

Gateshead Metropolitan Borough Council Fostering Service

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

Unique reference number	SC054507
Inspection date	17/11/2011
Inspector	Stella Henderson
Type of inspection	Key

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Date of last inspection	14/09/2007

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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

The fostering service is part of Gateshead Council's Looked after Children's Service based within the Learning and Children Department. Gateshead Council fostering service recruits, assesses and supports foster carers to provide short, medium and long-term placements to children and young people with a wide range of needs.

As well as mainstream carers the service also provides an intensive fostering scheme, and has a number of carers who are paid a fee and are known as contract carers. Contract carers provide emergency, remand and task focused placements. Mother and baby placements and shared care for children with disability are also included, as well as respite care through their home from home scheme.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

Young people make excellent progress and enjoy successful outcomes in the care of Gateshead Fostering Service. Young people say they feel safe. They benefit from being looked after by carers who are very carefully assessed and scrutinised by the fostering panel. Good health is promoted and young people are encouraged and supported to pursue their education. Young people are frequently consulted by the service and their views and opinions make a difference to their day to day lives and the service delivery.

Good quality support is offered to foster carers who are well supervised and undertake relevant training. Young people are carefully matched with foster carers who are best suited to meet their needs. This enables young people to thrive and prosper in their foster homes.

These outcomes are achieved as a result of a strong corporate approach, clear management objectives and the efforts of a very competent staff team. Some shortfalls are identified, however, and recommendations are raised in order to drive forward further improvements for young people.

Improvements since the last inspection

Recommendations were made at the last inspection in relation to recording and procedural shortfalls. These have been met which contributes to positive outcomes for young people.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

Young people's good health is very effectively promoted. Prior to placement, the fostering service ensures that the fullest information possible is secured so that young people's health needs are quickly identified and addressed. Once in placement young people are registered with a range of local primary health care services. This ensures that immunisations, dental and optical health checks are kept up to date.

Young people are supported to develop a good understanding of what constitutes a healthy lifestyle. Foster carers confirm that the service promotes healthy eating, ensuring young people enjoy a balanced diet. One young person commented, 'I have to eat all my dinner up, I'm not allowed any snacks. I love grapes and bananas.'

Young people benefit from receiving specialist help to address specific health conditions when they require it, and in particular to help meet their emotional and psychological health needs. Young people have easy access to specialist health workers, a looked after children's nurse and a psychologist, all with specific remits to work with looked after children. Interventions and support from these professionals contribute significantly to young people's improved outcomes, particularly in regard to mental health and substance misuse.

Health professionals provide information and advice to young people on themes such as healthy eating, sexual health and smoking cessation. Young people are also provided with opportunities to engage in activities which encourage exercise and an interest in sports. This bolsters young people's psychological and physical health.

Young people's health is closely monitored through annual well-being and development checks, and by foster carers who report promptly any accidents or concerns to the agency. A wide range of health training is built into the foster carer training programme which contributes to young people enjoying good health. This includes training to meet the specific needs of children with disability. Young people's health needs are considered as part of the process of matching them with foster carers, and arrangements for delegating consent for medical treatment are clearly agreed.

Young people live in safe and nurturing environments. Foster carer's homes are subject to health and safety checks and regular announced and unannounced visits are carried out. Room sharing between young people is risk assessed. These measures ensure the promotion of young people's privacy and welfare.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

Young people's welfare is strongly promoted and safeguarded. Young people confirm that they feel safe in their foster homes. They know who to turn to if they feel

vulnerable or have concerns about anything and confirm that they know who to speak to if they want to make a complaint.

Young people report that there is no bullying and the majority of young people choose not to go missing from their foster homes. When this does occur foster carers take appropriate steps to report them missing and this is closely monitored by the service. One young person noted, 'I feel safe, protected and appreciated.'

Young people are looked after by a service that is operated by managers and staff who hold appropriate qualifications and are highly experienced in protecting children. Foster carers are trained to recognise safeguarding issues and supervision in relation to this is robust. Young people are protected because allegations and complaints are swiftly responded to and the procedures for dealing with these matters is very effectively implemented.

A range of other highly effective measures such as risk assessments, environmental health and safety checks and rigorous assessment of foster carers and staff afford young people an extremely high level of protection. Young people, who are vulnerable because of their own behaviours, are protected by an additional risk management process. This joint agency approach with the youth offending team ensures that young people with these specific needs are very closely monitored and supported.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Young people confirm that they are made to feel like one of the family. They enjoy emotionally rewarding and nurturing relationships with their foster carers and this results in young people being better able to modify their behaviours. Along with placement stability this provides young people with highly beneficial attachment experiences and enables them to develop emotional resilience and a sense of trust and belonging.

Young people are afforded a diverse range of opportunities to enhance their confidence and self-esteem. They have the opportunity experience a range of different activities both at home and away, such as holidays abroad, attending brownies and guides, rugby, football and other sports. This helps young people to integrate into their local communities and develop friendship networks.

Young people have excellent opportunities to enjoy educational achievements irrespective of their age or ability. They receive clear messages about the importance of a good education and are given every chance to succeed. For example, foster carers ensure that young people are up in time and are properly dressed and equipped for the school day. One young person noted, 'my foster carers make sure I always attend school' and another that, 'we go to parents' evenings to see how my education is going.'

Young people succeed educationally because Gateshead Fostering service has a range of mechanisms to support young people in their education. This includes foster carers strongly advocating for young people's educational needs, as well as the support of a virtual head teacher and systems which track and monitor the attendance and educational attainment of young people. As a result young people are ambitious for themselves and secure college and university places, work placements and apprenticeships.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

Young people are listened to by the fostering service and their views carry considerable weight in terms of influencing service development and in their day-to-day care. This enables young people to feel valued and respected which in turn helps them to establish a positive self-view. One young person noted that their foster carer, 'takes note of what I say and writes it down and talks to my social worker about my feelings', another that, 'I always go to meetings and have my say.'

Young people's views about what they value in foster carers are taken into account at a corporate level. For example, the Engagement Plan for Gateshead has been informed by young people and includes principles created by members of the One Voice Youth Network forum. This provides young people with a powerful medium to convey key messages from their perspective and has resulted in, for instance, young people delivering training to carers and staff and the establishment of a Sunday lunch club for young people who have left the care of the authority.

Young people have their say on plans and decisions made for them and they are actively encouraged to attend and contribute to their statutory reviews. One young person commented, 'I told my foster carers I didn't want to go to contact anymore. They spoke to the social worker and now I only go if I want to.' Another young person noted 'I said I wanted to stay here until I'm an adult, and now they are changing the plan to long term for me and my sister.'

Young people's sense of belonging and worth is bolstered because the fostering service values diversity and successfully promotes a culture of equality. It provides a range of carers who meet young people's cultural, ethnicity and linguistic needs. Young people's contact with their family of origin is also actively promoted which reinforces their identity and helps them to maintain their relationships with family, friends and their local community.

The fostering service strongly promotes social integration through linking young people into arts, leisure and cultural activities. As a result, young people are successfully engaged in their local and wider communities, learning about their own culture as well as that of others. For example, young people and their foster carers have participated in a community arts project, explored the Christian heritage during a visit to Durham Cathedral and experienced an element of another culture through a

visit to a Polish restaurant.

Young people's sense of self-worth and confidence is also strengthened through foster carers encouraging and supporting their individual interests or talents. Foster carers, and the service itself, celebrate young people's achievements and look for opportunities to boost young people's individuality and self-esteem.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is outstanding.

Young people enjoy strong support which enables them to make a successful transition to independence. They are actively involved in their pathway planning, which focus on a range of needs such as finance, housing, health, education and employment. Professionals from these agencies help to provide important and highly effective multi-agency support. One young person noted 'I have had meetings with Connexions. My social worker asks questions about what I would like to happen in the future and my carer gives me advice.'

Young people particularly benefit from a drop in centre where a number of professionals from partner agencies are on hand to offer advice, support and assistance in an informal setting. One young person noted, 'we talk about getting a job, learn how to cook and clean, education and housing.' Young people commented that they welcomed the friendly informal nature of these sessions.

Young people are aware that they can remain in foster care after their 16th birthday through supported living arrangements. One young person noted, 'I'll be staying with my carers until I go to university', another that, 'until I'm about 22 at least'. This promotes a sense of stability and supports young people to make informed life choices and preparations for independence at a manageable pace.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

Young people experience excellent support and stability from their foster carers. They have their needs met to a very high standard which results in outstanding outcomes. Careful consideration is given to young people's placement needs and one foster carer commented that, 'I always get enough information on which to make a decision about a placement.' Another stated that, 'all placements are well matched with the whole family.'

These successful outcomes are achieved because foster carers receive effective support, supervision and training opportunities. One foster carer commented on how they had benefited from the, 'excellent training programme' and another described the helpfulness of, 'monthly meetings with my link worker checking diaries, progress and any concerns.'

Young people's needs are central to the operation of fostering panel and the foster service is well managed which impacts positively on young people. One stakeholder noted that the fostering service is, 'positive, with professional relationships and good communication', and a social worker noted that, 'children placed consistently make good progress.'

Fostering staff report that they are very well supported. They confirm that they are able to access training, advice and guidance. This ensures that staff understand what they are accountable for in terms of meeting the needs of young people. Managers strive for continuous improvement in the service they provide for young people and often exceed the aims and objectives set out in the Statement of Purpose.

Case files relating to the care and welfare of young people are maintained to a good standard and these records are compliant with legal requirements. This ensures that young people have an accurate record of their experiences and events during their time in foster care.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. Young people's individuality is strongly promoted and they benefit from the emphasis on equality and diversity which is apparent in practice. Foster carers are drawn from backgrounds which provide young people with role models who reflect and celebrate a range of diverse cultural, religious and sexual identities.

Shortfalls in practice are noted which have some indirect impact on young people. For example, recruitment strategies have not been successful and this has put pressure on the number of placements available, and where exemptions have been made these have not been managed in accordance with statutory guidance. Sound assessments are undertaken on prospective foster carers however there are sometimes gaps in the information provided to the fostering panel. Foster carer's first annual reviews are not always undertaken within required timescales.

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):

- implement an effective strategy to ensure sufficient foster carers to be responsive to predicted and future demands on the service (13.1)
- ensure all necessary information is provided to panel members at least five working days in advance of the panel meeting to enable full and proper consideration (NMS 14.3)
- ensure that a review takes place not more than one year after approval and thereafter whenever the fostering service provider consider it necessary, but at

- intervals of not more than a year (breach of Regulation 28 (1))
- ensure that a person may not foster more than three children unless all elements of the statutory guidance are complied with. (Schedule 7, The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 4: Fostering Services)