

Calderdale Metropolitan Borough Council Fostering Service

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

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Inspector	Marian Denny / Sue Winson
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Service information

Brief description of the service

Calderdale Metropolitan Council operates its fostering services from its office in Sowerby Bridge. The fostering team is responsible for approvals, foster carer training programmes and their formal supervision. It provides long and short-term placements, including pre-adoption and pre-permanence placements, emergency and remand foster placements. There is also a short breaks service and friends and family carers are assessed and supported.

Between 1st April 2011 and 31st March 2012 the service had 174 children in foster care and 252 foster carers.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding: a service of exceptional quality that significantly exceeds minimum requirements

Good: a service of high quality that exceeds minimum requirements

Adequate: a service that only meets minimum requirements

Inadequate: a service that does not meet minimum requirements

Overall effectiveness

The overall effectiveness is judged to be **adequate**.

This is an improving fostering service. Leaders and managers are committed to providing children with a quality of service which promotes improved outcomes. Unplanned placement changes are reduced as far as possible. A large majority of children in care are placed with foster carers or connected people. However, an insufficient number foster carers and the size of households limits placement choice.

The majority of children and young people have positive views about the quality of their foster placements and their relationships with foster carers and their families. The fostering service works in effective partnership with other professionals and services, such as education and health. This is beneficial to children and young people, as Calderdale does better than its national comparators in improving the health and educational outcomes for them. Education, health and therapists are available to assist in foster carer training. These professionals also provide advice or direct services to children and their foster carers. Foster carer assessments generally cover all the required areas. Family and friends carers are assessed fairly and receive support, supervision and training in line with all foster carers.

Managers understand the strengths and weaknesses of the fostering service and

have development plans in place to address the shortfalls. There have been improvements in several areas including the involvement of foster carers in service development, the quality of foster carer reviews, as well as improving the supervision and support to foster carers. A number of recommendations have been made in this report, in order to address the shortfalls in the service and to help drive forward improvement for children and young people.

Areas for improvement

Recommendations

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

- ensure that children communicate their views on all aspects of their care and support. This is with specific reference to placement choice and consultation prior to statutory reviews (NMS 1.3)
- encourage and support children to have positive views of themselves and to be proud of their identity and heritage. This is specifically related to undertaking life story work and completing a life story book for a child or young person (Volume 4, statutory guidance, para 3.44)
- ensure that foster carers contribution to improving outcomes for looked after children is appropriately recognised and acknowledged, their status respected and their levels of authority clearly defined. (Volume 4, statutory guidance, para 2.4)
- give children information about the foster carer before arrival, unless an emergency placement makes it impossible, and any information (including where appropriate, photographic information) they need or reasonably request about the placement, in a format appropriate to their age and understanding (NMS 11.3)
- implement an effective strategy to ensure sufficient foster carers to be responsive to current and predicted future demands on the service (NMS 13.1)
- ensure that reviews of foster carers take place at intervals of not more than a year (breach of Regulation 28 (2))
- ensure written minutes of panel meetings clearly cover the key issues and views expressed by panel members (NMS 14.7)
- ensure the panel provides a quality assurance feedback to the fostering service on the quality of reports being presented to panel (NMS 14.2)
- ensure that prior to the placement of each child, the foster carer is provided with all the information held by the fostering service that they need to carry out their role effectively (NMS 15.2)
- ensure foster carers have a clear understanding about delegated authority, as delays and missed opportunities for looked after children as a result of poor planning around delegation of authority can be a bar to children experiencing a

fulfilled childhood and feeling part of the foster carer's family (Volume 4, statutory guidance, para 3.9)

- ensure foster carers are able to evidence that the Training, Support and Development Standards have been attained within 12 months of approval (or within 18 months for family and friends foster carers) (NMS 20.3)
- ensure that peer support, foster care associations and or self help groups for foster carers are encouraged and supported (NMS 21.4)
- ensure that each approved foster carer is supervised by a named, appropriately qualified social worker who has meetings with the foster carer, including at least one unannounced visit a year. (NMS 21.8)

Outcomes for children and young people

Outcomes for children and young people are **adequate**.

A large majority of children and young people who are looked after, state that they are well cared for by their foster carers and are treated as part of the family. They maintain that their lives have improved since being in foster care. They gave examples of how their foster carers encourage them to eat healthily, involve them in leisure activities and support them with their education. They state that their foster carers help them to understand their situation and to feel good about themselves. This increases their ability to develop positive relationships with others. However, not all children or young people have this understanding, as some have not been involved in life story work or have life story books. Young people also state that their foster carers have supported them in their transition to adulthood and enabled them to develop independent skills and embark on further education.

Children and young people state that they participate in day-to-day decisions in their foster homes, and a large majority in surveys said they were listened to. However, their views are not always gained prior to, or as part of their statutory reviews. Some examples were given though, where children's views have influenced their care. For example: their views about remaining in placements long term and where appropriate and safe to do so; contact arrangements with their family and friends have been listened to and acted upon. Young people also report that there has been an improvement in their participation in service development, through the Children in Care Council. There is good communication between social care, health and education which benefits children and young people when they move placements and ensures there are no gaps in provision of the services they need. Good attendance at pre-school, school or other education provision assists children and young people to make good progress in their learning. Their achievements are celebrated and they are encouraged to have ambitions for their future.

However, whilst the majority of looked after children and young people are living with foster carers who have been recruited by the local authority, choice is augmented by the use of placements with independent fostering agencies. These placements though do not always allow for children and young people to live close to

their families and schools. Children and young people are not routinely provided with written information about their foster carers and their family prior to arrival. There are also some difficulties placing sibling groups, as the authority is not recruiting larger sized fostering households. A small minority of children experience unplanned endings.

Quality of service

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

The fostering service recruits foster carers who are able to meet the needs of looked after children, but not in sufficient numbers, nor in the categories required to allow for placement choice. A detailed recruitment strategy is in place; however staffing deficiencies in the fostering service have delayed effective implementation. This has also affected their ability to complete assessments in a timely manner. However, the restructuring of the service, together with a recent increase in staffing has enabled the service to begin addressing these issues.

The preparation and assessment of foster carers has been reviewed and now more effectively equips them to meet the needs of looked after children. Assessments address the applicants' competence for the role. Whilst staff are adjusting to the new assessment process and to ensure the increased number of assessments are dealt with in a timely manner, a number of external assessors have been commissioned to deal with this work. Generally assessments are of a good standard, as they focus on how people can meet children and young people's needs, however, in some cases they are a little lacking in analysis. Foster carer reviews are carried out, however, not all of these are taking place annually. Plans to gain the views of foster carers' sons and daughters to inform the reviews are not yet fully implemented.

The fostering panel makes timely, appropriate and child-centred recommendations. Panel members have a breadth of experience and skills which ensures a clear focus on fostering and the needs of looked after children. The panel minutes are clear but do not always demonstrate the considered and rigorous discussion that has taken place. However, they do clearly outline the reasons for the recommendations made. Whilst the quality assurance functions of the panel are robust, there are no formal mechanisms in place to ensure a contribution to service improvement. The agency decision maker makes timely and robust decisions, taking into account the panel's recommendations.

The service has worked with placing social workers to improve the quality and range of information provided at the matching stage, however, foster carers do not always have all the information they need to carry out their role effectively. In the past insufficient staff in the fostering service has affected their ability to fully support foster carers with children in placement. For example, in situations where there has been staff sickness, it has not been possible to arrange for another worker to visit the family. This has resulted in gaps in frequency of supervisory visits and support, and unannounced visits have not always been carried out annually. While the foster carers' support group has been re-established in recent months, it had lapsed. Foster

carers report that access to this recently established support group has been a useful forum for training and information sharing. Independent fostering agency placements are used where necessary to meet specific needs of individuals. The quality of these placements is monitored effectively to ensure children and young people make progress.

Family and friends carers confirm that they are assessed fairly and have the same access to training and support as other mainstream foster carers. Foster carers are positive about the quality and range of the training they receive and confirm that they address the issues of diversity. They also report that the training they receive helps them to meet children and young people's needs. The involvement of a range of professionals in training delivery, including health and education, provides foster carers with information and empowers them to advocate on behalf of children in their care. However, a significant number of foster carers have yet to complete the Training, Support and Development Standards within the recommended timescales.

Safeguarding children and young people

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

Children and young people are safe and generally feel safe in their foster homes. Foster carers and staff working for the agency understand safeguarding procedures. The recently formulated carers' supervision record considers children's safety, including the possibility of bullying. A large majority of children and young people state that their foster carers help them to deal with any incidents of bullying. They also state that they know how to complain and are actively supported to do so. They receive good and accessible information within the children and young person's guide and have ready access to participation, children's rights workers, as well as an independent visitors and advocacy service. Work with children and their carers is effective and there is an appropriate, protective response to any incidents of bullying. Children rarely go missing from care and, if this does happen, foster carers are aware of the correct procedures to follow.

The service deals with allegations and concerns about foster carers promptly, thoroughly and consistently. It provides effective protection for the child, young person, the foster family and the person making the allegation, and support was also provided for the person who was subject to the allegation. All allegations were thoroughly reviewed, any patterns and trends that emerged from these investigations were collated and analysed. The service also deals with any complaints and concerns promptly. Outcomes are used to inform the service's policies, procedures and practice.

Calderdale recognises further development is required in relation to its care planning and work is being undertaken in relation to this. The service is also working hard to ensure foster carers receive full information about children, which includes their vulnerabilities or special needs. Work is being undertaken to make sure foster carers have a clear idea of their levels of authority, as some carers are rather unclear about this. Guidance and support from the fostering team and other specialists is good and

readily available. However, full information regarding children's histories and previous experiences is not always provided. This impairs foster carers ability to effectively care for the children and young people placed with them. In addition, unannounced visits, have not always been made on an annual basis.

The recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of foster carers, including family and friends foster carers, have a clear focus on safeguarding and child protection. Similarly, the recruitment and vetting of staff is equally strong. Thorough checks are carried out before people commence their work with children. Monitoring and evaluation of any incidents is effective and the service is able to identify any patterns or trends that may exist. Where matters indicate that children and young people are at risk, prompt action is taken to safeguard them and take appropriate action.

Leadership and management

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

Managers and staff are fully committed to the improvement of the service and there are plans in place to move the service forward, for example, increasing carer recruitment and support. Changes have been made to the service's policies, procedures and practice with a view to improving outcomes for children and young people. However, the impact of these improvements are still very much at an early stage and their effectiveness is not fully evaluated. Action has been taken to address the majority of the recommendations made at the last inspection; however, insufficient action has been taken to ensure annual unannounced visits of foster carer households.

There have been considerable changes in the senior management team which have inevitably affected both the strategic and operational management of the fostering service. This situation has been further exacerbated by the fostering service's previous structure and limited staffing resources. This has had a significant impact upon the effective delivery of the fostering service and ability to provide good outcomes for the children and young people. However, more recently there has been an increase in staffing, which has resulted in more manageable workloads. The restructuring of the service has also resulted in staff having a clearer focus to their work and a greater understanding of their responsibilities. This has placed staff in a stronger position to provide an effective fostering service of quality.

The current interim manager of the service is viewed positively by carers, staff and social workers. He is described as being energetic, creative, forward thinking and ensures action is taken. Staff indicate that he is approachable, responsive and provides good formal and informal supervision and support. Staff are also positive about the management team, stating that they have the vision and provide the necessary leadership, to drive forward the improvement agenda. Staff indicated that they were also committed to ensuring there was continuing improvement in the service. The interim manager and staff are appropriately qualified, experienced and

skilled. Administrative staff provide valued and effective support. Annual staff appraisals are carried out to address staff development needs. Staff are positive about the training opportunities provided them.

About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to assure children and young people, parents, the public, local authorities and government of the quality and standard of the service provided. The inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000 to assess the effectiveness of the service and to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards.

The report details the main strengths, any areas for improvement, including any breaches of regulation, and any failure to meet national minimum standards. The judgements included in the report are made against the inspection framework and the evaluation schedule for local authority fostering agencies.