

# Team Fostering

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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## Service information

### Brief description of the service

Team Fostering is a not-for-profit independent fostering agency. The company, which is limited by guarantee, has two branches, of which Team Fostering North East is the subject of this report. It was established in 2001 and operates from an office in North Tyneside, with further premises in Middlesbrough. The other, separately registered, branch is based in Sheffield.

At the time of the inspection, the North East branch was providing services to 108 children and young people, of whom four were placed under staying-put arrangements. It had 83 approved fostering families, and it had recruited eight fostering households in the year ending 31 March 2015. The agency provides short-term, long-term, and short-break placements, including parent and child placements and placements for children with complex needs.

### The inspection judgements and what they mean

**Outstanding:** An agency demonstrating and exceeding the characteristics of a good judgement where children and young people are making significantly better progress and achieving more than was expected in all areas of their lives.

**Good:** An agency where children and young people, including those with the most complex needs, have their individual needs met and their welfare safeguarded and promoted. They make good progress and receive effective services so they achieve as well as they can in all areas of their lives.

**Requires improvement:** An agency that may be compliant with regulations and observing the national minimum standards but is not yet demonstrating the characteristics of a good judgement. It therefore requires improvement to be good. There may be failures to meet all regulations or national minimum standards, but these are not widespread or serious; all children's and young people's welfare is safeguarded and promoted.

**Inadequate:** An agency where there are widespread or serious failures which result in children and young people not having their welfare safeguarded and promoted.

## Overall effectiveness

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

Inspirational and ambitious leadership and management and an exceptional quality of service have resulted in outstanding experiences, progress and outcomes for children and young people. The agency provides high-quality foster care to children and young people with very complex needs. It has developed its operation to deliver a highly effective service which meets those needs very well. Children and young people enjoy family life. They develop positive relationships with the adults who care for and support them, and consequently they thrive and develop, often over and above what was expected. Over half the current placements are permanent, thereby

enhancing children's and young people's sense of security, emotional well-being and sense of belonging.

Foster carer recruitment is targeted to meet the needs of local authorities, with which there are effective relationships and excellent communication. Well-thought-out and systematic processes ensure that the preparation and assessment of potential foster carers are carried out well within timescales, and are rigorous and analytical. Training provided to foster carers is extensive and of an exceptional quality, and this, coupled with regular support and high-quality supervision, promotes appropriate and responsive care and support. Social workers and independent reviewing officers have commented on 'exemplary care', and, 'an excellent standard of care', when discussing the fostering placements.

The agency provides an extensive programme of activities for children, young people and foster carers so that they have very positive experiences, feel part of a wider fostering family, and make good relationships with other fostered children and young people. This significantly enriches their life. One young person commented: 'We are made to feel equal.'

Children's and young people's participation is an area of strength. Well-established groups of children and young people (the Teamies) make a significant contribution to shaping the service. Foster carers are also fully involved and feel valued by the agency.

The agency has continued to improve and develop since the last inspection. Leaders and managers are ambitious to improve outcomes for children and young people. They are keen to learn, and respond to findings from research, as well as feedback from their own extensive monitoring mechanisms. For example, the remit of the E-spire (education support) team has been expanded to include educational support in its widest sense, thus providing direct work with children and young people which has led, in some cases, to exceptional outcomes. A post for a leaving-care worker has been established in response to a request from children and young people.

Excellent working relationships with partner agencies ensure that children's and young people's safety and well-being are promoted. One shortfall which has not had an impact on outcomes for children or young people, has been identified. The agency should ensure that it informs the local authority designated officer of any concerns about a foster carer.

## **Areas of improvement**

### **Recommendations**

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

Ensure that any allegations against people who work with children or members of the fostering household are reported by the fostering service to the LADO (NMS

22.6).

## Experiences and progress of, and outcomes for, children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

The agency ensures, as far as possible, that children and young people have information about their carers before they move in, by providing child-friendly profiles which are sent to the local authority. These, when used, make their transition easier and help them to settle.

Many children and young people do exceptionally well in their placements. They benefit from consistency and stability and, as a result, they thrive and make good and, in some cases, outstanding, progress. Placement stability is good, and the agency places a high premium on supporting placements to try to sustain them. This has been strengthened since the last inspection, by holding multi-agency placement support meetings if the placement appears to be in jeopardy. This identifies what further support is required to prevent a breakdown. The success of this can be demonstrated by the fact that 70% of placements are of over a year's duration, and 54% of children and young people are matched for permanency. Given the challenges that some of the children and young people present, this is excellent. If plans have to change, and children and young people have to move on, this is managed and planned for well, for example by offering other carers from the agency whom the children and young people already know, to make the transition easier.

Many children and young people have made excellent progress as a result of these safe, stable and secure placements. A social worker commented: 'It is absolutely marvellous; the child has come on in leaps and bounds.' Another stakeholder said: 'The child has done so well, over and above what I would have expected.' The agency is very good at ensuring that children and young people have clear plans and know what is happening to them in reasonable timescales, rather than allowing drift. Staff challenge local authorities as appropriate to ensure that they listen to children's and young people's wishes and feelings, and also ask for reviews to be brought forward if there are issues to be discussed. This helps children and young people to feel safe and secure and to develop attachments.

Children and young people are happy. They feel settled and cared for, and they enjoy a whole range of activities, and have access to many opportunities that they may otherwise not have had. Both the agency and the foster carers ensure that children and young people have the best opportunities to make progress and to develop into adults. These activities include an array of sporting and other leisure pursuits which improve health, develop skills and improve confidence and self-esteem. They are fully included in the foster carers' family life. They go on holidays, take part in social events, and feel part of the family. They also see their own friends. Comments from children and young people include:

'they care for me and keep me safe'; 'I love my foster family and wouldn't want to be

anywhere else'; 'I trust her 100%. She is always there for me'; 'I get to do good things, they keep me safe'; 'they make me feel like family'; and, 'I would be a chav if it wasn't for them.'

Many brothers and sisters are placed together in foster families. When this is not possible, foster carers are tenacious at supporting and promoting family contact. A stakeholder commented that a foster carer was instrumental in promoting good sibling contact and challenging other professionals when this was not going well. Foster carers have a really good understanding of the importance of the birth family to promote a child's or young person's positive identity.

The agency provides a significant number of enrichment activities, which promote really positive experiences and enable children and young people to make progress and have improved outcomes. For example, the E-spire team provides a number of life skills activities that any young person over a certain age can access. The agency also has two memorial funds, which can be used for purposes such as driving lessons, horse-riding, school trips abroad, buying laptops and so forth. This ensures that children and young people are not disadvantaged, and have the opportunity to benefit from life-enriching experiences, which improve their skills, confidence and self-esteem. One stakeholder confirmed this by saying: 'Team has provided both carers and children with additional support that is not always available with other fostering agencies. In one case, they were able to provide some financial support towards driving lessons for a young person, which has made a significant difference to the young person's employment options in the future.'

Children's and young people's participation and consultation are very well embedded and highly valued. One young person said, when asked about the remit of Teamies: 'We scrutinise the work of the agency.' They have made a significant contribution to the operation of the service. For example, the fostering panel uses questions that they have developed. They make sure that documentation is child-friendly, they are involved in interviewing staff, and they have made a film about their experiences of being in foster care, which is shown to potential foster carers. They have plenty of activities with other fostered children and young people, which they enjoy, and are fully involved in framing what is on offer. Their consultation is enhanced by accessing a specific worker who obtains their views for the foster carer reviews. Children and young people feel listened to and say that they can talk to the foster carers' supervising social worker and be confident that their views will be heard and taken seriously. Advocacy is also accessed when children's and young people's views and wishes are not being taken into account in care-planning decisions.

Children and young people receive excellent educational support to ensure that they have improved educational outcomes. The E-spire team plays a really active part in encouraging appropriate educational placements, good school attendance and improved attainment. They also challenge in personal education plan meetings when targets are set too low. All but one relatively recently placed child have educational placements. Only four have below 90% attendance, and the reasons for this are explored and known. Their educational attainment at all stages is above the national average for looked after children. One child, for example, who was two years behind in his

attainment, has now fully caught up and is performing above his peers in class. Their achievements are enhanced through work on life skills and other enrichment activities that the team promotes. Achievements, however small, are celebrated, and there is an annual celebration event where all achievements are recognised.

Young people are healthy and are encouraged to lead healthy life styles. Their emotional well-being is fully supported through their carers' understanding of the secure base model, as well as specific therapy, provided by both external agencies such as the child and adolescent mental health services, and an in-house service. Those young people who are engaging in risk-taking behaviour, such as drug misuse and going missing, are fully supported by the carers and agency to reduce this, and there is clear evidence of partnership working to secure a multi-agency approach.

## Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

The agency provides an outstanding quality of service to its foster carers, children and young people. It offers placements to children and young people with very complex needs, who may otherwise not have the opportunity to experience family life. This includes children and young people with sexually harmful behaviour and those with significant therapeutic needs. The service has been expanded to include a wraparound service, which includes weekly therapy provided by the agency, and carers who are fully trained and supported to meet their needs.

There are excellent systems for the recruitment, preparation and assessment of foster carers, based on a comprehensive understanding of the needs of local authorities. The agency responds promptly to any enquiries, with full written information and an initial visit, which is carried out by one worker to ensure consistency. Consistency is further promoted through the recruitment manager, who oversees all initial screening visit reports, supervises the independent assessors and quality assures all assessments before they are presented to the fostering panel. Assessments are of a high quality and analytical. Good monitoring and tracking systems ensure that they are timely and presented to the fostering panel within appropriate timescales. Annual reviews are very thorough. They provide really good information and analysis about the foster carers' abilities, strengths and any areas for development, and are carried out by an independent worker to add robustness and an additional tier of challenge to the process.

The chair of the fostering panel has a wealth of relevant experience, including safeguarding, and this adds real robustness to the process. The membership comprises a range of different personal and professional experiences of fostering, including a formerly fostered person. Its child-focused approach is also enhanced through the use of questions formulated by the Teamies. Panel members are provided with access to good and relevant training. The panel is well administered. Minutes are prompt and of good quality, and contribute to robust and timely decision making. There is a good relationship between the panel and the agency and one which allows for challenge and

two-way feedback.

Foster carer training is exceptional. The agency has high expectations of carers to attend a large number of courses throughout their fostering career. Foster carers feel that they really benefit from the training and speak of how effective it is in helping them to understand and respond in the best way possible to the challenges of being a foster carer. Training is well monitored, so it is clear when updates are needed. All foster carers complete their training and development standards within the required timescales and all have first-aid qualifications. One foster carer said: 'The training is brilliant'. Another commented that it was 'most thought provoking.' The agency is very responsive and promptly arranges training to meet identified needs. A stakeholder recognised the impact that the training has on improving outcomes for children and young people and said: 'Through the training, the agency encourages the foster carers to be the best they can be.'

Foster carers comment very positively about their supervising social workers and say that supervision is regular, effective and challenging as well as supportive. For example, supervising social workers will email research and resources to help with particular issues identified through supervision, which demonstrates that they are constantly thinking of the needs of the child or young person and foster family, and are taking these seriously. Foster carers talk of professional yet friendly relationships. They also say that placements have been sustained only as a result of the support that they have received. The out-of-hours service is prompt and responsive, and appreciated by the carers. It is evident that the success and longevity of the foster placements are as a direct result of excellent training, supervision and support.

Foster carers have a clear understanding of their role and the various professional relationships that they need to maintain. They contribute fully to reviews, and are excellent advocates for the children and young people, particularly in relation to education. Their regular, good-quality written reports support care planning and enable the placing social worker to have a good understanding of how the child or young person functions on a day-to-day basis.

Foster carers are really positive about working for Team. They say: 'I am glad I picked Team, I love Team' 'They go out of their way to make things happen.' 'I am proud to be part of Team.'

They feel fully consulted and listened to on an ongoing basis, so there is nothing that they can think of that could be better. They like the not-for-profit ethos because they know that everything is used to improve the service for children and young people. They enjoy the support groups, appreciate the carer representative system, and feel that leaders and managers are visible, interested and know the children and young people.

Matching is a strength. It is very clear that only the right carers, who can meet the needs of the children and young people referred for placement, are put forward. There is a very systematic approach, which demonstrates that the agency clearly considers the needs, any gaps, how these can be met and whether the match should go ahead. Carers confirm that there is no pressure to take placements. A number of stakeholders

commented that the match was 'brilliant'. There are clear processes for obtaining full information, including delegated authority from local authorities and escalation where necessary. This ensures that carers know the needs, understand the care plans and have the necessary authority to make appropriate decisions on behalf of the children and young people in their care.

## Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The agency provides a safe service for children and young people. Their rights are promoted and they have a number of avenues available to them, should they need to raise any concerns. The written information that they receive includes a number of contact details for independent services, but they also see their foster carers' supervising social worker alone on some occasions, as well as their own social worker and independent reviewing officer. Children and young people said that they felt confident that they would be listened to and taken seriously. They also said that they felt safe, and that foster carers gave them good advice about how to manage their own safety, including risks from social media.

Placement plans and risk assessments provide foster carers with good written guidance about how to manage known and potential risks. These are regularly updated to reflect changing needs. Foster carers' understanding of the impact of abuse and neglect on children's and young people's behaviour is significantly enhanced through their training, which includes the secure base model. This ensures that carers have a good understanding of the reasons behind children's and young people's behaviour and presentation, and are equipped with the skills and knowledge to respond appropriately. One foster carer commented in relation to one course, 'It was a light bulb moment.'

Very few children and young people go missing or have unauthorised absences from their foster homes. Each foster carer is provided with the local protocol and has comprehensive written guidance about how to respond and whom to notify. This is enhanced by relevant training. When there has been concern in the past, multi-agency meetings have been convened to consider the placement and how to provide further support to protect the child or young person concerned. The agency has also developed a child sexual exploitation risk assessment tool to promote safer care.

The agency has comprehensive safeguarding policies and procedures, which are implemented in practice. However, in one case there was a misunderstanding about the responsibility for notifying the local authority designated officer, in the event of an allegation about a foster carer. The agency requested that the local authority social worker did this, when it is, in fact, the fostering service's responsibility. This has not had a negative impact on children's and young people's well-being and safety as the local authority designated officer has been notified.

Safeguarding is a central focus of the recruitment, assessment, preparation, supervision and training of foster carers. A safe service is assured through rigorous checks and assessment, excellent training, regular and challenging supervision and two

unannounced visits a year. The latter is enhanced because one of the visits is undertaken by someone independent of the carers' supervision. Foster carers' annual reviews are also undertaken by someone independent of the service, and this adds further robustness to the process. Children's and young people's views form an essential part of the review, and their participation is promoted and potentially made more meaningful through the involvement of a worker from the E-spire team, rather than the carers' supervising social worker.

Staff and panel members' recruitment is robust and complies with current guidance. They have regular safeguarding training, and this has recently included the risks from radicalisation to ensure that they are up to date with current issues.

## Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

Leaders and managers are ambitious, inspirational and passionate in their desire to provide a service of exceptional quality to improve the outcomes and life chances of fostered children and young people. They are constantly striving to improve and develop and, despite having no formal requirements or recommendations from the previous inspection, a number of improvements are noted. These include the wraparound service, which provides holistic therapeutic support for the most difficult-to-place children and young people, and widening the scope of the E-spire team to improve participation. There have been changes at a senior level within the organisation, including a new responsible individual and a very recently appointed manager, who is in the process of applying to be registered with Ofsted. The service has also been reconfigured to improve consistency in recruitment, preparation and assessment of foster carers. These changes have not been without some difficulties, but the service has responded positively to feedback and maintained its focus on outcomes for children and young people.

There are excellent working relationships with local authorities and commissioners. There are effective systems and good communication to ensure that the agency has a comprehensive understanding of the changing needs of local authorities, and it responds proactively and creatively to meet these for the benefit of children and young people. A commissioner commented: 'Team are very engaged. They work very well with us. They communicate very clearly and respond to our requests.' Another said: 'They comply over and above our minimum requirements.' For example, the agency is involved in two commissioning sub-groups, looking at staying-put and outcomes monitoring, and their staying-put arrangements have influenced one of the frameworks. A child's social worker was also very positive: 'I have had a really good experience of working with Team. They attend care team meetings very regularly, and are easy to contact. Brilliant.' Another stakeholder said: 'I am very impressed with the overall service. Team is absolutely fantastic.'

The agency provides excellent opportunities for children and young people to have fun, participate, and engage with the agency. The agency holds regular social events and activities, including a caravan holiday. The Teamies meet with the directors to give

feedback, and they are involved in developing aspects of the agency's work, such as documents for children and young people. The agency has improved its outcomes monitoring since the last inspection, making it more evidence based, to ensure that it has an up-to-date understanding of the progress that children and young people are making so that it can provide additional support where necessary.

The agency's systems for monitoring are robust, and it places a high premium on obtaining the views of children, young people and foster carers. There are foster carer representatives groups, the Teamies, annual surveys for foster carers, children and young people, as well as auditing of records and staff supervision. The premises in Middlesbrough and the addition of a leaving-care worker are both a response to issues raised by foster carers and young people. There is regular managerial reporting so that the directors are fully aware of any issues, including financial viability. The agency produces a comprehensive annual report in addition to its monitoring under regulation 35.

The statement of purpose is comprehensive, clear and available on the website, so that anyone interested in knowing about the service can access it and know what to expect. The children's guide has been developed in conjunction with children and young people so that it gives them relevant information in a child-friendly format. The Foster Carers' Charter is embedded into practice.

The system for recruitment activity has been reconfigured in the last year. It is now dealt with centrally and managed by a specific manager who liaises closely with the placements team and marketing manager. This arrangement promotes consistency, and ensures that the recruitment manager is well informed of referral trends so can respond and target recruitment appropriately. Initial screening visits are carried out by one worker in the region, and decision making as to whether to progress the enquiry is made by the recruitment manager. Meetings with commissioners also inform the recruitment strategy. There has been a significant increase in approvals this year. Retention of carers is important, and the agency has developed a process whereby it is proactive if carers are considering resigning, to see if it can offer any support to encourage them to stay.

The agency is staffed with, and managed by, people with the relevant skills, knowledge and experience to deliver a highly effective service. They are well supported by regular reflective supervision, thorough annual appraisals and training. The responsible individual is accessible and approachable. One staff member commented: 'She is a visible presence. She really cares, knows all the carers and children, and is a marvellous ambassador for the agency.'

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## About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to inform 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 and to support services to improve.

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 the inspection of independent fostering agencies.