

Rochdale Child Care Services - Fostering

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

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Inspector	Lynn O'Driscoll
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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

Rochdale fostering service has 121 approved fostering households providing 210 placements for children and young people, of which 185 are filled. Of these, 54 children and young people are now happy and settled in long term placements and 51 are placed with their own family and friends.

They also purchase 35 foster care placements from external providers to ensure they specifically meet the assessed needs and personal preferences of individual children and young people.

Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

This judgement is reached following a key inspection to assess compliance with the Regulations and all the key National Minimum Standards. Children and young people were actively involved in this process and are very happy with the care they receive. They say, 'I like my bedroom. I love my carers and my mum and friends live close by', and 'My carer is amazing. She is a really nice lady who helps me with problems, cooks really well and I love her'.

Social workers are impressed with 'the excellent care and dependability' carers provide which has been 'hugely instrumental in improving outcomes in all areas' and makes a 'massive difference' to young people's future prospects.

Health professionals have also commented on the 'excellent care provided for looked after children' and are 'so impressed by the carers' knowledge skills and attitudes' describing them as 'kind, compassionate, understanding, empathic and fair'. They say they 'provide excellent role modelling and increase children's self esteem' and would give them an 'absolute gold standard in behaviour management'. They conclude, 'these children will go from strength to strength with the support these obviously dedicated people offer them'.

Carers are highly satisfied by the support and training received and many have confirmed significant improvements. Comments include, 'Rochdale fostering is outstanding in their performance. When we need them, they come' and, 'our supervising social worker is excellent. We see her regularly and she is always available by telephone or e-mail to give us guidance and support'.

Carers also confirm high satisfaction with the way the service promotes and addresses issues of equality and diversity and many specifically highlight the 'excellent' training provided. Comments include, 'we are Muslims and have been

treated with equality and sensitivity to our religion and belief' and, 'the children are dual heritage and have good support from the service about this including the link worker researching so we were better informed'.

Improvements since the last inspection

The timely appointment of the manager two years ago has produced consistent improvements to the systems and documentation within the fostering service. Many carers acknowledge this saying, 'we have seen great improvements all round including meeting our needs and the children's. We are happy with our relationship with them. They have enabled us to gain qualifications in this field and we have made many friends. We have been supported through our ups and downs and feel valued'.

Four actions were raised following the last key inspection on 4 October 2007 which have all been satisfactorily addressed. One related to the training of carers in first aid and in response, 21 courses have been provided by external trainers and the feedback in respect to the quality of this course is very positive. Indeed as a direct consequence, a life was saved. Moreover, the course has been provided in the day, in the evenings, at weekends and in carers' homes to meet individual needs.

Three actions were raised under 'staying safe' and consequently there are now clear and very effective systems in place and up to date data bases to show that all carers' reviews are undertaken at intervals of not more than a year and for the timely renewal of criminal record checks. Young people are also contributing positively to carers' reviews.

Ten recommendations were also made and they have all been actioned. In respect to 'being healthy', basic food hygiene is now provided as a mandatory course for all carers.

Most notably are the significant improvements to documentation in respect to risk assessments, safer caring and the quality of reports presented to panel. Members also now receive very detailed minutes of the discussions and outcomes of carer's reviews heard at the more informal review panel.

The opportunities for looked after children to contribute positively to their day to day lives and their futures have also been significantly strengthened.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

Overall there are outstanding arrangements in place to actively promote the health and development of children and young people living with foster carers and this service strictly adheres to current guidance by not placing any children under five with carers who smoke.

Most children and young people confirm that they 'always' get support and advice about being healthy and the meals their carers provide are 'top quality'. They also say they are encouraged to eat healthy meals and now really like the 'peas, carrots and bananas'. Moreover, they enjoy a range of physical activities including football, swimming, basketball, bike riding and running.

Carers are equally satisfied with the help they receive to promote healthy lifestyles. There is an ongoing programme of relevant training for carers including, promoting the health needs of looked after children, healthy eating, food hygiene, sexual health and first aid. They also confirm very good access to more specialist courses to ensure they meet more complex needs, for example, cerebral palsy, tube feeding and parental substance misuse and the impact on the child.

Specialist services to meet children and young people's identified needs and to support carers in their role include physiotherapists, play therapists and psychologists who offer weekly open surgeries and a home visit to every new child placed. Looked after children also have priority access to the children and adolescent mental health services and the benefit of an 'extremely proactive' designated nurse.

Timely health assessments and immunisations are undertaken and carers ensure they are registered with local doctors, dentists and opticians and receive any treatment needed. There are also effective systems in place should access to dental treatment prove difficult and for ensuring they are given any missed vaccinations in childhood.

Promoting individual health needs is discussed at every supervisory visit, in detail in the children and young people's own statutory reviews and in carer's annual reviews and any issues are efficiently addressed.

Health professionals have expressed in writing how especially impressed they are with the ability of some carers to provide high quality care to babies with very complicated health needs.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

Overall there are outstanding arrangements in place to help to keep children and young people safe. Indeed results of a National Survey found that looked after children in Rochdale feel much safer than the National average.

In particular, the service has really tightened up their processes to ensure each child is suitably matched with the most appropriate carer to meet their unique assessed needs. This is further enhanced by the manager's excellent knowledge about the specific competencies, characters and experiences of each carer and the needs and preferences of every individual child and young person.

Carers are highly satisfied with the 'excellent support the service provides to maintain

placements'. As a direct consequence, there have been no long term placement breakdowns in the last twelve months. Comments include, 'we have had the most testing year of our lives and the support from our link worker and the whole fostering team was outstanding to ensure the placement could be maintained'.

Children and young people are very happy and feel really well cared for in their current placements. They say, 'I love my carers. They look after me and love me back and help me to stay healthy and feel confident'.

They benefit from having a range of people to talk to if they are unhappy about something and know how to make a formal complaint should the need arise. All complaints, however minor, are taken seriously, fully investigated and positive outcomes reached including remaining in placement and changing their social worker. Direct access to an independent advocate is offered from the outset.

No young people report being bullied and there are rigorous systems in place to address any incidents and training available to carers to ensure that they remain alert to all the possible signs and symptoms.

There are robust systems in place to ensure carers provide safe, comfortable and nurturing environments and can comfortably accommodate all who live there, including a visit from the fire service to all newly approved carers and annual health and safety inspections. Risk assessments are in place for all children and young people who share a bedroom and safe caring policies are child specific.

Staff files are in very good order providing clear evidence of a safe and competent workforce.

Safeguarding training is mandatory for all staff and carers and an excellent range of more specialised courses are also available including safeguarding children with disabilities, domestic violence and the impact on the child, children and young people who display sexually harmful behaviour and fabricated and induced illness in children.

Clear procedures are in place following an allegation and carers are provided with independent support and representation.

Fostering panels are organised very efficiently and effectively to ensure good quality decisions are made about the initial and continued approval of carers.

The main fostering panel is well constituted in line with the Regulations and Standards. Members benefit from regular training, sound legal advice, an independent chair who is highly qualified and experienced and an 'extremely efficient' panel administrator who produces accurate and detailed minutes following some very complex discussions.

This service also has an established review panel which is equally well chaired and provides a more relaxed setting for carers to share the highs and challenges of the

previous twelve months. Most carers are satisfied with the information received about each child prior to placement to enable them to adequately protect all members of the household. Any disquiet is passed on to the manager of the area social work team who is joining the panel to hear any concerns firsthand and ensure they are followed up and satisfactorily addressed.

Social workers provide reports to inform carer's annual reviews and they are extremely impressed with the quality of care provided to looked after children. Comments include, 'they are excellent and very committed carers who are very competent with teenagers. They will do their utmost to ensure young people in their care receive the best possible outcomes in life', 'they are fantastic carers and provide an excellent level of care, love and attention to children with disabilities and can tune into their needs and wants' and, 'carers show tremendous commitment and have provided excellent care. They are very patient people who show children emotional warmth and affection and also clear boundaries and positive reward and praise. They bend over backwards to meet the children's needs and are always willing to do whatever is in their best interests'.

In respect of both panels, reports are produced to a high standard and from the relevant questions asked it is evident that members read them and arrive fully prepared. Any matters arising are efficiently followed up by the manager who provides a detailed response. Area managers confirm that she also provides 'impressive' training to social workers on producing good quality paperwork to panel especially in relation to family and friends carers.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Overall, there are outstanding arrangements in place to support children and young people to reach their full potential.

Promoting equality and diversity is integral to the work of this fostering service and in particular, there is a robust matching process in place to ensure the unique and often complex needs of each looked after child and young person is met. Services are provided to meet any identified gaps. Carers confirm satisfaction with the necessary equipment, vehicles and adaptations provided to enhance the independence of disabled children.

In line with the National Minimum Standards, foster care agreements specify the importance of enhancing children's feelings of self worth and building up their confidence and carers are provided with training to support them in this role.

Children and young people benefit from living with very resourceful carers who are pro active in arranging and maintaining a range of constructive activities and social events for them. Moreover, over the summer holidays the fostering service provides an excellent range of fun educational activities for all ages including singing, drama and talent shows, arts and crafts, ceramics and jewellery making, books and poetry,

and sports and games which are thoroughly enjoyed by children and carers alike. They say, 'it's a fantastic scheme that allows looked after children to play, learn and interact whilst being themselves'.

Many looked after children benefit from regular holidays abroad with their carers including Spain, Portugal and America and additional allowances are provided by the fostering service to financially assist level one and two carers. This service also continues to provide a good choice of very successful and enjoyable outdoor pursuit holidays in this country and a very popular and well organised Christmas party for all looked after children, carers and their families.

This service gives high priority to actively promoting and supporting appropriate education and most children and young people confirm that they 'always' receive the right help so they can achieve. They say, 'my carers listen to me, help me with my homework if I need them to and check to see that my homework is done'. The service also provides a computer for every looked after child over four years old. Many are doing 'exceptionally well' at school and benefiting from 100% attendance.

Carers act as excellent advocates, attending and contributing to personal educational planning meetings and parents evenings. They also actively encourage and support any extra curricular activities young people are involved in.

This service particularly benefits from the recent appointment of specialist education mentors who provide any additional support and in particular, try to ensure a smooth transition to high school. There is also a 'virtual head teacher' who tracks the progress of all looked after children to prevent young people drifting.

Carers are highly satisfied with the help they receive to support the education of the children living with them. Comments include, 'Rochdale fostering go out of their way to help my grandchildren' and, 'if a child has specific needs they provide all the help and support needed'.

Some young people have clear aspirations for their futures including being a chef and an astronaut and some have successfully moved on into higher education and their studies include IT, travel, tourism and social work. Others have chosen gainful employment supported by Rochdale Council who provide a range of employment opportunities for looked after children.

Rochdale fostering offer a needs led respite service to disabled children and their families and carers. Carers are specifically trained, their homes are fully adapted and the necessary equipment provided to meet assessed needs. They also benefit from excellent working relationships and the specialist advice of teachers, occupational therapists and physiotherapists.

Parents and siblings are very appreciative of these short breaks and confirm that their children 'love it' too and 'get very excited when they are told they are going to stay'. They also enjoy 'good communication' with the carers and feel their wishes in respect to the specific care of their children is fully respected and adhered to.

Another new and successful initiative is the provision of respite care to children and young people to prevent family breakdowns.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

Overall, there is an outstanding range of opportunities for children and young people to contribute positively to their day to day lives and their futures. They also confirm that carers actively listen to them and take notice of their opinions. Their views are obtained and taken very seriously. For example, in the matching process, their own statutory reviews, carers' annual reviews and through an independently run 'listen up group' that specifically consults with young people aged 14 years and over.

Moreover an annual consultation event is facilitated by the advocacy service and the report produced shows a high level of satisfaction with the care they receive. Some young people represent Rochdale's looked after children and young people at a national forum.

The respite service for disabled children has recently been integrated into the team and a recognised challenge is to provide them with an equally impressive range of appropriate consultation opportunities.

Another new initiative is an activity based support group for birth children of carers giving them a fun and safe environment to share their feelings and experiences.

Positive contact with family and friends is actively promoted in line with legal directions and young people's personal preferences, including carers providing daily transport and offering sessions in their own home. Social workers are particularly appreciative of this role and comments include, 'these carers have been able to build excellent relationships with the child's family and will facilitate contact in her own home', 'the carers work well with birth family despite extremely difficult behaviour and transport to contact no matter how far away it is' and, 'this carer actively promotes contact and has done so much running around to ensure contact takes place which has helped the family come to terms with the adoption plans'.

The manager of the fostering service is 'very impressed' with the new contact service which is actively listening to any concerns raised by carers and providing additional specific support as needed.

In line with the National Minimum Standards, carers record any perceived impact on the child following contact which are explored with supervising social workers.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is outstanding.

There are outstanding arrangements in place to help to ensure that young people are fully prepared for living independently. Most young people say they are 'always' helped to prepare for the future and carers are very clear about their responsibility to provide age and developmentally appropriate opportunities for learning independence skills which is explored from the outset in the pre approval training. Their knowledge is further enhanced by the manager of the fostering who has extensive experience in this area and can, therefore, provide any specific advice and training.

There are also clear protocols in place to ensure young people are allocated a support worker at 15 years and three months to begin to draw up an individualised pathway plan in full consultation with the young person and start to undertake more focussed preparation work.

Moreover, it is established good practice in Rochdale to enable settled young people the choice to remain in placement beyond their 18th birthday funded by the Council, including the provision of grants to build extensions if required. They also continue to financially support those young people who wish to further their education.

For all young people who want to actively prepare for independence, specialist resettlement officers are allocated and together they concentrate purely on developing the necessary skills including gaining work experience and pursuing employment. They are also supported through an intensive course which aims to cover all the potential pitfalls.

In addition, there are semi independent flats available which are staffed twenty four hours and 'trainer' flats to further prepare them for this transition, before finally feeling ready to work alongside accommodation development officers to find an appropriate home of their own.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

An up to date Statement of Purpose is in place which accurately reflects the aims and objectives, procedures and practices of this fostering service. It is also presented to elected members every six months which exceeds the expectations of the National Minimum Standards.

There are two children's guides one for younger and one for older children which can be translated into different languages as required so they know what services they are entitled to. However, the manager is mindful that to date there are only written formats available which are not appropriate for some looked after children.

This service is sufficiently staffed by a qualified and experienced team with a diverse range of relevant backgrounds including health, education, child protection, family support and leaving care. They say they remain busy but have manageable workloads enabling them to fully support their carers in safeguarding and promoting the welfare of the children and young people living with them. They confirm regular and good quality supervision, annual appraisals and monthly team meetings with open and honest discussions.

This fostering service is also exceptionally well managed by a suitably qualified, highly experienced and child focussed team providing clear direction and guidance to staff. Staff and carers say they are accessible and very approachable.

There are established and very effective monitoring systems in place including those required by Schedule 7, six monthly checks by the Resource Manager and the signing off all work by the manager to ensure it meets the required standards. All the policies are regularly reviewed and updated as necessary, documentation is of a high standard and carers and children's files are in very good order. All of this is supported by a administrative team of dedicated and efficient staff.

Independent reviewing officers are impressed with the quality of reports produced by the service for young people's reviews and their attendance and constructive contributions have proved invaluable.

Contracts with independent fostering providers have been renewed and tightened up to ensure they provide a high quality service to the children and young people placed with them and fortnightly placement meetings are used to explore any issues in respect to external placements.

Carers describe Rochdale fostering as 'an outstanding service', 'second to none' and are highly satisfied with the support they receive. Comments include, 'I can only speak very highly of the fostering team. They are there for you if you need them 24/7' and 'the fostering staff are super. You can talk openly to them about any problems that arise'.

All members of the fostering team are trained to deliver the pre approval training which is described by carers as 'excellent' and they are equally satisfied with the frequency, range and quality of the post approval courses available to them. They say, 'we have always found them excellent with regards to training'. Recent workshops from specialist facilitators include, aspergers syndrome, the importance of the buddy scheme, support networks and criminal record checks, working with social workers, attachment, moving onto adoption and cerebral palsy as a result of head injury. Crèche facilities are provided if needed and some carers are paid to look after children to enable their colleagues to attend courses.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. Children and young people are treated and respected as individuals in their own right. Services are provided to ensure their specific assessed and often very complex needs and informed choices are met. The fostering team and the membership of the panel are suitably

representative and this service benefits from a diverse range of carers, many of whom have considerable experience.

It is included in all the documentation and systems and given high priority during initial visits to prospective carers, in the pre approval training, at panel, in supervision sessions and team meetings. Referees are also asked to comment on the individual's ability to promote equality and diversity and the rights of individuals and groups.

Family and friend carers are fully integrated into the service ensuring excellent matches. They benefit from frequent visits from a supervising social worker and the full range of training opportunities. They also attend review panel, have a representative on the Committee to ensure their voice is heard and are included in the summer fun activities, such as the Christmas party and the annual dinner dance. Here, the service can formally acknowledge the tremendous work that carers do. Family and friend carers are appreciative of the support afforded them and describe their link workers as 'absolutely great', 'invaluable' and 'they actually care and do things for you'. They say, 'our link worker is very good and helped me with finances and lets us know what we are entitled to. They got us beds, school uniforms and a computer for a child with learning difficulties'.

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):

- ensure suitable opportunities are provided for all looked after children and young people to contribute their wishes and feelings regarding their care (NMS 11.4)
- ensure children's guides are produced in different formats appropriate to the needs and abilities of all looked after children and young people (NMS 1.5).