

# Middlesbrough Borough Council Fostering

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

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<b>Setting address</b>	Middlesbrough Teaching and Learning Centre, Cargo Fleet Lane, Middlesbrough, Cleveland, TS3 8PE
<b>Telephone number</b>	01642 201962
<b>Email</b>	lynn_woodhouse@middlesbrough.gov.uk
<b>Registered person</b>	Middlesbrough Borough Council
<b>Registered manager</b>	
<b>Responsible individual</b>	Lynn Woodhouse
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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 fostering service recruits assesses and supports foster carers to provide placements to children and young people with a wide range of needs.

### Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This is a well managed fostering service that highly values children and ensures that their care, safety and welfare is at the centre of service delivery. Children receive good quality care with some outstanding outcomes. They are making positive progress in relation to their health, education, leisure and independence. Children are developing in confidence, emotional resilience and they are encouraged to aspire and prosper. Children live in safe fostering households and feel welcome, loved and part of the family. Children feel safe. They say they do not experience bullying and know how and who to complain to. Children are actively engaged in decisions made about their care and in the development of the fostering service. This is a particular area of excellence and demonstrates how children's wishes and feelings are listened to; they have a direct influence at the highest level of the organisation.

The new fostering manager and staff are qualified, experienced and well supported. They have a very good knowledge about the foster carers and children placed with them and the support, guidance and training is highly valued by foster carers. The fostering panel is robust and ensures that panel members are fully informed before making recommendations to the agency decision maker. Stakeholders comment positively about the fostering service. Comments include: 'the children have all thrived and are making excellent progress' and 'the fostering service have been able to work effectively with myself to make positive changes for children' and 'I have no concerns about the service Middlesbrough provides.' The promotion of equality and diversity underpins the fostering service and ensures that children are fully integrated into their communities and have equality of opportunity, irrespective of their differences.

However, aspects of practice fall short of the national minimum standards and could impact on the services that children receive. These relate to the recruitment of foster carers, telephone verification of references for staff and matching children and carers when gaps are identified. In addition, not all foster carers' reviews are completed annually.

## **Improvements since the last inspection**

The fostering service has addressed all but one of the seven recommendations made at the last inspection. All carers receive first aid training and this is updated. Panel minutes record the reasons for recommendations made by the fostering panel and the assessment of connected persons are undertaken in a timely manner. Improvements have been made to ensure clearer recruitment practices when internal appointments and promotions are made. Written records comply with data protection legislation. Foster placement agreements have been reviewed; these are in the process of completion to ensure they fully comply with the fostering regulations and set out the daily arrangements regarding responsibility and consent. These improvements enhance the quality of service that children receive. One outstanding issue relates to the recruitment of foster carers in sufficient numbers to meet children's needs.

## **Helping children to be healthy**

The provision is good.

Children benefit from living in healthy environments that promote their holistic health needs. This is due to the strong relationships developed between health professionals, foster carers and the fostering service. Children are promptly registered and linked to health professionals, such as the health visitor, doctor, dentist and optician. They access specialist support to meet their additional needs, such as the Children and Adolescent Mental Health service. Children under five years old receive good health support and their foster carers are well advised and supported to ensure children's developmental milestones are met. Foster carers support children to understand the importance of maintaining good health, for example, through developing healthy eating habits and taking regular exercise. This improves their physical, emotional and psychological health and well-being. This is particularly notable in children who, prior to being fostered, had weight issues and are now reaching a healthy weight. Children say that they always get support and advice about being healthy. Typical comments include: 'I eat chicken and milk' and 'we talk about having a balanced diet quite a lot.' Foster carers are well trained in relevant health matters, for example, paediatric first aid and first aid training for children with mental health needs; this helps carers to meet children's specific needs and act as positive advocates for them. Young people who are making pathways to independence have produced a health passport. This is endorsed by the children in care council and provides young people with a record of their health history.

The fostering service has an exceptionally good relationship with the looked after children's nurse and doctor. They are accessible and provide good support, training and bespoke advice to the service, carers, children and older young people on a range of health matters. Children have health needs assessments and regularly reviewed health plans. However, children who live outside of the area do not receive the same prompt service due to the reliance on other health authorities to respond. This is an ongoing issue that is being addressed.

Children live in foster homes that provide good child-centred environments. Foster carers' homes are clean, well furnished, decorated and provide suitable space for children to thrive in. Annual health and safety risk assessments and unannounced visits ensure children continue to live in safe environments.

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

The provision is good.

Foster carers understand the importance of keeping children safe and they support them to take appropriate risks. Children say that they feel safe, are safe and can define what being safe means for them. Children know who to talk to if they have any concerns or worries. One child said 'It's great because if you're very concerned and worried about a certain thing or problem they help you.' The positive relationships that have developed between children and adults ensure children have someone they trust to talk to if there are issues that they wish to disclose. Safe care policies are followed in fostering households ensuring everyone is protected.

Children rarely go missing from home. Foster carers take appropriate action when children go missing to ensure their safe and prompt return.

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

The provision is outstanding.

Children enjoy highly positive, nurturing and trusting relationships in fostering households. Children benefit from foster carers who have high aspirations for them and instil positive values and firm boundaries that they understand, irrespective of their age. Positive role models, such as foster carers' own children, encourage socially acceptable behaviours. Children say that they get sanctioned when they misbehave; sanctions are proportionate. Children receive good support, which helps them when their behaviour is challenging. Foster carers are aware about their responsibility not to impose corporal punishment and they use agreed strategies to effectively manage children's diverse behaviours.

Children say they are not bullied. A number of children are conversant in and have a good knowledge of the different forms of bullying, including cyber bullying. This positive awareness empowers children to talk to someone if they experience bullying.

Children are actively encouraged to engage in a wide range of activities and experiences that they choose and enjoy. There is excellent support from the corporate parents, the children in care council and foster carers; this support enables children to have access to a wider range of leisure provisions. Children are members of clubs, sporting and leisure activities in the community, such as swimming and dancing. They have access to a range of home based activities and are included in holidays with their foster carers. Children are encouraged to develop and sustain friendships. These activities promote children's self-esteem and confidence and promotes their social inclusion.

Children benefit from an excellent commitment to support and develop their educational potential. This is enhanced by the virtual headteacher's oversight who provides an effective and direct interface with the fostering service, educational provisions and the safeguarding and social work teams; this helps to meet children's educational needs. A number of older young people have achieved beyond expectations and some are continuing their education into sixth form, college and university and making decisions that will inform their future career pathways. There is a high level of educational attendance and stability in mainstream and alternative provisions. Exclusion levels are low and individual education packages, including mentor support for some children, encourage children to progress. Foster carers are recognised for their support, such as helping children with reading and homework; this helps to improve children's educational attainment. Foster carers attend education meetings and have access to personal education plans and statements of educational needs, which enables them to support children. Children say that they are given the right help to be successful in their education. They say 'I like school.' and 'yes, the people help you get back on track' and 'we talk about revising and getting the grades we want.' Children are recognised and praised for their achievements, individually and at an annual event. This is excellent for children's self-esteem and motivates their determination to achieve.

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

The provision is outstanding.

Children's wishes and feelings and their contribution to developing the fostering service is fully integrated into the service. This makes children feel listened to and well respected. Children say 'my carer asks me questions about what I think.' Children are empowered and they have the confidence to voice their opinion without fear or favour. This is strengthened by the excellent work of the children in care council who were involved in the development of the children's pledge produced in 2009. The pledge forms the basis of the looked after children's and corporate parents' strategy and its compliance is monitored by a multi agency and corporate parenting board. Representatives from the children in care council regularly meet as a group. They also meet with various service leads, such as the director of children's services, the chief executive, elected members and senior managers to discuss and challenge relevant issues. Children have also met with the Children Rights Director, Ofsted at a national consultation event. The children in care council represent children and young people in the area on the national benchmarking forum, which has a direct influence on service delivery. Children who are currently and previously looked after are involved in the recruitment and training of people who apply to be foster carers. They have a presence on the selection and interview panel for social work applicants at the local university. One carer commented about the children in care council: 'I recently heard the children in care council speak at an event and was very impressed.' Children's wishes and feelings are actively sought. They are also consulted about their foster carer's performance, their pathway meetings and when they leave care. A DVD to promote the children in care council was recently launched and received the groups approval. Children are making a positive contribution in

foster homes and in the wider community; their interventions are having a direct impact on the quality of service that they experience in foster care. Children know how to complain and have access to an advocacy service that promotes their rights.

Children are well cared for in line with their individual placement plans and they are making positive progress. Children are supported to have contact with significant family members and friends and this is actively promoted and well facilitated. Children are developing in self-confidence and emotional resilience as a result of the stable, nurturing environments that promote their overall health, well-being and sense of belonging. Children know the reasons for being fostered and their future plans. They are developing skills that encourage individual choices and independence.

Children express satisfaction about living in fostering households. They are made to feel welcome and are treated as part of the family. Typical comments made by children include: 'I love them' and 'I am being well loved and cared for' and 'I have caring and loving foster parents and also I have many friends.'

### **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is outstanding.

Young people benefit from excellent opportunities to prepare for independence and progress in a planned and safe manner at their own pace. They have the full commitment from the corporate parenting board and senior management to reach their goals and potential with ongoing support from their foster carers. Young people say they are helped to think about the future. Young people are well supported to make positive life choices and they have real opportunities to engage in apprenticeships, further education and training. For example, one young person completed a placement with the council's legal services and wants to pursue a law degree at university. This is testament to a scheme that is working in looked after children's best interests and giving them real opportunities to achieve their ambitions.

Young people receive excellent support, advice and guidance from the pathways team. They are very accessible and provide a range of highly child-focussed services that meet individual needs. Young people are fully consulted and involved in their pathway plans, which inform their future goals and are regularly reviewed; foster carers are involved in this process. Young people benefit from a supported lodgings scheme and an increasing number of young people are remaining with foster carer's after their 18th birthday. This service is well embedded in practice and is increasing in number. Young people with a disability are supported by key agencies to ensure their positive transition into adulthood.



## Organisation

The organisation is good.

Children and young people, foster carers and partner agencies know about the aims and objectives and the services and facilities provided by the fostering service.

Children benefit from a well-managed fostering service. A permanent fostering manager is now in post. They have the appropriate qualifications, knowledge and experience to deliver an ethical, efficient and effective child-centred service. The fostering manager is acutely aware of the shortfalls in the service and has development plans to improve. This is with the full support of partners, such as senior managers and the corporate parent board. The manager also has a firm commitment to the children in care council pledge to ensure they drive forward improvement and deliver a quality fostering service that continues to improve outcomes for children.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. Children's life chances significantly improve as a direct result of the service placing them at the centre of their practice. Children's diverse care needs are identified and met and the support and guidance provided to them serves to enhance their self-esteem, resilience, social integration and independence.

Fostering social workers are well qualified and experienced. They have transferable skills and work effectively in partnership with their professional partners. This includes a close working relationship with the looked after children team of social workers with whom they share the same office. Fostering social workers have a good knowledge of the foster carers and the children placed and know how to support them. They are well motivated, retained and feel supported. They are regularly supervised and have open door access to managers that they have confidence in. Fostering social workers also have access to a range of training opportunities to ensure their continued learning and registration with the professional social work body.

All personnel employed to work in the fostering service are checked during the recruitment process to ensure they are suitable to work with children. This includes enhanced Criminal Records Bureau checks and photographic identification. However, telephone verification of references are not followed up as an additional safeguarding measure.

The fostering service continues to be challenged by a shortage of foster carers to meet the current demand of children and young people who need placements, in particular large sibling groups. The service is addressing this issue in a proactive and innovative manner; in particular the exceptionally good use of modern media. To reduce the use of the number of external placements made with independent fostering agencies and better meet capacity the service has begun to assess additional carers. Assessments are carried out in line with the regulations and carers express no issues with the process; their views indicate that they feel treated fairly

and with respect. Assessments of connected persons are timely.

Children benefit from a fostering panel that ensures only suitable carers are recommended to care for them. It provides a robust quality assurance function and a good level of scrutiny and participation. Panel members who are skilled, experienced and knowledgeable sit on the panel. The independent chair has a professional social care background and is child focused. Legal and medical expertise is appropriately utilized. Competent and clear fostering panel minutes reflect panel business and show the reasons for recommendations made. Panel members have access to training and other opportunities to develop their awareness of issues. Foster carers express no concerns about their experience at panel. There is a clear acknowledgement that panel representation lacks diversity with respect to race, age and gender; this is being addressed.

Children are carefully matched with foster carers who have the knowledge, skills and experience to meet their diverse needs. There are a number of long-term placements and stability is experienced by many children. Placements are well organised and planned where possible. However, although emergency placements are well matched, the additional training, resources or support required to care for children is not always clear. Some foster carers say that children's information is not always available at the time of placement, however, they do receive information eventually and planning meetings are held, which they attend.

Most foster carers report excellent support, supervision and training to enable them to care for children. They say that they have 100% support from the fostering service and have seen a significant improvement over past 18 months; they feel they have more of a voice. Foster carers speak highly of the contact they have with fostering social workers and feel valued and part of the fostering team. Typical comments include: 'brilliant, knows our history, she's part of our family' and 'the support given is excellent.' Foster carers who have had to contact out of hours services said: 'very good response and took control of the situation.'

Foster carers are involved in consultation groups and forums where they can raise issues with senior management. A recent response from the assistant director satisfied carers and made them feel listened to. This enables them to continue to suggest improvements in the service that enhance children's lives, such as the development of a buddy peer support scheme. Foster carers are also involved in preparation training for new carers and other developments in the service. Foster carers are aware about the children's pledge and feel that they follow the pledge in their daily lives. A high number of foster carers have completed an approved child care qualification and have attended other training courses to enhance their role as carers. Foster carers have personal development plans and their training needs are identified and reviewed. There is a firm commitment to training; the employment of a training officer has placed a higher profile on training. This means that foster carers are well supported through flexible learning arrangements and peer support. Connected persons are few in number; however they are supported in the same way as foster carers. They have access to training. However, there is recognition that specific training needs to be developed for this group of carers. Foster carers are

reviewed on a yearly basis to ensure they continue to be suitable. However, not all reviews have taken place within the timescales. In one instance, foster carers had not had an annual review for over three years. This does not enable the fostering service to fully satisfy itself about the foster carer's ongoing suitability.

The small numbers of allegations made against foster carers are appropriately handled. Foster carers understand this process and confirm they have access to independent support. When a parent raises concerns about their child's well-being the fostering service deals with these effectively and involves the parents and partner agencies.

Children's records are well maintained. They are clear, up-to-date, stored securely and provide good background information and helps a clear understanding of the children's life to be developed. This means foster carers have enough information to ensure the care delivered to children meets their needs.

## **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):

- recruit a range of foster carers in sufficient numbers to meet the current and predicted demands on the service (NMS 13.1)
- ensure foster care reviews take place not more than a year after approval and thereafter whenever the fostering service considers it necessary, but at intervals of no more than a year (NMS 13.8 breach of Regulation 28(2) of the fostering service regulations 2002)
- ensure telephone enquiries are made to each referee to verify written references (NMS 19.1)
- ensure that where gaps are identified in matching, the fostering service should work with the responsible authority to ensure the placement plans sets out any additional training, resources or support required. (NMS 15.1)