

Redcar & Cleveland Borough Council

Fostering

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

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Inspector	David Martin / Valerie Shephard
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Service information

Brief description of the service

This fostering service currently supports long and short term placements as well as placements with foster carers under shared care and family support. The service also assesses and supports kinship foster carers, where children are fostered by family or friends. In addition to the manager, there are six qualified social workers, training and development officer, a support worker and a team clerk. There are 65 approved foster carer households and the authority has approximately 140 children and young people in foster placements.

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 local authority fostering service provides young people with good outcomes. Young people enjoy good health and are doing well in school, training and employment. Matching processes work well and placement disruptions are kept to a minimum. Foster carers are well supported and feel increasingly that they are part of the team. Panel undertakes its work effectively and robustly scrutinises assessments.

Young people's views are valued and are fully considered in decision making. Young people are safe and know how to keep themselves out of harm's way. Foster carers understand their role in protecting young people.

The service is well managed and, following a period of transition, is making sustained progress. There are areas, such as the consistency of foster carers' assessments, which the service has already identified for improvement. One recommendation is made in this report concerning delegated authority.

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 foster carers are clear about what responsibilities and decisions are delegated to them; specifically this refers to permission for haircuts, medical treatment and school trips. (NMS 6.5)

Outcomes for children and young people

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

Young people are encouraged and enabled to contribute to decision making regarding their personal care and more generally to the service as a whole. There is a well-established Children in Care Council which ensures that young people's views are heard at a corporate level. Prior to reviews, young people are able to record their thoughts electronically. This system works well and is highly regarded by reviewing officers as a basis for exploring young people's views with them. Young people's opinions are taken seriously and are valued by the fostering service.

Young people are looked after safely. They are familiar with safe caring plans which help to keep them safe in their daily routines. Young people are not involved in risky behaviour and incidents of offending, substance misuse and young people going missing from their foster home are very low. Young people are safe and comfortable in their foster homes and are treated as part of the family. This protects them from harm and promotes a sense of security and stability.

Foster carers are able to meet the emotional and physical needs of individual young people. They have undertaken a wide range of training to assist them in understanding and managing challenging behaviour, child development and attachment disorders. They are supported well by mental health services and the designated nurse for looked after children. They value regular supervision which enables them to reflect on their practice. The arrangements in place make a significant contribution to young people's sense of wellbeing and ensure they enjoy good health and lead healthy lifestyles.

Young people benefit from being placed in stable foster care placements. Disruptions rarely occur at short notice. Matching processes work well and ensure that young people are placed with the most appropriate foster family. Where necessary, the authority uses independent fostering agencies to supplement its own provision. This ensures that there is a full range of placements available and young people can remain with their siblings. Overall, young people experience stable and secure family lives.

Young people's attendance at school is excellent. Young people in year 11 are making progress in achieving good GCSE grades and attainment at Key Stage 2 is in line with national averages. Young people are encouraged to participate in other learning opportunities in their free time. The fostering service is successful in promoting education and supporting young people to value learning.

Young people are supported well in having contact with their birth families. Foster carers are proactive in facilitating contact and are willing to 'go the extra mile' to ensure it takes place as agreed. This approach enables young people to maintain relationships with people who are significant to them.

Young people are making positive steps towards independence and adulthood. Leaving care services are well-established and are helping young people to engage with decision making about the future. The 'staying put' scheme works well and allows young people to move on at a pace that suits their individual needs. Young people are strongly supported in making a successful transition to adulthood.

Quality of service

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

Retention of foster carers is good. However, the fostering service has a relatively small number of foster carers and is reliant on external placements to ensure that all young people are found suitable families. It is a priority of the service to recruit more in-house carers to ensure that it can meet the increased demand for placements. Despite this, placing social workers are confident that there is a full range of options available to them in making successful matches.

Preparation and training of newly recruited foster carers is good. The quality of assessments of new carers is variable but work has begun to ensure assessments are completed to a consistently high standard and are fully evaluative of foster carers' competencies. Foster carers value supervision in helping them to understand and meet the needs of young people. All carers have undertaken appropriate level of professional training or are enrolled to do so. There is good access to more specialised courses. Foster carers are well-equipped to provide young people with positive experiences of family life.

The fostering panel functions effectively and fulfils its role in scrutinising all matters that come before it. Panel meetings are quorate and membership has been established through the central list. The range of skills and experience of panel members is wide and all members are confident about sharing their opinions. The panel chair, who is highly regarded by colleagues, ensures that panel's recommendations are made after full and careful consideration. The arrangements in place ensure that panel makes a significant contribution to the approval and review of foster carers.

Foster carers feel optimistic about the future of the fostering service and have a strong sense that they are increasingly valued as key members of the team working with young people. They work well with professional colleagues to promote good health and educational outcomes and to ensure that placements remain stable. When placements are made, carers are given sufficient information about young people to enable them to meet their needs. This is an area which has improved considerably in the last 12 months.

Foster carers have had training in promoting positive behaviour. They understand factors that influence challenging behaviour and have the skills and experience to redirect young people and engage them in constructive activities. They are well supported by supervising social workers and feel that their own children are fully involved with the fostering service. They are satisfied with the level of service they receive. One carer summed up their experience by saying, 'We have received good support from children's social workers and excellent support from our supervising social worker, not only in respect of placements but also on a personal level.'

Some carers are unclear about the fostering service's position on delegated authority and consent to medical treatment. In some cases there are delays in social workers making decisions and consulting parents on this issue. The current policy is not being implemented effectively. This is not in the best interests of young people.

Safeguarding children and young people

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

Young people feel safe and protected from harm. Generally, they do not experience bullying and they know how to keep themselves out of harm's way. Young people know how to make a complaint and have good access to independent advocates as the need arises. This ensures that there is help available to assist young people raise any concerns.

Young people in foster care rarely go missing. The fostering service has well-established strategies for monitoring and supporting fragile placements and there are effective measures in place to minimise the risks of young people going missing. This helps to protect young people from harm and prevents young people from putting themselves in situations where they are vulnerable.

The recruitment and vetting of adults working for the fostering service is robust. This ensures that they are safe and suitable to work with young people.

Foster carers and supervising social workers have a good understanding of their individual and collective responsibility to protect young people from abuse. Carers have undertaken child protection training and are confident about reporting any concerns to the appropriate authorities. Foster carers have also completed training in the prevention of sexual exploitation of young people. This has made a significant contribution to their understanding of safeguarding. Safer caring plans are family specific and have been shared with young people. This ensures that all members of a fostering household understand issues of privacy and keeping themselves safe.

Allegations against foster carers are infrequent but are handled sensitively when they arise. On such occasions, the fostering service takes prompt action to ensure that all young people remain safe.

The fostering service has recently implemented effective measures to ensure that

accidents and incidents are recorded consistently. This enables it to identify any patterns or trends and to ensure that young people get the care and support they need. All fostering households are subject to regular health and safety checks to ensure that young people are placed in hazard-free environments.

Leadership and management

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

It is widely acknowledged that the fostering service has been through a period of transition in the last 24-months and did not benefit from a number of temporary appointments at a senior level. However, the appointment of the current manager on a permanent, full-time basis has been influential in stabilising the service and enabling it to make good progress. It has strong foundations in place to ensure that it provides young people with the best possible care and support.

The manager has implemented strategies to monitor young people's progress and to ensure that their placements continue to meet their individual needs and circumstances. Matching processes and foster carers' reviews are used to actively consider young people's needs in relation to continuity of education, contact arrangements and friendships. This minimises the potential for placement disruptions.

There is an increasing emphasis on foster carers playing a full and active role in the team supporting young people. At a recent first review of a foster household it was noted that the family 'see themselves as members of the team around the child'. This is a positive development and ensures that foster carers' input into decision making is central to young people's on-going care and support. Young people have positive relationships with their reviewing officers and their contribution to reviews is valued. The authority actively listens to a full range of views.

The fostering service has a good track record in responding positively to recommendations made at previous inspections. The service has appointed a 'regulation and inspection officer' to ensure that the service complies with regulations and national minimum standards. This is a positive appointment and contributes to the continuous development of the service. The service is making good use of monitoring and the annual development plan to consolidate areas of good practice and to identify shortfalls and areas for further improvement.

The service is sufficiently well staffed to cope with the current demands that are placed on it. The staff are appropriately qualified and experienced. They enjoy regular supervision which enables them to reflect on their practice and helps them identify areas for professional development. The workforce is valued by the management team and is encouraged to make a full contribution to the way in which the service is run.

The profile of the fostering service is steadily rising within the authority; councillors

and senior managers, in their capacity as corporate parents, take an active interest in the progress the service is making. They fully support the fostering service in its aspirations to provide young people with high quality outcomes.

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.