review was not available and a review being presented to panel nearly seven months after the review took place.

The authority provides its carers with a range of good training that includes

'mandatory' and developmental elements. Training to be provided is set out in training programmes issued to foster carers. Training events are provided during the day and on an evening to enable as many carers as possible to attend. The authority is working to help carers achieve the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) National Occupational Standards for foster carers. The authority is also has provided National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) level 3 training for many of its carers. Centralised records of foster carers' training are not good enough and the service is finding it difficult to identify which carers have done what training. This means that it is not certain whether all carers are up-to-date with required training. However, the service has recently been given permission to appoint a training coordinator which would enable better oversight of carers' training.

Children's records are generally well maintained. Records reflect children's care status and situation and files are well maintained and well ordered. Records 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 not timely enough. Initial visits take place in line with the regulations but subsequent assessments are not completed until significantly after the timescale required by regulations. For example, a recent assessment took seven months to complete. This means that children's safety is not sufficiently promoted until the assessment of their carers has been completed. However, assessments, when they are completed, are of excellent quality and assess family and friends carers to the same level of suitability and competence as mainstream carers. Placements are well supervised and monitored during the period in which the assessments are being undertaken which provides interim assurance of children's wellbeing.

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 the health and safety checklist used is sufficiently wide ranging to assess foster homes for all eventualities (NMS 6.6)
- ensure that foster placement agreements contain all the elements required by regulation and this National Minimum Standard and clearly identify the day to day arrangements regarding responsibilities and delegated consent (NMS 8) (breach of Regulation 34(3) of the Fostering Services Regulations 2002)
- ensure that telephone enquiries are made to verify written references for staff working in the fostering service and that these checks and their outcome are clearly recorded (NMS 15.3)
- ensure that panel minutes form a clear, accurate and appropriate record of the meeting and the panel's deliberations (NMS 30)

- ensure that the children's guide contains the address and telephone number of Ofsted (NMS 1) (breach of Regulation 3(3)(c) of the Fostering Services Regulations 2002)
- ensure that effective arrangements are in place for the management and prompt reporting of foster carers' reviews (NMS 21)
- ensure the service can identify all carers training requirements and plan to meet these effectively (NMS 21)
- ensure that assessments undertaken of family and friends foster carers in situations in which children are placed on an emergency or immediate basis are undertaken in a timely manner in line with the regulations (NMS 32) (breach of Regulation 38(2) of the Fostering Services Regulations 2002).