

Reading Borough Council Fostering and Adoption Team

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

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About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to assure children and young people, parents, the public, local authorities and government of the quality and standard of the service provided. The inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000.

This report details the main strengths and any areas for improvement identified during the inspection. The judgements included in the report are made in relation to the 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

Reading Borough Council fostering service exists to provide quality substitute family care to meet the needs of Reading children and young people who become looked after by the authority on either a short term/temporary or longer term/permanent basis. The service also supports children who continue to live within their communities and families of origin by providing regular periods of family based respite care. To this end the service recruits, trains and supervises a range of foster carers. Each of the following schemes stands alone with the unifying framework being the fostering regulations, and in some cases the associated teams are based in different locations:

Family Link Care provides regular short breaks (day care or overnight) for families with children who have special needs;

General Foster Care provides substitute family care, either short or long term, for children who cannot remain in their birth families;

Family & Friends provides care for children with whom they are connected by birth, marriage, or emotional bond;

Community Parents are specialized carers who need to have particular qualifications and skills;

Supported Lodgings Carers are carers who work with older adolescents to prepare them for independence and leaving care;

Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care (Directions) a specialist intensive fostering programme.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

There has been a significant restructuring of Children's Services. The appointment of permanent staff and the growth and relocation of the new Placement, Choice and Stability stream has energised the team. Under the direction of an enabling manager the staff team has used this as an opportunity to identify areas for improvement and is now working on addressing those areas to improve the service that is offered, with a clear focus on improving outcomes for children through the recruitment and support of foster carers.

Improvements since the last inspection

Since the last inspection a secure management structure has been established. There are permanent appointments at senior management level as well as the appointment of a manager of the fostering service. The service is part of the Placement, Stability and Choice Stream. The Fostering team and the Adoption and Permanence team

now have separate managers. The Supported Lodgings scheme is part of the general fostering team and the Family and Friends team is part of the Adoption and Permanence team. These teams along with Directions, a specialist fostering programme, report to the same service manager.

The fostering service was asked to make a number of improvements relating to management issues.

Work has started on the development of a rolling programme of training for foster carers to ensure that all carers receive core training within the first year of approval. This is being considered in the light of the Children's Workforce Development Council standards and the Webster-Stratton parenting course.

The Family and Friends assessment format now includes details of dates of employment as specified in the regulations. The register of foster carers is up to date. There is a more robust approach to the decision making processes in removing a foster carer from the register. There is work on the development of quality assurance processes for external and in house placements, which will be monitored by the fostering team in addition to the scrutiny. A children's commissioning post is to be established.

The monthly summaries written by foster carers now include details of contact. The format of the record is to be changed to reflect the Every Child Matters outcomes to enable the service to evidence clearly how contact is promoted.

At the last inspection the fostering service was asked to improve some aspects of health and safety for children and young people. There are now good systems in place in the family link team for ensuring parental consent is obtained where foster carers may be required to provide a medical intervention, physiotherapy for example. The personnel files of sessional workers now contain the information required by the regulations. A risk assessment has been carried out in relation to a gas boiler in a bedroom cupboard.

A system has been established for sharing information about the outcome of foster carer reviews. The panel has become more robust in requiring that children's views are included in these. The panel minutes now record the agency decision maker's response to the panel recommendation.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

There are good systems in place to help foster carers to promote and support the health care needs of children in care. The children and young people placed are registered with health care professionals and attend both routine and emergency appointments as and when required. This is monitored through the children's review system and the foster carers' annual reviews. There are plans in place to update the paperwork for foster carer reviews and supervision to better reflect the work under the five 'Every Child Matters' outcomes, which includes health. Foster Carers are provided with regular training opportunities and there are required frequencies for updates, e.g. first aid every three years. One carer said 'I have had training needed

for each of my children that have needed it, physio, medical care etc.' There are also plans to introduce a running programme of informal support sessions for carers on addressing the health needs of children/young people placed with them.

Not all the files seen contain evidence that foster carers have a copy of the signed parental consent to medical treatment for the child.

Both foster panels have a health care representative. On one panel this is the Child in Care nurse. The minutes of these show that the approval process considers how prospective foster carers will meet the health care needs of children placed.

The local authority is in the process extending the good practice identified in the Directions foster care programme to the general foster care programme. This is to include a significant improvement in access to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services. In addition to improved resources there are plans to increase scrutiny of the service, with the aim of achieving screening for all children so that children who need this service receive it more quickly.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The personnel files of social work staff appointed to work for the fostering service, including the manager, contain the information outlined in the regulations. The files seen of the administrative staff are lacking some of the information.

The homes of foster carers are warm and welcoming. The approach of the fostering service to accommodation issues, number of bedrooms and sufficient space for example, is not as robust in family and friends placements as it is in general fostering. This pragmatic approach is acknowledged by the service and links with other relevant local authority departments, housing for example, are to be established earlier on to assist the assessment process. Health and Safety checklists are completed as part of the assessment and are updated as part of the foster carers' annual review. The link worker visits foster carers unannounced at least once per year.

The matching process is well evidenced for children and young people in long term placements. Matching is a key component of discussions relating to short term placements, using information supplied by the child's social worker, but this is not demonstrated well in the placement records. A new foster placement agreement format is being piloted. The intention is to ensure that information relating to matching is recorded thoroughly, including the identification of areas where foster carers need additional support to compensate for any gaps in the match. Children and young people are given opportunities to visit prospective foster homes where this is practicable.

There is a clear training programme for foster carers, which includes safer caring and child protection. Safer caring guidelines are in place for the majority of the children

and young people. Foster carers have a clear understanding of acceptable behaviour management measures and those which are not permitted. There is clear guidance for foster carers on how to address bullying issues and manage unauthorised absence.

There are management systems in place for monitoring child protection allegations. The decision is not clear in one case. This is an area of work that is being developed, to include allegations made by a child or young person in any of the local authority's foster care provision.

There is an acceptance by foster carers that there may be little background information on children placed with them in an emergency. There is some frustration about the length of time it takes for information to come from placing social workers once the child has been placed.

There are two fostering panels, one for general fostering and another for family and friends. The panel chairs are experienced and have benefited from specialist training and mentoring in this area. The panel membership is kept under review, with new members sought to fulfil particular roles. The panel sees part of its role as improving practice by providing information on the quality of assessments and requesting feedback on their own performance. All first reviews and any overdue reviews are taken to panel and thereafter the panel receives management information about these.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The fostering service has good systems in place that provide guidance and support to carers in valuing and promoting equality and diversity. The appointment to the post of cultural advisor and the training and support offered in this role is appreciated by foster carers. Foster carers of children with disabilities are supported to help them access activities in the community.

Foster carers are very keen to promote education for the young people in their care. The majority report good links with schools and good support from the fostering service. A significant number report a lack of support when children are not in school. This is an area identified for development and there are plans in place for the Care Matters team to support young people who are not in school. A virtual head teacher has been appointed who has an overview of the educational achievements and needs of children in care. There is an active group established which meets to monitor blockages/preventers in access to education. Children say that they are helped by their foster carers to do well at school.

There is an established short break scheme run by a discrete team within the fostering service. This service continues to grow and develop to meet the particular needs of children using the service,.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is satisfactory.

The fostering service has clear systems in place to enable foster carers to promote and support contact arrangements. Children and young people are well supported by foster carers to have regular contact when there are clear and established contact arrangements in place. The foster carers rely on accurate, current information being supplied to them by placing social workers. They also rely on placing social workers responding to any queries and or concerns about contact. Foster carers report significant communication difficulties with placing social workers. The restructuring of the field work teams is thought to be a contributory factor in this. These communication difficulties are having an impact on the positive and safe management of contact for some young people.

Children and young people report that their foster carers listen to their opinions, examples are 'They ask me how I feel about things'; 'We have talks' and 'They listen to me when I am upset'. Children and young people are well supported to express their opinions through regular reviews. It is unclear how children and young people are informed of the complaints process and the external support available, the children's rights officer for example. There are plans to review the way in which information is given to children.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

There is an up to date statement of purpose which is reviewed and updated annually.

There is a new management structure in place following reorganisation and this is working well. There are very clear lines of accountability which are understood and appreciated by staff. The staff of the fostering service are benefiting from and appreciate working with a manager with a strong knowledge base. There is a work load management system in place and staff have regular, effective supervision. The monitoring of placements with Independent Fostering Agencies is a work in development as the role has been changed during restructuring. There is a small, dedicated administrative support team. There are clear systems in place and being further developed to ensure a streamlined approach to recruitment of foster carers and referrals from placing social workers.

The creation of the Placement, Choice and Stability Stream has resulted in the

expansion of the service as a whole with extra workers being recruited to the various fostering schemes. There are vacancies at present in addition to some sick leave. The post of foster carer recruiter is due to be advertised in line with the recruitment strategy.

Foster carers across the schemes report good support levels from their link workers. Foster carers also comment that link workers seem more confident in their role under the new manager. In addition they report satisfaction with the support provided by the local foster care association, Reading Carers Link (RCL). RCL receive a grant for the council and for this they provide support services for carers including an out of hours support line, a monthly newsletter, a website and a monthly 'ring around' for those approved carers who wish to be on their list. The Directions programme includes a weekly support group for its carers and 24 hour telephone support. There is a well established monthly support group for long term carers, valued by those who attend. There is a clear competency based assessment process which is tailored in line with the regulations to meet the different requirements of each fostering scheme.

A small number of foster carer reviews are undertaken outside the annual timescale. These are currently undertaken by the link worker. Consideration is being given to annual reviews being undertaken by an independent worker.

There are some difficulties in communications between link workers and the child's social worker. The field departmental restructuring and reconfiguration is very new. This has been identified as an area for improvement by the management.

The case files of children placed are of a good standard, with up to date records from foster carers. Additional information is held on the accessible placing social worker records. The foster carers records contain the information required.

The fostering service has a clear commitment to recognising the particular relationship and position of family and friends carers. There is a discrete family and friends team with a separate established panel. The team is growing and developing new ways of working.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Statutory Requirements

This section sets out the actions, which must be taken so that the registered person/s meets the Care Standards Act 2000, Fostering Services Regulations 2002 and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider(s) must comply with the given timescales.

Std.	Action	Due date
12	provide each foster carer with appropriate information regarding	28/03/2008

	the arrangements for giving consent to the child's medical or dental examination or treatment. Fostering Services Regulations 2002 Reg 17(3)	
6	ensure accommodation issues are considered thoroughly and plans made to address any identified shortfalls in this area in Family and Friends assessments. Fostering Services Regulations 2002 Reg 27 (2)(a) Schedule 3 (5)	21/03/2008
9	ensure that the record of allegations reports the outcome in each case. Fostering Services Regulations 2002 Reg 12 (20)(c).	28/02/2008
21	ensure that reviews for foster carers take place at intervals of not more than a year. Fostering Services Regulations 2002 Reg 29(2).	28/03/2008
15	ensure that administrative staff files contain evidence that gaps in employment have been explored. Fostering service regulations 2002 Regulation 20(3)(d)(i) Schedule 1	28/03/2008

Recommendations

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

- ensure that administrative staff files contain evidence of telephone calls to referees. (NMS 15)
- make available safe caring guidelines for each foster home. (NMS 9)