Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council Fostering Services

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

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Inspector: Valerie Shephard / Simon Morley
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Service information

Brief description of the service

Rotherham Borough Council is a local authority fostering service for looked after children. The service has carers providing short or emergency care, long-term care, short breaks to children with disabilities and their families, and carers providing care to family members or close friends. The service recruits, assesses and supports carers.

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 fostering service is effective. Children and young people enjoy good outcomes in terms of all aspects of their welfare.

Overall foster carers can meet children’s and young people’s needs, including where siblings need a placement together. Matching processes work well and unplanned endings are at a minimum level. Foster carers benefit from high quality support and consequently feel valued by the service. Generally foster carers demonstrate a good understanding of children and young people’s needs. Children’s and young people’s views are considered and valued and influence the development of the fostering service.

Children and young people say they feel safe in their placements and foster carers understand their role in protecting them. Children and young people are positive about their relationships with their foster carers and develop strong attachments to them. Opportunities exist for young people to remain with their carers after the age of 18 years, with the provision of the ‘stay put’ scheme. This means that young people can remain in their placements where they feel stable and secure.

The fostering panel undertakes its work effectively, robustly scrutinising the assessments which come before it. There has been an improvement in the quality of recording in the panel minutes and meetings are quorate.
Management of the fostering service is good. Managers have an accurate understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the service and plans are in place to sustain improvement. There have been developments in a number of areas including the ‘Invest to Save’ programme and the marketing strategy. Both of these initiatives focus on increasing the number of fostering households to extend placement choice.

Two recommendations are made to address shortfalls and help drive forward improvement for children and young people. These relate to: ensuring foster carers understand the impact of children and young people’s challenging behaviour on them and their families; and recording of verification of references during recruitment of new workers. These shortfalls have a limited impact on the outcomes for children and young people.

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 prior to the placement of each child, the foster carer is provided with all the information held by the fostering service that they need to carry out their role effectively. In particular, ensure the foster carer fully understands the information and the potential impact the child's background and history may have on them and their family (NMS 15.2)

- ensure during recruitment of new staff, that telephone enquires are made to each referee to verify the written reference, and a record of this telephone conversation is recorded. (NMS 19.1)

Outcomes for children and young people

Outcomes for young people are good.

The large majority of looked after children and young people live in foster care. They benefit from good outcomes in all aspects of their development. All are in education, employment or training. Education for looked after children is overseen by a virtual headteacher who effectively promotes educational achievement. Children and young people enjoy excellent attendance and achieve higher than average in GCSE grades and attainments at end of Year 6. The fostering service has effective links with education support services to assist children and young people with their learning and progress. The authority’s ‘Get Real’ team offers a range of support such as mentoring and challenging bullying. A carer said, ‘The Get Real team arranged for our fostered child to have a mentor when they were struggling at school.’ Children and young people are confident and have high aspirations for their future. They talked of their wishes to work in the fields of law, information technology and sport. The ‘Aim for Life’ programme effectively links school leavers with a local university
for a taste of student life. The high levels of support and encouragement provided by foster carers and support services clearly enhance children and young people’s life chances.

Generally children and young people enjoy good health supported by the provision of services such as the looked after children’s nurse. Foster carers are able to link directly with this service; consequently, health needs are promptly met. Excellent tracking and monitoring of health assessments of looked after children demonstrate a significant increase in completion of these within timescales. A new development has been the child-friendly health plan for young people to keep when they move on, signposting them to support services. Emotional health is preserved through effective links with the child and adolescent mental health service (CAMHS) and the council’s looked after and adopted children’s (LAAC) service. Children and young people engage in a range of activities which support good physical and emotional health and opportunities for socialisation. Examples of these include dancing, drama and sport.

The service actively seeks the views of children and young people to influence the development of the fostering provision. Consultation with children and young people takes a variety of forms. These include the use of questionnaires and information from the looked after children’s council and the ‘Right 2 Rights’ service. The looked after child’s review process ensures that children and young people are able to contribute to their own reviews. They have the opportunity to meet their reviewing officer prior to their review or alternatively contribute via an electronic consultation process. These measures ensure that children and young people are able to express their views and opinions. They also give their views about the care they receive for their foster carers own review process. Managers value this information and this informs the development of foster carers and the service as a whole.

Children and young people say they feel safe and do not engage in behaviour which puts them at risk. Incidences of children and young people going missing or participating in offending behaviour are very low. Children and young people feel part of their foster family and have a strong sense of safety and security. One young person said, ‘Why would I run away, I love living here?’

Overall there is effective matching of children and young people with foster families who are able to meet their needs. The introduction of a multi-agency support panel has resulted in early decision making about children’s and young people’s placement needs. Successful matching provides children and young people with opportunities to develop attachments and consequently trusting relationships. These contribute to their emotional resilience and sense of well-being. As a result, placements are stable and disruptions occur at a rate slightly below the national average.

Foster carers fully support children and young people to maintain contact with their birth families. This ensures children and young people are able to sustain attachments to significant people and assists with their identity. Young people move successfully towards independence and adulthood with support from their foster carers and the local authority’s leaving care provision. Young people have access to personal advisors and a range of support services. A number of
young people are able to remain with their foster family beyond the age of 18 years. The ‘stay put’ scheme enables carers to convert to providing supported lodgings. This ensures that young people can stay where they feel settled until they are ready for independence and adulthood.

**Quality of service**

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

The fostering service has successfully recruited a number of new foster carers during the two years of their ‘invest to save’ programme. However, there still remains a shortfall in relation to placements for children and young people with more complex needs. The aim is to recruit more carers as currently reliance is on independent fostering agencies to meet this gap in provision. The service has implemented a range of initiatives in an attempt to reach new potential carers. One strategy is the availability of funding to enable foster carers to extend their properties and consequently increase placement choice. Another is the involvement of foster carers in the newly developed marketing team. This has a clear focus on linking into diverse communities with the aim of recruiting new foster carers.

Overall, the quality of assessment of new carers is sound and generally considers the needs of looked after children and young people. Foster carers believe that other than emergency admissions, matching is generally effective. A multi-agency support panel makes decisions about placing and matching on the basis of detailed written information about children and young people. Generally foster carers say that they receive sufficient information about the child or young person to enable them to offer effective care. However, information from unplanned endings indicates that while carers may know about a child’s difficulties, they do not always appreciate the likely impact of this. Expertise within the fostering service is not always utilised to interpret the potential effects of children’s and young people’s behaviour on the family. Sadly, placements sometimes end due to this lack of thorough preparation for the demands individual children and young people may bring.

Foster carers feel highly valued by the fostering service. They consider themselves to be part of the team and contribute their views regularly to inform planning and service development. Foster carers benefit from excellent support by their supervising social worker and feel they are working in partnership with the fostering service. Foster carers’ own children are also fully involved in the service. As well as participating in the assessment phase, they have access to a support group in recognition of their role in the foster family. One foster carer said, ‘my social worker is great, she will always chase up any missing information, nothing is too much trouble for her.’ Foster carers value their supervision in helping them to understand and continue to meet the needs of young people.

Foster carers have access to a range of services to assist them in their care of children and young people. The provision of LAAC and CAMHS are available to support foster carers in their role in promoting good emotional and mental health. Foster carers have access to appropriate training both during the assessment process
and post approval. Training covers topics such as safeguarding, safe caring, child development, attachment issues and managing challenging behaviour. Foster carers can also access e-learning which fits in well with the demands of the fostering task. There is a high take-up rate for foster carers completing the Children’s Workforce Development Council (CWDC) training standards. Consequently, children and young people benefit from foster carers who have the necessary skills to care for them competently and safely.

The fostering panel functions effectively and fulfils its role in efficiently scrutinising all matters presented to panel. Panel meetings are quorate, supported by membership on the central list. There is evidence of thorough and careful discussion of all matters presented to panel. Panel members have a range of skills and experience between them, demonstrated by the full discussions held leading up to a recommendation. An effective quality assurance system results in feedback to social workers about their performance and quality of reports. The provision of good quality information enables the agency decision maker to make sound decisions. Twice yearly panel training ensures panel members are up to date with legislation and current practice in relation to foster care. The effective functioning of panel contributes to good outcomes for children and young people in relation to placement stability.

Foster carers are clearly proud of their roles and believe the fostering service has improved significantly during the last 12 months. They feel highly valued by the service and believe they work well with professionals in education and health to promote good outcomes for children and young people. They particularly like the 72 hour planning meeting held following a new placement. This ensures matters such as delegated authority and contact plans are agreed and in place. This is of benefit to themselves as well as the children and young people they care for.

**Safeguarding children and young people**

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

The fostering service effectively protects children and young people from harm. This is achieved through good quality support and monitoring of carers, and excellent links with education, health and support services. Children and young people say they feel safe and are not subject to bullying. They say they know who they would talk to if this was a problem. One young person said, ‘I told my foster carer about being bullied at school and she rang school and sorted it out.’ Children and young people clearly know how to make a complaint and are aware of the advocacy services available. Foster carers are fully aware of their responsibilities in relation to safeguarding children and young people. The service undertakes unannounced visits to foster carers on at least an annual basis and in practice more often than this. This enables supervising social workers to challenge evidence of poor practice for the benefit of children and young people. Foster carers understand the reason for these visits and use them as a learning opportunity.

Recruitment, assessment, preparation and supervision of foster carers have a strong focus on safeguarding and child protection. Fosters carers have access to child
protection training and understand their responsibility to keep children and young people safe. Safe caring policies ensure that foster carers and their families understand about issues of privacy and how to keep themselves safe. Foster carers are aware of what action they need to take in the event of any child protection concerns. They have excellent links with support services to help them meet the needs of children and young people who have experienced abuse. The prompt provision of support in the event of difficulties may explain why children and young people rarely go missing from foster care.

There is speedy but sensitive management of allegations against foster carers. In these situations, the child or young person is priority and immediate action taken to effectively safeguard them. Independent counselling and support are available for foster carers and their family following an allegation. Annual evaluation of allegations and regular meetings between the service managers for fostering and safeguarding ensure there is effective overview and learning.

The recruitment and vetting of adults working for the fostering service are generally robust. This helps to ensure staff are safe and suitable to work with children and young people. However, there is a shortfall in relation to verifying references, as there are no records to evidence that verification takes place. Consequently this does not support good recruitment practice.

**Leadership and management**

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

Managers are fully committed to improving the fostering service. There is strong evidence that developments in policies and procedures have improved outcomes for children and young people. Strenuous efforts to increase the number of foster carers have been successful in part and consequently there is less reliance on independent fostering agencies. The service has exceeded the target set two years ago in terms of the net increase in fostering households. Social workers say that there are sufficient placements for babies and younger children and placement choice. For children and young people with more complex needs and teenagers, the number of approved carers has not increased significantly. However, the service continues to address this shortfall. A dedicated marketing strategy is focusing on developing more in-house provision for these specialist areas. One initiative is the funding of extensions to foster carers’ homes to increase capacity. The planning department is approving a high percentage of these extension plans. This is having a positive impact on the number of placements available for children and young people.

Managers effectively monitor all aspects of the service including allegations, complaints and disruptions and share their learning with the staff team and other professionals in the authority. This embeds learning into practice and consequently has a positive effect on children and young people. Excellent and wide-ranging consultation with children and young people and foster carers influences developments in the service. This provides valuable information to the fostering team as well as conveying to children and young people that their views are important.
Foster carers feel respected as part of the team and have a positive input into recruitment and service development. The use of mapping potential applicants’ journeys through the fostering process ensures effective learning from customers to drive improvements in recruitment.

The fostering staff are clearly very proud to work for the service. They feel fully supported by management and are positive about the training and support they receive to deliver the service. Staff say they benefit from regular supervision and are happy with the quality of this. Regular meetings and reflective practice sessions provide opportunities for discussion and shared learning across the teams. Annual appraisals consider the development of staff and there is a strong focus on opportunities to study for higher qualifications. This equips staff with new skills and knowledge to promote fostering for the benefit of children and young people.

The fostering service is able to demonstrate capacity for continued improvement and positive impact on children and young people’s outcomes. Actions have been taken in relation to recommendations from the previous inspection. For example, improvements have been made in the delivery of foster carer training and as a consequence carers have increased competency in meeting the needs of children they look after.
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 the inspection of local authority fostering agencies.