

# Sunderland City Council Services for Looked After Children Fostering Service

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

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<b>Unique reference number</b>	SC054506
<b>Inspection date</b>	22/09/2010
<b>Inspector</b>	Stephen Smith / Sean White
<b>Type of inspection</b>	Key

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<b>Date of last inspection</b>	05/09/2007

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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

Sunderland City Council Children's Services fostering service is based in Penshaw near Sunderland. The service recruits, assesses and supports foster carers to provide placements to children and young people with a wide range of needs, including long and short-term placements. The service also provides foster carers for young people with disabilities within a short break scheme and supports a growing number of family and friends foster carers. A specialist fee paid foster care scheme is also provided to care for children who need additional support.

At the time of the inspection the service was supporting approximately 210 foster carers with around 285 children in placements. The service has a staff team comprising 13 fostering social workers responsible for assessing and supporting foster carers as well as administrative staff. The fostering service manager is supported by two team managers.

### Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This was an announced full inspection of Sunderland City 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 well-being. The effectiveness of the service's organisation was also inspected as was its work to promote equality and diversity.

Sunderland City Council operates a strong fostering service that provides good outcomes for children overall with some outstanding aspects. The service is robust in its arrangements for assessing and approving foster carers. It provides its carers with very good support and supervision to help them undertake their work with children well. The service also has an effective placement process that works well to plan and match placements. These factors mean that children are placed with foster carers who meet their needs. This service is well managed and monitored. It has a motivated staff team who undertake their duties with a commitment to meeting children's needs. The service consults children well and has good arrangements to involve them in service developments and delivery.

Children are provided with outstanding support for their health and educational attainment. The service has strong working relationships with its partners which allow the provision of creative and high quality initiatives in these areas. These help produce excellent outcomes for children.

The fostering service has continued to develop and improve since the last inspection and demonstrates a focus on improvement. The service's procedures and practice regarding the commencement of the foster carer assessment process are not correctly aligned to the regulations. This leads to a lack of fairness for some applicants. Additionally, some attention is required to ensure that all foster carers have recently updated essential basic training in safeguarding, behaviour management and first aid.

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

At the last inspection of the service a number of recommendations were made. The service was asked to improve its management of exemptions from the usual fostering limit. It was also asked to ensure that foster carer reviews take place every 12 months and include the views of fostered children and their social workers. It was recommended that improvements be made to foster carers' safe care policies, arrangements for social workers to visit children in their placements and some elements of foster carer assessments. A recommendation was made that foster carers were made fully aware of the range of consultation initiatives for children. It was also recommended that an aspect of recording regarding children's education be improved and that some elements of foster carer training should be developed further.

The fostering service has addressed all these matters although some further work is required to ensure that all foster carers have first aid training that is up to date.

### **Helping children to be healthy**

The provision is outstanding.

The fostering service is outstanding in the way it supports and promotes children's health. The authority has developed effective partnerships with health services at a strategic level and these translate operationally into very strong support for fostered children and young people. 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.

A wide range of training is provided for carers in specialist health issues as well as matters relating to the promotion of good health and healthy lifestyles. Very good specialist health training is provided for carers of children with disabilities. The authority regards first aid training for foster carers as mandatory although it does not provide enough courses to ensure that all carers have a current qualification.

Access to mental health services for fostered children is excellent with arrangements for them to have fast track access to the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service if required. Looked after children's nurses work closely with the fostering service.

Impressively effective arrangements exist for children to receive annual medical checks as children looked after by the local authority. Psychological support for children is available through direct consultation and also through fortnightly foster carer consultations. Any issues identified through children's health assessments are identified immediately by the psychologist and appointments are arranged promptly. For example, in one situation an appointment was arranged for a date within three weeks of a child's health assessment. This process of information sharing means that children receive excellent support.

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

The provision is good.

The authority's fostering social workers visit foster carers' homes regularly and ensure 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 regularly. Risk assessments are undertaken for all placements.

The authority has an excellent placement planning and management process that supports the making of well-considered placements. This process involves a multi-agency panel that considers every placement to ensure that foster care is the most appropriate arrangement. All placements are considered by this panel with emergency placements being looked at retrospectively. This means the authority is clear about the reason for all placements it makes and identifies any additional support that may be required. Long-term placements are very carefully planned and matched. Children's plans for permanence are considered by the fostering panel as is the suitability of carers for a permanent matched placement before the match is considered. This is excellent and promotes stability and positive outcomes for children.

Foster placement agreements meetings take place for all placements. These ensure that appropriate agreements are drawn up and help ensure that carers receive the information about children they need. This process of sharing information generally works well although there remains some room for improvement in this area. Placements are risk assessed to ensure their suitability. The social workers of children in placement are consulted about the placement of an additional young person. Exemptions from the usual fostering limit are used in a considered manner and well monitored to ensure that young people's needs are being met. Placements made with independent fostering agencies are monitored and the authority is clear about the reasons for these placements being made.

Fostering social workers visit placements very regularly and meet with children. Children's social workers also regularly visit the children they have in placements. Joint visits are undertaken if necessary. As such, young people are able to raise any concerns they have and placements are well monitored. Children feel safe and well cared for in their placements. One said, 'I am very much loved and certainly protected. I couldn't ask for a better family.' They know who to speak to if they are

worried and report positive outcomes from their foster placements. Another young person said, 'I love this family, they spoil me and look after me really good'. The authority has a clear procedure for responding to any complaints, allegations or significant events and for notifying the relevant people.

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. However, training arrangements are not good enough to ensure that all carers have this updated periodically. Foster carers develop safe caring policies for their homes. These are specific to the young person concerned and are agreed with children's social workers to ensure that children are safeguarded.

The authority operates a robust and careful staff recruitment procedure that ensures that all the required checks on the suitability of new staff members are carried out. This helps ensure that young people are kept safe.

The authority's fostering panel is thorough in its consideration of the cases presented. It receives full information on which to base its deliberations. Panel is correctly constituted and only considers cases when it is properly quorate in line with the regulations. It makes clear recommendations which are well supported by accurate minutes which record the reasons for the recommendation. This robust panel process ensures that children are placed with carers who are suitable to meet their needs.

## **Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do**

The provision is outstanding.

Children and their families receive a service that values them and supports their diverse needs. The authority recruits and prepares carers to care for children from a range of backgrounds and with a range of different needs. Applicants' ability to reflect diversity and promote equality is assessed before they are considered suitable people to care for children placed by the authority. Foster carers' preparation training covers equality and diversity and this is reinforced with ongoing training. 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 carers work sensitively to balance the wishes of young people and the requirements of their religion.

Children with disabilities and those with pronounced health needs are very well served by the authority's short break fostering service. This provides children with disabilities and their families with support based on their individual needs. Creative work has taken place to secure funding to provide carers with any special equipment, including vehicles that they need to support children with disabilities. Very effective work with health and education services supports young people well and minimises the disadvantages they face.

The authority provides outstanding support for children's education through its

'virtual school' for looked after children. This ensures that prompt and effective support is provided to children where needed. Focussed individual support and tuition is provided to children both inside and outside school; children are provided with laptop computers and other educational equipment they need. One young person said, 'I am getting extra help for my important lessons to get good grades'. School attendance is well monitored and managed and effective work is done to minimise school exclusions. An impressive scheme is in operation by which looked after children in key school years receive activity packs in the post every month that contain educational activities, games and materials for them to undertake with their foster carers.

Foster carers are provided with training, information and advice about education arrangements, how to help children and the support available to them. Personal education plans (PEP) are promptly drawn up for children looked after by the authority and these are then updated regularly. The authority places a great importance on recognising and promoting the achievement of fostered children. Recognition and achievements events take place regularly providing rewards for achievement.

The authority's short break fostering service that provides respite care for children and young people with a range of disabilities is a strong service. It has capacity to provide short-break care for all children and families who require this. Foster carers are well trained and very well supported. They are provided with any specific equipment they may need to meet children's needs. This service allows children to experience a positive lifestyle while promoting the involvement of families as the people central to their children's lives.

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

The provision is good.

Children are supported to maintain contact with family and friends wherever this is appropriate for them. Assessments and the preparation of foster carers covers their ability to work with birth parents and to support and promote contact. Contact arrangements are taken into account when matching children with carers and are clearly set out in foster placement agreements. Children's social workers or social work assistants support and supervise contact where necessary and carers undertake these duties where appropriate. Individual arrangements are made for contact based on the preferences of children and their parents or the specific needs of the situation. For example, one child was supported at a community leisure venue based on the interests of the young person and the family member.

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. Children are consulted before their own reviews and able to express their views. The authority has recently implemented a new method of seeking children's views on their own care which is already showing benefits. Children's views are also sought for the reviews of their foster carers. This helps ensure that



placements remain suitable for them. Young people receive clear information about being fostered and are provided with information about how to complain.

The authority involves and consults young people about the wider aspects of its services for children. The authority has a 'change council' comprised of looked after children and operates a youth parliament. The change council is involved in helping develop the service further. For example, it has been involved in foster carer recruitment and has been instrumental in amending some of the authority's procedures. These initiatives mean that the voices of fostered young people are increasingly well heard and considered within the authority.

### **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is good.

The fostering service works well to assist children to leave care and support their move 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. Carers receive excellent support and this helps maintain placement stability. Robust arrangements to match long-term placements help young people to develop relationships and remain in foster care beyond their 16th birthday. The authority's leaving care service works with young people appropriately. Although foster carers report some inconsistencies in the work of this service some good examples of support are evident.

### **Organisation**

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The authority recruits carers to meet the needs of children from a range of backgrounds and cultures. Carers' assessments cover equality and diversity matters and training in this area for carers is provided. The service works effectively to provide children with placements with well-matched foster carers. Children with disabilities are well served by the authority's short break service. Impressively effective arrangements to support and promote children's health and educational achievement help minimise the disadvantages they face. Practice and procedure regarding the process of foster carer assessments and access to the Independent Review Mechanism does not fully promote fairness for applicants whose applications are not approved.

The Statement of Purpose for the fostering service accurately sets out its approach to working with foster carers and the service it provides. The authority has two children's guides to fostering; one for younger children and one for older which provide the required information.

The authority displays a positive commitment to the management and development

of its fostering service. It has robustly actioned matters identified at previous inspections and continues to develop further. Strong work has also been undertaken in the development of effective working partnerships with education and health services which improve the lives of fostered young people. Day-to-day management is good and processes for quality monitoring the activities of the service are robust. The committed staff team are appropriately trained, supervised and supported and workload management systems are in place to ensure they can do their jobs effectively.

The fostering service's practice and procedure regarding the approval of foster carers is unclear regarding the point in time at which the assessment process commences. Health checks on potential foster carers are undertaken before the service considers an assessment to have commenced. The service can make a suitability decision on the basis of such a check before it considers it has received an application. Consequently, a negative decision at this point does not allow for a determination of suitability to be made by the panel and decision maker. This prevents access to the Independent Review Mechanism. This process is not as set out in the relevant regulations and is not fully fair and inclusive.

The service works well to recruit foster carers. Preparation training is good and includes input from foster carers and fostered young people. Thorough suitability checks are undertaken. The service assesses applicants' competence to foster as well as considering their background and experiences of child care. Assessments are of very good quality. This thorough process means that new foster carers are well prepared and suitable to look after vulnerable young people.

The fostering service provides its carers with excellent support. Supervising social workers visit foster carers on a monthly basis and have frequent telephone contact in between times. Foster carers speak very highly of the support provided to them. Supervising social workers carry out unannounced visits annually to monitor the work of foster carers. A range of support groups operate and foster carers are involved in the coordination of these. Foster carers are also involved in providing training and take part in an additional out of hours support rota to support other carers who need this.

Foster carers' reviews take place annually. This is an effective process that is well controlled and implemented. The views of fostered children and their social workers are effectively sought for these reviews which provide a strong reflection of carers' continued suitability to foster.

The authority provides its carers with a range of mandatory and developmental training. Training is provided on a rolling programme and specific training can be provided based on the individual needs of carers or the circumstances of the children they are looking after. Arrangements to provide all carers with basic training in first aid, child protection and behaviour management are not effective enough. The number of carers undertaking this training each year is not sufficient to ensure that all carers have training that is up to date and current. The authority's arrangements to train carers to the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) National

Occupational Standards for foster carers are well in hand.

Children's records are generally well maintained. Files are well-structured and contain copies of all key documents relating to the young person. Files contain clear chronologies that allow easy access to information about key events happening to the young person and their family. 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. Administrative records held by the fostering service are generally well maintained. The files of foster carers are retained in both electronic and paper format as the service is working to implement a process of electronic record keeping. The service is able to access the information it requires between the two recording formats.

Arrangements to assess and support family and friends carers are effective. Assessments of family and friends carers are of good quality and a clear process is in place to ensure that assessments carried out under Regulation 38 of the Fostering Services Regulations 2002 are carried out in a timely manner. Good support is provided to family and friends carers in a way that reflects the different nature of the care they provide.

## **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 there are structures and systems in place to ensure assessments of carers are managed effectively. Specifically, that arrangements regarding the commencement of the assessment process and access to the Independent Review Mechanism are fair and in compliance with the regulations (NMS 16.6)
- ensure that foster carers are trained in the skills required to provide high quality care. Specifically, that all carers have regularly updated safeguarding, behaviour management and first aid training. (NMS 23.1)