

# 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 task centred placements.

At the time of the inspection the service was supporting approximately 85 foster carers with around 135 children in placements. The service has a staff team comprising the manager, a senior practitioner, five supervising social workers, a support worker and administrative support.

### Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This was an announced inspection of Middlesbrough Borough Council's fostering service. The purpose of the inspection was to assess the service's compliance with the fostering national minimum standards and regulations. All the key standards were inspected under the five outcome areas of being healthy, staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution and economic wellbeing. The effectiveness of the service's organisation was also inspected as was its work to promote equality and diversity. All outcome areas are rated as good as is the service's organisation and its promotion of equality and diversity.

The fostering service provides children with good support for their health and education. It is good at helping them have contact with their families and gives good support to help young people prepare for adulthood. The service is impressively well managed. This means that, despite a dramatic increase in the numbers of children within the authority needing foster placements and the consequent high pressures faced, the fostering service has continued to develop and improve the quality of its practice.

The service makes placements carefully with carers who are as closely matched as possible although the level of detail in foster placement agreements does not always identify roles and responsibilities clearly enough. The authority undertakes extremely detailed assessments of foster carers and provides them with good support and training. However, it does not have enough carers to be able to ensure that children can be placed in a planned way with appropriately matched carers. Assessments of family and friends carers are not undertaken promptly enough but when carried out these are detailed and comprehensive. The authority is careful in its recruitment of staff for the fostering service when appointing people from outside the authority. However, procedures are not well enough developed when appointing internal

candidates to positions in the fostering team. Children's and foster carers' records are generally very well maintained, though records held do not always support the need to protect confidential information.

Foster carers are provided with very good formal supervision and this helps ensure that children are safe and well cared for in their placements.

### **Improvements since the last inspection**

The service has addressed the 10 recommendations made at the last inspection. It has improved arrangements for matching children with foster carers. It has also developed the way it arranges placements and information sharing with the independent fostering agencies who provide carers for the authority's children. It has improved the quality of its recording and elements of its management, training and support of foster carers. It has continued to work to recruit more foster carers although, as stated earlier, more work is required in this area.

### **Helping children to be healthy**

The provision is good.

The service ensures that children's health is promoted well. Good training is provided where children have complex or specific needs arising from their disabilities or health. It provides carers with training in wider aspects of children's health including nutrition, health, sexuality and relationships. Arrangements to ensure that all carers have up-to-date training in first aid have not been effective enough, although more training is planned. The foster carers' handbook provides carers with a useful reference point regarding children's health and carers receive support and advice about children's health on an ongoing basis.

Communication is effective when placements are made so that foster carers receive good information about children's health needs, particularly where any special health needs are present. The authority works closely with the looked after children's nurse, who provides good support to children and ensures that they receive annual medical checks. Good relationships exist between the authority and school nurses who provide another source of support for children's health.

The arrangements for the delegation of responsibility to consent to routine and emergency medical treatment is identified and made plain to foster carers when placements are made. This means that children can receive any treatment they need promptly. Children are registered with the primary health care services they need. They receive very good support for any specialist health needs they have and prompt access to any service they require.

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

The provision is good.

Children are placed with foster carers in homes that are safe and suitable. Home safety is monitored on an ongoing basis during supervision and unannounced visits and health and safety assessments are updated as necessary.

The fostering service has experienced a dramatic growth in the numbers of children within the authority who need foster placements. Despite this the service works effectively to place children with foster carers who are appropriate to meet their needs. It endeavours to place children with foster carers whose approval terms are an appropriate match and provides additional monitoring and support in situations where this is not the case. The service has an increasing numbers of foster carers who have exemptions agreed. These allow carers to care for more children than the usual fostering limit of three children who are not all siblings. However, in these situations care has been taken to ensure the placements are appropriate. For example, in a number of cases the children concerned already knew each other and most are short term arrangements. Exemptions are very well monitored and the service will not place children with carers where this is likely to unsettle children already in placement. Placement stability is very good with high levels of support being provided to foster carers and children from the fostering team and children's social workers.

In order to place children appropriately the authority is using a significantly higher proportion of placements with independent fostering agencies than is usual. These placements are well managed, supervised and monitored with a clear decision making process in place regarding their use.

Despite the significant pressures on the service it is generally good at ensuring that foster carers receive comprehensive information about children when they are placed. Foster placement agreements are drawn up for each placement and placement meetings take place though, often, these do not take place until after the placement has been made. Foster placement agreements generally contain good levels of background information about children where this is known. However, they do not always set out the day to day arrangements and responsibilities for supporting contact well enough. Additionally, the level of delegation of authority to consent to matters such as leisure and educational activities is not always identified specifically enough. Consequently, there can be a lack of clarity with some foster carers and social workers having differing views about who should be doing what. This, in some circumstances, results in misunderstandings and some communication difficulties between foster carers and social workers which could hamper the care provided to children.

The fostering service and authority work well to ensure that children are kept safe in their foster placements. Foster placements are monitored and supervised regularly; fostering social workers meet with children and provide carers with very good support.

The suitability of foster carers is rigorously checked during their assessments and criminal records bureau (CRB) and other suitability checks are updated regularly. Children's social workers visit children in foster care regularly and children are able to report any concerns they have. Children feel safe and well cared for in their placements. For example, one young person said, 'It's a really nice home, I'm treated just like one of their own children, there is no difference, they are really caring.' They know who to speak to if they are worried.

The fostering service has an effective procedure for responding to any complaints, allegations or significant events. It has well developed systems for monitoring any significant events, the action taken, its outcome and for notifying the relevant people. It provides its carers with training in child protection, behaviour management and safe caring so they are able to care for children safely and safe care policies are developed for each foster home.

The authority has procedures for the safe recruitment of staff in place that clearly set out the information required in respect of new applicants. It is robust and thorough in its recruitment of staff members that are joining the authority from another employer. However, processes for the recruitment or promotion of internal candidates are not effective enough. This deprives the authority of the opportunity to ensure that essential checks are updated to comply with current recruitment practice.

The fostering panel is thorough and robust in its work. It is well constituted with members bringing a wide range of relevant knowledge and experience to their roles. The panel not only gives careful and close consideration to cases presented to it but also takes an active role in monitoring the timeliness and suitability of children's plans. Administrative arrangements are effective and ensure that panel has full information on which to base its deliberations. Panel has access to robust legal and medical advice which aids its work further.

Panel makes clear recommendations and provides an effective quality assurance check for the service. The records of panel meetings are detailed and comprehensive. However, they do not clearly record the reasons for recommendations made which could leave the agency decision maker without clear guidance about panel's thought process in coming to a recommendation.

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

The provision is good.

The authority's fostering service provides services to children and their families that are based on their individual needs that reflect and value their differences. It also recognises and values difference in the way it works with foster carers. Applicants' attitude and ability to reflect diversity and promote equality is assessed very thoroughly before they are considered suitable people to care for children placed by the authority. The service provides carers with very good training in equality and

diversity as part of their preparation training. This is reinforced in ongoing training and supervision. The service approves foster carers from a range of backgrounds and cultures and regards diversity as a strength.

It works effectively to match children with carers appropriate to their needs and gives close consideration to any cultural differences between the child's family and their foster placement. The agency works with an independent organisation to provide support, training and advice to carers if they have children of a different ethnicity placed. Children with disabilities and complex needs receive very good support from the fostering service. Good training and the provision of necessary equipment aid individualised care packages with carers who can meet children's health needs.

Children are provided with good educational support. The service provides carers with good information about education within the foster carers' handbook and strong training is available in educational matters. Good quality personal education plans are developed promptly for all children looked after by the authority. These are appropriate for the age of the child concerned and form a basis for planning and providing educational support for children.

There are good links between the fostering team, children's social workers and the education service. This helps ensure fostered children receive the necessary support and are able to access the most appropriate schools for them. The need to maintain educational placements is given consideration when planning placements. Arrangements are clearly identified in foster placement agreements to ensure that attendance at school is promoted. Educational equipment can be provided for children where needed and financial grants to support education are available. Foster carers support children with homework and they and social workers attend meetings at school.

Records are kept of children's academic achievement and the authority holds celebration events to recognise achievement.

The authority does not have a specific short-break foster care scheme. It does not undertake a great deal of work in this area but is actively recruiting carers to develop this aspect of the service. However, disabled children are well supported by the authority. Foster carers are provided with all necessary equipment and training and there are good arrangements to ensure there is appropriate levels of support from health professionals.

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

The provision is good.

The fostering service and wider children's services support and promote contact between children and their families. Foster carers help children maintain contact with families and friends where this is appropriate and receive support with this as needed. Foster carer supervision covers contact and any issues arising from this. This

ensures that any problems or difficulties can be addressed. Good information is contained within the foster carers' handbook.

Arrangements to supervise contact are made where necessary. Supervision is undertaken by the authority's staff or foster carers as appropriate. Contact arrangements are set out in the foster placement agreement although issues such as transport arrangements are not always made clear enough and this can sometimes lead to differences of opinion regarding roles and responsibilities. Children know their contact arrangements and have their views taken into account when they are reviewed.

Fostered children and young people are involved and listened to regarding the provision of their care. Foster carers take notice of their opinions and support them to express these in care planning discussions. Children are consulted for their reviews. They meet their social workers frequently and know who to talk to if they have any concerns or worries. The authority is working to ensure that children's views are sought for and fully reflected in the annual reviews of their foster carers. It has recently revised its arrangements to ensure this happens more effectively.

Children are involved in and consulted about wider aspects of the authority's activities. Children and young people have been involved in the development of the authority's 'Pledge' and are consulted by different parts of the service as developments are considered. Celebration events take place which enable children's achievements and contributions to be recognised. The fostering service has developed a 'children who foster' group in conjunction with an independent organisation.

### **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is good.

The service provides young people with good support to help them prepare for adulthood. It provides foster carers with good information and advice in the foster carers' handbook about helping prepare children to be as independent as possible. Training is provided in pathway planning and helping children move on. Supervising social workers provide foster carers with ongoing advice and support with supervision covering preparation for independence where appropriate.

Foster carers work with children to help them learn some of the skills they will need to live independently. Social workers and the authority's leaving care team work well with children to support them and help them plan for their future. Pathway plans are drawn up in a timely manner and are well supervised and monitored. Children are involved in planning for their future and are well consulted as these plans develop.

## Organisation

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The service recruits and approves carers from a range of backgrounds and cultures and works with an independent organisation to endeavour to recruit carers from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds more effectively. Applicants' ability to work with children in a way that recognises and promotes equality and diversity is considered very closely prior to their approval as carers. Equality and diversity issues are covered in detail during foster carers' preparation training and ongoing training and supervision reinforces this. The authority takes children's specific needs and cultural backgrounds into account when making placements. Although current pressures on the service mean that children cannot always be matched with carers of the same ethnicity, support is provided to carers to ensure that children's needs are met.

The fostering service has a clear and succinct statement of purpose that accurately describes the service it provides. It has a children's guide in place that meets the national minimum standard. This is more suited to older children and is not presented as attractively for children as it could be. The service has recognised this and has another guide under development.

The fostering manager and senior managers in the authority manage and control the operations of the fostering service effectively. The fostering service produces an annual report to the authority's corporate parenting board and the manager operates a rigorous system to monitor and act on any significant incidents. Regular file audits take place to ensure that recording is of good quality. Staff members within the fostering team are well trained, supervised and managed.

Workload management systems are in place to ensure the service is able to deal with the dramatically increasing workload it is facing. The service has benefited from the appointment of a full time senior practitioner and is in a position to recruit two additional social workers which will enable it to deal more effectively with the rising numbers of fostered children. Commendably, the management of the fostering service is impressively strong. Very effective work allocation and delegation of responsibility has created an environment of improvement. Over a period of time during which the service has had to respond to significant pressures the quality of its work has also increased measurably. This demonstrates the outstanding quality of the direct management of the service.

The service number of caring families approved by the service has reduced in size slightly because of the retirement or resignation of a number of carers. However, the service has had some success in increasing the numbers of carers it recruits. Recent recruitment campaigns have been successful though the service still does not have enough carers to provide fully matched placements for the increased numbers of children.

The fostering service is very robust in the way it assesses foster carers. Thorough

suitability checks are undertaken and the service assesses applicants' competence to foster as well as considering their background and experiences of child care. Assessments are very rigorous, detailed and evaluative with reports ranging from very good to outstanding. This ensures that those carers approved are suitable to care for the authority's children.

Once approved, foster carers are provided with good support and very thorough formal supervision. Supervising social workers visit carers very frequently and ensure that support is always available to carers. A comprehensive foster carers' handbook provides good information to underpin carers' practice and unannounced visits take place at least annually to monitor the care being provided. Children's social workers visit children in placement regularly.

The authority provides its carers with a wide range of good training. In addition to 'mandatory' elements the provision of training is flexible based on individual needs identified as required or in supervision or at reviews. Training events are take place during the day and on an evening to enable as many carers as possible to attend. Transport and child care support arrangements are provided as needed. The authority is working to help carers achieve the children's workforce development council national occupational standards for foster carers.

Reviews of foster carers are robust. They consider carers' ongoing suitability to foster, ensure that CRB and medical checks are up-to-date and monitor training undertaken. Review processes include arrangements to seek the views of social workers and fostered children for the foster carers' reviews. Although the service experiences some difficulties in reliably getting views of social workers and children for carers' reviews it has recognised this and developed a new procedure to ensure that these are gained more consistently.

Children's records are well maintained. Records reflect children's care status and situation and files are well ordered. Key documents on file are usually well completed and good records are maintained of any specialist input provided to children. Records are appropriate to assist planning and act as a reference for children in future should they wish to look back at their history.

Foster carers' records are also well maintained. Files are well structured and ordered with all information easy to find. File audits take place to ensure that recording is of a good standard and key case decisions are clearly recorded on files. However, in some instances information on file is not retained in such a way as to protect confidential data. For example, CRB disclosure certificates are retained on file beyond the timescale identified by the issuing authority for their destruction and in some cases disclosure certificates were retained on a files of people with only an indirect relationship to the person concerned. In another case a confidential assessment of one child was retained in the file of a sibling's carer.

Longer term placements of children with family and friends carers are unusual within the authority. Assessments may be started but, usually, the situation changes before they are completed. When they are undertaken assessments are not completed until

significantly after the timescale required by regulations. For example, a recent assessment took five months to complete. However, initial suitability checks including CRB, local authority and other key checks are undertaken promptly and placements are well supervised and monitored. This provides some interim assurance of children's wellbeing but their safety is not sufficiently promoted until the assessment of their carers has been completed. Assessments, when they are completed, are of excellent quality.

## **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 all carers receive first aid training that is updated appropriately (NMS 12.5)
- ensure that foster placement agreements clearly identify the day to day arrangements regarding responsibilities and consent arrangements (NMS 8) (breach of Regulation 34(3) of the Fostering Services Regulations 2002)
- develop clear recruitment processes for internal candidates who move posts or are promoted (NMS 15)
- ensure that panel minutes clearly record the reasons for recommendations made (NMS 30) (breach of Regulation 25(2) of the Fostering Services Regulations 2002)
- recruit a range of carers in sufficient numbers to meet the needs of children and young people who require a foster placement (NMS 17.1)
- ensure that written records comply with the requirements of data protection (NMS 25)
- ensure that assessments of family and friends carers for immediate placements are undertaken in a timely manner. (NMS 32) (breach of Regulation 38(2) of the Fostering Services Regulations 2002)