

Rochdale Metropolitan Borough Council - Child Care Services - Fostering

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

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Inspector	Sarah Oldham / Sue Winson
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Setting address	Targeted Services, Floor 5, Municipal Offices, Smith Street, ROCHDALE, Lancashire, OL16 1XU
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Registered person

Registered manager

Responsible individual

Date of last inspection

Rochdale Metropolitan Borough Council

Steve Garner

27/11/2008

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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

This local authority fostering service provides care for children and young people who are looked after by the local authority. The fostering service offers a number of different fostering arrangements which include emergency, short and long term, permanence, respite, and care with family and friends. It is responsible for safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children and young people who are fostered.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

The health outcomes for young people are generally good. They are able to access appropriate health care services and foster carers ensure that all children and young people are registered with appropriate health care professionals. Young people feel safe, secure and happy and report that they feel that they are very much part of their foster family. Education is well supported and this is increasing the educational attainments of children and young people.

The fostering service is actively recruiting foster carers but acknowledges that there is still a need for more carers to provide support for children and young people in the authority. Carers say that they receive excellent levels of support from their supervising social workers and have access to training. However, not all carers can access the training due to the timing of it and would appreciate a more flexible training timetable. Safe care policies are in place for all children and young people in placement. All carers receive unannounced visits and health and safety checks are updated on an annual basis. This ensures that carers provide a safe environment for children and young people to live in. Foster carers say that they receive appropriate levels of information regarding children placed with them and ensure that records are maintained of the time spent with them.

Consultation processes for children and young people are in place. This ensures that the service is aware of their wishes and feelings, to act appropriately on them and explain clearly the reasons when this is not possible.

There are systems in place for monitoring the service. However, some of the systems are not sufficiently robust to enable effective monitoring of all aspects of the service. This has been acknowledged by senior managers and appropriate systems have been put in place to ensure that any shortfalls are quickly identified and acted upon appropriately.

Improvements since the last inspection

Two recommendations were made at the last inspection in November 2008. These were to ensure that children and young people are able to contribute their wishes and feelings regarding their care and to ensure that the children's guide is in an appropriate format. The service has introduced a range of consultation opportunities and children and young people can contribute to their carers reviews through completing questionnaires. Independent reviewing officers also support young people to ensure that their wishes and views are included in all aspects of their care. The children's guide has been updated and contains all the required information. Individual information is provided to young people with complex needs in the most appropriate format for each young person.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Children and young people have their health care needs promoted. This includes their physical, emotional and psychological health. Foster carers are aware of the importance in ensuring that young people are registered with health care professionals to enable them to access health care support. They also maintain records of health care appointments and the outcomes of these. Initial health care medicals had previously been delayed. This was identified by the service and appropriate action taken to rectify this. These medicals are now undertaken in a timely manner. Annual health care assessments are coordinated by the looked after children's nurse for health care visitors and school nurses to undertake. There has been a delay on carrying out a small number of annual health care assessments. Where this had happened, it was identified at the young person's statutory review and an action plan implemented to address this. Immunisations for young people are below the national average. However, this is being addressed and the number of children and young people who have had all immunisations has risen substantially in the past year. The fostering service has good links with the children and adolescent mental service to support foster carers in understanding and managing children's behaviour. All these measures ensure that the health care needs of young people are clearly identified and responded to appropriately.

The service undertakes health and safety assessments of all foster carers' homes. Foster carers undertake training in health promotion, food hygiene, first aid and management of medication. This ensures that children and young people live in a comfortable and safe environment with foster carers who have the appropriate skills to promote individual health care. This contributes to children and young people's ongoing health and well-being.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

Children and young people say that they feel that they are part of the family, they are well-cared for and feel safe. One young person said, 'I am happy living here as my carers give me all the love and care I need and I feel safe.' Another young person said, 'I feel safe here but if I was unhappy about anything I know how to make a complaint.' All foster carers have a safe care policy in place that is specific to each individual young person. This ensures that the safety and welfare of young people is individually assessed and effectively promoted. Training is undertaken by all foster carers on safeguarding and the promotion of safe caring. They know the procedures to follow in the event of a significant incident occurring, for example, if a young person is missing from home or had an accident or sustained an injury. This ensures that the safety and welfare of the children and young people is effectively promoted. The service has a monitoring system in place to record, respond to and investigate information about allegations, disclosures of abuse or complaints.

As part of recruitment procedures, all appropriate checks are undertaken, these include enhanced Criminal Record Bureau checks and include any adult member living within the same household or those that have regular unsupervised contact with the children or young people. These are renewed every three years.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Young people have positive relationships with their carers. Those young people who responded to questionnaires and those spoken to at the time of the inspection are happy within their placement. The service undertakes effective matching and this promotes good levels of placement stability. Foster carers encourage and support young people to participate in a range of constructive leisure activities. These include joining clubs and organisations within their local community. Individual interests are also encouraged and supported. This enables them to develop their particular interests, meet other young people, develop friendships and play an active part in their community.

Education is promoted well within the authority. Children and young people are supported to attend school, college and further education. Personal education plans are in place. These outline the educational needs of each young person. These plans are undergoing further development to ensure that they contain comprehensive educational information to enable young people to achieve the best possible educational outcomes. Foster carers support and enable young people to attend school, they attend parents' evenings and advocate on behalf of the young people if required. Young people say that their carers help and support them with their education. One young person said, 'I am doing a lot better at school and my carers have really helped me.'

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Children and young people are able to express their wishes and views effectively. They are encouraged and supported to attend their statutory reviews. Independent reviewing officers arrange reviews in consultation with the young people, this includes discussion about where the review is held. One young person said, 'I have my reviews at my foster home because it is where I feel most comfortable and feel able to say what I feel.' Their views are also gathered as part of the foster carers annual review. This enables children and young people to comment on the care and support that they receive from their foster placement. Processes are in place for consultation with birth parents. However, some birth parents say that the level of consultation varies and they do not always feel that they are kept informed regarding their child's progress. Foster carers say that they feel that they are consulted on a regular basis. They have access to support groups and a new foster carer committee is being developed to enable an additional forum for consultation with carers.

Children are encouraged to develop a positive self-view, emotional resilience and understanding of their background. Life story work is being undertaken. Foster carers are collecting mementos for children to enable them to have an understanding of events that have taken place in their lives and to have memories when they move on. Contact is exceptionally well promoted. Foster carers are very clear about their role and the importance to the child. Kinship carers are supported to manage contact in ways which benefit children, especially where there are complex contact arrangements in place.

There are good systems in place to support young people move into their placements. Matching is effective and this is demonstrated by the low number of placement disruptions for children. Foster carers say that they receive placement plans and care plans for children when they are placed or within a reasonable period of time. This enables them to have a clear understanding of the needs of the child. Wherever possible, children are supported to meet with carers prior to moving in. This enables them to begin to develop relationships and to make them feel welcome.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

Children and young people are supported to make transition into adulthood appropriately. Foster carers are aware of their role in supporting young people to develop skills that will enable them to move onto independence. Pathway planning is undertaken with the young people. These plans identify the individual needs of young people and enables effective planning to be implemented to ensure that they receive support and access to further education, work and appropriate accommodation. Foster carers also have the opportunity to contribute to these plans.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. There is a clear Statement of Purpose in place that outlines the aims and objectives of the fostering service. This document is kept under review to ensure that information reflects current practice. The children's guide provides information for children and young people, although ongoing work is in place to develop it into a wider range of formats for all young people to access.

Recruitment of carers is ongoing and there is a clear recruitment strategy in place. The service acknowledges that additional carers are required to ensure that a range of placements are available as currently a the use of external placements is high.

Foster carers feel well supported and express a strong commitment to working for this particular local authority. They have access to training events and many have obtained appropriate qualifications. Full pre-approval training is provided to carers and is delivered by the fostering service. Information regarding safeguarding, child protection, education and health is provided along with the roles and responsibilities of fostering. Further post approval training is provided through the Children's Workforce Development Council induction standards. However, the number of carers who have completed these remains relatively low. Foster carers say that the time that training sessions are held does not always provide enough flexibility and would appreciate additional evening and weekend training sessions to be made available. Each carer has an individual training profile in place. However, a clear management system for recording attendance and training completed or future needs for training is not in place. To address this a new recording format has been introduced to enable closer monitoring of training.

The agency decision maker and the fostering panel make appropriate commendations and decisions. Panel members have a range of relevant experience and panels are child-focused and challenging. The panel is quorate, properly constituted and provides a clear quality assurance function. Appraisals for panel members have commenced but not all members have had their appraisal. Although training has been provided to panel, a full analysis of training and development needs for members has not been completed to ensure that panel members are kept up-to-date with relevant changes to legislation. Assessments are generally undertaken within agreed timescales. However, the quality of the assessments, analysis and evaluation of factual information varies. This has been identified through the panel and raised with managers. To address this, further training for assessing social workers has been identified to ensure consistency in practice.

Foster carers say that they receive good levels of support from their supervising social workers. This includes regular supervision that is valued and enables carers to reflect on the care and support they provide to children. Unannounced visits are also undertaken and records maintained of these.

The fostering service has had a period of reorganisation over the past eighteen months and a new manager has been appointed. Staff say that they are effectively supported, consulted and kept informed on the ongoing development of the service and this supports cohesive working practices. They have access to a range of training and development opportunities and feel that this enhances their skills and knowledge. Staff receive supervision on a regular basis and say that this is beneficial and supports them with their practice.

The fostering service has a clear development plan in place. There has been a shortfall in monitoring systems, resulting in a difficulty in maintaining an oversight of health immunisations and initial health medicals. New monitoring systems have been introduced to ensure that monitoring is effective and appropriate action undertaken to address any shortfalls.

Foster carers say that they are paid in a timely manner and are aware of the allowances payable. Information about carers payments is included within the foster carers' handbook. Children's files are electronically recorded and stored securely. Foster carers files are in the process of being transferred onto the electronic system, with current paper files stored securely within the office.

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 the wishes, feelings and views of those that are significant to children, in particular birth parents, are taken into account in monitoring foster carers and developing the fostering service (NMS 1.7)
- ensure that all training fits within a framework of equal opportunities and anti-discriminatory practice and is organised to encourage and facilitate attendance by foster carers (NMS 20.10)
- ensure that there are clear and effective procedures for monitoring and controlling the activities of the service (NMS 25.1)
- ensure that each panel member's performance, including that of the chair, should be reviewed annually against agreed performance objectives. (Volume 4, Statutory Guidance, paragraph 5.15)