

Darlington Borough Council Fostering Service

Inspection report for local authority 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

Darlington Borough Council Fostering Service recruits, assesses and supports foster carers to provide foster placements to children and young people with a wide range of needs. These include long term and short term foster placements. At the time of this inspection the service was supporting around 65 foster families. It had approaching 100 young people placed with in-house foster carers and approximately half that number placed with carers from independent fostering agencies.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This fostering service provides good outcomes for children. Despite an increase in the number of children requiring foster placements, the agency matches children with foster carers well. It is continuing to increase the number of available foster carers. It makes placements with carers from independent fostering agencies where needed to secure the correct family for young people. However, in some situations the quality of information given to foster carers at the time placements are made is not good enough. This could limit their ability to care properly for the child in the early stages of the placement.

The service is thorough in its assessment and approval process and foster carers are well supported, trained and managed. This means they are able to meet children's needs well. The fostering service's decision making process is careful. However, panel minutes do not cite the reasons for recommendation, which reduces the quality of the information the decision maker has available on which base her decision about a carer's suitability to foster. Children are kept safe and protected although the assessments to check the health and safety of foster carers' homes are not sufficiently wide-ranging to fully assess the home's suitability. Children's health needs are met and support for their move into adulthood is good.

Children receive very strong support for their education and wider education and leisure services are outstanding. The authority's commitment to providing very high quality school holiday activities for children and young people is impressive. It promotes a sense of achievement and self esteem as well as a wide range of healthy activities that help young people develop new skills. The fostering service is also excellent in the way it involves children. They are very well consulted about their own care and lives, although the children's guide does not give them full information about the fostering service and care. However, young people play a very important role in the development of the service and have a significant influence over its policies and practice.

Improvements since the last inspection

At the last inspection of this service in 2008 six recommendations were made.

It was recommended that service reviewed the membership of its panel to ensure its independence. Action has been taken and panel is now appropriately independent. The other recommendations related to various aspects of the service's records and documents. There are improvements in certain aspects of foster carers' training records, panel minutes, file monitoring and records of suitability checks on staff and an update to the foster carer agreements. The agency has attended to all these matters which has improved recording and practice.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Children receive good support to be healthy. Foster carers receive training in first aid and other health matters such as health promotion, sex and relationships and reducing self harm. The assessments of foster carers consider their ability to raise children to have healthy lifestyles and to look after their health. Children's health needs are considered as part of the process of matching them with foster carers. Arrangements for delegating consent for medical treatment to foster carers are clearly agreed but health information within foster placement agreements is not always as good as it should be.

All children receive prompt primary health services. Access to specialist mental health services, such as the child and adolescent mental health service, is very good. The authority is working effectively to ensure that health checks are carried out appropriately and that children get any health input they need. The service ensures that foster carers and children have access to good support services for matters such as drug and alcohol use and sexual health. Foster carers promote healthy lifestyles and activities for their children and this is monitored in their supervision and annual reviews.

Foster homes are suitable places for children to live. This suitability is assessed during the assessment and approval process and monitored at foster carers' supervision sessions and annual reviews. The physical safety of carer's homes is assessed on a regular basis but the assessment checklist used for this is not as wide-ranging as it should be and, consequently, does not check on some key safety issues.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

Children and young people living with the service's foster carers are safe and well protected.

The fostering service is thorough in the way it assesses and prepares foster carers. Suitability checks are careful and updated appropriately. This ensures that carers are suitable people and able to meet children's needs. Training is provided to carers in safeguarding, safer care and about dealing safely with children's behaviour.

The fostering service is careful and child focused in the way it matches children with appropriate foster carers. One child said, 'I call them mam and dad and they love me.' The needs of the children being placed and those any already living with proposed carers are considered when matches are proposed. Foster carers develop safe care policies in respect of the children and these are monitored and updated at foster carers' reviews. Safety matters are addressed within foster carers' supervision and unannounced visits to foster carers take place at least annually. The service works closely with partner agencies, including advocacy services, to ensure that young people have access to a wide range of people, should they need to express any concerns. Foster carers notify the service appropriately of any significant issues. As a consequence, children feel safe and well cared for in their foster homes. For example, children said, 'they keep me safe'. Placement stability is good which helps to provide consistent, nurturing care for children and young people.

Children are protected from the risks of going missing from care. Clear policy and procedural arrangements are in place and the agency works effectively within the local inter-agency protocol for children missing from home and care. Incidents of children being away from their foster homes without permission are well monitored and the authority effectively distinguishes between children who are not in their proper place and those who are actually missing. This monitoring means that the agency knows the whereabouts of and understands the reasons for any young person being away from the foster home without permission and can respond to these appropriately.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Children and young people receive excellent support to help them enjoy and achieve. The service takes care when making placements to ensure they are as well matched as possible. One young person said, 'I get treated like my foster carer's daughter.' It provides good support to children and their foster carers. Foster carers are well supported and receive training in managing young people's behaviour and their supervision focuses on their work with children. This helps to form good relationships between children and their carers which help them to nurture young people and support them to make good progress. For example, one young person said they are 'happy and settled' in their foster family. Another described how challenging they had been, but how their foster carer had helped them learn how to behave and had now 'grown up'.

Young people receive excellent support to develop new interests and a social and emotional confidence. Foster carers encourage and support children to undertake a range of interests that will keep them healthy, broaden their experiences and teach

them new skills. The authority supports foster carers and children both financially and by providing a range of opportunities. This support is provided individually and by the provision of activities for all looked after children. Children receive very good financial support for activities they undertake. For example, one young person has received financial support for equipment and participation in a very expensive hobby and as a consequence is experiencing considerable success. This success is building the young person's self esteem and social competence as well as helping them to learn valuable new skills and gain a greater maturity. This degree of individual commitment to children's development is impressive. As well as this high level of individual support the authority provides a creative and extremely valuable holiday scheme called 'Outdoor Ambition'. This provides activities four days per week during school holidays based on developing teamwork, exercise and healthy lifestyle skills in the outdoors. Activities include: ghyll scrambling; gorge walking; swift water swimming; rock climbing and raft building. This outstanding range of activities is really greatly appreciated by young people and foster carers and is described by them as, 'brilliant' and 'amazing'. It provides excellent opportunities for young people to help build their self-esteem, confidence, social skills and physical fitness.

The fostering service works well with the authority's educational service to ensure that children and young people receive strong support. Carers' commitment to education is considered during their assessment and supported in their ongoing supervision. They receive training in educational matters. Foster carers work well with schools and are supported well by the authority's looked after children educational team. Individual support is provided to children with matters such as attendance, attainment and their behaviour at school. Professional staff support carers and intervene directly to resolve any problems. Children have personal education plans in place and these are well reviewed and include the opinions of the children and their carers.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

The service listens to and consults with young people and takes their views into account. The service knows the children it works with well and takes time to develop good relationships with them. Children and young people are consulted about their own care through the review processes and are listened to by their foster carers. Their views are also sought for the annual reviews of their foster carers. Professionally designed and printed consultation forms are used for these reviews which demonstrate the importance that is placed on children's consultation.

The service seeks children's views about overall service provision too. The service uses the results of this consultation to promote positive improvements to practice. Fostered young people are part of the 'Darlo Care Crew' which represents looked after children in the authority. This group is very well supported and fully integrated into the authority's developmental processes. For example, this group has been fully involved in the development of the authority's pledge and also the recent development of the foster carers' charter. Some young people were concerned that,

at times, social workers cancelled visits to them without informing them. This, and other issues, were addressed at an event organised by young people, where individual children interviewed social workers and senior managers. Managers and staff spoke positively to inspectors about the challenges this gave the service. One of the outcomes of this forum has been that the authority's procedures now require social workers to give children at least two hours notice of an appointment cancellation. This degree of young people's influence over the authority's practice is excellent

The wide range of activities provided to children through the 'Outdoor Ambition' scheme helps young people to develop an emotional maturity and resilience and to help them function as part of a team in the community. Young people's contact with their families is well supported. Foster carers understand and support contact arrangements, both practically and emotionally. Contact is supervised by staff from the authority where necessary. The authority is working with the judiciary to help ensure that contact plans and agreements are appropriate and meet children's needs.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

Young people are well supported to help them prepare for, and move on into independence. Leaving care workers become involved with young people well before their 16th birthday. This ensures that they know young people's needs and the support they need. Foster carers understand the issues that young people face as they grow older and work to equip them with the skills they need. This includes emotional support and preparation for adulthood and also the development of practical skills such as budgeting, self-care and self-help skills. Supervising social workers support and monitor this work through the supervision they provide to foster carers. The authority works with an independent organisation to arrange accommodation and support for young people leaving foster care. Young people are able to remain with their foster carers beyond their 18th birthday if this is appropriate.

Educational services continue to support young people as they approach adulthood to help them secure appropriate employment or continued education arrangements. This work is effective with practically all young people progressing into continued education, employment or training.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

This is a well managed fostering service. The organisational arrangements at executive, strategic and operational levels are effective and promote the achievement of good outcomes for children.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Young people receive an individualised service based on their unique needs. The fostering service uses well prepared and trained carers who promote equality and challenge discrimination. The authority works very effectively to reduce the disadvantages faced by looked after children. Positive relationships with children promote their capacity to achieve. The service provides placements for young people which are able to meet their needs.

The fostering service has effective recruitment arrangements. These enable it to recruit more foster carers to meet the needs of the increased number of looked after children. Initial screening is thorough. This, combined with thorough and rigorous assessments, ensures that foster carers are prepared well for their role. Family and friends carers are assessed and trained as other carers, but there is additional regard given to the complexities and difficulties that this role can bring. Foster carers are well trained and supported through the supervision and review process. Foster carers are involved in the running of the service. A foster carer association is in place which helps with the development of policy and practice.

Decision-making processes are robust. The fostering panel is appropriately comprised of experienced people with an interest in fostering. It gives close consideration to the cases it hears and makes clear recommendations to the agency decision maker. However, panel minutes do not explicitly record the reasons for panel's recommendations. Consequently, this does not give the decision maker as full information on which to base a decision as it could.

The authority has experienced an increased number of children who require families. Despite this, the fostering service works hard to place children with foster carers who are well matched to their needs. In doing this it places children with its own carers or those from independent fostering agencies nearby. Once in placement, levels of support are good and this, combined with the care taken with matching, leads to good levels of placement stability. However, the provision of written information when placements are made is not always as good as it could be. Some foster carers have positive experiences of the information provided but others say it is not good enough. For example, one carer said the information given at placement is, 'poor and getting worse'. Foster placement agreement documents are also not always well completed. For example, a number were incomplete, including some sections of the document for which information was known. This lack of good quality and timely information about children limits carers' ability to care correctly for the young person, particularly in the important early stages of the placement.

Darlington Borough Council's fostering service is well managed. It has strong links with the authority's social work teams and other services that help support fostered children. Working relationships are highly effective and there is a clear focus on meeting the needs of each young person. Senior staff members in the authority are committed to providing good services that meet children's individual needs. They retain a clear focus on the well-being of each young person and demonstrate a drive to improve the lives of the children concerned. Staff members have the qualifications, skills and experience necessary and benefit from good supervision and strong direct management. Recruitment procedures in relation to staff, panel

members and foster carers are robust and help ensure the safety of young people. Workloads are monitored to ensure that the fostering team continues to provide a good service to children. Administrative arrangements support the operation of the service well.

The Statement of Purpose clearly and accurately sets out the aims of the fostering service and how it operates and is reflected in the service's procedures. The service produces a pack for children and young people which gives them good information about the service. This pack informs them how they can complain, access an independent advocate, contact their independent reviewing officer and how they can contact Ofsted. However, this pack does not include a summary of the Statement of Purpose that tells young people what they can expect of the fostering service, how they should be treated and the expectations placed upon them. Additionally, information about how children can contact the Children's Rights Director is not included.

The fostering service has clear arrangements for receiving notifications from foster carers about any significant events and for dealing with these and referring on to other agencies if needed. Records are of good quality and well maintained and stored securely. Files contain clear evidence of decision making and management supervision to ensure the quality of recording and direct the work undertaken. Consequently, records are effective in helping to plan, implement and review the care provided to young people and would help children in later life to understand the things that have happened to them.

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 avoidable hazards in foster carers' homes are removed as is consistent with a family home. Specifically, that health and safety assessments are sufficiently wide-ranging to identify key safety issues (NMS 10.3)
- ensure that written minutes of panel meetings record the reasons for its recommendation (NMS 14.7)
- ensure that the foster carer is provided with all the information held by the fostering service that they need to carry to their role effectively (NMS 15.2)
- ensure that the Children's Guide includes a summary of what the fostering service sets out to do for children and how a child can contact the Children's Rights Director. (NMS 16.4)