

# South Tyneside Council Fostering

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

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## Service information

### Brief description of the service

South Tyneside Metropolitan Borough Council fostering service is a local authority fostering agency. It recruits, assesses, trains and supports foster carers to meet the differing needs of the young people who need families. Children are placed with foster carers on a short-break, time limited or long-term basis. The fostering service also places children with connected persons, operates a short-break service for children with disabilities and a specialist fostering scheme known as 'Young Futures'. The authority also commissions foster placements from independent fostering agencies. The service has approximately 155 children and young people in placement with around 135 fostering families.

### The inspection judgements and what they mean

**Outstanding:** a service of exceptional quality that significantly exceeds minimum requirements

**Good:** a service of high quality that exceeds minimum requirements

**Adequate:** a service that only meets minimum requirements

**Inadequate:** a service that does not meet minimum requirements

## Overall effectiveness

The overall effectiveness is judged to be **good**.

This is a good fostering service. It provides a good quality service and sound social work practice, producing good outcomes for children.

Most looked after children are placed with foster carers provided by the agency or by independent agencies. These children are carefully matched with foster carers who can meet their needs. Consequently, placement stability is good, with children generally remaining in their placements for long periods and few unplanned endings of placements.

Assessments of the suitability of foster carers are thorough and rigorous. These ensure the suitability of people who become foster carers. The support and training provided to approved foster carers is also good. This helps carers to provide positive outcomes for children. One carer described this support as 'second to none'.

Children are safe and thrive in their placements. They receive good support with their health and education which helps them to make progress in these areas. A foster carer summarised this by saying, 'Everyone involved is working for the wellbeing of children, and it is working.' The authority's provision of good support for

children's education is beginning to close the gap in academic achievement between looked after children and their peers who are not looked after. Children and young people have a say in their own care and the running of the agency.

Leaders and managers understand the strengths of the fostering service at a strategic level; management at this level is effective. Electronic recording systems in the authority are not well enough developed. The resulting mix of systems and paper recording in the fostering service does not always support its work sufficiently. The day-to-day monitoring and quality assurance of the work of the agency is not effective enough. This has led to some instances of weak practice regarding the approval of foster carers and the making of placements which are not in line with the service's procedures. This monitoring weakness further contributes to some weaknesses in the quality of the service's records in terms of their accuracy or completeness. Decision making in the authority is careful, considerate and helps ensure children's safety and wellbeing but is not timely enough in every case. However, strong social work practice has prevented these matters translating into negative outcomes for children.

## Areas for improvement

### Recommendations

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

- ensure that, on the occasion of the first review of a foster carer and in situations where the terms of foster parents' approval is being changed, this review report is referred to the fostering panel for consideration (Regulation 28(5) and 28(7) of the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011)
- ensure that no child is placed with foster parents unless their terms of approval are consistent with the proposed placement unless this placement is made in an emergency and is for no longer than six working days (Regulation 22(2)(b) of the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010)
- ensure that written minutes of panel meetings are accurate and record the reasons for its recommendation Specifically, that the record of panel members present for each item of business is accurate and that full reasons for the recommendation are cited (NMS 14.7)
- ensure that the manager regularly monitors all records kept by the service. Specifically, that the records and the aspects of practice they relate to are completed with sufficient quality and detail (NMS 25.2)
- ensure that the decision-maker makes a considered decision within seven working days of receipt of the recommendation and final set of panel minutes (NMS 14.9)
- ensure that information about the child is recorded clearly and in a way which will be helpful to the child when they access their files now or in the future. (NMS 26.6)

## Outcomes for children and young people

Outcomes for children and young people are **good**.

Children and young people are well involved in and influence the day-to-day operation of the service and its development. Participation workers ensure that young people can express their views. Young people are consulted about their own care and the plans made for them as well as providing input to foster carers' reviews. The input of children and young people is used to improve the way services are delivered. For example, young people have produced a DVD to support the recruitment and pre-approval training of foster carers and developed some questions for panel to ask people applying to be foster carers. They have also been involved in the recruitment of staff to the authority, including a strategic manager, as well as developing the authority's Pledge. The authority's corporate parenting board meets with young people. Consequently, young people are empowered and their emotional wellbeing is well promoted.

Children and young people feel safe and well cared for in their foster placements and are treated as part of the family. Young people are well matched with foster carers who can meet their needs and benefit from good support. This results in good, stable and settled placements which meet children's needs and enable them to develop positive relationships with their foster carers. Few children experience unplanned placement endings.

Most children and young people looked after by the authority are placed with foster carers. They are placed with and live with their siblings wherever this is possible and appropriate. In situations such as emergency placements where this is not possible, action is taken to enable them to live together as soon as possible, or arrangements are made to allow them to keep in contact and maintain relationships. Where it is appropriate and safe, young people enjoy contact with their family and friends and maintain relationships with the people important to them. This is well supported by the fostering service and its carers.

Fostered children and young people benefit from good health that is well promoted by the service, its carers and its partner agencies. Children's physical health is well promoted and they have good access to primary health services. For example, one foster carer who took a very young child on a next day basis received support from the health service to care for the child before it had moved into her home. Access to specialist support for children's emotional health needs is also good due to the authority's effective work with partner agencies. Psychological support and input is provided where necessary and the service works well to ensure the continuation of this support when changes take place. Children and young people also benefit from good health information and guidance relating to drugs, alcohol, smoking and sexual health.

Educational outcomes for fostered children are positive. School attendance is good and the achievement of fostered children is improving. Good support is provided to

children through the authority's project for looked after children's education (the PLACE). Young people benefit from a wide range of educational and leisure activities. Additional tuition is provided to young people as necessary. One foster carer described the amount of extra tuition available as 'incredible'. Foster carers work to support and promote children's education. One young person commented on education: 'I wasn't bothered about school before but now I'm achieving over my level in all subjects.' Educational success is recognised and rewarded at celebration events.

Young people are well supported in their transition into adulthood. The authority operates a 'Staying Put' scheme and high proportions of young people remain in their foster placements after their 18th birthday. Higher than average levels of care leavers are in employment, education or training. This helps improve their future life opportunities.

### **Quality of service**

The quality of the service is **good**.

The fostering service recruits a range of skilled foster carers based on its knowledge of the sort of children and young people who require placements. The authority is slowly increasing the numbers of carers it has available as a result of its recruitment activity. The authority does not yet have the full numbers of carers it requires but ensures that the needs of those children and young people requiring foster placements are met by commissioning additional placements with independent fostering agencies. The authority uses a significant number of these placements but is working to reduce this. Commissioning arrangements are effective and help ensure the quality of these placements and their value for money. The authority uses very few exemptions from the usual fostering limit.

Placement matching is careful and leads to stable and nurturing placements for children and young people. Work with children is proactive and, consequently, the majority of placements are made on a planned basis. The fostering service ensures it receives information about children that is as complete and detailed as possible and shares this with foster carers. Foster placement meetings take place which help ensure that information sharing is good. Children and young people are provided with good information about their prospective carers in the form of profiles that were developed at the request of looked after children. The authority's placement information record documents, part of the electronic recording system used, are not consistently good enough. For example some are only cursorily completed. However, the fostering service uses an additional placement planning document to offset this weakness.

The fostering service understands that it is required to place children only with those carers who have suitable terms of approval. It is working to amend foster carers' approval terms to make this more practical. However, on occasion the authority has placed children outside foster carers' terms of approval for more than six working days. These placements were appropriate and did not have a negative impact on

children's safety or wellbeing but are indicative of some of the management monitoring weaknesses identified in the leadership and management section of this report.

Assessments of prospective foster carers are very thorough. They fully consider and address applicant's suitability and competence for the role. They are robust in checking the suitability of applicants and concentrate on ensuring that approved foster carers are able to meet children and young people's needs. These assessments are undertaken in a timely manner and the reports presented to panel are of good quality.

The local authority's fostering panel is correctly comprised and includes members who have a clear focus on fostering and the needs of looked after children. Panel members bring a range of expertise and experience and the authority's partner agencies who work with looked after children are well represented. The panel gives careful consideration to the cases presented to it, making robust and careful recommendations to the authority.

The fostering service provides its carers with very good support and supervision which helps ensure they provide good care to young people. Formal foster carer supervision is regular and child focused. The agency provides carers with good levels of day-to-day support. Fostering social workers maintain close contact with foster carers and provide a 24-hour support service in addition to the authority's emergency duty system. Additional support is available from the service's partner agencies. For example, carers can draw on readily available support, guidance and advice regarding children's education from the PLACE. This high level of support helps maintain placement stability and improves outcomes for children and young people.

Foster carers' approval status and terms of approval are reviewed on an annual basis, or sooner if required. These reviews are generally thorough. However, first reviews of foster carers or those for whom changes in the terms of approval are required are not always taken to the fostering panel for consideration as is required. This could lead to their status not being properly considered.

The authority provides carers with a range of training that they really appreciate. As well as a set programme of compulsory training in matters such as first aid, safeguarding and behaviour management, foster carers undertake a range of developmental training which improves the care they provide. This includes a range of on-line training and access to the level 3 diploma. Training provided is linked to the national occupational standards for foster carers. Of particular note is the attachment training provided to foster carers. As well as a two day training course the service also provides carers with an intensive 18 week course. This is highly regarded by foster carers and clearly contributes to the high levels of placement stability.

### **Safeguarding children and young people**

The service is **good** at keeping children and young people safe and feeling safe.

Children and young people are safe and feel safe in their foster homes. Foster carers and fostering staff understand safeguarding procedures and the service takes correct steps where necessary to protect children. The assessment, supervision and training of foster carers includes matters relating to children's safety and protection, including the possibility of any bullying.

Children and young people know how to complain and they are able to do so. They have ready access to children's participation workers and independent advocacy services. Fostered children and young people receive good and accessible information in the young person's guide to being fostered.

The fostering service handles complaints, allegations and concerns promptly. Where matters indicate that children and young people may be at risk, prompt action is taken to safeguard them.

The matching of children with foster carers when they are placed is careful and the service ensures that foster carers receive comprehensive information about children's vulnerabilities or special needs. The fostering service provides foster carers with good guidance and support. This helps foster carers to take children's histories and previous experiences into account and provide them with safe care. For example, foster carers have specific safe-caring guidelines for each young person in placement with them. Children rarely go missing from care and have good relationships with their foster carers as well as access to independent advice and support. Staff from the fostering team usually visit foster carers on an unannounced basis twice per year to monitor the care provided.

The recruitment of foster carers and fostering staff is careful and thorough to ensure that children are protected. Thorough checks are carried out before people commence their roles working with children. Positively, children and young people have been involved in the recruitment of staff and have developed questions for the fostering panel to ask prospective foster carers

## **Leadership and management**

The leadership and management of the local authority fostering agency are **adequate**.

This fostering service has adequate management arrangements in place. Some elements are effective and support the strategic development and performance of the fostering service well. However, aspects of day-to-day management control and monitoring are not sufficiently rigorous and allow some inconsistencies in practice and recording. The fostering service has addressed all the recommendations made at the last inspection although new recommendations are made in this report regarding foster carers' reviews and case recording as these issues are not fully resolved. Nevertheless, the management of the service continues to support a good quality of service which produces good outcomes for children.



The managers and staff of the fostering service are appropriately qualified and experienced. They are well managed and supervised which ensures that practice is of good quality. Staff and foster carers have good access to training which ensures that children receive good quality care within their foster families. The authority has effective relationships with partner organisations in health and education. These work well at operational levels and provide good support to children and their foster carers.

Leaders and managers have a good oversight of the strategic operation and development of the service. Clear development plans to increase the numbers of connected persons, recruit more in-house foster carers and reduce the authority's use of placements with independent fostering agencies are in place. These are showing some success. Good commissioning of independent placements with a regional commissioning group ensures that these placements are well monitored and provide appropriate value for money. The fostering service provides detailed and regular reports to the executive side of the council who provide good support for the operation of the service. The local authority is committed to the effective operation of its fostering service. For example, additional staffing capacity within the team has enabled it to expand the size of the service and continue to support the achievement of good outcomes for children.

The monitoring, controlling and quality assurance of aspects of day-to-day practice and recording is not always good enough. For example, some records are not well completed. Documents are often not dated, sometimes erroneous information is recorded and some omissions are not explored to identify whether the practice or the recording is incorrect.

This weakness in monitoring also has an impact on other areas of practice. Positively, the quality of social work practice employed within the fostering service has ensured that service provision remains of good quality. but management control and quality assurance is not supporting this as effectively as it should. For example, as reported earlier, aspects of practice including the occasional placement of children with foster carers outside their approval terms and the management of carers' reviews are not always compliant with the fostering services procedures. This has not been identified or addressed. The agency's decision based on panel's recommendation is not always undertaken in a sufficiently timely manner, but as panel minutes are not clearly dated, monitoring is not able to identify where the delay in this area occurs. The authority's fostering panel minutes do not record the reasons for their recommendation well enough or the people present at panel for each item of business. This means the decision maker has less information about panel's considerations that they should have. This issue has been identified by the fostering service but not addressed.

The local authority has acknowledged weaknesses with its electronic recording system and is taking action to address these. However, current arrangements mean that required information is not always easily accessible from the system and the quality recording in some of the electronic documentation is incomplete or of poor quality. The authority and fostering service have a range of records and methods in

place to work around this issue which allows good matching and care planning to take place. However, the quality of recording and accessibility of information is not consistently good enough to allow young people, either now or in the future, to gain a full understanding of their situation and experiences.

## 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 to assess the effectiveness of the service and to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards.

The report details the main strengths, any areas for improvement, including any breaches of regulation, and any failure to meet national minimum standards. The judgements included in the report are made against the inspection framework and the evaluation schedule for local authority fostering agencies.