

North Tyneside Metropolitan Borough Council Fostering Service

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

Unique reference number	SC041537
Inspection date	01/03/2013
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Type of inspection	Full

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Date of last inspection	17/10/2007

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Service information

Brief description of the service

North Tyneside Fostering Service recruits, assesses and supports foster carers to provide a range of placements for children and young people. The fostering team places children with long-term foster carers as well as short term and mainstream carers. The service includes an immediate placement scheme, a short break care service for children with disabilities and assessment foster carers.

The service comprises the manager and deputy in addition to the supervising social workers, support workers and administrative staff. At the time of the inspection, the fostering service was supporting 214 children and young people in 139 foster Households. Seven children were placed in 10 short break households and a further 16 children and young people were placed with independent fostering agencies.

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**.

A very large majority of looked-after children live in foster care. The fostering service is very effective in recruiting foster carers, including family and friends carers. This has resulted in most children and young people being placed with the service's own foster carers.

Children and young people's views are well integrated into the planning and development of the fostering service. Their wishes and feelings are highly valued and respected and their input has a positive impact on practice and service development.

The service carries out thorough assessments of carers, robust matching processes and excellent partnership working with all relevant services is firmly established. Proactive and creative safeguarding practice is very much central to everything the fostering services do. Consequently, children and young people are kept safe and feel safe. Children and young people clearly benefit from excellent relationships with their carers. They are very happy and settled in their current placements and most want to remain until they feel ready to move on to independence.

Carers are extremely enthusiastic about the work they do and are totally committed to ensuring that the best possible outcomes for children and young people are achieved. They are extremely strong advocates for them and will do their utmost to ensure that their best interests are served. This, together with excellent partner relationships with other services, ensures that children and young people make excellent progress in all aspects of their development. They are also very much encouraged to have ambitions and are actively supported to realise them.

Carers confirm high satisfaction with the support and supervision provided to them by the service. They were also extremely positive about the training they receive, which they describe as 'excellent'. This enables them effectively to meet children and young people's complex and diverse needs and to maintain placements successfully.

The service is well managed. Leaders and managers provide strong leadership, clear direction and excellent support to staff. They also demonstrate a strong commitment to continuous development and have a very clear strategy in place to achieve this. Quality assurance systems, though, are not always robust and as a result, there were some shortfalls in agency and carers' records.

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 each foster carer accepts and understands and operates with policies and guidance agreed by the fostering service.
- improve the system in place to monitor the quality and adequacy of record keeping and take action when needed (NMS 26.2)
- ensure that information about the child is recorded clearly and in a way which will be helpful to the child when they access their files now or in the future. (NMS 26.6)

Outcomes for children and young people

Outcomes for young people are **outstanding**.

A very large majority of children and young people who are looked after by the local authority live with foster carers, where this is the placement of choice and is the best option for each child. They benefit greatly from very appropriate placements and a large majority are placed with siblings, if this is in their best interests. In situations, where the placements of siblings together are not possible, there are very flexible contact arrangements in place to allow them to meet very regularly and maintain relationships. In some cases, the service has arranged for daily contact to take place between siblings. Where appropriate and safe, children and young people enjoy

contact with their family and friends, which enables them to maintain their relationships with each other.

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. For example, some children and young people have expressed a wish that they would like to determine who should be present at their looked-after children's reviews and this is being addressed. Children and young people have regular opportunities, irrespective of their age and ability, to participate. Effective support is provided by the participation and engagement team who know the children and young people well and ensure that their voices are heard. Children and young people influence the service in a variety of ways. For example, children and young people are involved in the 'skills to foster' training. They have also devised a list of 27 questions for staff to ask foster carers, as part of the assessment process. Firm plans are also in place to involve children and young people in the recruitment of foster carers. In addition, there are plans to involve young people in providing training to foster carers about drug and alcohol misuse.

The children in care council is also extremely active and has recently devised an action plan relating to the services provided looked-after children. The chairperson and other members of the council talked about the steps that they were taking to put this plan into practice and were confident that these actions would be realised. A very large majority of children who met with the inspectors or completed surveys said that their views 'are listened to'. This means that children and young people in North Tyneside's looked after services have a very powerful voice in the shaping and delivery of their services, as participation is clearly an embedded part of the council and its partners' practice.

Children and young people actively participate in day-to-day and more complex decisions about their lives, as appropriate. They are consulted prior to their statutory reviews and attend them. Their views are also included at their foster carers' 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 to feel they can make a difference.

Children and young people feel safe, extremely 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 placement stability and have resulted in a number of young people living with their carers for a considerable number of years.

The service ensures that the linguistic, religious and cultural needs of looked after children and young people are thoroughly assessed and their needs met. Children are well matched with their carers, who very successfully meet their needs. For example, one young person said, 'I am glad I am in foster care, as it means I always have someone there to talk to and help me through things'. The service also ensures that the linguistic, religious and cultural needs of looked-after children and young

people are thoroughly assessed and their needs met.

Children and young people also have a good understanding of their situation, as demonstrated by the comment, 'foster carers help me to understand what has happened to me.' Children and young people also increase in confidence, emotional resilience and self-esteem. This is most clearly illustrated by some of their comments; for example, 'I believe I can do things now'. 'I feel better about me.' 'Since coming into care I have learnt to do a lot more for myself.' 'I am not frightened about trying things, as I know my foster carers are behind me, supporting me'.

There are excellent partner relationships with other services. This ensures that children and young people receive services that are individually tailored to meet their needs. Children and young people receive excellent support to ensure their health and well-being is promoted and maintained. Their health is sustained by strong and well-co-ordinated practices delivered by a range of health and mental health services. For example, there is a looked after children's nurse. In addition, there is a designated doctor who undertakes all health assessments. A designated dentist provides dental care treatment for all looked-after children. These specialist medical staff have a good understanding of the young people's needs and are able to provide a very responsive, flexible and effective service. Consequently, children and young people readily access these services and almost all of those in foster care have received dental care and health assessments. Regular medical reviews have also taken place from health staff who they know well. There has also been a tremendous improvement in accessing the child and adolescent mental health (CAMHS) team. Children and young people who are looked after now have a priority service. The service is child focussed and is now part of the wider team supporting the child. This ensures that a very open and seamless service is provided to children and young people, who are able to access the services they need.

Carers act promptly to address children and young people's health needs. Some foster carers have gone the extra mile to ensure that children and young people's health needs are quickly met when they have been placed with them in an emergency. This level of commitment clearly shows the importance and value foster carers place on ensuring that children and young people's needs are met.

Children and young people are healthy and well informed about healthy living. Children say that they are encouraged to eat a balanced diet and take exercise. Their emotional health needs are also clearly being well met.

Educational outcomes for fostered children and young people are excellent. Their education is overseen by a virtual head teacher, who very effectively promotes the educational achievement of all looked-after children and ensures that any help or support provided has a very positive impact on a child's educational progress. Excellent support is provided by the Raising the Health and Education of looked after children (RHELAC) team, who work alongside schools, carers and social workers to support children. These services, together with other 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, with attendance above that of the general school population. Children and young people benefit from exceptional educational attainment from their starting points. For example, even after children had been in care for at least a year, they were at least 7% below the England average at Key Stage 2. In some respects, this is unsurprising, given their original starting points and the need for them to settle both physically and emotionally, before being able to make educational progress. However, at Key Stage 4, 38% of students achieved five or more GCSEs at grades A* to C, including English and Mathematics. This is more than double the England average of 15% and only one local authority reported a higher percentage.

Carers attend a range of education meetings and are strong advocates for the children and young people in their care. They are excellent at promoting children and young people's education and can access the RHELAC team as required. The vast majority of children and young people are in education, employment or training. Their achievements are always celebrated and rewarded. All those working in the service encourage children and young people to have high aspirations and these are achieved. For example, a number of young people are in further education and embark on professional and trade careers. Their life chances are therefore significantly enhanced by the high levels of support and encouragement they receive.

Children and young people participate in a wide range of leisure activities which supports their development and social skills, according to their individual wishes and aptitudes. They also have opportunities to broaden their outlook and enjoy events such as holidays, outings and overnight stays with friends. Children and young people spoken with and those that completed surveys, expressed satisfaction about the activities available to them.

Young people are encouraged and very well supported to develop practical independence skills from their early years into adulthood. They are also supported emotionally for adult life. 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 are extremely positive about their leaving care support. Some young people who move into independence regularly visit their foster carers and maintain contact with them as extended family members. In so doing, they receive support from their foster carers after leaving care.

Quality of service

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

The fostering service recruits a range of skilled foster carers based on its knowledge of the sort of children and young people for whom it needs placements. Recruitment is successful and as a result there is usually good placement choice for children. However, there is a slight shortfall in carers for older children and short-term foster carers. The service though is very aware of this and is addressing this through targeted recruitment. At the time of the inspection, a large majority of children and

young people are placed with the service's own carers and only 5.6% are placed with carers from independent fostering agencies. The fostering service ensures that children and young people are in placements that are most suitable for them and commissions and monitors placements with independent agencies very effectively.

The recruitment, preparation and assessment of foster carers is undertaken with significant involvement from children and young people. For example, they are involved in the fostering preparation training and there are plans for their role in training to be developed. They also have an input in the assessment of carers and again there are plans in place to develop this.

All assessments are undertaken by qualified and competent staff. Assessments are good and address the applicants' competence for the role. Applicants' own children are included in the assessment process and their views are seriously considered. The service is robust in checking the suitability of applicants and concentrates on ensuring that approved foster carers are able to meet children and young people's diverse needs. Foster carers stated that the assessment process had not taken too long, but had been very thorough. However, they totally understood the reasons for the robust nature of their assessment and agreed with this. The development of recent specialisms within the team has enabled assessments to be carried out in a very timely manner and the reports presented to panel are of good quality.

The fostering panel is suitably constituted and includes members who have a clear focus on fostering and the needs of looked-after children. It is a robust panel that makes careful, well considered child-centred recommendations to the authority. The panel effectively quality-assures the fostering service's work and provides clear feedback on quality matters, which contributes to the service's improvement. The agency decision maker is similarly robust and is extremely child-focussed. Considerable thought is given to decision making, taking into account the panel's recommendations. Decisions are made timely and effectively communicated.

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 placement stability. A very large majority of carers stated that they received comprehensive information regarding the children placed with them. This enabled them to understand the children they were caring for and effectively meet their needs. They also stated that they felt part of the team in working with children and young people and shared responsibility with other key professionals in the child's life. They said that they felt highly valued and had good working relationships with fostering social workers.

The fostering service provides its carers with very good support and supervision which helps to ensure that they provide good care to young people. Direct supervision is 'child focussed and challenging.' Carers appreciated this, as it enabled them to understand how best to help the children in their care. A variety of support is provided, such as support groups, including groups for children of foster carers,

male carers and connected person carers. Additional support is also readily available from a range of partner agencies who work together extremely well to provide an integrated support service. For example, carers can receive support from health, education, RHELAC, CAMHS, as well as from the participation team. This was also confirmed by a very large majority of carers who were extremely complimentary about the support provided. For example, one carer said it was of 'high quality', another stated 'my worker is fab, helpful and supportive', another stated 'the service does not only support us, but the whole of my immediate family'. This high level of support helps to develop and retain foster carers, as well as maintaining placement stability.

The authority provides carers with a rolling programme of induction, core and additional training, which can be tailored to meet individual carers' needs. For example, one-to-one training can be provided on a variety of medical conditions, such as diabetes. New training has also been introduced for male carers. The service has good systems for monitoring carers' attendance at training, which indicates when refresher training becomes due. Only one carer has been unable to evidence the Training Support and Development Standards (TSDS) within the required timescale. Feedback is actively sought after every training course and appropriate changes made to constantly improve the programme. Carers confirmed that they are able to fully explore their attitudes and appreciate the potential impact on their own family during training events. They also particularly highlighted the value of carers and fostered children being involved. The majority of carers stated that their training since approval had helped them to meet the needs of the children placed with them.

Placement matching is carried out based on good assessments of children and young people's needs. Care plans are of a good quality and are updated regularly. Placement agreements are completed in full and supported by planning meetings before the placement is made or as soon as possible after in the case of an emergency. Placement meetings are attended by all relevant staff so that children and young people's holistic needs are fully considered as part of the matching process. Children and young people are provided with good information about their prospective carers. The majority of children and young people stated that they were told lots of useful things about their foster family before they moved in or stayed with them. Information sharing is good, with foster carers reliably being given all the information held by the authority. Any multi-disciplinary support required is identified early in each placement and provided promptly. Consequently, children are placed with families who are able and well supported to meet their needs. This maintains placement stability and improves outcomes for children.

Safeguarding children and young people

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

The fostering service very effectively protects children and young people from harm. This is delivered through a variety of ways, for example, good quality support and careful monitoring of carers. In addition, there is positive partnership working with

health, education and other services that have safeguarding responsibilities.

Children and young people say that they are very happy, well looked after and feel safe and secure in their current placements. They enjoy excellent relationships with their carers and this has a marked positive effect on their self-esteem and confidence. The service has established a culture of openness and trust, which also exists between carers and children and young people. This enables them to feel comfortable and express any concerns they have, knowing that they will be listened to. Children and young people know how to complain and are able to do so. They have access to children's rights workers, advocates and if necessary, independent visitors. All complaints are taken seriously, fully investigated and positive outcomes are reached in a timely manner. There are very few incidents of children and young people going missing and if this does happen, foster carers are fully aware of the correct procedures to follow. Social workers also visit them on their safe return, actively listening to their reasons for going missing and take any appropriate action necessary to prevent further incidences. Young people stated that they are positively welcomed back on their safe return. Children and young people clearly benefit from practices that promote their safety and welfare. The manager rigorously monitors these incidents and quickly ascertains if there are any trends or patterns that cause concern.

The recruitment, assessment, supervision, training and the support of foster carers has an extremely strong focus on safeguarding and protection. For example, foster carers are made aware of the impact of abuse and the need to take this into consideration when caring for children and young people. The service also actively works with carers own children to ensure they have a strong sense of safety and well-being. Carers also have very good contacts with health, education, mental health and social care services, which can support them to meet the needs of children and young people who have experienced abuse. Unannounced visits are carried out and they are undertaken more frequently in response to any concerns.

The fostering service challenges 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 allegations process. They have access to independent support and advice should they be the subject of a complaint or allegation.

The service is proactive in its safeguarding practice, as demonstrated by its robust safe home procedures to prevent accidents. There are also very strong procedures in place to ensure that lessons are learnt from any accidents. This means the most vulnerable children, including foster carers' children, have a strong sense of safety and well-being. Children and young people, as appropriate to their age and understanding, are supported to take reasonable risks as part of their growth and development.

There is also a systematic means to learn from allegations, child protection investigations and reviews of children who go missing from home. This learning is incorporated in the service's practice and has a direct impact on the development of

the service

Robust recruitment and vetting of adults working for the fostering service; foster carers; their baby sitters and those aged over 18 who reside in foster homes, effectively safeguards children and young people.

Leadership and management

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

Leaders and managers routinely and rigorously monitor and evaluate the service to drive improvement to ensure that children and young people make progress. Regular reports are compiled to assist this process and highlight any areas for improvement.

Robust recruitment ensures that a large majority of children and young people are placed with the authority's own carers. There are some slight shortfalls in relation to carers for older children and short-term carers. However, this is being addressed.

The role of family and friends carers is well promoted and understood. Where appropriate and in the interests of children in long term placements, the service is successful in promoting the use of other legislative routes to permanence.

A strong continuous improvement agenda is shared by all staff. Foster carers are valued and feel valued as part of the team. The local authority has adopted the Foster Carers' Charter and developed it, in consultation with foster carers, elected members and looked-after children. This charter is fully meeting its commitments.

There is a strong commitment to participation and inclusion in the service and the wider authority. This is genuine and purposeful and enables all who are connected with the fostering service to feel that they are part of the service development. For example, foster carers are involved in service development through the local foster care association and foster care support groups. The service actively listens to carers and as a result, has made a number of changes, including providing new training for male carers.

The fostering service is well managed. The service 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, experienced and skilled. They fully understand their roles and responsibilities. This ensures that they provide good quality safe care for children and young people. Staff are valued, well supported and supervised. Annual appraisals address development needs and staff are provided with good training opportunities to develop their knowledge and skills in fostering. This ensures that they continue to provide a good service to fostering households.

Good management oversight of children and young people's placements ensures that their progress and improvement is measured. This includes monitoring progress of children and young people placed in external placements. Regular reports on the

performance of the service are provided to the authority's corporate parenting group. Elected members take an active interest in the service and meet regularly with managers and members of the children in care council. This ensures that there is effective support from corporate parents.

The service has also established positive working relationships with partner agencies, which work effectively together to improve outcomes for children and young people. Children and young people's views are highly valued and respected and they greatly influence developments in the fostering service. Leaders and managers know their strengths, acknowledge areas of weakness and invest in improvement. However, monitoring systems are not always robust and there are some inconsistencies in carers' and children's records. For example, in one child's file, the information regarding the birth parent's ethnicity was inconsistently and inaccurately recorded.

All the recommendations made at the last inspection have been fully addressed and children and young people have benefitted from these improvements.

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 the inspection of local authority fostering agencies.