

Stockton on Tees Borough Council Fostering

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

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Inspector	Jacqueline Malcolm / Valerie Shephard
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Service information

Brief description of the service

Stockton-On-Tees Borough Council fostering service is located within the authority's department of Children, Education and Social Care. There is an on going recruitment campaign to increase the range of placements currently provided. These include placements in respect of short term and temporary, long term and permanent, bridging, parent and child, short breaks and sharing the caring children with disabilities, respite care, emergency care and care by connected persons. At the time of the inspection there were 88 foster carers approved by the service and 130 children placed with foster carers.

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**.

Children and young people are placed with foster carers and connected persons who can meet their needs. Good quality support is provided to carers that result in high placement stability and minimal unplanned endings. Children and young people have outstanding outcomes in relation to their starting points, in particular in their educational attendance and attainment and their employment prospects. This reflects the highly effective joint practices that the service has with education, health and other partner agencies. Children and young people make good progress in relation to all aspects of their development and effective arrangements are in place to support them. Children and young people have positive views about the quality of their care and most have strong attachments to their carers. In some instances, young people remain living with their carers post eighteen years old.

Robust assessments to ascertain foster carers' suitability and good support from the fostering service and partner agencies promote children and young people's safety and welfare. Carers are well supported and supervised. They have good access to a range of services that can assist them to meet children and young people's diverse and complex needs.

Children and young people have an active voice and influence the work of the

fostering service. Leaders and managers are committed to developing this fostering service that has the capacity to improve. In particular immediate measures are in place to: increase staffing in the fostering team; recruit more foster carers and reduce the number of external placements. Issues of shortfall relate to ensuring foster carers are provided with information about children in a timely way and that all records are signed and dated; these shortfalls have a limited impact on the outcomes for children and young people.

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 that the management of the service ensures all staff's work and all fostering activity is consistent with the 2011 Regulations and NMS and with the service's policies and procedures. In particular, ensure all records are consistently signed and dated and that foster carers are provided with information about children and young people without significant delay (NMS 25.3)

Outcomes for children and young people

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

Children and young people's views are well integrated into the development of the fostering service. Their wishes and feelings are highly valued and respected and their responses have a positive influence on the quality of service they receive. Children and young people have regular opportunities, irrespective of their age and ability, to participate. Effective support is provided by youth participation workers who know the children and young people well and ensure that their voice is heard. Children and young people influence the service in a variety of ways. For example, they are involved in the recruitment of foster carers. One young person said their interventions make them feel 'powerful', which indicates that they feel they have an impact. Children and young people have used their meetings effectively; they have invited the lead counsellor for looked after children and senior managers to them so that they have been able to raise issues they have about their education and employment. Children and young people are involved in peer mentoring and advocacy and are using their learning to support younger children. A DVD and radio sound bites of young people talking about their experiences of being fostered is intended to be used to recruit more carers. Their recorded views clearly demonstrate the affection that a number of children and young people clearly hold for their carers. Children and young people are consulted prior to their statutory reviews and attend them and some young people chair them. Their views are also included at their foster carer's annual reviews and when they leave their carer. These activities ensure that children and young people make exceptional progress to develop positive self-esteem and confidence and feel they can make a difference.

Children and young people feel safe, comfortable and well cared for in their foster homes. They say that they feel like one of the family and a number remain where they are living when they are 18 years old. These positive attachments contribute to the high levels of placement stability in the majority of households. A number of young people have lived with their carers from childhood to adulthood. They are placed with carers who can successfully meet their holistic needs, including those arising from their culture and personal identity. This enhances their emotional resilience, self-view and understanding of their histories. Excellent partner agency relationships ensure that children and young people receive services that are tailored to them and can promptly meet their needs. Siblings are placed together most of the time. Suitable contact arrangements ensure that children who do not live together continue to maintain their relationships with each other, their family and significant others, including previous carers. Very few children and young people experience unplanned endings of placements, which minimises the incidences of them feeling rejected, devalued and vulnerable.

Children and young people receive good support to ensure their health and well-being is promoted and maintained. Their health is sustained by strong and well-coordinated practices delivered by a range of health services, such as looked after children's nurses and mental health services. This means that children and young people can access services that they need and these services are monitored. Carers act promptly to address children and young people's health needs. Some foster carers have gone the extra mile to ensure children and young people's health needs are promptly met when they have been placed with them in an emergency; this can be with little or no information from placing social workers. This level of commitment shown by foster carers shows that they value children and young people.

Educational outcomes for children and young people who are fostered are excellent. Their education is overseen by a virtual head teacher who effectively promotes the educational achievement of all looked after children; their interventions have a positive impact. Good support provided by the Looked After Children in Education (LACE) team and partners ensure that all children and young people, irrespective of their age and ability, have the same rights to an education as their peers. Children and young people benefit from exceptionally good attendance in their early years, school and college provisions. The attendance figure is 96.1 per cent, which is above the national average; this is an impressive figure. Children and young people benefit from exceptional attainment from their starting points in all aspects of their learning. Children and young people do not experience persistent absences and are rarely excluded from education. Carers promote children and young people's education and can access the LACE team as required. Carers attend a range of education meetings and are involved in projects with the LACE team; one carer has received national recognition for their support to children and young people in improving their literacy. Young people have high aspirations and their achievements are celebrated and rewarded. All children and young people are in education, employment or training. Their life chances are significantly enhanced by the high levels of support and encouragement they receive.

Young people are encouraged to develop independence skills from their early years

into adulthood. Young people are positive about their leaving care support and a number say that they do not want to leave their carers. A number of foster carers continue to care for young people who reach their eighteenth birthday under an arrangement supported by the local authority. Young people who move into independence regularly visit their foster carers and maintain contact with them as extended family members.

Quality of service

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

The fostering service recognises that there is a shortage of foster carers to meet the demand of children and young people coming into the care of the local authority. Good retention of existing foster carers, some whom have fostered children for several decades, provide experience and commitment to others. Some carers have left the service due to retirement, adopting children or due to deregistration. The fostering service has made good efforts to recruit more foster carers and the publicity campaign over the last year has attracted a large interest, but has not yet made a significant impact to the overall numbers of new foster carers. This has increased the use of independent fostering services so that children and young people can be matched with suitable foster families. These placements are effectively commissioned and monitored, which ensures good care practices.

The preparation and assessment of people who want to become foster carers are good. Children, young people and existing fostering families have effective input in the recruitment and preparation training of applicants. Applicants' own children are included in the assessment process and their views are seriously considered. Good quality assessments ensure that applicants are competent and suitable to care for children and can meet their diverse needs. Applicants consider the process to be intense and one applicant described the assessment process as, 'long, hard going but I understand why.' Assessments are timely unless there is reasonable explanation for the delay, which are minimal.

Children and young people benefit from an effectively operated and quorate fostering panel that is independently chaired. The fostering panel comprises of stable members with good expertise, skills and a good level of independence. The agency decision maker is well informed to make decisions based on the good quality information.

The fostering service ensures that children and young people are placed with carers who can meet their needs, often at short notice. This includes children and young people from different cultural and religious backgrounds whose needs are met with additional support. Most carers confirm that they are well informed about children and young people and matching arrangements has led to high levels of placement stability. Carers said, 'sometimes when children are placed with you little information is available, this takes time to come through in some cases, but we are given all the information that the social worker has at hand. We are never left in the dark.' and 'I think 'comprehensive information' is too strong. We do get some information though'

and 'This information is not always available when a child first comes into care, but generally I have found that over time, I receive all the information I need.' This is not the experience for all carers. In one example, a foster carer who has until recently waited too long to receive the most basic information about children placed with them. Although there is no discernible impact on outcomes for children and young people, this is not good social work practice.

Foster carers say they feel part of the team working with children and young people and share responsibility with other key professionals in the child's life. They say that they feel highly valued and have good working relationships with fostering social workers. One carer said 'I have an excellent link worker who goes above and beyond some other workers.'

Foster carers confirm that they receive good support from the fostering service. They are visited unannounced once a year and this is increased if there are concerns in fostering households. Foster carers have good access to services that help their care of children and young people, such as services dealing with mental health, sexual abuse, bereavement, anger, behaviour management issues and cultural awareness. Foster carers are trained on a wide range of childcare issues, some of which are tailored to meet the needs of the specific children and young people they care for. They say that they can access training through e-learning if they cannot physically attend training courses and have access to childcare support. A carer said 'I have accessed a lot of training that is offered by the fostering service and this has greatly helped me support the young people I work with.' Some carers have achieved approved childcare qualifications, which inform their practice.

Safeguarding children and young people

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

The fostering service effectively protects children and young people from harm. This is delivered through a variety of means, such as the support and monitoring of carers and positive partnership work with health, education and other services that have safeguarding responsibilities. Children and young people say that they feel safe with their foster families and some young people confirmed that their carers have helped them deal with bullying. Children and young people who have not felt safe have felt confident to disclose information about their carers to people they trust, which is listened to and quickly acted on. Foster carers are aware of their safeguarding responsibilities. They are visited unannounced by fostering social workers and more frequently if there are concerns. The fostering service challenges poor practice that may impact on the safety and welfare of children and young people. This is welcomed by carers who perceive this as part of their learning and development.

Foster carers are aware about the impact of abuse and take this into consideration when caring for children and young people. Foster carers have good contacts with health, education, mental health and social care services who can support them to meet the needs of children and young people who have experienced abuse.

Children and young people benefit from practices that promote their safety and welfare. Allegations, disclosures complaints and concerns are effectively and robustly handled and monitored. Action is taken that is in the best interests of children and young people when they have made disclosures about their treatment in foster care or concerns have come to light through other means. Foster carers are aware about the allegations process. They have access to independent support and advice should they be the subject of a complaint or allegation.

The stable placements experienced by children and young people minimise the occasions that they go missing from home. Appropriate reporting procedures are followed in the event that children and young people are missing from home. One young person said 'I have never gone missing but my carers love me very much and protect me in every way. I would not do anything to hurt them as they took me in as a stranger into their home and accepted me for who I am.' Children and young people have good access to independent advice and support and know how to complain. The young people's participation group is currently reviewing how the advocacy service can be improved to meet their requirements.

Robust recruitment and vetting of: adults working for the fostering service; foster carers; those aged 18 plus who reside in foster homes safeguards children and young people. Young people's involvement in the recruitment process influences decisions made about an individual's suitability.

Leadership and management

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

The fostering service is well managed. The fostering team benefits from a consistent and effective manager who has a good knowledge of the foster carers and the children and young people. The manager and fostering staff are appropriately qualified and experienced and understand their roles and responsibilities. Fostering social workers are well retained and skilled. New staff have a fostering background or transferable skills. Staff are valued and are well supported, supervised and have good training opportunities. This ensures that their professional development is promoted and they continue to provide a good service to fostering households.

Good management oversight of children and young people's placements ensures their progress and improvement is measured. This includes children and young people placed in external placements. There is effective support from corporate parents and established, positive working relationships with partner agencies who work effectively together to improve outcomes for children and young people. The views of children and young people influence developments in the fostering service and they are listened to and valued. Leaders and managers, know their strengths, acknowledge areas of weakness and invest in improvement. However, the monitoring has not identified and addressed inconsistencies in the quality of some carers and children's records. For example, carers' supervision notes and annual reviews are not routinely signed; allegations and complaints records are not clearly dated. Although there is no impact on outcomes for children and young people, the

lack of attention to detail does not ensure comprehensive records are maintained.

The fostering service has experienced some setbacks due to insufficient staffing, which has impacted on aspects of the service, such as foster carer training. This has been redirected to another provider, enabling the team to focus on their core activities. Agency staff are supporting the staff team until the full staff complement is restored. A post has been created to meet the increase in numbers of connected persons coming to the attention of the fostering service. Despite the current pressures, the fostering team has the capacity to improve, based on its track record, outcomes for children and young people and action taken to address previous recommendations made at the last inspection. The service is working hard to recruit new foster carers to meet the current demand and has increased their use of external fostering providers in the interim.

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.