

# Stoke on Trent City Council Fostering Service

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

---

<b>Unique reference number</b>	SC055018
<b>Inspection date</b>	16/07/2007
<b>Inspector</b>	David Morgan / Jackie Callaghan
<b>Type of inspection</b>	Key

---

<b>Setting address</b>	Heron Cross House,, Grove Road, Stoke-on-Trent, Staffordshire, ST4 3AY
<b>Telephone number</b>	01782 234555
<b>Email</b>	
<b>Registered person</b>	Stoke on Trent City Council
<b>Registered manager</b>	
<b>Responsible individual</b>	Sarah Ann Hill
<b>Date of last inspection</b>	05/12/2006

---

© Crown copyright 2007

Website: [www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://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.

You can obtain copies of The Children Act 2004, Every Child Matters and The National Minimum Standards for Children's Services from: The Stationery Office (TSO) PO Box 29, St Crispins, Duke Street, Norwich, NR3 1GN. Tel: 0870 600 5522. Online ordering: [www.tso.co.uk/bookshop](http://www.tso.co.uk/bookshop)

## 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

Stoke on Trent City Council Fostering Service has 119 general foster care households, 31 kinship care households and 23 family link households. An additional 24 placements are available through Stoke OUTCOMES. Stoke OUTCOMES is a separate service run by a private company contracted to the local authority. It was not inspected as part of this visit.

The management and delivery of the Children's and Young Peoples Services are now being led by an independent strategic partner, Serco. Serco has installed a leadership team that will operate for at least three years. Its aim is to improve the outcomes for children and young people in the city.

### Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

This was the annual key inspection. The service is undergoing substantial changes that have manifested themselves in widespread improvements and the service has reached a 'satisfactory' level. However, it is too soon for the full impact of such changes to become evident.

Matters that were not inspected this time included out of city placements, the carer assessment process and the authority's financial processes.

### Improvements since the last inspection

The scheme for payments to carers has been completely reviewed to simplify it. The number of staff and managers have been increased so that the service can operate effectively.

A permanent service manager has been appointed so that the uncertainties surrounding interim appointments can be avoided.

A higher level of attendance at carer training events will have a bearing on outcomes for children.

Improvements have been made to the access and transfer of critical information, for example, between field and service social workers.

The number of extensions and exemptions to fostering approvals has been approximately halved in the past year; this is a substantial improvement that will contribute to placement security.

All placements by the Central Placement Team are now agreed by the fostering team to ensure appropriate matching.

More assessments are now undertaken by the service's own staff rather than independent assessors. This should improve consistency and it has allowed the same staff to provide post-approval supervision; this is good practice.

The support of kinship carers has improved.

## Helping children to be healthy

The provision is satisfactory.

Young people are protected by all foster carers completing a first aid course and familiarising themselves with any medication recording procedures. Medical consent details have been clarified with carers in writing. However, not all children who are not on care orders have consent from parents to obtain emergency treatment in case of a serious injury or accident. This means some young people are at risk of not receiving appropriate medical care.

Children and young people's health needs are identified and assessed at an early stage. Parents of young people who receive short breaks retain responsibility for ensuring their child's health care needs are met. All health information is obtained at the point of placement and background health information is actively pursued from placing authorities. The health needs of young people placed with foster carers are not always addressed through foster placement agreements because currently not every child has a current placement agreement review form. This means that some young people are at risk of not receiving appropriate and timely support. This is being gradually addressed through reviews.

Discussions with foster carers demonstrated their good understanding of the need to promote the health of young people placed in their care. Young people visited are registered with a doctor and attend health appointments. Where required, young people have been referred to the local Child and Adolescent Mental Health team and receive appropriate support. Children and young people's health needs are discussed and recorded by supervising social workers and foster carers in varying degrees of detail. Overall, children and young people receive care that actively promotes their well being and health.

## Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is satisfactory.

### Suitable carers

The service ensures that suitable carers are approved. Accommodation provided by carers varies but is generally satisfactory. The foster carer agreement has been reviewed recently and reflects the new Payments for Skills scheme.

An additional 24 placements are available through Stoke OUTCOMES. Stoke OUTCOMES is a separate service run by a private company contracted to the local authority. It was not inspected as part of this visit.

In the past year there have been 21 assessments arising from 376 initial contacts from the public. This represents a substantial amount of initial interest and work with only a small result.

### Matching

The authority ensures that children are appropriately matched with carers.

Placements are organised by the Central Placements Team, which was visited as part of this inspection. Placement agreements are in place for those children who have been placed since agreements were introduced. Family link placements are matched separately and this operates effectively.

Specific details about carers are provided to children before placements start. The number of extensions and exemptions to fostering approvals have been approximately halved in the past year; this is a substantial improvement. Exemptions to the approval of carers are given a high priority and are monitored by the corporate parenting panel.

It has been agreed that the Central Placements Team discuss all potential foster placements with the fostering team; this is an improvement since last time and the placements team provided evidence of child-centred practice. Sufficient management cover is now available to ensure that the service is consulted about all placements. The Panel approves carers for certain age ranges of children. The number of age ranges that carers can accommodate has been reduced and this will simplify matching and reduce the need for approval extensions.

The shortage of placements in Stoke on Trent means that children are placed with agencies. Given this situation it was noted that in long-term foster care there are 41 children but 34 vacancies. This was discussed with managers who provided a number of possible causes.

#### Protection

Carers receive appropriate training. Safe caring guidelines are in files and in carers households and carers understood their implications. Child protection issues are dealt with promptly and are shared with relevant professionals. During the inspection, children raised no child protection concerns.

Files did not show that car insurance and road tax are checked although it is understood that they are checked annually.

The new strategic partner has been required to give safeguarding a high priority throughout the authority. In particular, timescales for investigations will be shortened and a more effective database installed.

Policies are not in place to address allegations about staff who have more than one social care job, for example, foster carers who are childminders. The manager reported that referrals were not made to the Protection of Children Act list.

Carer training does not include the use of physical intervention except in family link where some carers have been trained in techniques including the use of touch and physical presence. This is not common practice throughout the service, however, and there has been no assessment of the extent of physical interventions. Records indicated there had been no physical interventions. The fact that the service manager was unaware of these discrepancies within the service contributes to the discussion about whether or not the whole service should have common management and auditing.

The foster carer reviewing officer post will be located in the safeguarding team; this is good practice and will facilitate the officer's independence. Independent reviewing officers are under review themselves to ensure they have the necessary skills and capacity. This is critical for children who are fostered and who require permanent placements and also contributes to maintaining the capacity of the service.

### Suitable staff

Procedures are in place to ensure that appropriate staff are employed. Police clearances are renewed every three years, as required.

Assistant team managers have been appointed but their person specification does not refer to fostering. This meant that candidates with fostering experience were not necessarily aware of or attracted to the posts.

The number of agency staff has decreased and of those remaining some are being recruited to permanent posts. This is an important contribution to the competence of the team.

### Panel

A robust fostering panel is in place, which is chaired by an experienced independent person. This ensures good quality decisions are made that safeguard young people. Membership and tenure of the panel are satisfactory. Independent members provide additional expertise in education, health and experience of being looked after in the care system. Since the last inspection significant improvements have been made to the communication between the chairperson and management.

Observation of the panel and reference to minutes of previous meetings demonstrated that the panel was thorough in its discussions. However, it was found that provisional approval was sometimes occurring prior to all checks being received. There was a risk that carers mistakenly thought they were approved and that cases would have to return to panel at a later date.

An independent panel advisor post has not been agreed but is under consideration. The panel accepts work from a private fostering agency (Stoke OUTCOMES) that has contracted with Stoke on Trent to obtain and supervise a number of carers. There is no evidence that the chair of the panel has been made aware of the implications, for example, a different team and procedures.

## **Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do**

The provision is satisfactory.

### Valuing Diversity

The service consults with children from a diverse range of abilities and backgrounds and has access to a diversity officer and other specialists. Those children contacted by inspectors considered that their individual needs were being addressed. Carer training takes into account issues of diversity.

Awards evenings celebrate the social and community achievements of children, not just academic attainments. As a corporate parent, the authority offers looked after children free or subsidised access to city recreational and leisure services.

Although appropriate discussions are held between interested parties, files did not indicate clearly the progress that children were making in achieving outcomes.

Managers are aware there is a higher proportion of foster children from a black and minority ethnic background than is represented amongst either carers or staff. The recruitment team manager is making positive efforts to focus recruitment efforts on minority groups at festivals and schools as most of those recruited so far are kinship carers. This new part of the recruitment strategy does not yet reflect the substantial experience of colleagues in other authorities, for example, in the recruitment of

carers with limited English.

#### Education

All city schools now have designated teachers for looked after children. Staff reported there was better communication between agencies, especially when young people are excluded. All the children spoken to by inspectors were in education or training. Statistics show that in 2006 young people in mainstream foster care obtained the best ever educational results in 2006. Young people receive good support and foster carer's value, promote and encourage their young people to make the best of their educational opportunities.

Education for looked after children is supported by a multi-disciplinary team called Yellowhouse which is based in the same building. Young people's educational attainments and school exclusions are recorded in their personal educational plans (PEPs). However, not all young people who are placed with foster carers have a PEP, for example, those in family link. The service currently does not have an effective information system that monitors attainment or schools exclusions for all young people in foster care. Therefore, the educational outcomes for some young people are not clear.

Some family link carers felt that they did not have a role with education.

#### Family link/short breaks

Young people with disabilities who are provided with a respite service through the family link scheme receive good care from their family link foster carers. Foster carers reported that they receive sufficient support from supervising social workers and that training opportunities are varied. However, most struggle to attend due to other commitments. Social workers were seen to be creative at enabling carers to develop skills, for example, one carer has a child protection DVD. This will help to increase their skills and knowledge in safeguarding the young people they care for. Carers feel well supported and feel that information sharing has improved.

### **Helping children make a positive contribution**

The provision is satisfactory.

#### Contact

Contact arrangements are clearly outlined in files. Carers and children reported that such plans were implemented in practice and this was observed during visits.

#### Consultation

Children are routinely consulted by both social workers and link workers. Children receive newsletters and invitations to events. One reported that 'they really listen'. Carers reported that children are routinely involved in review meetings and the children's consultation group, CHANGES, has begun work on improving children's participation.

However, some family link carers reported that consultation was not applicable; this is not acceptable. Some family link carers said that their foster children are not consulted. Also, inspectors did not find evidence of systematic use of augmentative communication systems, for example, pictures in family link care, and it was not

identified in paperwork. This is likely to be a key part of effective communication with children who have communication difficulties.

There are a range of consultation exercises underway with groups of young people, including a consultation day that young people themselves are preparing. These have educational and social benefits for young people as well as assisting the authority. Activities have included young people learning interview techniques and assisting with the appointment of senior managers. Currently, it is not clear what percentage and range of fostered children are involved in the consultation exercises. This is information that would help direct future consultation exercises. There is minimal use of the communication systems that children and young people commonly use, such as mobile phones, text messaging and e mail.

Complaints are recorded and are now tracked by the service manager. It was reported that the number of complaints by children about care issues had fallen.

## **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is satisfactory.

### Preparation for adulthood

Carers were positive about the support provided by the Leaving Care Team. Young people who were leaving care and were spoken to by inspectors were also positive about the arrangements. There has been a substantial increase in the number of young people aged 19 who are in employment, education or training, who were looked after aged 16. This is attributed to more mentors and, in some cases, better communication between agencies. Although practices vary, there is insufficient evidence of effective working between foster team link workers and other social workers, including the Leaving Care Team and field social workers. This extended, for example, to the lack of distribution of Pathway Plans, which link workers should be considering in carer supervision meetings.

### Carers' allowances

A new and simplified scheme was implemented in April, which is in line with government guidance. The Payments for Skills scheme will reward carers for attending training and maintaining their competence levels. This will improve both their effectiveness as foster carers and the outcomes for children. Carers reported that their payments are organised effectively although some felt they may be worse off. The authority has specifically stated that carers will not be out of pocket and this matter will be reviewed during the next inspection. The scheme does not include family link carers.

## **Organisation**

The organisation is satisfactory.

### Statement of Purpose

The Statement of Purpose is up to date and was reviewed in June 2007. Information to children gives details of how to get involved in services. It also gives details of how to complain, although some information is out of date, for example, the active

involvement booklet. It was reported that the number of complaints by children about care issues had fallen.

There was no evidence that the children's guide was available in formats for children with learning, reading or other difficulties; this is the responsibility of the foster service rather than the placing social workers.

#### Management skills

The management team have the necessary skills and qualifications. The management and delivery of Children's and Young Peoples Services are now being led by an independent strategic partner called Serco. Serco have installed a leadership team that will operate for at least three years. Its aim is to improve outcomes for children and young people in the city.

The management structure has been reviewed from the director down. In the fostering service the previous lack of management capacity and consistency has now been addressed by the appointment of a permanent service manager, an additional part-time team manager and assistant team managers. A dedicated team is in place for kinship care.

The management team and staff team have increased in size substantially in a short space of time. Managerial capacity is now sufficient to support effective delivery.

#### Monitoring

There are a variety of monitoring systems in place including staff supervision meetings, corporate monitoring systems, management of information about allegations and complaints. Monitoring by the council has been refined and now takes a higher priority, especially given the council's responsibilities as corporate parents for looked after children. However, there is not a system, such as that described in the regulations, that considers fostering as a whole. Such a system would contribute to effective management of the whole service, including the identification of any discrepancies between parts of it. Also, there is no system for monitoring outcomes for children.

#### Effective management

The service operates in four sections covering recruitment, retention, kinship care and family link with clear management of each section. Staff were positive about the effectiveness of this new structure so far.

#### Staff organisation

Improvements have been made to the access and transfer of critical information, for example, between field and service social workers.

More assessments are now undertaken by the service's own staff rather than independent assessors. This will improve consistency and has allowed the same staff to provide post-approval supervision; this is good practice.

Managerial effectiveness has been reduced over several years by a succession of interim appointments. This has now been addressed by the strategic partner who has appointed senior managers to three-year posts.

The structure of the service causes some discrepancies, for example, having a separate organisation, Stoke OUTCOMES, operating in tandem with the service, and having the family link service operating as part of disability services. Whilst the

outcomes for children in Stoke OUTCOMES and family link may be as good as or better than the main service, there are compromises around auditing, management supervision, accountability and managerial efficiency.

It has been identified that there is a shortage of space and equipment for staff and this is currently being addressed .

#### Sufficient staff and carers

Stoke on Trent, like other fostering services, is unable to attract sufficient foster carers. The service has increased its total number of carers partly by using a private recruitment agency. However, the efforts of the agency were unsatisfactory and the carer recruitment strategy is now being implemented by the service itself.

In the year to 31 March 2007, 376 enquiries led to 21 full assessments. Given the growth of the service, it now has capacity to review the rate at which it converts enquiries into carers. Similarly, the service is now in a position to focus recruitment strategies at community groups.

The staff team has increased in size. Staff were particularly pleased with the recent increase in staff and managers to the service, which they consider is sufficient to meet current demands.

#### Training

About 80% of qualified social workers have achieved their post-qualifying award level 1. Staff reported that they can attend departmental courses and some improve their knowledge by attending courses for carers. Otherwise, staff training has not been provided in a coherent way. Specific courses that are relevant to fostering are not in place and the strategy for staff training is unclear.

#### Staff accountability

Staff are supervised and appraised at appropriate intervals. The computer programme has been upgraded so that more information is held electronically and can be audited more readily. This is an improvement but is encountering significant reservations amongst staff as well as a lack of computer terminals.

Policies and procedures have been reviewed recently and are available to staff. Staff are aware of the new procedures, which are available electronically. However, staff in new management positions had not considered the importance of integrating the procedures into practice. This will be critical if standards are to be maintained and improved.

#### Support for carers

In questionnaires, carers were positive about the service: one said she was enjoying working with staff and another said her social worker was excellent. Several have noticed improvements in the service, for example, in social functions.

Carers expressed their dislike of changes in management and children's social workers. Kinship carers noted that they are sent information about other children that is inappropriate to the type of work they undertake. They felt this reflected poorly on the service.

Support groups have been arranged for some time by the advisory foster carers but more are planned to start in September and there are plans for a group for carers of transracially placed children.

A duty manager rota is in place for carers to use in office hours and the emergency duty system for outside office hours.

Peer group support is provided to carers by advisory foster carers. This group offers social events, babysitting as well as a newsletter and other services. Respite care is available.

Reviews of carers occur annually and carers own children contribute.

Carers reported that their link workers usually responded promptly to their messages. However, there was little use of e mail.

#### Carer supervision

Unannounced visits are recorded separately now and are also identified on the IT system. Carers reported that visits occur regularly and at appropriate intervals.

Carers receive handbooks about being a foster carer. Procedures have been reviewed and their availability to carers is being rolled out at present.

The foster carer agreement is satisfactory.

#### Carer training

Attendance at carer training has improved dramatically because the new Payments for Skills scheme rewards attendance at training events. There was evidence of staff using imaginative ways to ensure carers are competent. Carers are also encouraged to achieve NVQ Level 3. The Payments for Skills scheme now forms part of carers contracts. The focus on training will also help carers attend a greater variety of courses.

The Payments for Skills scheme does not apply to family link carers. The service was not able to evidence that family link carers had received sufficient training.

#### Children's case records

Records are kept securely and are well presented. Foster carers are expected to keep daily notes of events and have been issued with secure containers for storage. Some carers wish to use computers to compile records and email them to the service.

Files are monitored by team managers; this is good practice. Gaps are investigated. Placement agreements were not on all mainstream carers' files because they have only been implemented recently. However, family link carers do not have placement agreements at all.

#### Administrative records

Administrative records are satisfactory.

#### Premises

Office accommodation is located centrally and has car parking. However, it is too small and plans are in place to remedy this.

#### Friends and families/kinship care

A dedicated staff team is in place for kinship care. Work is up to date and staff are pleased with the increase in their numbers. This increase will enable the team to undertake more assessments themselves.

Clear procedures are available to staff.

Some carers had a protracted period whilst they were assessed before the child was

placed. Whilst the delays were out of the control of the fostering service, the time could have been used to undertake pre-approval training.

Support of carers by the service is satisfactory and this was confirmed by carers themselves. This is a recent improvement as kinship carers previously reported a lack of support.

A kinship carers support group is expected to start in September.

The service is aware that the training needs of kinship carers have not been met and that they are slightly different to those of mainstream carers. Carers know that a training scheme is in place and they are expected to attend three courses a year.

## What must be done to secure future improvement?

### Statutory Requirements

This section sets out the actions, which must be taken so that the registered person/s meets the Care Standards Act 2000, Fostering Services Regulations 2002 and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider(s) must comply with the given timescales.

Std.	Action	Due date
9	review the policy and training regarding physical intervention throughout the service (Regulation 13)	14/01/2008
19	compile a programme of appropriate training for all staff (Regulation 21)	14/01/2008
23	shall provide family link carers with such training, advice, information and support as appears necessary in the interests of the children placed with them (Regulation 17)	14/01/2008
24	compile foster placement agreements for all carers including family link carers (Regulation 34)	14/01/2008

### Recommendations

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

- ensure that parents have delegated responsibility for medical treatment (National Minimum Standard 12)
- ensure that all managers are aware of the Protection of Children Act list and it is reflected in procedures (National Minimum Standard 9)
- ensure that the proportion of long-term vacancies is kept to a minimum (National Minimum Standard 8)
- consider ways of improving the conversion of initial enquiries into carer assessments (National Minimum Standard 6)
- ensure that procedures take into account disciplinary and safeguarding issues affecting staff who are employed in other social care settings such as

- childminding and residential care (National Minimum Standard 9)
- enhance young people's safety and improve practice by ensuring all checks are completed and seen before approval of foster carers is given by the Panel (National Minimum Standard 30)
  - consider best practice from elsewhere in the recruitment of carers from black and minority ethnic groups (National Minimum Standard 15)
  - ensure that the Panel chairperson is aware of the distinct features of the Stoke OUTCOMES service and has addressed any implications (National Minimum Standard 30)
  - ensure that the educational achievements of children with disabilities in mainstream and family link foster care are evaluated (National Minimum Standard 13)
  - ensure that all family link carers are familiar with children's education targets (National Minimum Standard 13)
  - consider extending the use of electronic communication between staff and carers and children (National Minimum Standard 11)
  - ensure that all children are routinely consulted, with augmentative communication systems where necessary (National Minimum Standard 11)
  - implement the systematic use of augmentative communication systems with those children who have communication difficulties (National Minimum Standard 11)
  - assess whether the consultation exercises are representative of all groups of fostered children (National Minimum Standard 11)
  - ensure that link workers are not operating in isolation from other social workers including the Leaving Care team (National Minimum Standard 14)
  - ensure that the children's guide is available in formats appropriate to the communication needs of children (National Minimum Standard 1)
  - implement a monitoring system for the whole service such as that described in Regulation 42 (National Minimum Standard 4)
  - consider whether all sections of the service could be amalgamated to better effect (National Minimum Standard 5)
  - ensure that the information circulated to carers is applicable to their work (National Minimum Standard 21)
  - ensure that recruitment documents such as person specifications and job descriptions refer to fostering (National Minimum Standard 15)
  - review the process of carer recruitment in light of best practice to ensure it is as efficient as possible (National Minimum Standard 17)
  - implement a system for monitoring the service and outcomes for children (National Minimum Standard 4)
  - decide how the whole management team will integrate the new procedures into practice (National Minimum Standard 20).