

South Tyneside MBC Fostering

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

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Setting address	Fostering & Adoption, 16 Barrington Street, SOUTH SHIELDS, Tyne and Wear, NE33 1AN
Telephone number	0191 423 8500
Email	brian.morgan@southtyneside.gov.uk
Registered person	South Tyneside Council
Registered manager	Brian Morgan
Responsible individual	Amanda Bradley
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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

South Tyneside Council fostering service is an integral part of the Children and Young People's Directorate. The Directorate provides a wide range of care and support for children in need and their families.

The fostering service recruits, assesses and supports foster carers to provide care and accommodation to children and young people with a wide range of needs. It uses five different kinds of carer to meet these needs. These are called mainstream carers, relative carers, respite carers, teenage scheme and permanence scheme carers.

At the time of this inspection visit, the staff team at the service were supporting 93 fostering households providing placements to 136 children and young people across these various areas of work.

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. Arrangements to help children achieve economic wellbeing are not key standards and were not inspected on this occasion.

The managers, staff and foster carers are committed to maintaining good standards, whilst working to further improve the range and quality of the service provided.

The service is good at promoting children's health and children receive good support to ensure their health needs are met. The service works closely with the Looked After Children (LAC) Health Team to monitor the attendance of children and young people at their annual health reviews and nearly all children have benefited from these in the last 12 months. Children who need additional support benefit from the good links maintained with the local Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS).

To keep children safe, the service ensures that they are properly matched with their foster carers. They also make sure that each foster home is a safe place for them to live. Staff are very experienced and suitable and there are good arrangements to vet new staff to ensure that children and young people are protected. However,

employment histories for new staff members need to be completed in full detail on each occasion, and a record kept of the follow up telephone calls made to verify written references. The manager should routinely sign the documents used to monitor safety of children in the service overall.

The service works closely with educational staff to both support and recognise the work and achievements of children and young people. It is continuing to work to ensure that children's views are gathered and presented to their carers review meetings.

There are effective management structures and processes in place and the service is well organised. The current foster carer agreements are compliant with Schedule 5 of the Fostering Service Regulations 2002, but do not highlight the change of responsibility for regulation from the Commission for Social Care Inspection to Ofsted. Case files and carers records are very well presented and comprehensive.

Improvements since the last inspection

The service has responded positively to the previous requirements set and recommendations made. Children, their carers and their placing social workers were unable to highlight any major common areas in need of further improvement. When asked what had changed in the last 12 months most carers felt that the service had got 'better'. Most social workers who had placed children see the good working relationships they enjoy with foster carers and fostering team members as a particular strength of the service. One described how 'I consider the fostering service to be supportive and helpful both to the carer and the young people in their care. I also consider that colleagues in foster care keep me appropriately updated with relevant information as and when necessary'. One foster child simply stated that 'being fostered is the best thing that's ever happened to me in my life'.

The service has participated in a joint training initiative organised across the directorate. This has improved the understanding of foster carers and social workers about which children's records need to be completed and why. This in turn has led to more comprehensive records, including placement agreements, which are regularly monitored for their quality. The fostering team are provided with as much information as is possible to support their matching with carers. Better placement planning has improved the arrangements for placing older children and reduced the number of emergency placements made. Certificates of exemption, approved by a senior officer, are now used on every occasion when a foster carer is asked to exceed their usual fostering limits.

The training programme for foster carers has been revised to ensure that they are given regular opportunities to update their skills in first aid, child protection, behaviour management and anti-bullying. A central training record is maintained. Carers are visited unannounced on at least one occasion each year. Safe care agreements are drawn up and agreed at the commencement of each placement.

The level of clerical and administrative support has been reviewed and improved,

particularly with regard to the fostering panel. The agency decision maker is now sufficiently senior and does not have day-to-day involvement in the running of the service. The verbal references obtained during foster carers assessments are recorded and then shared with the referees. Foster carer agreements and notices are issued following each change to carers approval. The agency continue to work with the Sahara Project to try and recruit more carers from a range of ethnic communities and backgrounds.

The arrangements to assess family and friends carers by social workers have been improved through the provision of specific guidance. Direct support and advice from members of the fostering team is also available and is routinely provided to social workers when these assessments are undertaken.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Children and young people benefit from good health care services that meet their overall physical, emotional and social developmental needs. Most foster carers see the support received from the fostering service as either 'outstanding' or 'good'. One described how children's health needs were discussed 'mostly in supervision visits or unannounced visits. We talk about doctor's visits, dental, optician and any medical needs, what exercise the children do, activity etc'. Another described how staff 'are always on the end of a phone and you can expect help with anything no matter what'.

The service has strong relationships with local children's health services. One social worker who has placed children through the service described how 'there is very good access to health professionals through the provision of a dedicated LAC nurse. Also a dedicated clinical psychologist for young people who are looked after'. Through their links with the LAC nurse, the service can monitor the attendance of children and young people at their annual health reviews. Almost all children have attended these in the last 12 months with details of these and other health appointments recorded within their care files. The clinical psychologist also provides good quality support directly to children and their carers. Fostering staff also highlighted the joint training opportunities provided as part of this package of support.

Foster carers normally receive full details of the health needs of children in advance and also receive regular training. They know their role in registering the children with doctors, dentists and opticians, they advocate for children and support them with their health appointments, diet and personal hygiene. The questionnaires received from young people and the comments they made in group discussions were very positive. All of these children feel that they are receiving the right support and advice regarding their own health needs from their foster carers.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

To help keep children safe, suitability checks are undertaken on carers and staff, and are kept up to date. Staff files are well presented and contain most required information. However, in one recent example, there was no evidence that telephone enquiries had been made to verify the written references received. It was also noted that the employment history had not been completed in full detail.

Health and safety checklists are used to help ensure that homes are safe places for children to live. These are used when foster carers are first assessed and are routinely updated during subsequent visits to their homes by staff from the fostering service. The service has developed specialist foster carer training in partnership with the regional fire service to further improve fire safety precautions. Individual risk assessments and family safe care agreements are also routinely used to help keep children safe.

The service works to ensure that the systems used to match children with carers are as effective as possible. A dedicated panel has been introduced to review and monitor the best use of foster care placements. The placements officer uses agreed procedures and standard documentation, to both gather in and then share the information needed, to properly match children with their carers. Potential placements are discussed in detail at the weekly team meetings. Placing social workers are invited to meet with potential carers in advance to share views and information. Visits with carers and children further illustrated the good matching procedures in place. Although the service is busy, most matches of children to carers are planned in advance rather than occurring as an emergency. The unplanned ending of placements is also rare.

When children do have to move, carers describe the support they receive from the service as either 'good' or 'outstanding'. They are equally positive when they describe the quality of the matching of children with them and the good information they are receiving to help achieve this. Placement agreement meetings to formally agree and record care arrangements for the children are taking place promptly. Every child who wrote in told us that they are 'always' well cared for where they are living now. One explained that this was true 'because I feel safe and my foster parents which I call parents are understanding and lots of help. I'm living here for the rest of my life'.

Arrangements for safeguarding children and young people from abuse are good. There are robust systems to allow the manager to monitor any referrals and incidents, however, the main documentation used is not currently signed by them. Carers receive training to help them keep children safe. None of the young people who wrote to or spoke with us are being bullied.

The fostering panel ensures that the assessment undertaken on any new foster carers are thorough and that their ability to care safely for children are regularly

reviewed. To help the panel with their responsibilities, a new post of panel advisor has been introduced. Panel members are also provided with training. The minutes from panel meetings do not clearly indicate the attendance of its independent members. This makes it more difficult to confirm that meetings are quorate.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The service values and promotes diversity and equality for children and young people. Foster carers see the support received from the service in addressing these issues as either 'good' or 'outstanding'. Carers receive regular training in dealing with diversity issues. The service has good links with the regional Sahara Project which it uses to promote the recruitment of carers from a range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Carers are also given good support to help children use activities in the community. One described how 'we have cards that allow free access to many activities in South Tyneside and beyond'. Others described the regular group events organised by the service, including trips away, fun days and the annual celebration of achievement awards evening.

Children and young people are supported to think about their future and their educational needs are prioritised. The service are part of the local Multi-Agency Looked After Partnership (MALAP) which promotes and supports the overall educational needs of all looked after children in South Tyneside. 'The Place' local education project takes a key role in co-ordinating and providing this support directly to foster children. A member of staff from this project has joined the fostering service panel as its education representative.

Carers described the 'good' or 'outstanding' support provided to them in meeting the educational needs of the children they care for. Children themselves confirmed that they 'always' or 'usually' get the right help to be successful in their education and to think about their future. One commented that 'I get encouraged for what I want to become'. A computer is provided to every fostering household to support home learning. Detailed records of children's educational achievements are kept by their carers and staff. The service was able to report that all of the young people undertaking their GCSE examinations in the last 12 months had been successful, with just under a quarter of them achieving five passes.

The service has appropriate policies, procedures and guidance, ensuring that where 'short break care' is provided to children and families, the arrangements positively recognise and support parents as the main carers of their children.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Policies and procedures are in place which help ensure that contact arrangements for the child or young person are promoted and monitored. Carers receive training to help children maintain contact with their birth families and friends. When contact occurs, it is recorded by carers and shared with the children's own social worker. Financial support is provided by the fostering service and the local contact centre is used to help facilitate arrangements. Carers describe children overall as having 'good' or 'satisfactory' networks with their family, friends and the local community.

Children are regularly consulted and are able to raise and discuss any concerns they have regarding the care they receive. Children told us that their carers 'always' listen to them and take notice of their opinions. One young person said of their carers that 'when I tell them something they will listen to me and help me if it's any problem'. Children also confirmed that they know how to complain and who to speak to if they are unhappy.

The children and young peoples directorate also employ dedicated staff who consult regularly with looked after children and young people on their behalf. There is a looked after children's participation group and the service is currently working to re-establish a 'Children Who Foster Group' who can contribute to the training programme for new foster carers.

Carers rate the service as 'good' at involving children in decisions about their day-to-day lives and about how the fostering service is run. One carer described how 'the child always comes first and the birth parents' views and needs are listened to'. Another confirmed that 'my support worker always listens to my children'. Children are visited regularly at their foster homes by their own social workers and are encouraged to participate in their own care review meetings. The independent review officers who chair these meetings are busy introducing a better system to gather children's views for their foster carers own review meetings. This new system will also gather the views of children if their foster placement should end for any reason.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The Statement of Purpose (SOP) has been recently reviewed and provides a clear statement of the aims and objectives of the service, however the actual date of the recent review is not included within it. Foster carers are provided with a copy of the statement as are placing social workers. Children and young people are given their own age appropriate guide to it.

Management arrangements within the service are effective and individual areas of responsibility and delegation are clearly agreed. The administrative support is well organised. One carer described the skills of the administrative workers as 'fantastic'.

Ongoing local publicity campaigns ensure that the service is promoted and new carers are regularly recruited. Processes to check, assess and train new carers are effective. Some original Criminal Records Bureau documentation had been maintained within carers' files where only the date and reference number are now necessary. Details of the terms of each carer's approval are also maintained and are amended as their circumstances change. The foster carer agreement documents currently used are compliant with Schedule 5 of the Fostering Service Regulations 2002, but require an amendment following the change of responsibility for regulation from the Commission for Social Care Inspection to Ofsted. Carers gave good examples of why they choose to foster for this service. These included good support, friendly advice and being part of a service for the local community. One carer said 'we wouldn't change, they are friendly, good humoured and very nice understanding people who do not judge anyone'. Another highlighted how the service is 'always striving to better the system and do much more for the children and carers'.

Fostering staff undertake regular supervision visits to ensure that their carers are supported effectively. Comprehensive records of these visits are maintained within files for reference with carers provided with their own copy. Most carers feel that the service provides outstanding support to them in caring for children, including the support provided outside office hours. One described how 'if my support worker is not around, there is always someone there to help'. Another described the support they received as 'second to none'. To help them look after children and young people, carers told us that the service provides them with a broad range of support, such as information and equipment, advice, training, support meetings, care plan meetings, psychological support, help with nursery places, respite and simply 'someone to talk to'.

The service operates a robust system which ensures that foster carer annual review meetings take place as scheduled. The meetings are chaired by independent review officers. The documentation in use is comprehensive and is generally prepared in good detail. One example of the monitoring sheet for significant events not being properly completed for the review was highlighted to the manager. However, documentation overall is being used to demonstrate that routine safety, police and

health checks for carers, are being updated as necessary, and that their ongoing abilities to provide good standards of care to children are being properly considered. The independent review officers are busy introducing a better system to gather children's views for their foster carers review meetings. Good communication exists between social workers placing children through the fostering service and the service itself. Fostering staff regularly attend children's care team meetings. Placing social workers are routinely requested to provide their written views to the carers review meetings.

The service encourages and regularly reviews the overall participation of carers in training. An annual programme is arranged in advance and shared with carers. These include opportunities for joint training with fostering service staff and placing social workers. Carers' individual training needs are regularly discussed in their supervision. Attendance at training is recorded within foster carers' own files and is noted in their annual review reports. Carers evaluate the effectiveness of the training they have received and share their views with the training officer through the feedback forms provided. Opportunities for carers to further develop their skills through National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) and British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) training are regularly offered. Currently, nearly half of the approved fostering households include carers who either hold or are working toward an NVQ qualification at level 3 or its equivalent.

The service has participated in a joint training initiative regarding LAC documentation organised across the directorate. This has improved the understanding of foster carers and social workers about which children's records need to be completed and why. Consequently, case files for children are generally well presented and contain comprehensive information. The overall administrative systems are well organised, records are in place, containing all significant information relevant to the running of the service and these are regularly monitored by the manager.

Appropriate policies and procedures are in place to assess, encourage and support the care of children and young people by family members and friends. These assessments are carried out by social workers who are not part of the fostering team, therefore, specific guidance has been developed to help them in their task. To give further help with the assessments, fostering team members undertake joint visits with these social workers. The assessment reports produced are also read by senior fostering staff. This helps maintain quality and provides feedback to social workers and their managers on any issues arising.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Recommendations

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

- ensure that staff files include an indication that telephone enquiries had been made to follow up the written references received and that previous employment histories are completed in full detail (NMS 15)
- ensure that fostering panel minutes clearly describe the role of each person in attendance, particularly with regard to the attendance of independent panel members (NMS 30)
- implement the procedures developed to ensure that the views of young people are gathered at the end of placement and at foster carer reviews (NMS 11)
- ensure that the date of the recent annual review of the current SOP is included within the document itself (NMS1)
- amend Foster Carer agreements to highlight the change of responsibility for inspection and regulation from the Commission for Social Care Inspection to Ofsted (NMS 21)