

Hartlepool Borough Council Fostering

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

Unique reference number	SC041205
Inspection date	05/07/2012
Inspector	Michael McCleave / Ann-Marie Born
Type of inspection	Full

Setting address	Hartlepool Family Placement Team, 8-9 Church Street, HARTLEPOOL, Cleveland, TS24 7DJ
Telephone number	01429 405593
Email	jacky.yeaman@hartlepool.gov.uk
Registered person	Hartlepool Borough Council
Registered manager	Jacky Yeaman-Vass
Responsible individual	Jacky Yeaman-Vass
Date of last inspection	10/08/2007

© Crown copyright 2012

Website: www.ofsted.gov.uk

This document may be reproduced in whole or in part for non-commercial educational purposes, provided that the information quoted is reproduced without adaptation and the source and date of publication are stated.

Service information

Brief description of the service

This local authority fostering 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, short-term foster placements for teenagers and foster care for young people with disabilities within a shared care scheme. In addition, the service assesses and supports kinship carers and provides placements across these various areas of work. At the time of the inspection there were 92 fostering households providing placements for 146 children.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding: a service of exceptional quality that significantly exceeds minimum requirements

Good: a service of high quality that exceeds minimum requirements

Adequate: a service that only meets minimum requirements

Inadequate: a service that does not meet minimum requirements

Overall effectiveness

The overall effectiveness is judged to be **good**.

This a well-managed fostering service where strong leadership and direction are provided to all staff and foster carers. There is clearly an enthusiasm among the team that embraces the challenge of change in order to improve service delivery. Foster carers are included as part of the professional team. It is evident that young people are fully involved in the development of the service and their wishes and feelings about the quality of their care are heard.

Outcomes for young people are at the forefront of service delivery. Although the academic achievements for young people are below the national average, this service positively strives to support all looked after children to achieve within their capabilities. Young people benefit from the strong support from the fostering service and educational system, resulting in a number having high aspirations.

Safeguarding of young people is of paramount importance and there is a shared responsibility among all professionals and foster carers to keep young people safe.

The input of young people in the operation of key aspects of the fostering service is embedded into the overall culture of the organisation. This emphasises the value placed on listening to young people. For example, their active participation in the design of facilities within the fostering office has resulted in a welcoming and brightly

decorated place for adults and young people to meet and participate in the numerous activities available. Young people are actively involved in the further development of resources within the department. The involvement of young people is a particular strength of the service.

The fostering panel and the reviewing officers provide an effective oversight of the work of the fostering service. The panel is properly constituted and functions well, but would benefit from the inclusion of a participant whose life has been touched by fostering.

There is a comprehensive training programme available to staff and foster carers. However, some foster carers do not always feel that they can access many of the courses on offer. In addition they do not feel that their skills are always utilised in training other foster carers.

The fostering service is positively committed to change, and it is evident that there has been a marked improvement in the management and delivery of the service since the appointment of the current management team. This is a forward-thinking service.

Areas for improvement

Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further the registered person should take account of the following recommendation(s):

- ensure the number and experience of persons on the central list are sufficient to enable the panel to reflect the nature of the children and carers the service caters for (NMS 14.8)
- ensure training is made available to foster carers, including hard-to-reach foster carers, to assist them in meeting the specific needs, including specialist provision as required. (NMS 20.8)

Outcomes for children and young people

Outcomes for children and young people are **good**.

This service demonstrates a positive commitment to ensuring that fostering is a well-thought-out choice for young people. It works proactively and creatively with other services to provide flexible, effective and well-managed support, based on the individually assessed needs of the young people. The fostering service engages closely with health, educational professionals and social workers to meet the care and emotional needs of those young people who are fostered. A strength of the service is the way the young people are actively supported and encouraged to participate fully in decisions that affect them. They are confident that the service provides them with a safe nurturing homely environment where they are fully

integrated into family life. For example, one young person said, 'I love having my sisters with me in my foster home.' Another young person stated, 'being in foster care has been life changing. I am happy living with my foster carer who supports me and doesn't put me down like my parents.' It is clear that the calibre and commitment of foster carers have made a difference to the lives of the young people.

A positive feature of the resources available to support the young people is the health and therapeutic team. This team provides health and therapeutic support that positively enhances the stability of placements through intensive input from the looked after nurse and locally based therapists. The team is based in the fostering service office, enhancing speedy access as required. The team can access the child and adolescent mental health service, where therapeutic support to those people who need a more intensive input relating to emotional or behavioural issues is required. These services are readily available and positively enhance opportunities for foster carers and young people to form secure attachments and develop sound relationships. Young people in foster care are able to access the looked after nurse for advice and guidance in any health-related or personal matter. This promotes their understanding of health-related risks such as smoking, sexual health and substance misuse.

Children and young people who are looked after do not score well in national educational attainments. However, through the intensive support of the virtual school, all young people in foster care are making good progress compared to their starting points when initially admitted into foster care. Staff linked to the virtual school are on hand to offer advice and guidance to foster carers, young people and to schools. Additional tuition is available from the virtual school to assist young people who require extra support in key subject areas. This range of readily available support gives them the opportunity to achieve and to improve behaviour, thereby reducing the risk of exclusion. The virtual school encourages and supports foster carers to help young people to improve reading and maths through an innovative scheme known as the Letter Box Club. Young people who require extra help are sent a parcel of books and writing materials during the months of May to October. This enables the foster carers and young people to undertake extra study during the long school summer holiday.

A strong feature of this organisation is the active participation of young people in the operation of the service. The Children in Care Council is a key forum where young people are consulted about aspects of service delivery and improvements. The commitment to involving young people has been very well demonstrated by the support given to a meeting with the Children's Rights Director and the Minister with responsibility for children and families. Young people are additionally involved in training for new foster carers. They have been active in the design and decoration of the fostering service offices. It is clear that young people are actively supported to take responsibility for decisions about their lives. This promotes their understanding of decisions made on their behalf and increases their self-confidence and broadens their outlook on life.

The annual awards ceremony is an affirmation of the commitment of the organisation to positively celebrate achievements of the young people.

Quality of service

The quality of the service is **outstanding**.

The preparation, training and assessment of prospective foster carers are robust. This detailed process is intended to ensure they are properly prepared to meet the needs of children placed with them. Assessment reports are of a high quality, evaluative and provide the fostering panel with the necessary information on which to make its recommendations to the agency decision maker. The training programme for foster carers is thorough and provides a sound base for their development. However, most foster carers felt that training opportunities beyond the required syllabus are often difficult to access due to the high demand from other professionals.

The process for selecting applicants who wish to foster is thorough. This promotes the safety of the children. Equality and diversity are at the forefront of the authority's procedures and practice. The service strives to recruit foster carers from any background, culture, race and gender to meet the complex needs of children who need a permanent family. Assessments of prospective foster carers are thorough and consider applicants' abilities to respect and promote diversity. A strong feature is the active involvement of young people in the recruitment, preparation, and training of foster carers and staff.

The service works hard to ensure that children are matched with adopters who are able to meet their needs and where possible reflect their background and heritage. Every effort is made by the service to identify the most appropriate foster carers for each individual young person where their needs will be met.

The calibre of foster carers is high. They are positively motivated and demonstrate a total commitment to ensuring that they provide standards of care that represent the highest quality. Young people are very satisfied with the care they receive. For example, some young people described how, 'being in foster care has given me the opportunity to experience a better life than when I was at home', and, 'in foster care I can get an education; my parents didn't care if I didn't go to school.' Foster carers demonstrate an enthusiastic commitment to the young people in their care. They are supported by a team of social workers who clearly reflect high standards in their work. This combination of talents strongly promotes the care and well-being of all young people in foster care.

A significant feature of the service is the excellent relationship which exists between the foster carers and their social workers. This has generated a high level of trust and respect, where the interests of the young people are paramount. Foster carers are treated as full partners who are fully involved in all aspects of the care planning process, and their views are valued by the fostering service.

The fostering panel is very ably managed by the chair. This ensures that sound recommendations are made to the agency decision maker. The panel maintains a quality assurance function in respect of all reports, thereby promoting high standards in all aspects of the work presented to the panel. The administrative support to the panel is efficient, ensuring that all reports are received by panel members at least five days before the panel meets. Applicants to become foster carers are always invited to attend the panel and are given the opportunity to present their views on the process. Applicants are informed orally of the panel recommendation immediately after panel has concluded discussion of their case. The agency decision maker will finalise the process within five working days. This demonstrates an efficient service. Although the panel is appropriately constituted, representation from people whose life has been touched by fostering would provide the panel with an even more balanced combination.

Safeguarding children and young people

The service is **good** at keeping children and young people safe and feeling safe.

Young people are confident that their foster carers will keep them safe. They are aware of how to make a complaint and have a clear understanding of their rights to feel safe and to live in foster homes that provide them with a caring and secure home environment.

The service maintains a strong emphasis on very thorough assessments of prospective foster carers. There is a positive emphasis to ensure that children and young people are placed with foster carers who have been appropriately vetted for their suitability to provide safe care. The service operates a robust recruitment and selection process to ensure only appropriate adults are chosen for this challenging role. The suitability of prospective foster carers is considered on an inclusive basis, based on the needs of children and young people, irrespective of applicants' race, sexuality, disability or marital status.

The safety of the young people is enhanced through unannounced visits to foster homes. These are carried out by social workers in the fostering team who are not the link worker for the foster carer, at least twice a year. This ensures impartiality and offers a critical insight into the care provided by the foster carers.

Training in safeguarding is key to ensuring that foster carers are aware of their responsibilities. It is offered in a flexible way to suit their work and domestic commitments. The training provided adequately equips the foster carers with the competence and skills to enable them to effectively care for children and young people who have experienced abuse.

Young people rarely go missing from their foster homes and this is a demonstration of the confidence that they have in being able to discuss any issues or concerns with their foster carers. The service ensures that the high calibre of foster carers is maintained through regular formal supervision that is recorded.

Leadership and management

The leadership and management of the local authority fostering agency are **good**.

The management of the fostering service is very effective. Positive leadership and direction are provided by the current team manager. The key functions of the fostering service operate well. It is clear that significant steps have been made to improve the efficiency of the service. For example, the requirements and recommendations from the last inspection have been fully complied with. The day-to-day operations and processes are well monitored and managed. This ensures that children with a plan for fostering are found suitable and well-prepared families in a timely manner. The management team demonstrates a positive commitment to improving outcomes for the children and young people in foster care. This is a service that has a demonstrable capacity to improve.

There is a strong commitment to the involvement of young people in the development of the fostering service. Examples include their participation in the fostering panel, recruitment and training of new foster carers, and membership of the Children in Care Council. This is a sound demonstration of inclusiveness, and enhances the self-confidence of young people as well as enriching the fostering service.

A significant feature is the high level of children and young people who are fostered (86%) compared to the national average (74%). This is a clear demonstration of the importance attached by the local authority to placing children and young people in a family environment.

Fostering staff are committed to their role, and work to high professional standards. Relationships between the fostering service and placing social workers are good and this positively supports effective planning for children and young people. The service provides its staff with direct support through formal supervision. Training and development opportunities for staff are available, with access to both internal and external training courses. This promotes the knowledge and competences of staff in a challenging complex environment.

The fostering service has a team of foster carers who thrive on the challenges posed by the demands of caring for children and young people, many of whom have experienced difficult circumstances. Foster carers are committed to improving the life chances of the young people. Some foster carers, however, do not always feel that the service is responsive to their further training needs beyond the required initial training requirements.

This service works in partnership with other services to ensure that children and young people have their care needs met in the widest sense. This is demonstrated through the close working arrangements with other statutory services within and outside of the local authority.

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 to assess the effectiveness of the service and to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards.

The report details the main strengths, any areas for improvement, including any breaches of regulation, and any failure to meet national minimum standards. The judgements included in the report are made against the inspection framework and the evaluation schedule for local authority fostering agencies.