

# Reading Borough Council Fostering

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

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## Service information

### Brief description of the service

Reading Borough Council fostering service exists to provide 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 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**.

Reading Borough is a socially and culturally diverse area that contains both areas of significant affluence and economic deprivation. The foster service is responsive to changing needs and is successful in ensuring that young people requiring foster care are placed with foster carers who can meet their physical, social and cultural needs. Although the service experiences difficulties in recruiting foster carers, it accesses a number of independent fostering agencies to ensure children and young people can continue to reside in the Reading area. This enables young people entering care to maintain a degree of continuity in their lives by accessing existing social networks.

Outcomes for children and young people are good and placement stability indicates the majority are settled and are responding positively to the individualised care they are receiving. The majority of children and young people placed in long-term care now reside in their placements until 18 years of age. The service is aspirational and there is an expectation that children and young people will grow and develop during their placements. Many of the children and young people entering care have experienced disruption in their education and make significant progress once settled. An increasing number of young people are now continuing on to college and in some instances university. Children and young people are encouraged to adopt healthy lifestyles by eating appropriately and taking regular exercise. The health and well-being of individual's is monitored by foster carers on an on-going basis and specialist help obtained to address specific health issue. Young people live full and active lives and expand their horizons by participating in a wide range of social and recreational activities. Children and young people talked in positive terms about their placements and the support and encouragement they received from their foster carers. All said

they feel safe.

Although the service has made significant progress in many areas since the last inspection, its development has been curtailed by an increase in demand, staff shortages and inconsistent leadership, particularly at team manager level. The shortages have, in some instances, impacted on the degree of support available to foster carers. The difficulties have been clearly recognised by the senior management team and a number of new staff appointments have been made. The service benefits from having a stable group of experienced and well-qualified staff who are intent at ensuring that foster carers are helped to provide extremely good quality care. Carers said they generally feel valued but would appreciate more consistent support. Arrangements for the recruitment and training new carers are good and both panels are working effectively and fulfilling an important quality assurance role. In spite of the difficulties it has faced the services has maintained its 'child focus' and carers and staff continue to provide safe and nurturing placements in which children and young people can grow and develop.

## Areas for improvement

### Recommendations

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

- develop training and resources to help foster carers implement a more structured approach to helping young people develop independent living skills (NMS 12.2)
- ensure all foster carers receive regular supervisory home visits on a regular basis (NMS 21.2)
- introduce regular training opportunities for panel members (NMS 23.1)
- ensure placement agreements make clear the nature and frequency of respite breaks that take account of the needs of any children placed (NMS 21.5)
- ensure that changes to the short break service do not impact negatively on the service's ability to support children and young people with physical, sensory and learning impairments (NMS 25.12)
- ensure policies and procedures relating to the sharing of confidential information are clear and consistently applied (NMS 25.4)
- ensure staff have access to regular supervision by appropriately qualified and experienced staff (NMS 24.4)
- develop child friendly profiles on all foster families. (NMS 11.1)

### Outcomes for children and young people

Outcomes for young people are **good**.

The service is successful in ensuring children and young people are placed in warm nurturing environments in which they can grow and develop. Although the service recognises each child and young person as a unique individual with their own physical, social and cultural needs, it is not always possible to match them with carers who share their ethnic, religious and linguistic background. However, foster carers receive excellent advice and support from a dedicated cultural adviser that ensures appropriate arrangements can be developed to meet the needs of each individual.

Due to the difficulty in securing foster placements for large sibling groups, a number of children and young people are living in separate settings. However, regular contact arrangements are made to ensure relationships can be maintained. Placement stability indicates that in spite of the service's often limited capacity, young people are appropriately placed with foster carers who can meet their needs. The short break service has been particularly successful in placing young people with carers who have both the skills and facilities to meet their often complex health needs.

Children and young people spoke positively about their foster homes and special mention was made of their accommodation, the activities they engaged in and the support they received from their foster carers. It is clear children and young people respond positively to the stability and care their placements provide and are making significant progress in many areas of their physical, social and emotional development. Children and young people are integrated into their foster families and participate in all aspects of family life. As one young person remarked, 'I have always been made to feel part of the family.' Many children and young people reside in their placements until they move on to independent or supported living placements.

The service has developed an open culture in which the views of children and young people are regularly gathered. Suggestions from young people are always considered and responded to. Specialist interpreters are frequently used to illicit the opinions of those who experience communication difficulties. The views of children and young people are appropriately shared with all interested parties including their foster carers. Children and young people spoken with were aware of how and to whom they could report any worries or concerns about their placements. Children and young people engage well with the reviewing process and are encouraged and supported to plan for their futures.

Education is given a high priority within the service and is viewed as a key element in increasing opportunities in life for children and young people in care. The virtual school is helping raise the educational aspirations of young people and an increasing number are now obtaining educational and vocational qualifications before leaving care. On entering care every effort is made to limit the inevitable disruption to children and young people's lives by maintaining existing educational placements. By being able to access existing social networks a degree of continuity is maintained. The progress of each child and young person is monitored by staff from the virtual

school and additional support help children and young people who have disruptive educational histories to catch up and in many instances surpass their peers. School attendance is good and exam results indicate children and young people are making significant progress. Virtual school staff are aware of all exclusions and intervene to help prevent reoccurrences.

The health needs of all children and young people are appropriately assessed on entering care. From the information received health plans are developed to address any identified concerns. A looked after nursing care team carry out regular reviews to ensure children and young people's health needs are being addressed. Effective systems have been established that ensure that children and young people who have arrived from overseas receive recommended immunisations. Many children and young people enter care following periods of stress and uncertainty that can, if not addressed, impact negatively on their social and emotional development. The service provides access to a range of specialist therapists to help individual's understand the particular circumstances that brought them into care. This work has proved extremely important in helping individual's increase their emotional resilience. All foster carers are provided with training on first aid and health related issues to ensure they can effectively monitor the health and well-being of the young people in their care.

The service promotes healthy living and children and young people spoken with were clearly aware of the contribution eating wisely and taking regular exercise contributes to health. Children and young people live full and active lives and participate in a wide range of sporting and recreational activities in their local communities. Young people in their teens are helped to assume responsibility for monitoring their own health and are provided with advice and guidance on issues such as the use of alcohol, drugs and sexual health.

Although most children are helped to develop a range of useful domestic skills that will help them when they eventually move on to independent or semi-independent living, the current system is somewhat ad hoc and does not ensure all young people acquire the same key skills.

## Quality of service

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

While the service is successful in recruiting carers, it has experienced difficulties in meeting the recent rise in demand for placements and is having to access further placements from independent agencies. Arrangements for monitoring the progress of young people in such placements are good. The service is committed to increase its pool of in-house foster carers and has recently initiated a new recruitment campaign with a new team of enthusiastic staff. All potential foster families and their properties are assessed as part of a robust vetting process. Only those who successfully complete an initial training programme are presented to panel for approval. The

service's recruitment process is efficient and many foster carers are approved within six months of applying. The system ensures unsuitable individuals are excluded and that approved foster carers are individuals who will provide safe and appropriate care.

There is an expectation that once approved foster carers will access the many training opportunities available to them to continually update their knowledge and skills. All new carers complete a training programme that familiarises them with key aspects of fostering such as attachment, contact, education, health and development and safeguarding. The service has been extremely successful in supporting foster carers to achieve Children's Workforce Development standards and National Vocational Qualifications. All new recruits are now being enrolled on the new Diploma. Carer training also raises awareness of equality issues and specific courses focus on culture, religion and disability. Although foster carers generally spoke in positive terms about the quality of training available, a number of long-term carers felt the programme could be repetitive and would benefit from the introduction of some specialist training to address the specific needs of individual young people, such as those that experience medical or behavioural difficulties.

Although the service operates with a team of experienced and well-motivated social workers, recent shortages and a reliance on agency staff has compromised their ability to offer high quality support on a consistent basis. This is reflected in a recent decline in the frequency of supervisory visits to foster carers' homes. This has mitigated to some extent by the good lines of communication that foster carers have established with their supervising social workers. Regular contact is maintained by telephone, email and text. Foster carers are clearly aware of the importance of reflecting on their practice and often access informal networks they have established with experienced foster carers to discuss care issues. As one carer remarked, 'even though I have been fostering for many years I still seek out the views and opinions of other foster carers as well as my supervising social worker. Support and guidance is also available via an out of hours service that operates during evenings and weekends. Although foster carers confirmed that additional support is always available if they are experiencing difficulties, there was some concern that the limited number of respite carers often meant that foster carers were unable to take agreed breaks. Foster carers respond sensitively to the changing needs of the young people in their care and pass on key information to their social workers. Records and placement plans are appropriately updated to reflect changing circumstances.

The service benefits from the scrutiny of two appropriately constituted fostering panels, one of which focuses exclusively on family and friends placements. The panel list includes members with expertise in childcare, education and health. Although all panel members have completed an induction programme that included observing a number of panels in action, there has been no further training. The panel list provides sufficient members that ensure both panels can meet regularly and remain quorate. The approval and reviewing functions of the panel provides an effective quality assurance function that ensures that children and young people are only cared for by appropriately trained and vetted foster carers. Decisions are made on good quality and rigorous assessments. Panel members provide advice to supervising

social workers on the quality of their assessments and review reports. This feedback helps drive up the quality of both assessments and the on-going support of foster carers. Effective mechanisms exist for the panel and decision maker to discuss issues and differences. Foster carers spoke in positive terms about their experience at panel and felt that though the experience was daunting, they were made to feel at ease and were treated with respect throughout.

## **Safeguarding children and young people**

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

Safeguarding underpins all the policies, procedures and working practices within the service. The recruitment and vetting of service staff is comprehensive and ensures unsuitable individuals will not get access to vulnerable young people. The service only deploys temporary staff from a number of approved agencies that have demonstrated robust recruitment and vetting procedures.

Supervising and children's social workers liaise effectively to ensure that foster carers are provided with key information about a child or young person before a placement is made. There is been a developing trend to undertake joint visits. Service staff are effective in helping foster carers develop safe care and behaviour management plans that are applicable to their particular social circumstances. Although every effort is made to ensure children and young people are kept safe in their placements, the service is not risk averse and there is an expectation that all will live full and active lives by participating in a range of social and recreational activities both within their homes and local community. Risk assessments are undertaken on every child and young person entering the service to identify their vulnerabilities and areas of potential risk. All family members are made aware of their individual responsibilities in regard to the reporting of any safeguarding worries or concerns. No child or young person reported being bullied and all indicated they had an adult to whom they could report any worries or concerns. The service responds appropriately to concerns and complaints and will initiate child protection processes if required.

Once settled foster carers work alongside children and young people and help them develop effective strategies and practices to keep themselves safe. For example, children are introduced to road safety and stranger danger while teenagers are made aware of the risks associated with taking illicit substances and the potential difficulties that can arise by disclosing personal information on social network sites. Foster carers are successful in breaking established patterns of anti-social and destructive behaviours. Children and young people reported that they feel safe in their current placements.

Although the service has established systems to regularly monitor placements and audit all related records, the information has not always been used effectively to deploy staff. For example, during a period of recent staff shortages some carers continued to receive regular monthly home supervisory visits while others had to wait a number of months for a visit. Although regular phone and email contact was



maintained during this time supervisory social workers were unable to comment on the standard of the foster carer's home or observe their interaction with the children and young people in their care. The recent appointment of new permanent staff should help alleviate this problem. All carers receive at least one annual unannounced visit and an annual household review to ensure accepted standards are being met. All looked after children reviews are undertaken within accepted timescales. The views of children and young people, reviewing officers and children's social workers are always sought prior to foster carers' annual reviews and all comments are relayed to the foster panel for consideration.

## **Leadership and management**

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

The service has made significant progress since the last inspection. All the recommendations arising from the inspection have been appropriately addressed and have contributed to better outcomes for young people. Safeguarding arrangements have been strengthened by more robust staff recruitment procedures and the introduction of updated safe caring guidance. Arrangements relating to the health and well-being of children and young people have also improved. Health passports are now used to record all health checks and interventions. Health passports move with each child and young person. Previous difficulties that carers experienced regarding providing consent for medical intervention have been clarified and are now made explicit in all placement plans. A high degree of placement stability indicates that the fostering duty team's introduction of a matching tool and the greater availability of appropriate agency placements has contributed to young people being appropriately matched with foster carers who can meet their needs. Although the introduction of random sampling of records, thematic audits and the monitoring of how key indicators are being met are all contributing to a more comprehensive quality assurance system their effectiveness is being somewhat compromised by the limitations of the existing computer system. Managers can not currently harness technology to monitor all aspects of the service and share information between all interested parties. However, the appointment of new panel chairs and the breadth of experience now available amongst panel members on the central list has ensured more considered and consistent decision making. The detailed scrutiny of panel decisions by the service's decision maker has also contributed to a more robust approval and reviewing system. Complaints and concerns are acknowledged, investigated and responded to within appropriate timescales. Outcomes from investigated complaints contribute to the service's robust approach to improvement. Allegations against foster carers are now appropriately recorded, investigated and resolved within established timescales.

The development of the service has, in recent times, been curtailed by the difficulty it has experienced in maintaining staffing levels in line with rising demand. The recruitment of suitably qualified and experienced staff to management posts has proved particularly difficult. Although the permanent staff team has been

supplemented by the deployment of agency staff, it has clearly been hard to maintain consistent support to all foster carers. Foster carers spoke in positive terms about the quality of support and guidance they generally received from the permanent long-term staff. However, there is clearly a lack of consistency in regard to the amount of support and monitoring each carer is currently receiving. There was a particular concern that recent policy changes relating to the sharing of information were being interpreted differently by different staff.

Although staff are clearly frustrated by the difficulties they experience in meeting current demands, they feel it is a temporary problem that will be addressed when recently appointed staff have taken up post and settled in. The service continues to develop a more integrated approach by working more effectively with other social work teams, council departments and outside agencies. For example, staff were able to illustrate how joint visits with looked after children social workers were able to resolve difficulties before they developed into major concerns. While there is an acknowledgement that the service needs more foster carers staff feel that the rigorous recruitment and training is producing caring and competent foster who are keen to develop their knowledge and skills. Although staff have a strong commitment to developing their professional development by accessing regular training opportunities, their ability to reflect on their practice has been curtailed by a lack of regular supervision. Developments and new initiatives are encouraged and best practice is shared between foster carers and staff.

Since the last inspection a new management patch structure has been introduced. Unfortunately its implementation has proved difficult due to a lack of consistent management at team manager level. However, staff are now settling and new appointments have been made to key roles. The senior staff team are held in high regard by staff and foster carers who believe that, in spite of significant difficulties, they have been successful in raising standards. The senior management team are clearly aware of the need for the service to remain responsive to changing needs. This is currently reflected in recent proposals to restructure the short breaks service. Although the proposals has been announced there appears to be a degree of confusion amongst staff and foster carers about the underlying rationale.

## 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 the inspection of local authority fostering agencies.