

**Durham Local Authority Fostering Service**  
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 outcome for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and relevant National Minimum Standards for the establishment.

## 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**

Durham County Council fostering service is based on the outskirts of Durham City. The authority covers a large geographical area and provides a range of services to children who are looked after by the local authority. The fostering service aims to promote and maintain stability, safety and security for children and young people in the care system. There are established systems in place to recruit and assess prospective carers, and to support and train existing carers. The fostering service also works closely with childcare teams and other agencies.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this visit was to undertake a key unannounced inspection. The five outcomes were inspected: being healthy, staying safe, enjoying and achieving, positive contribution and organisation. The service has substantial strengths and a sustained track record. Where weaknesses emerge the service recognises them and manages them well.

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

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

There are no outstanding requirements from the last inspection

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

The provision is outstanding.

Children and young people benefit from a consistently well-managed process that assesses their health needs, and identifies where services need to be provided. All children and young people are registered with appropriate health care services. In line with good parenting health information is shared with foster carers, which means that children and young people have someone responsible for their health needs on a daily basis. One young person commented 'I get lots of health advice from my carers, about smoking and healthy food and things like that'. Regular monitoring of children's health is undertaken, through the statutory review process and other means, to ensure that children and young people receive routine checks. Expert advice is sought where necessary through prompt referral to specialist services such as the Child and Adolescent Mental Health service (CAMHS). A girls group, run by the Looked After Children (LAC) nurse, is one example of the innovative way in which the fostering service provides opportunities for young women to make informed choices and to take some responsibility for their own health and well-being. Young women meet with the LAC nurse to discuss issues such as teenage pregnancy, bereavement, smoking, and healthy eating. This helps them to maintain their health in the short term and equips them with knowledge that will inform their decision-making in the future. The fostering service ensures that prospective carers are in good health before they are approved as foster carers. Those who smoke are not allowed to care for children under five years of age, and smoking generally is discouraged. This protects children and young people from the effects of passive smoking.

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

The provision is outstanding.

The safety and well-being of children and young people is central to the operation of the fostering service. There is excellent practice and highly effective systems and procedures in place, which means that the welfare of children and young people is safeguarded and protected. For example, a process of thorough assessment, vetting and scrutiny ensures that only those with the capacity to provide safe, healthy and nurturing environments are approved as foster carers. Any recommendations made by the fostering panel are carefully considered by the agency decision-maker before a decision is made about approval. Once approved, the fostering agency ensures that high standards are maintained by foster carers through supervision and support, excellent training opportunities, unannounced visits and annual review's. The fostering agency also takes action to ensure that those who are no longer suitable to act as carers are prevented from fostering. This ensures that children and young people in the wider community are also protected from poor or dangerous practice. Comprehensive child care assessments and care planning clearly identify the needs of children and young people. A highly effective matching process ensures that they are placed with carers who can not only meet their needs but also improve their outcomes, and in the majority of cases, planned introductions and visits are undertaken. Children and young people also benefit from additional safeguards, such as risk assessments and frequent monitoring visits from fostering officers, which helps maintain the stability of the placement as well as protect children and young people. The supervision of carers pays attention to the progress and safety of children and young people, and one foster carer commented that 'the fostering officer makes it her business to visit when children are present'. Children and young people are protected by efficient recruitment and selection systems which ensure only those who are thoroughly vetted are allowed to work in the fostering service. For example, appropriate statutory checks are routinely undertaken and the interview process is rigorous, and there are additional safeguarding measures such as contacting referees.

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

The provision is outstanding.

Children and young people benefit from the high priority given to meeting their educational needs. The fostering service is ambitious for children and young people to do well in education, and to get the best out of their time at school and college. To achieve this, a dedicated education team provides support, guidance and assistance to children and young people, and their carers. For example, children and young people are supported in preparing for key-stage tests and other national examinations, and there are close links with local universities and colleges to encourage young people to think about higher education. Each child and young person has a Personal Education Plan in place, and these are reviewed on a regular basis. One young person commented 'I get support with exams and keeping up with school work for the things I want to do when I leave school', and another reported 'If I need any revision guides, these are provided for me'. Foster carers are advised in how best to support children and young people at school, with training such as 'understanding modern teaching techniques', and 'how to help your child learn and revise' on offer. The majority of children and young people are looked after within their own communities, but where this is not possible, carers are given support and access to advice about caring for those from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. This enhances children and young people's sense of identity and self-worth. Specific short-term break provision is provided for children and young people with disability. This ensures they receive expert intervention from carers who recognise that parents remain central to the promotion of health and education needs.

## Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

Contact with family and significant others is encouraged, which helps children and young people to develop an understanding of self and sense of belonging. Contact is also organised in a way that enables them to feel safe and helps them to exercise an element of choice and control. For example, the wishes and feelings of children and young people are consistently taken into account when contact is being arranged, and one young person stated 'they listened to me about how and when I wanted contact to take place'. Comprehensive risk assessments are in place which indicate the level of supervision required, if any, during contact visits. Foster carers are provided with excellent training and support to deal with contact, and are expected to report on how contact arrangements are progressing, the impact on the child and the quality of contact. This ensures that children and young people are safeguarded by carers who have an understanding of the implications and effects of contact on the child. Children and young people are listened to. Their views and experiences are taken seriously and viewed as central to a safe service. For example, one young person noted 'my carers give me choices and respect my opinions, even if I'm right or wrong', and another commented 'I feel very well supported where I'm living now. I feel listened to'. This helps children and young people feel respected and cared for. Children and young people are empowered to make and contribute towards the decision-making processes that affect their lives. They are encouraged to attend their statutory reviews, put forward their views and have a say in who should attend. In some instances, young people are enabled to chair their own reviews. The fostering service also has a participation strategy for the full and active involvement of children and young people at every level. For example, several stakeholder events and some foster care training is facilitated by children and young people. As well as reinforcing a sense of self-confidence, this enables them to feel respected and valued by the service.

## Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

## Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

Children and young people benefit from being looked after by a fostering service which focuses on providing them with excellent care, improved outcomes and rigorous safeguarding. This is achieved because the service is led by stable, respected and authoritative management who ensure and maintain highly effective service delivery. There is awareness and recognition among managers, for example, of what the service does well and where development is required. Staff and carers are closely supervised and supported in their work, and are allowed the opportunity to think creatively and innovatively about how best to achieve successful outcomes for children and young people. Additionally, there are robust and well-developed quality assurance mechanisms in place to ensure consistency in the standard of care received by children and young people, and to monitor the performance of the fostering service. Staff are equipped with the extensive skills, competences and understanding required for the task of working with a range of foster carers. They possess expert knowledge about the experience of children and young people in care which, in turn, enables them to support carers in providing environments where children and young people develop and flourish. The calibre of foster carers often exceeds minimum standards and there is an awareness amongst both staff and carers of the high expectations placed upon them, enabling them to achieve consistently good outcomes for

children and young people. Both staff and carers receive excellent, relevant training, and are in sufficient numbers to provide a high quality service. Staff and carers share and learn about good practice through staff meetings and foster carer support groups. The low turnover of both staff and carers indicates a high commitment to the foster care task. This means that children and young people are able to enjoy consistent standards of care in secure, stable and safe environments. The Statement of Purpose accurately reflects the services being provided by the fostering service and this document is updated regularly. This, along with the children's guide, is presented in a form that is easily understood by children, young people and their families. This enables them to know what services they can expect, what they are entitled to, and how they will be cared for. Wherever possible, the fostering service seeks to maintain and preserve the child or young person within their own family or friendship circle. This gives them the opportunity to receive care from people who are already known and familiar to them, which helps to promote a sense of identity and belonging. Children and young people benefit because family and friends foster carers are assessed to the same standards, their carers supported in the same way, and expectations for improved outcomes are the same as for mainstream carers. Case records for children and young people are comprehensive with excellent recording that clearly demonstrates their needs, progress and development. This information is shared with children and young people, where appropriate, and this gives them an understanding of important events and experiences in their lives. All records and other information at the fostering service and within foster carer homes is kept secure, accurate and up to date and demonstrates that the fostering service respects the confidentiality of children and young people in their care.

## What must be done to secure future improvement?

### Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions, which must be taken so that the registered person meets the Care Standards Act 2000, The Fostering Services Regulations 2005 and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider must comply with the given timescales.

Standard	Action	Due date
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### Recommendations

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

## Annex

## Annex A

### National Minimum Standards for la fostering agency

#### Being healthy

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service promotes the health and development of children (NMS 12).

**Ofsted considers 12 the key standard to be inspected.**

#### Staying safe

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- any persons carrying on or managing the service are suitable (NMS 3)
- the fostering service provides suitable foster carers (NMS 6)
- the service matches children to carers appropriately (NMS 8)
- the fostering service protects each child or young person from abuse and neglect (NMS 9)
- the people who work in or for the fostering service are suitable to work with children and young people (NMS 15)
- fostering panels are organised efficiently and effectively (NMS 30)

**Ofsted considers 3, 6, 8, 9, 15 and 30 the key standards to be inspected.**

#### Enjoying and achieving

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service values diversity (NMS 7)
- the fostering service promotes educational achievement (NMS 13)
- when foster care is provided as a short-term break for a child, the arrangements recognise that the parents remain the main carers for the child (NMS 31)

**Ofsted considers 7, 13 and 31 the key standards to be inspected.**

#### Making a positive contribution

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service promotes contact arrangements for the child or young person (NMS 10)
- the fostering service promotes consultation (NMS 11)

**Ofsted considers 10 and 11 the key standards to be inspected.**

#### Achieving economic well-being

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service prepares young people for adulthood (NMS 14)
- the fostering service pays carers an allowance and agreed expenses as specified (NMS 29)

**Ofsted considers none of the above to be key standards to be inspected.**

#### Organisation

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- there is a clear statement of the aims and objectives of the fostering service and the fostering service ensures that they meet those aims and objectives (NMS 1)
- the fostering service is managed by those with the appropriate skills and experience (NMS 2)
- the fostering service is monitored and controlled as specified (NMS 4)

**Annex A**

- the fostering service is managed effectively and efficiently (NMS 5)
- staff are organised and managed effectively (NMS 16)
- the fostering service has an adequate number of sufficiently experienced and qualified staff (NMS 17)
- the fostering service is a fair and competent employer (NMS 18)
- there is a good quality training programme (NMS 19)
- all staff are properly accountable and supported (NMS 20)
- the fostering service has a clear strategy for working with and supporting carers (NMS 21)
- foster carers are provided with supervision and support (NMS 22)
- foster carers are appropriately trained (NMS 23)
- case records for children are comprehensive (NMS 24)
- the administrative records are maintained as required (NMS 25)
- The premises used as offices by the fostering service are suitable for the purpose (NMS 26)
- the fostering service is financially viable (NMS 27)
- the fostering service has robust financial processes (NMS 28)
- local authority fostering services recognise the contribution made by family and friends as carers (NMS 32)

**Ofsted considers 1, 16, 17, 21, 24, 25 and 32 the key standards to be inspected.**