

# Newcastle City Council Fostering Unit, Children's Social Care

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

Newcastle Fostering Service is known as 'Foster a Future' and is based at the Sheriff Leas Office in Blakelaw, Newcastle upon Tyne. The service recruits, assesses and supports foster carers to provide placements to children and young people with a wide range of needs, including long-term foster care and short-term placements. The service also provides foster carers for young people with disabilities within a shared care scheme and supports a growing number of family and friends foster carers. At the time of the inspection the service was supporting approximately 223 fostering households with about 305 children in placements. The service has a staff team of experienced social workers responsible for supervising and assessing foster carers, working alongside experienced administrative staff. The manager is supported by two deputy managers.

### Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This fostering service operates to high standards. The manager is very experienced and provides effective leadership to a dedicated, knowledgeable and experienced team of staff. There are good administrative systems in place to provide support to the foster carers, staff and the fostering panel. Over half of the foster carers who completed a survey said that the service has changed for the better over the last 12 months.

Foster carers are good at meeting the health and care needs of the children placed with them and providing them with a safe, caring environment. There are good relationships established between the children and their foster carers. This is manifested in the stability of placements that are based on an appropriate matching process which focuses on the needs and welfare of children. Foster carers actively support and encourage children to achieve their potential both socially and educationally. Where children have a disability, this is not seen as a limitation to their ability to achieve. One young person commented: 'I am very well cared for and happy where I am living and have a good social worker and lots of friends.' Another said: 'I have everything I need and feel very happy where I am.'

The service positively promotes equality and diversity and will consider applicants to become foster carers irrespective of, for example, their culture, religion or sexual orientation. The service ensures that the most important consideration is people's dedication and commitment to provide children who are disadvantaged, with a loving stable home. Children live in foster homes that provide them with a safe, caring and homely environment.

The service is good at assessing people who apply to be foster carers to ensure they are suitable. It is very good at supporting foster carers to provide a safe, caring environment for children that will help meet their needs and keep them safe. The great majority of foster carers indicated that the service is either 'good' or 'outstanding' at supporting them in caring for children. The service is committed to ensuring that foster carers are appropriately trained, to develop their skills and knowledge in order to provide the best possible care for children. The service takes a flexible approach to support carers' access to appropriate training where needed.

The work of the fostering panel is well organised and panel members are thorough and conscientious in carrying out their responsibilities. They ensure that decisions are timely and made in the best interests of children.

There are good arrangements for the support, supervision and training of staff who work for the fostering service. The service carries out a range of checks on staff to help ensure only suitable people are employed and to safeguard children. However, the service's recruitment and selection procedures are not sufficiently robust.

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

Following the last inspection a number of requirements and recommendations were made. These related to: information about the service; health and safety checks of foster carers' homes; panel members' access to panel procedures; suitability checks on staff and foster carers; and the arrangements for monitoring the service and safety of young people. The service has taken action to address these requirements and recommendations and this has improved the overall outcomes for children and young people.

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

The provision is good.

The service is good at ensuring that the health care needs of the children are appropriately met and their health and well-being is promoted. Foster carers have a clear understanding of their responsibilities to ensure that, where required, children access the necessary health resources. Supervising social workers and children's social workers, liaise effectively in order to provide foster carers with the appropriate health information for each child. Foster carers encourage children to adopt healthy lifestyles and to participate in appropriate physical activities, as well as supporting them to enjoy their hobbies and interests.

Foster carers ensure children are registered with a local doctor and other health professionals as required. They are also aware of their responsibilities for monitoring the health needs of the children and making sure the service and the children's social workers are kept fully informed of any concerns or treatment required. There is a good partnership arrangement between the service and other services, such as the local children and adolescent mental health service (CAMHS), to ensure children have appropriate access to the services they need. For example, the CAMHS team may

fast-track referrals for children who are in foster placements, and this service is available to children who move out of the authority, provided the placements are accessible. This partnership also helps make sure foster carers have good access to advice and guidance on any health related issues. Foster carers also have good access to relevant training regarding health care issues and health promotion. This includes access to training relating to the specific needs of some children.

Foster carers provide the children with a safe, clean and well-maintained homely environment to live. This is covered in the assessment of foster carers and includes carrying out a risk assessment of any potential hazards. These risk assessments are carried out annually to help ensure that children continue to live in a safe environment. Foster carers have a good understanding of their health and safety responsibilities. They receive training that covers the service's policy in respect of health and safety. Foster carers also receive training in emergency first aid to enable them to take appropriate action should a child in their care require it.

The great majority of foster carers who completed a survey confirmed that the service was either 'good' or 'outstanding' at: supporting them to help children be healthy and have healthy lifestyles and, supporting them to support children to undertake activities in the community. One foster carer wrote: 'The fostering service offers an outstanding network of professionals that children in my care can access when required.'

Of the children who completed a survey 21 confirmed they 'always' get support and advice about being healthy. One child said this 'usually' happened and two said it 'sometimes' happens. All of the children said they 'feel well cared for'. One said that their foster carers gave them the opportunity 'to try new things and learn more.'

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

The provision is good.

Foster carers promote the safety and welfare of children they foster. The service ensures that children are looked after in a safe and caring home environment, and that foster carers are appropriately trained in their safeguarding responsibilities. Training covers safe caring and, where appropriate, skills to care for children with specific needs, such as children who have disabilities. The service works effectively with other agencies concerned with child protection, such as local schools, to manage any safeguarding matters. Regular meetings of the Council's Multi Agency Looked After Partnership (MALAP) help to ensure this happens.

All the children spoken to, or who completed a survey, confirmed they feel well cared for, and there was evidence of positive relationships between foster carers and children. For example, one young person wrote: 'I am very happy and safe where I live.' Another wrote: 'My carers take good care of me and I wouldn't want to be anywhere else. I feel safe and settled ... my carers are funny and we get along very well.'

The service has procedures for handling incidents when children go missing or are absent without consent. Foster carers receive training covering these procedures to ensure they take appropriate action if a child is missing. The management team monitors any such incidents to make sure that appropriate action has been taken to protect children; there have been very few incidents during the last year.

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

The provision is good.

Foster carers provide children with a caring and supportive home environment that helps promote and support children's positive behaviour. The service provides training in positive care and behaviour management to increase the confidence and skills of foster carers. In addition, foster carers are provided with good quality information about the backgrounds of children. This helps them to understand a child's needs and provide appropriate support, including when children display behaviour that can be challenging.

Foster carers actively encourage and support children to pursue appropriate leisure interests. This helps the children to develop skills and improve their self-confidence. Children spoken to said they took part in a range of activities such as canoeing, swimming and cycling. The majority of foster carers who completed a survey said the fostering service is good at helping them support children to undertake activities in the community. This includes producing a regular newsletter that contains information about activities and events that are available. Children benefit from the good links the agency has with other services such as the Arts and Culture department of the Council as well as the support provided by two resource workers who work in the fostering agency. For example, some children have been supported to participate in drama workshops and are now engaged in other projects as a result of this.

A strong feature of this service is the positive support provided for the children to achieve their potential at school. This has resulted in some children showing a marked improvement in school attendance and academic progress. Foster carers take their responsibilities seriously and advocate on behalf of children to ensure they have the same educational opportunities as other children. The service works effectively and in partnership with other agencies to promote and support the education of children. For example, children benefit from good access to personal tuition services if needed, including specialist tuition in literacy and numeracy. The service also aims to provide each foster carer's household with a lap top to help children with their homework.

Of those foster carers who completed a survey, one confirmed they receive satisfactory help from the service to support the education of the children they care for. Fourteen said the help they receive is good and nine said it is outstanding. One foster carer said it is inadequate.

The majority of children who completed a survey confirmed they are 'always' helped

with their education; two said 'usually' and one said 'sometimes'. One young person wrote that their carers 'give us encouragement to do our homework and hand it in at the right time.' Another said: 'I can talk to my teachers, social worker or foster carers if I am stuck with any issues about my education.'

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

The provision is good.

It is evident that the fostering service and the Council actively support and encourage children to express their opinions about their care and on important matters affecting them. The majority of foster carers who completed a survey said the service is 'good' or 'outstanding' at involving children in decisions about their daily lives, and about how the fostering service is run. One foster carer said that the service: '... really tries to achieve this in several different ways such as events, questionnaires, groups and panels.' There is a well organised participation group for children, which meets regularly. This forum contributes its views on a range of issues that impact on the quality of care and service received by looked after children in Newcastle. Young people who attend this forum said that they feel listened to and that they are 'able to influence what's happening.'

Children are also confident that their views count within their foster home. Of the 24 children who completed a survey, 22 said that their foster carers 'always' listen to them and take notice of their opinions. Foster carers also support and encourage children to take an active part in meetings such as their statutory reviews, so they can have their say about their care and plans for their future.

The service ensures children receive appropriate information about how to complain and who they can contact for independent advice and support. Of those children who completed a survey, 19 confirmed they know how to make a complaint, one said they didn't know how to. Asked if they know who to speak to if they are unhappy or have a personal problem: 19 children said 'always', one said 'usually' and two said 'sometimes'. One young person commented: 'I've been sent loads of letters on how to make a complaint.'

Foster carers support and encourage the children to develop their self-confidence and esteem. They enable children to experience life in a family environment where they can exercise choices within limits that are reasonable and appropriate. Foster carers are supported to make appropriate delegated decisions taking into account risks and the emotional maturity of the child. The service ensures foster carers are fully briefed about a child's care plan and assessed needs.

Foster carers are good at supporting and encouraging children to maintain and develop appropriate contact with family and friends. They receive support and training to manage any difficult issues that may arise, as well as practical help where needed.

The service tries to make sure, wherever possible, children are introduced to their



foster carers at a pace that suits the child. Foster carers are aware of the emotional sensitivity of these situations and the importance of welcoming a child into their family. Fostering service staff try to ensure there is careful matching of children with foster carers and this involves fully sharing information about a child with the foster carers. There were also good examples of where social workers gave older children relevant information and involved them in choosing an appropriate placement. Overall placement stability is good and this is helped by the reduction in emergency placements.

## **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is good.

There are good arrangements for preparing and supporting young into adulthood and the service is committed to keeping young people in placements, where appropriate, after they reach the age of 18. The service works well with foster carers to ensure young people are prepared for independence. This can be an emotionally demanding time and the role of the foster carer is critical to the success of any transitions process. Foster carers are clear about their responsibilities which include: advising and guiding young people on personal relationships and how to take care of their health; preparing them for the demands of work or higher education, and helping them to develop skills such as budgeting.

The Council has a 'teenagers to work' scheme that provides young people with the opportunity to gain appropriate work experience. The Council is also currently developing its apprenticeship programme and young people who apply may be offered a preferential interview. Following consultation with young people and foster carers the fostering service is currently recruiting to increase the number of foster carers who can provide supported lodgings. The aim is to enable, where appropriate, more young people to remain with their carers once they reach adulthood, before they move to more independent accommodation.

## **Organisation**

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The guidance and training carers and staff receive helps to ensure this. The service welcomes applications from people from any ethnic, cultural or religious background; who already have children; who don't have any children; who are single; who are part of a couple; who are lesbian or gay and who are employed or unemployed. Foster carers are selected for their positive approach towards caring for children who need a safe, positive and stable home environment. All foster carers receive mandatory training in equality and diversity as part of their preparation as well as training relating to the individual needs of children of children in their care. The service is part of a consortium that supports a project known as Sahara. This project helps services recruit and support potential adopters from minority ethnic backgrounds.

The service has a pool of dedicated foster carers who are well trained and equipped with the skills to provide a safe, caring and homely environment for children. The selection process for applicants to become foster carers is robust, with an emphasis on recruiting people from diverse backgrounds. Applicants are treated with respect and without prejudice. Training for carers prepares them well for the challenges of fostering.

The fostering panel is properly constituted and includes people who are suitably experienced to undertake the demands of the panel process. The panel has a legal advisor but currently does not have a medical advisor. However, the service is addressing this and the panel does have access to medical advice to assist the panel. The fostering service management team and the panel chair ensure that all reports presented to panel are of a good quality. This enables the panel to make appropriate recommendations to the agency decision maker. Panel members clearly understand the quality assurance role of the panel and they are thorough and diligent in their approach to ensuring the welfare of children is safeguarded. The administrative support to the panel is efficient, ensuring that panel business is carried out in a timely manner.

The process of matching children with foster carers is conducted effectively to try to ensure good outcomes for the children. This involves information sharing between social workers, members of the placement team and foster carers. When possible and appropriate, social workers also make sure children are involved in this process. These measures promote the stability of placements and likely success of the matching process. Where gaps are identified the service ensures plans are in place to provide additional support or training. Foster carers said placement stability is good. Asked, in a survey, about the quality of information they received before a placement, most indicated it was either 'good' or 'satisfactory'. Three foster carers said it was 'outstanding', but three indicated it was 'inadequate'. One foster carer said: 'I only received information on a child's behaviour and needs after the placement began.'

Foster carers are clear about their responsibilities and they understand the aims and objectives outlined in the service's Statement of Purpose. The children's guide to the fostering service is well designed and in a child-friendly format that contains clear and accessible information, including how to access an independent advocate. Young people helped to design and update the guide.

The fostering service is managed efficiently and effectively. The manager is qualified and has significant experience of working in a fostering service. The fostering team is also comprised of staff who are qualified and experienced. The manager and two deputy managers provide effective day-to-day oversight of the service and undertake professional supervision of the staff. It is clear that the agency is well organised, and managed and staffed in a manner that delivers good outcomes for the children who are fostered.

The service has satisfactory systems for the recruitment and selection of staff and panel members, to ensure only appropriately qualified and suitable people are

appointed, and that children are safeguarded. However, the Council's recruitment and selection procedures are not sufficiently robust. They do not cover all the recommended checks on staff. The fostering service follows good practices in the selection, vetting and assessment of foster carers, including family and friends carers, ensuring that the safeguarding of children is at the forefront of this process.

The training of new foster carers is good. All applicants assessed as suitable are required to enrol on a four day pre-approval training programme. There are also very good opportunities for foster carers to develop their skills through regular post approval training events held throughout the year. All foster carers have a training portfolio identifying training they have completed. Their personal development and training needs are considered at their annual reviews. A foster carer commented: 'There are many training programmes to help us understand all the different issues that we may face.'

The service ensures that foster carers, including family and friends carers, receive good support. Carers are able to access advice and guidance as necessary, to ensure consistent high quality care is provided for the children. As well as being allocated a supervising social worker they can contact a duty social worker or, outside of office hours, a qualified and experienced foster carer for support and advice. The supervising social worker is responsible for maintaining appropriate contact with foster carers and monitoring their continuing competence and performance. As part of the arrangements for monitoring foster carers and the quality of care they provide to children, supervising social workers carry out two unannounced visits a year to each foster carer. This is very good practice. A foster carer said: 'Regular supervision and support from my supervising social worker ensures I can meet the needs of children in my care.' Another said: 'My supervising social worker gives me support and help and listens to any concerns I may have.'

Foster carers have a clear understanding of their safeguarding responsibilities, and know how to refer onto the service any issues or concerns. There are appropriate supporting mechanisms available for staff or foster carers who are subject to a safeguarding enquiry. The service ensures that any allegations are handled effectively and appropriately.

There are good arrangements for the support and supervision of staff. The management team provides regular supervision that helps ensure good quality standards of work are maintained. Staff have good access to training and demonstrated a commitment to continually improve and develop their skills and knowledge. The management team also has a very positive approach to staff development.

The service is managed very efficiently and there are effective procedures in place for monitoring and controlling the operations of the service. For example, the manager ensures all records are monitored to ensure compliance with policies and procedures. If shortfalls in standards are identified the manager ensures action is taken to address any issues.

Records are well maintained and these are kept in a secure office. Foster carers are aware of their responsibilities in respect of confidentiality and the security of records they keep in their home. These measures promote the safety of the children.

The fostering service's offices are well maintained and well equipped and there is secure with access. This is an efficient service with good administrative systems to ensure effective support to staff and foster carers. This includes making sure foster carers receive payments in a timely way.

There is a suitable notifications system in place whereby significant events affecting a foster child or the placement are notified to the appropriate authorities. This helps ensure appropriate action is taken to protect the children.

The service works closely with its foster carers and supports them to play an active role in children's care plans. Foster carers are encouraged to contribute their views as to the effectiveness of these plans. They are trusted partners in the care of the children and it is evident that the fostering service and its staff value their contribution.

## **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 the agency's staff recruitment and selection procedures are consistent with good recruitment practice and all applicable statutory requirements and guidance. (NMS 19.2)