

# South Tyneside MBC Fostering

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

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| <b>Unique reference number</b> | SC054504                        |
| <b>Inspection date</b>         | 21/12/2009                      |
| <b>Inspector</b>               | Stephen Graham / Dennis Bradley |
| <b>Type of inspection</b>      | Key                             |

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| <b>Responsible individual</b>  | Amanda Bradley   |
| <b>Date of last inspection</b> | 06/12/2007   |

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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 a number of different kinds of carer to meet these needs. These are called mainstream carers, relative carers, short break and emergency carers, teenage scheme carers, permanence and task centred scheme carers.

At the time of this inspection visit, the staff team at the service were supporting over 100 fostering households providing placements to over 130 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.

The purpose of this visit was a key inspection to examine all key national minimum standards (NMS). The inspection examined outcomes for young people in the areas of being healthy, staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution, economic well-being and organisation. Children and young people placed through South Tyneside Council fostering service benefit from good levels of care. Some comments received from foster carers about the support they receive in achieving this included the observation that the service 'adapts to the needs of the children and the foster carers and are always looking for new ways to improve.'

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

To help keep young people safe the service has improved the procedures to complete necessary checks on new staff members. The minutes of the fostering panel meetings have been improved to better explain the role of each person in attendance. The arrangements to gather the views of children about the care they receive have been reviewed and improved. The Statement of Purpose for the service is clearly dated to better demonstrate that it has been reviewed. Foster carer agreements have been amended to highlight the change of responsibility for inspection to Ofsted.

## 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. Foster carers know their role in registering the children with doctors, dentists and opticians and work closely with a variety of specialist medical staff to promote and support good outcomes for the children and young people placed with them. Carers receive details of the health needs of the children placed with them and attend additional training where necessary to help ensure that these needs are met.

The service monitors the information provided to their carers and responds promptly if any additional information is required. One carer described how, 'The children in our care are registered at our doctors, we have contact with the children's health visitor, we discuss the children's health needs and lifestyle during supervisions where concerns are addressed or extra support found.' Nearly all of the carers who wrote to us described the support they received from the service in meeting the health care needs of children as either good or outstanding.

Social workers who have placed children through the service gave lots of good examples of how the service works with its carers, to ensure that children and young people keep themselves healthy. Examples of how they do this include the very strong links the service has with the looked after children's health care team and the good joint working that comes from this, the access to necessary health care training provided by the service to its carers and the monthly care team meetings where the changing health care needs of young people are closely monitored.

Those young people who wrote to us or spoke with us feel that they are receiving support and advice regarding their own health needs from their foster carers. Children spoken with also confirmed that they are encouraged to eat healthily and that they are registered with local health services. One young person described how, 'When the health visitor comes she asks if I would like any information.'

## 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. These are monitored through a central system to make sure that they are kept up to date. Application forms are scrutinised to ensure that all required information is provided. Referees are contacted by phone to ensure that information they provide is accurate. However, a clear indication of this is not currently maintained within the staff files.

Health and safety checklists are used to help ensure that homes are safe places for children to live. These are routinely updated during visits to the homes of carers by staff from the fostering service. Individual risk assessments and family safe care

agreements are also used to help keep children safe but the records of these do not always clearly indicate when they have been updated or that all necessary information has been fully considered. One social worker comments that, 'carers and staff have been excellent at communicating concerns around risks and they have reacted well to guidance, information and direction where given, therefore enabling children and young people to stay safe. All homes have been safe.'

The service works to ensure that the systems used to match children with carers are as effective as possible. The service has a dedicated placements officer and agreed procedures and standard documentation are used to gather and share the information needed to properly match children with their carers. Visits made with carers and the children placed with them illustrated the good matching procedures in place. There have been few unplanned endings of placements.

Carers describe the support they receive from the service when children do have to move as mainly good or outstanding. They are also positive when describing the quality of the matching of children with them, and described the good or outstanding work of the staff at the service in ensuring that they can meet the needs of the children and young people placed with them. They also highlight the mainly good or satisfactory information they are receiving to help achieve this. Placement agreement meetings to formally agree and record care arrangements for the children take place promptly. One carer described how, 'the social workers provide me with all the information regarding health history and the background of the child.' All of the children who wrote in confirmed that they are always or usually well cared for where they are living now. One described how they felt this was true because of 'my carer, I have lived with her for about four years now and I feel secure and safe and she's always there when I need her to depend on'].'

Arrangements for safeguarding children and young people from abuse are good. Carers are provided with training to help them keep children safe. There are systems in place to allow managers at the service to monitor any protection referrals, incidents and any complaints. The questionnaires received from young people are positive, they feel that they are cared for safely and can speak to someone if they were ever unhappy. One young person described how, 'if I had a complaint to make I know how to do that.'

The fostering panel ensures that the assessments undertaken on any new foster carers are thorough and that their ability to care safely for children is regularly reviewed. Panel members are also provided with training to help them with their responsibilities.

## **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 and fostering staff receive training in dealing with diversity issues. Carers describe the support received with these issues as good or

outstanding. One carer described how, 'lots of support is offered, we had a child placed with us who had a disability, we accessed training on how to feed the child appropriately and how to work with his specialist equipment.' Children receive good support from their carers to help them access and use activities in the community. Children themselves provided many direct examples of their involvement in activities and clubs.

The service works to ensure that the educational needs of children and young people are prioritised and they are supported to think about their future. One placing social worker described the 'excellent support from carers to children in meeting education, good communication between carers and schools.' The service helps facilitate good links between its carers and a range of professionals to ensure that the educational needs of children and young people are prioritised and supported. One carer described how, 'education is discussed during each support visit. Staff attend important school meetings to support foster carers where required.' Carers have access to regular training to help them understand and support the educational needs of children in their care.

Children who wrote to us or spoke with us were generally positive about the help they receive with their education. The service has systems in place to monitor the achievements of young people in their education and to target additional support to young people who need it. Care files contain good examples of the quality of support provided to young people in helping to meet their educational needs.

The policies and agreed procedures put in place by the service ensure that, during short-term breaks in foster care, the parents of the children placed continue to be recognised as their main carers. Arrangements to share information and ensure that any equipment necessary to meet the care needs of children is in place are good.

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

The provision is good.

Policies and procedures are in place which both promote and monitor contact arrangements for each child or young person. Carers receive good training and are given detailed guidance to help children maintain positive contact with their birth families and friends. Arrangements are agreed and recorded in advance. Carers keep a record of any contact and share the children's own social worker. The local contact service provides additional support and facilities where closer supervision of contact has been agreed to be necessary.

The service has good arrangements in place to ensure that children are regularly consulted with. There are well organised participation groups for both younger and older children. The service also has well established and effective procedures to consult regularly with all looked after children either by survey or interview. These procedures demonstrate clearly how the views of young people are gathered, recorded and responded to by the service. Young people are encouraged to give their views both to their own and to their foster carers review meetings. All of the

children who wrote to us feel that their carers listen to them and take notice of their opinions. One young person told us; ' My carers listen to me all the time and I can always talk to them.' Children also know who to speak to if they are unhappy, and know how to complain formally if necessary.

Carers also rate the service as good at involving children in decisions about their day-to-day lives and at involving them in how the service is run. One described how, 'children are given information in an appropriate manner.' Another described how, in their experience, 'young people are always involved with anything that impacts on their day to day lives.'

### **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is good.

Staff from the leaving care service work closely with foster carers to gather and record information regarding the independent skills that young people have and what they like to practice. One placing social worker described how, 'Children and young people are encouraged to participate in discussions of their future. There is the transition service which aims to prepare young people for independence when they reach 16 yrs of age.' Another described how, in their experience, 'life skills are taught in placement.'

Foster carers were able to describe the mainly good or outstanding support received to enable them to provide an environment for young people to prosper. Policies and procedures are provided to support this in the foster carer's handbook.

One young person told us that, 'I'm being helped by my foster carers and my social workers to think about my future and told that I can choose.'

### **Organisation**

The organisation is good.

The Statement of Purpose is reviewed annually and provides a clear statement of the aims and objectives of the service. Placing social workers and foster carers can access a copy of the statement on request. Children and young people are also given their own guide to it, this is provided to them in age appropriate formats.

Management arrangements within the service are generally effective and individual areas of responsibility and delegation are clearly agreed. Managers monitor the service as a matter of routine. The administrative support is well organised and is provided by very experienced staff. Systems are in place to ensure that initial applications are processed efficiently and that carer reviews are completed to schedule. However, delays are occurring in the provision of final reports from carer review meetings, which consequently create substantial delay in the consideration of these reports by the fostering panel.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Guidance and training for foster carers and staff working at the service helps to ensure this.

The processes to check on and train new carers are effective, with records of the assessments undertaken completed in good detail. Carers give good examples of why they choose to foster for this service. One said, 'we were told of the reliability of the team by other foster carers. Also we had heard very good reports of their work. During our re-assessment training we could see the dedication and long hours of all who are involved with the service.' Another describes the 'high standards within the service, interests of children come first.'

Good communication exists between social workers placing children through the fostering service and the staff at the service itself. One placing social worker described how; 'The service involves us at all times in order to promote good outcomes for children. Fostering support workers offer invaluable support to children and young people as well as carers.' The social work team at the fostering service undertake regular supervision visits to their carers, including occasional unannounced visits. These visits focus on achieving good outcomes for young people in foster care. Records of these visits are maintained within files for reference and help demonstrate that carers are supported effectively. Most carers feel that the service provides outstanding support to them in caring for children. One states, 'we have regular visits from our support worker. She is very experienced and gives excellent advice.' Others highlight access to support, transport, training and advice. Another carer describes how, 'If I need to speak to anyone if I have any problems or concerns there is always someone on the other end of the phone. They offer advice about the children we care for and support with the meetings we attend. We have regular supervisions.'

The service has a well organised training programme and carers are encouraged to participate in regular training to help them meet the needs of children placed with them. A number of events are also organised to encourage joint training for carers and staff. Training is also provided at different times of the day and in different formats to encourage the participation of all carers. Some training is mandatory and attendance is monitored. The individual training needs of each carer are discussed and agreed regularly in their own supervision and annual review meetings. The training officer has introduced detailed personal development plans for carers to record and plan their individual training needs.

Case files for children are generally well presented and organised. Electronic recording systems have been introduced within the directorate and information about children is in the process of transfer from the previous paper system. As a result of this process some examples were noted of gaps in information in the more recent updates to the placement and care plans for young people. Additionally, some updated agreements and necessary consents were not immediately apparent or available for inspection. The administrative systems for the service are generally well organised and are monitored regularly by the manager and senior staff at the service.

The service has good policies and procedures to encourage, assess and approve family and friends as foster carers. The arrangements to provide them with support and access to training are similar to the arrangements in place for any other carer approved by the service.

## **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 a clear indication that telephone enquiries had been made to follow up the written references received (NMS 15.3)
- ensure that the records of individual risk assessments and family safe care agreements clearly indicate when they have been updated and that all necessary information has been fully considered (NMS 9.3)
- ensure that summary reports from foster carers first annual review meetings are provided promptly for consideration by the fostering panel (NMS 21.5)
- ensure that the case records maintained for each child or young person in foster care are comprehensive and up to date. (NMS 24)