

Fostering Services Rotherham

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

Unique reference number	SC047258
Inspection date	21/06/2010
Inspector	Stephen Smith / Dennis Bradley
Type of inspection	Key

Setting address	Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council, Norfolk House, Walker Square, Rotherham, South Yorkshire, S65 1AS
Telephone number	01709 382121
Email	
Registered person	Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council
Registered manager	Sue May
Responsible individual	Gani Martins
Date of last inspection	25/06/2009

© Crown copyright 2010

Website: www.ofsted.gov.uk

This document may be reproduced in whole or in part for non-commercial educational purposes, provided that the information quoted is reproduced without adaptation and the source and date of publication are stated.

You can obtain copies of The Children Act 2004, Every Child Matters and The National Minimum Standards for Children's Services from: The Stationery Office (TSO) PO Box 29, St Crispins, Duke Street, Norwich, NR3 1GN. Tel: 0870 600 5522. Online ordering: www.tso.co.uk/bookshop

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

Rotherham Borough Council provides a fostering service to 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.

Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

This was an announced inspection of Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council's fostering service. The purpose of the inspection was to assess the service's compliance with the fostering national minimum standards and regulations. All the key standards were inspected under the five outcome areas of being healthy, staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution and economic wellbeing. The effectiveness of the service's organisation was also inspected as was its work to promote equality and diversity.

Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council operates a satisfactory fostering service that provides good outcomes for children in many respects. Children are well supported with their health and well consulted about the care provided to them. The authority has made a good start in involving looked after young people in the running of the authority and there is a clear commitment to embedding this involvement further. The authority provides fostered children with strong support for their education in an effective and creative manner. This also helps young people to prepare for their adult lives well.

The fostering service has undertaken a great deal of improvement work since the last inspection. However, a lack of sufficient rigour in some areas, particularly in the quality assurance monitoring of the day-to-day work of the fostering service means that some weaker practice is not identified and addressed well enough. For this reason the outcome area of staying safe and the service's organisation, while sound, are not judged as strong areas of work. This results in the overall judgement of satisfactory.

Improvements since the last inspection

Since the last inspection the fostering service has undergone a restructure which has significantly improved its ability to provide an effective foster care service. Senior managers within the authority now retain a clear focus on the fostering service to ensure it provides an appropriate resource for the authority's children and young people. At the last inspection the fostering service was asked to carry out a number

of actions to improve its provision for young people.

It was asked to improve its procedures regarding the assessment of family and friends carers carried out under Regulation 38 of the Fostering Services Regulations 2002 and to improve monitoring arrangements for children placed with independent fostering agencies. The service was asked to improve the foster placement agreement and ensure that foster carers receive health plans and good health information about the children they foster. It was also recommended that the service ensured that carers' recording was in compliance with the service's policy. Action has been taken to fully address these matters.

The service was also asked to ensure that the arrangements for consenting to foster children's medical treatment were clearly identified. It was asked to ensure the accuracy of panel minutes and to strengthen the management monitoring of the service to improve its provision of care. These matters have been given attention by the fostering service but have not yet been addressed sufficiently well to ensure that the service provided is as strong as it could be.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

The fostering service provides good support to help children stay healthy. It ensures that foster carers have up-to-date training in first aid to help protect children in case of accident or injury. Foster carers are also provided with training in any specialist health matters arising from the needs of their fostered children. Children and their foster carers are provided with good advice, guidance and support in the wider aspects of children's health including nutrition, healthy living and sexuality and relationships. The authority provides good quality training regarding attachment for its carers. This helps them understand and respond to children's emotional health needs.

Information sharing when placements are made is generally good. This means that foster carers receive good information about children's health needs, particularly where any special health needs are present, and how these are to be managed. However, the arrangements regarding the delegation of authority to consent to any medical treatment needed by children are not always clearly set out when placements are made. This could lead to delay when seeking medical treatment for children.

The authority works closely with the looked after children's nurse and the leaving care service also includes a health support worker for young people. These arrangements provide fostered children with good support and ensure that they receive annual medical checks which help maintain their good health.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is satisfactory.

Children are placed with foster carers in homes that are safe and suitable. Home safety is monitored during the assessment of prospective carers and health and safety checks are updated on at least a yearly basis. Risk assessments are completed before any young people share bedrooms to ensure the safety of the arrangements.

As in other local authorities, the fostering service faces significant pressure to find foster placements for the numbers of children within the authority who need them. Despite this the service works effectively to place children with foster carers who are appropriate to meet their needs. It places children with foster carers whose approval terms are an appropriate match with the needs of children and provides monitoring and support in situations where matches are not ideal. Foster placement agreements are completed for all placements. These provide carers with information about children that is generally of good quality and identifies who will be responsible for each area of support to the child. Carers generally receive full information about the children placed including copies of key local authority plans for and reviews of children's care. Placement planning meetings take place before all planned placements and promptly after the placement of children in emergency situations. All long-term placements are matched at the authority's fostering panel. This provides appropriate additional scrutiny to ensure that plans meet children's needs.

The service has improved its practice impressively regarding the use of exemptions from the usual fostering limit of three children who are not all siblings. Very few exemptions are now used and, in these situations, care is taken to ensure the placements continue to be appropriate. The use of exemptions is well monitored by senior managers and fostering panel. Foster carers are offered good training in attachment which they benefit from. This helps carers to understand young people's needs and can help maintain placements and improve stability for children. The authority has appropriate arrangements in place to ensure that the placements of children with carers through independent fostering agencies are well managed, supervised and monitored.

The fostering service does satisfactory work to ensure that children are safe in their foster homes. Foster placements are monitored and supervised regularly; fostering and children's social workers meet with children and provide carers with very good support. Children feel safe and well cared for in their placements. For example, one young person said, 'The treat me like one of theirs, they give me everything I need.' They know who to speak to if they are worried.

The suitability of foster carers is generally well checked during their assessments and the review process ensures that checks are updated appropriately. However, a lack of rigour in some areas of monitoring means that the necessary checks are not always carried out in each case.

The fostering service provides its carers with training in child protection, behaviour

management and safe caring so they are able to care for children safely. However, some foster carers have received conflicting information about permitted and prohibited measures for disciplining children and this leaves some carers feeling disempowered and unsure about how to manage young people's behaviour.

Safe care policies are developed for each foster home with additional sections completed relating to each individual child. These policies are generally detailed and suitable but have not been cleared by children's social workers to ensure they are fully relevant and provide an appropriate consideration of any risk factor. The service undertakes a risk assessment for all placements of children with foster carers. Some of these are good but, in other situations, children's risk assessments are verbatim copies of those done for their siblings. As a consequence they do not fully identify and plan for the individual circumstances of the child.

The fostering service has generally effective procedures for responding to any complaints, allegations or significant events. These ensure that any incidents are examined, responded to and lessons are learned. However, on occasions the recording of action taken in response to an allegation does not demonstrate that there is a sufficiently rigorous monitoring and management oversight of the investigation.

The authority has an effective process for the safe recruitment of staff in place. This is followed in practice and this ensures that staff members appointed are suitable people who are qualified to work with vulnerable children.

The fostering panel is thorough in its consideration of cases presented to it and provides appropriate scrutiny to these cases. Suitable administrative arrangements mean that panel has full information on which to base its deliberations. The service is in the process of appointing two new independent members to replace members who have recently stepped down. In other regards it meets the requirement of the regulations in terms of its composition. The records of panel meetings are detailed. However, they do not always clearly record key points of discussion or the recommendations made and on occasion do not evidence that clear procedures are being followed. This reduces the quality of information available to the agency decision maker on which to base decisions.

Panel has not been quorate, in terms of the numbers of independent members at panel, on every occasion it has met in the last year. The service's quality monitoring processes did not identify this. This means that panel has been insufficiently independent of the fostering service in its consideration of the cases concerned. This is a breach of regulations and the independence and breadth of opinion brought to the consideration of these cases has not been as wide as it should have been. However, the careful consideration given by panel members to the cases presented reduces the potentially negative impact on outcomes for children from this situation.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The authority's fostering service provides services to children and their families that are based on their individual needs and reflect and value their differences. It also recognises and values difference in the way it works with foster carers. Applicants' attitude and ability to reflect diversity and promote equality is assessed before they are considered suitable people to care for children placed by the authority. In recent assessments this consideration is robust. The service provides carers with training in equality and diversity as part of their preparation training and on a mandatory basis after approval. This is reinforced in ongoing supervision. The service has identified that it needs more carers from the Asian community to meet the needs of children needing foster placements. It is working well to recruit, assess and approve new carers from this community.

The service works hard to place children with carers who are able to meet their individual needs. It gives close consideration to any cultural differences between the child's family and their foster placement and provides appropriate support for children and their carers in these situations. Placements of children with carers made on a long-term basis are all carefully matched including consideration from fostering panel to ensure that placements are individually suitable. Children with disabilities and complex needs receive good support from the fostering service. Good training and the provision of necessary equipment underpin individualised care packages with carers who can meet children's health needs.

Children are provided with very good educational support. The service provides carers with good information about education within the foster carers' handbook and training is available in educational matters. Educational arrangements are clearly identified in foster placement agreements to ensure that attendance at school is promoted.

Fostered children benefit from very good support from the authority's 'Get Real' team which provides educational support for looked after children. This provides practical one-to-one support for children including tuition and mentoring, educational equipment and resources. It also provides guidance for carers and support in educational meetings and discussions with schools. Personal education plans are developed for all children looked after by the authority and kept up to date. These are appropriate for the age of the child concerned and form a basis for planning and providing educational support for children. The quality of this educational support is apparent from the relatively high number of fostered children in, or moving into, higher education and reflects the raising of young people's expectations regarding their education. The authority's 'looked after and adopted children' (LAAC) team provides a wide range of support to children including support for a range of activities that promote young people's aspirations.

The authority's 'Families Together' service provides foster care for children and young people with disabilities with services from a daily sitting service to short-break

foster care. Children and their families receive good, individualised and flexible support from this service and its carers. Foster carers are well trained and the placement planning processes fully reflect the complexities of short-break care. This allows children to experience a positive lifestyle while promoting the involvement of families as the people central to their children's lives.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The fostering service and wider children's services support children to maintain contact with family and friends wherever this is appropriate for them. Foster carers help children maintain contact with families and friends and children's social workers or social work assistants support and supervise contact where necessary. Contact arrangements are taken into account when matching children with carers and are set out in foster placement agreements. Foster carer supervision covers contact and any issues arising from this. This ensures that any problems or difficulties can be addressed. Good information is contained within the foster carers' handbook. Children know their contact arrangements and have their views taken into account when they are reviewed.

Fostered children and young people are involved and listened to regarding the provision of their care. Foster carers take notice of their opinions and support them to express these in care planning discussions. Children are consulted for their reviews and those of their foster carers. They meet their social workers frequently and know who to talk to if they have any concerns or worries. Foster carers are provided with training in undertaking and assisting with life story work with children and some have done very good work with young people. This helps young people to understand more about their lives and the events that have happened to them. Young people placed in foster care receive age appropriate backpacks filled with items and information that may assist their time in foster care.

Children are involved in and consulted about wider aspects of the authority's activities. The authority has recently formed a looked after children council. This is in its early stage of development but plans are in place for this group to meet with the authority's corporate parenting board on a regular basis. Children and young people have been involved in the development of the authority's 'Pledge', have been involved in interviewing senior staff within the authority and produce a magazine for looked after children.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

The fostering service provides young people with good support to help them prepare for adulthood. It provides foster carers with good information and advice in the foster carers' handbook about helping prepare children to be as independent as possible. Foster carers work with children to help them learn some of the skills they

will need to live independently. Supervising social workers provide foster carers with ongoing advice and support with supervision covering preparation for independence where appropriate.

The authority's provision of leaving care services is not always effective enough in terms of its ability to promptly meet the needs of young people who require a pathway plan. There is often a delay in the allocation of a personal advisor for young people approaching their 16th birthday with a number of young people waiting until after their 17th birthday before having an advisor allocated. However, the authority's Get Real and LAAC teams work with young people to encourage them to aspire in later life and this is reflected in the relatively high number of young people remaining in their foster homes beyond their 18th birthday and those attending or planning to attend higher education.

Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The service is working to approve foster carers from a range of backgrounds and cultures in order to meet the needs of children needing foster care. Applicants' ability to work with children in a way that recognises and promotes equality and diversity is considered during their assessment to be carers and the depth of this consideration is good and improving in more recent assessments. Equality and diversity issues are covered during foster carers' preparation and ongoing training reinforces this. The authority takes children's specific needs and cultural backgrounds into account when making placements. Children with disabilities receive good individualised foster care that meets their specific needs and promotes their life chances.

The fostering service has a succinct Statement of Purpose that accurately describes the service it provides. It has a children's guide in place that meets the national minimum standard.

The elected members of the authority and its senior managers are committed to the effective operation of the fostering agency. Robust action has taken place to address previous shortfalls and this has resulted in a service that is now much improved. Restructuring of the fostering team has resulted in effective communication and allowed improved planning and service delivery. Staff members within the fostering team are provided with good training opportunities. They are well supervised and supported. Workload management systems are in place to ensure that staff are able to manage their caseloads.

However, the monitoring and quality assurance of the day-to-day work of the fostering service is sometimes not undertaken with sufficient rigour. For example, there are inconsistencies in recording within foster carers files and other records and some weaknesses in background checks on carers and panel processes. Additionally, some recording does not provide evidence that work to follow up actions following some allegations or panel recommendations has been effective enough. The

fostering service's own monitoring procedures do not always effectively identify these and ensure they are addressed. This means that management arrangements and some elements relating to keeping children safe are not as robust as they could be.

The service has an appropriate foster carer recruitment plan in place that has demonstrated some success in the last year. The service continues to recruit carers and is careful to ensure they are approved in line with their strengths and the service they are able to provide. Over the last 12 months the capacity of the service has only increased slightly but the approval of new carer is more carefully judged in terms of the number of placements they can provide than was previously the case.

The service assesses applicants' competence to foster as well as considering their background and experiences of child care. The quality of assessments of prospective foster carers undertaken by the service is improving. Recent assessments are satisfactory or better with the latest being good or very good. Earlier assessments were less detailed and evaluative and provided a less thorough consideration of equality and diversity issues. Two earlier assessments were not as robust as they should have been in assessing applicants' suitability to work with vulnerable children and this matter was not identified by managers or fostering panel. Later assessments are rigorous in these matters, detailed and evaluative and provide clear information and summaries to guide panel's deliberations.

Once approved, foster carers are provided with good support and thorough child focussed formal supervision. Supervising social workers visit carers frequently and ensure that support is always available to carers. Foster carers feel valued and well supported by their social workers but feel that they do not receive appropriate recognition from the authority as a whole. The foster carers' handbook provides good information to underpin carers' practice.

Reviews of foster carers are robust. They are independently chaired and consider carers' ongoing suitability to foster. They ensure that Criminal Records Bureau and medical checks are updated appropriately and monitor training undertaken. The views of social workers and fostered children are sought for the reviews of their foster carers and these are generally provided. This helps ensure that reviews are effective, balanced and thorough. The authority provides its carers with a wide range of good training. In addition to 'mandatory' elements the provision of training is flexible based on individual needs identified as required in supervision or at reviews. The authority is working to help carers achieve the children's workforce development council national occupational standards for foster carers.

Children's records are well maintained. The authority uses an electronic recording and filing system which ensures that all records are available when required. Records reflect children's care status and situation and key documents on file are usually well completed. Foster carers have clear guidance regarding their recording and ensure that records are retained confidentially. Records are appropriate to assist planning and act as a reference for children in future should they wish to look back at their history.

Foster carers' records are not always so well maintained. Generally, all the required information is present but in some situations lack of completeness or inaccuracy means that information is not accurate or inconsistent. For example, lists of children who have been placed with carers do not are not always accurate, training records do not always differentiate between which carers undertook the training and unannounced visits to carers are not consistently recorded.

The authority has recently revised its process for undertaking assessments of family and friends carers including those done for immediate placements under Regulation 38 of the Fostering Services Regulations 2002. Assessments are now done in a timely manner and the assessment format used encourages detailed and comprehensive assessments. The most recent assessment of family and friends carers for the long-term matched placement of a young person is an excellent piece of work. This comprehensively sets out the strengths and vulnerabilities of the placement and ensures that all parties are in agreement with the arrangements. All long-term foster placements of young people with members of their family are considered by panel and a recommendation made to the agency decision maker as to their suitability. This approach to family and friends placements reflects their importance to children and their family members and helps ensure that safe placements are made.

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 that, before a placement begins, the carer is provided with the clear procedures governing consent for the child to receive medical treatment. Specifically, that the level of delegation of the responsibility for consent is clearly identified in every case (NMS 12.2)
- ensure that foster carers and social workers are fully aware of, and in agreement with, the permitted and prohibited measures of discipline in relation to fostered children (NMS 9.1)
- ensure that foster carers' safe caring guidelines are cleared with the child's social worker (NMS 9.3)
- ensure that safe care policies and risk assessments are individually prepared for the young person they relate to (NMS 9.1)
- ensure that panel minutes accurately reflect the discussion of panel, its quoracy for all cases presented to it and the recommendations made (NMS 30)
- ensure that no business shall be conducted by a fostering panel unless it is quorate as set in the regulations (breach of Regulation 25(1) of the Fostering Services Regulations 2002) (NMS 30.1)
- ensure that each young person preparing to move to independent or semi independent living is allocated a personal adviser sufficiently promptly to provide the support needed to help them in their decision making and their transition to

independence (NMS 14.5)

- ensure there are clear procedures for monitoring and controlling the quality of the day-to-day activities of the fostering service (NMS 4.1)
- ensure that foster carers' records held by the fostering service are accurately and completed maintained. (NMS 25.3)