

Middlesbrough Council Fostering

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

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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

Middlesbrough Borough Council's fostering service is based at Middlesbrough Teaching & Learning Centre in Middlesbrough. The service recruits, assesses and supports foster carers to provide placements to children and young people with a wide range of needs, including long term foster care and short term placements.

At the time of the inspection the service was supporting approximately 95 foster carers with around 140 children in placements. The service has a staff team comprising the manager and a part time senior practitioner, four supervising social workers, two part time support workers and one full and one part time administrator.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This was an announced key inspection for the fostering service which was undertaken to assess how the service is complying with the key National Minimum Standards and regulations relating to fostering services.

The service is good at promoting children's health. Children receive good primary health care and access to specialist and therapeutic health support is good. Foster carers receive training in health matters and work is ongoing to ensure that all carers have a first aid qualification relating to children. The service is good at working with children to ensure that they receive an annual health check, but its monitoring of whether these checks have taken place is not always effective enough.

The service works hard to keep children safe. It ensures that foster carers' homes are safe and that children are placed with carers who can care for them safely. However, the service places too high a proportion of children with foster carers in an emergency and, as such, these placements are not as well matched as they should be. The service manages exemptions for placements with foster carers over the usual fostering limit effectively. However, placements of children with independent fostering agencies (IFA) are not managed enough in terms of the number of placements made and the arrangements to manage the quality of the process. The authority provides good support and training for carers to help maintain children's placements with their foster carers. Behaviour management training for carers is planned but the service does not have a formal behaviour management policy for foster carers.

Children are provided with good help and support with their education and for activities in the community. Academic achievement is promoted and recognised. Children are encouraged to be involved in decisions about their care and the running

of the service. Support for children's contact with their families is good.

The service is good at managing and supporting its foster carers. Assessments are thorough and support for carers is very good. The service does not pay all carers the Government's National Minimum Allowance for foster carers. The service is not recruiting carers in sufficient numbers to meet the needs of children who require a foster placement. The foster carers' review process is robust and the service is now effective in seeking the views of fostered children and their social workers in this process.

The authority keeps good records relating to foster carers and the overall management and monitoring of the fostering service. Children's records are not always good enough to provide evidence of the work being done with them or to contribute to an understanding of their life events.

Improvements since the last inspection

The service has carried out a lot of work to address the issues identified at the last inspection.

The fostering service has developed some of its procedures and records for the recruitment of staff to ensure that they protect children by collecting and recording the necessary information about new staff members. The manager has developed an effective system for monitoring the activities and records of the service to ensure the quality of the work done and identify any matters needing attention.

The fostering service has improved its arrangements for foster carers' reviews to ensure they are robust and provide a detailed examination of the carer's continuing suitability to foster children. It has improved the way it carries out safety checks on carers' homes and made sure that these are updated regularly. It has provided carers with safe caring training and ensured they have safe caring policies for their homes to help them care for children safely. The service also has continued to encourage foster carers to undertake National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) level 3. It has provided first aid training for carers and plans to provide training in behaviour management. All training undertaken by foster carers is now recorded.

The service has worked to improve the information contained in foster placement agreements although these are still not always completed well enough. It has also continued to work to undertake assessments of kinship foster carers within six weeks.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

The fostering service is good at meeting the health needs of fostered children. Children say that they receive good support and advice regarding their health.

Fostered children are registered with doctors, dentists and opticians in the community. Carers and professionals help them access health services and carers receive support from the service where needed to ensure that children are able to attend any appointments necessary. Specialist support for children in areas, such as psychology and psychiatry is available. The service ensures that children are referred to the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) and other therapeutic services as required.

The service has good arrangements in place to carry out annual health checks for fostered children and a high proportion of children receive these checks. Children's Looked after Children (LAC) reviews monitor whether annual medicals have taken place, but this monitoring is not always effective enough. For example, in one child's review the record showed that an annual medical had taken place despite information to the contrary being available. Consultation work has taken place with fostered children and their carers about how to make the process of annual medical checks better and more acceptable to children.

Foster carers are provided with training to help them meet children's health needs. For example, training in healthy living and sexual health has been provided to a significant proportion of the service's carers and work is ongoing to provide all carers with first aid training relating to children. Information is provided to carers on matters, such as drugs, alcohol, smoking and sexual health.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The local authority has an effective process for ensuring the suitability of staff working for the fostering service. No new staff members have been recruited to the fostering service in the last year and action has been taken to address some shortfalls in staff records identified at the last inspection. Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks on staff and foster carers are updated every three years.

The service ensures that foster carers' homes are suitable for the children placed. Health and safety checks of carers' homes are carried out and regularly updated. The service ensures that foster carers' cars are suitably taxed, tested and insured and pet safety questionnaires are completed where necessary. Health and safety information and guidance is provided to carers in the foster carers' handbook and carers receive health and safety training when they are assessed. However, this training is not updated on a periodic basis. Safety equipment is provided to foster carers where necessary.

The service has a clear system in place to provide foster placements for children who need them. A placement panel considers all requests for foster placements either before placements are made or, in emergency situations, retrospectively. This panel considers the appropriateness of a foster placement and whether other avenues for the child's care have been considered. This process aims to ensure that children are placed with foster carers in a planned manner wherever possible. However, this

process does not work as well as it should and the proportion of children placed in an emergency is too high which means that placements cannot be as well matched as they should be. The service responds to higher than usual levels of requests for placements in an emergency because of specific issues relating to the area's social needs and is working with other agencies in response to this.

Generally, the service provides good quality information to foster carers about children before or at the time that a child is placed, wherever this information is known. Placement agreement forms are being completed in more detail than previously, but in some cases the information contained is not detailed enough. However, information is provided to carers in other ways. The authority is to implement the Integrated Children's System documentation which will address this issue. Placement agreement meetings take place before or, in emergencies, very soon after a child is placed with carers. Although there is a pressure on placements within the authority the service is effective at managing the use of exemptions of the usual fostering limit and maintains good control of the situations surrounding these. Support to carers and children to maintain placement stability once placements have been made is good and levels of placement breakdown are low.

The authority has a clear commissioning strategy regarding the use of independent fostering agencies (IFA). However, a lack of capacity within the fostering service, particularly for carers for older young people needing long term foster care, means that a significant proportion of the children placed in foster care by the authority are placed with carers working for IFAs. The authority is considering how this situation can be addressed.

The process of placing children with IFA carers is not the responsibility of the authority's fostering service and there is not a good enough system for controlling the process and making sure that full information about the carer and child being matched is shared. For example, in one situation in which a child was placed with newly approved carers from an IFA, there was no evidence that details of the new carers' assessment was seen by the authority and file records showed that full information about the child was not shared with the foster carers soon enough. Records showed that the placement happened very quickly and provided no information about the reason for this. This long term, 'permanent' placement was not matched at the authority's fostering panel so there was no independent monitoring of the quality of the match made between the carers and the child.

Children are supported to feel safe in their placements and know how to make a complaint and who to speak to if they have a problem. Foster carers generally feel satisfied with the support they receive to care for children's welfare and children are visited regularly in placement by their social workers. Foster carers have safe caring policies in place. These are specific to the individual young person, signed by the carer and the social worker and updated regularly.

The service provides its carers with training in child protection and bullying and a significant proportion of the service's carers have undertaken this training recently. Behaviour management training is planned for later this year. The service provides

foster carers with guidance on managing children's behaviour but does not have a formal policy in place. Good support is available to help carers deal with any difficulties they are experiencing with fostered children.

The manager has an effective system to record and monitor any complaints or allegations made about carers and the service takes robust action to investigate and respond to these. Records of accidents, illness and other significant events are also maintained and monitored.

The fostering service has an experienced fostering panel in operation that gives rigorous consideration of the matters presented to it. Panel records show that panel meetings are well attended and quorate. Clear specific recommendations are made to the decision maker and good records maintained.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Foster carers get good support to help them care for children with different needs and from different ethnic backgrounds. The service provides foster carers with good information about promoting equality and diversity within the foster carer handbook and issues surrounding this are covered in foster carers' approval training. Practical advice and support is provided to carers looking after children from different ethnic backgrounds. For example, the service arranged for white carers looking after children from a different ethnic background to receive advice and support from a foster carer from the children's culture. The service has links with an organisation to help support the recruitment of foster carers from black and minority ethnic communities. This organisation also provides advice and support regarding individual situations.

Children with disabilities receive good support from the service and its foster carers. Good individual training is available for carers working with children with disabilities based on the children's specific needs and circumstances. Access to specialist equipment to meet children's needs is good.

Young people fostered by the authority receive good support with their education. The authority is working hard to ensure that all looked after young people have up-to-date Personal Education Plans (PEP) in place and the overwhelming majority of children aged 15 years and over have Pathway Plans in place. Children's files contain good information about their educational achievement.

The authority provides special help and resources to help foster children with their academic achievement and recent GCSE achievement levels for children leaving foster carer were good. Foster carers receive support in working with children's schools and carers and the authority work together to support children. For example, one foster carer made great effort when moving house to ensure her fostered children were able to move into the school of their choice. Foster carers and social workers make arrangements to transport children to and from school where

necessary, with social workers providing transport if carers are unable to.

Foster carers' views of the support they get for children's education is generally positive as are their views about the support provided to help children undertake activities in the community. The foster carers' handbook informs foster carers that they have to support and promote children's education. Children consulted feel that they get good help with their education. For example, one young person said, 'I get help from school, my foster carer and social worker.'

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Where it is appropriate for children to have contact with their family they receive good support to do so. Contact arrangements are set out in the foster placement agreement and children's files contain records of contact meetings with their families and the outcomes of these meetings. Foster carers' daily records include information about the child before and after contact. This information is used in developing and reviewing the young person's care plan.

Support for contact can be provided by foster carers, social workers or social work assistants. The authority tries to make sure that the same worker will support a child's contact with family although this is not always possible. Social workers and foster carers have some different views about how contact with families should be supported but it is clear that children get good help in this area. Foster carers generally think that children have networks with their own families that are satisfactory or better. They say that any difficulties are because of difficulties between the child and their family rather than a failing in the support provided. The service tries to ensure that the birth parents of fostered children are kept informed of their children's progress and are supported to have contact with their child where appropriate.

The foster carers' handbook informs carers of the importance of contact and their role in promoting it.

Generally, children have good networks with friends and within the wider community. Support for children, from their foster carers to have friendships and take part in activities in the community is good. Foster carers regard the level of support from the fostering service for children's activities in the community to be generally good.

Children are listened to and their opinions considered regarding the care they receive and children know how to complain and who to speak to if they have a problem. Foster carers also think that children are usually involved in decisions about their care. Young people are encouraged to attend their own reviews. A young person's guide is made available to all fostered children.

The authority seeks the views of fostered children about the way the service is run. A children's consultation group meets regularly and young people's views contribute to

the authority's planning including planning regarding health, leaving care and the authority's implementation of government policy. Children's views of their foster carers are sought for the annual reviews of their foster carers.

Events take place periodically at which children can get together and make their views heard.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is satisfactory.

Middlesbrough fostering service has structured foster carer payment arrangements that incorporate fostering allowances at different levels based on the age and needs of children being cared for. However, the service does not pay all carers at the level set by the Government's National Minimum Allowance for foster carers and the majority of carers are dissatisfied with the level of allowance paid to them. Information provided by the service shows that some carers are beginning to leave the service and that potential carers may be discouraged from applying to foster with Middlesbrough because of the level of allowances paid.

Financial support for special circumstances and the provision of any necessary specialist equipment is good.

The authority has effective arrangements in place to support the transition of fostered children into adulthood and the overwhelming majority of young people aged over 15 have Pathway Plans in place.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The fostering service's Statement of Purpose is up to date and provides a clear description of the aims and objectives of the fostering service. A children's guide is in place and children receive copies of this guide when they are placed with foster carers.

The fostering service is effectively managed and there are clear lines of delegation and accountability. Staff members are managed and supervised effectively and have appropriate training opportunities. Work is allocated appropriately among suitably qualified social work staff who also take on specific additional development or training roles. Administrative arrangements are appropriate and the manager effectively monitors and manages the quality of work undertaken.

Communication between the fostering service and its carers is good. Some carers report difficulties in communicating with children's social workers and social workers also say that some difficulties exist. The fostering team works to improve this communication and address any difficulties experienced. Social workers from the fostering team and children's social workers communicate effectively with each other.

The assessment process for new foster carers is rigorous and thorough. Careful checks are made regarding applicants' suitability including checks with CRB, local authorities, children's schools, birth children and previous partners. Applicants to foster are visited and interviewed frequently and undertake workbooks as part of their preparation process which gives detailed consideration of their experience, background and competence to foster. Assessments include preparation training and an assessment of the support networks available to the applicant. Written references are taken up from people unrelated to the applicants and these referees are visited with a written record of the visit made and signed by the social worker undertaking the visit and the referee.

The number of foster carers approved in the last year has been very small and, as some carers have left, the service does not have a large enough number of carers to allow it to offer a choice of placements and match children's needs sufficiently well.

The fostering service is very good at supporting and managing its foster carers. Carers are very satisfied with the support they are provided with and the majority say that the quality of the support they receive is the best thing about the service. Supervising social workers visit carers frequently and offer good telephone support. Some carers are concerned about support out of office hours but the majority are satisfied with the arrangements. Foster carer support groups take place and newsletters are produced for carers. A number of carers have developed informal support arrangements with friends who foster or other carers who live nearby.

Foster carers' supervision takes place very regularly with good records being maintained and agreed with the foster carer. Unannounced visits take place appropriately.

Foster carer reviews take place annually and, although previously some foster carers reviews were late taking place, the process is now effective and prompt. Foster carers' reviews monitor health and safety issues, safe caring and the carer's ongoing suitability. They also consider the quality of care provided and the training and support provided to the carer. Clear recommendations are made regarding the ongoing terms of the carer's approval and identify any additional support or training needed. For example, one review report contained a list of recommended reading to help the carer develop further.

Although the views of children and their social workers have not previously been sought effectively, the fostering service now places a high priority on getting these views. Recent reviews contain detailed reports from fostered children and their social workers that are considered alongside the foster carer's comments and those of the supervising social worker. Foster carers' reviews are now robust, detailed and well recorded and each review is considered by panel who make a recommendation to the decision maker about the carer's ongoing approval.

The service provides foster carers with a good range of training. A significant number of foster carers attend training events. For example, recent training in internet

safety, requested by carers, was attended by 46 carers. The service is promoting NVQ level 3 training for carers with 17 carers having completed this training and a further 18 ready to start. Foster carers speak positively about the quality and range of training provided. The authority is working to provide more flexibility in the timing of training events to make them more accessible to a range of carers. Training in child protection, safe care and bullying has been provided with more first aid and behaviour management training arranged. Additional training in a wide range of topics is provided based on carers' wishes or needs identified by the service.

Children's files contain all the necessary documentation required by the LAC system. In some files these documents are completed well and supported by other information which would help children understand the things that have happened to them. In other files the quality of the information is not good enough. For example, in one file the recording was not good enough to provide evidence that a foster placement made had been carefully and well matched. This file also contained minimal information within LAC documents and contained no child protection information, despite this being necessary. Another file contained private information about the child's sibling and the documentation contained unclear and conflicting information about the child's legal status.

The overall administrative systems are well organised with records in place containing all significant information relevant to the running of the service. These are regularly monitored by the manager.

Specific policies and procedures are in place to ensure that work to assess family and friends of carers takes place within set timescales.

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	prepare a written policy on acceptable measures of control, restraint and discipline of children placed with foster parents (Regulation 13(1)).	18/01/2008

Recommendations

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

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- make sure that children's LAC reviews effectively monitor whether children have received an annual health check or not (NMS 12)
 - provide foster carers with periodically updated health and safety training (NMS 6)
 - ensure that children are placed with foster carers in a planned way that ensures that careful matching can take place (NMS 8)
 - reduce the proportion of children placed with independent fostering agencies and ensure that these placements are made based on the specific needs of the child concerned rather than based on the capacity of the in-house fostering service (NMS 8)
 - implement a process to manage all placements of children with carers working for independent fostering agencies to ensure that full information about the carer is gained and full information about the child provided to ensure that the match is appropriate (NMS 8)
 - allow fostering panel to consider the match of all long-term 'permanent' placements of children with carers and make a recommendation regarding the suitability of the match (NMS 8)
 - pay all foster carers at a level at least equivalent to the Government's National Minimum Allowance for foster carers which covers the full cost of caring for each child placed with them (NMS 29)
 - recruit a range of carers in sufficient numbers to meet the needs of children and young people who require a foster placement (NMS 17)
 - make sure that children's files contain accurate, comprehensive information which details the nature and quality of care provided and contributes to an understanding of their life events (NMS 24).