



Inspection Report on

Rhondda Cynon Taff Fostering Service

Children's Services

Date Inspection Completed

01/11/2023

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About Rhondda Cynon Taff Fostering Service

Type of care provided	LA Fostering Service
Registered Provider	Rhondda Cynon Taff County Borough Council Adults and Children's Services
Language of the service	English
Previous Care Inspectorate Wales inspection	18 January 2016
Does this service promote Welsh language and culture?	The service provides an 'Active Offer' of the Welsh language. It anticipates, identifies, and meets the Welsh language and cultural needs of people who use, or may use, the service.

Summary

The local authority fostering service is provided by four teams with specific roles and functions; the assessment of mainstream foster carers and placement finding; kinship foster carer assessment and special guardianship order applications; and support to mainstream and kinships foster carers. Foster Wales provides a service to recruit mainstream foster carers. Each team is managed by a designated manager and a service manager oversees the overall function of the fostering service.

The core staff team are competent, committed and experienced with skills to meet the requirements of the service. Agency social workers and independent social workers are employed to undertake assessments and where vacancies occur across the teams.

Children receive care from foster carers who are supported by the service to promote and improve their well-being outcomes. Children's health and educational needs are prioritised and they have access to a wide range of resources to support their well-being. They are encouraged to develop interests and enjoy their leisure time with access to a range of activities. Foster carers have good access to training and there are a range of support groups and services available, including training and development opportunities.

Systems are in place to support the operation of the service. Improvements have been identified for the ongoing cycle of quality assurance and review to ensure the service operates in line with its statement of purpose, regulatory requirements and to support children achieve their personal outcomes.

Well-being

Children are consulted about their care and are able to make their views known through their child looked after meetings, consultation with their social workers and access to advocacy services. Whilst the local authority has developed partnerships with agencies to engage with care experienced children, the development of further consultation forums and feedback from children about their fostering experiences would support a more consistent approach to inform service development and improvement.

Children have access to health care services and attend routine and specialist health appointments. Health and well-being issues are discussed and considered in fostering support groups and health care professionals are invited to groups to promote awareness of children's health needs. Children are able to access specialist services to support their emotional health care and development. Life story work is completed with children and highlighted as a priority for the service. Some foster carers complete memory boxes for children to keep and store personal information.

The educational needs of children are carefully considered. The local authority meet their corporate parenting responsibilities regarding education to children. A virtual school has been developed providing on line tutoring for children who are unable to access mainstream education or to supplement their individual education plan. A care2work scheme is also reported to be successful in supporting older children transition to the workplace. Foster carers are actively engaged in children's education and support children to attain educational progress. They develop good links with children's schools to extend their support networks and access school initiatives to help support children's emotional health and well-being. Pioneer foster carers told us of their work with schools to promote their awareness of the needs of children who are care experienced.

Children experience care from foster carers who ensure they are integrated into family life and provide them with a stable home environment for them to grow and develop. Children are encouraged to follow interests and have opportunities to engage in a wide range of activities to support their overall well-being and promote a healthy lifestyle. We heard children attend swimming lessons, play rugby, karate and attend clubs within their community. The local authority provide leisure passes to children and their foster carers to support their involvement in activities. This is valued and is a well-received local authority initiative. Children receive support to develop a level of independence in accordance with their age and understanding. The service needs to ensure there is adequate oversight and monitoring of savings made by foster carers on behalf of children. This is identified as an area for improvement.

Foster carers have a good understanding of children's emotional development and have access to training to support a trauma informed approach to their care. The MAPS (Multi Agency Placement Support) team provide focussed support and intervention to minimise the risk of disruption to fostering arrangements and consider support strategies and services available to children and their foster carers. Children are supported to spend time with those significant in their life and foster carers recognise the importance of this and the role they

play to promote positive relationships. Kinship carers understand their responsibilities in supporting children to maintain contact with key people and understand their responsibilities in keeping children safe.

Children are generally kept safe. Foster carers understand their safeguarding responsibilities and have access to safeguarding training, policies and procedures. Safe care agreements are in place for children. Safeguarding concerns are dealt with as required under the Wales Safeguarding procedures. However, where allegations have been made about foster carers, the service does not consistently ensure their fostering approval is reviewed and returned to panel within reasonable timescales. This supports robust oversight to ensure children are safe.

Care and Support

The service has appropriate systems in place regarding the recruitment and approval of foster carers in order to ensure children are appropriately safeguarded. Foster Wales leads on the recruitment of mainstream foster carers. Assessments of all foster carers are of a consistently good quality and contain all the required information and checks to ensure their suitability to care for children. These are mostly undertaken by independent social workers and agency social workers with quality assurance processes in place, including a mid-point review to track the quality of assessments and timescales for completion. Some delays in completing mainstream assessments within a six month timeframe has been due to the lack of staff to allocate work. This impacts on the service's capacity to increase the availability and choice of foster carers for children.

The mainstream placement team considers referrals to the service and the matching of children's care and support needs with foster carers. Vacancies are limited and there have been occasions when exemptions have been requested to place children with foster carer's outside of their approval. However, this has not been consistently undertaken for all arrangements and consideration given to the impact on accommodation and the fostering household. The service needs to ensure full compliance with the regulations in relation to exemptions.

Foster carers are motivated, dedicated and committed to ensure children achieve and thrive in their foster placement. They have access to a broad range of training opportunities and these are available via online learning or are classroom based training. Foster carers told us specialist training had been provided to support the specific needs of children in their care. 'Pioneer' foster carers are also able to access Fostering Network Training. Training is booked via an online platform which does present issues for some carers. Recognition for foster carer's achievements are supported through awards and appreciation annual events. The system to record foster carer's learning and development needs to be strengthened to provide an overview of what training has been undertaken and to ensure this complies with the service's policy and expectations of foster carers.

Supervision from supervising social workers is valued by foster carers as their main source of support. Some have built strong relationships with their social worker, whilst others have not had consistent and reliable support. This has caused frustration for some foster carers. Visits by supervising social workers are not made within timescales as set out in the foster carer's handbook and service delivery standards. This has been as a result of staff absences and periods where there has been no allocated supervising social worker. The service have responded to these issues with a duty system which foster carers are able to access and receive a response to any queries or issues.

The service ensures there is effective communication with foster carers through regular email updates and via social media. This is well received by foster carers who feel they are kept up to date on current issues effecting the service, events, and news. Support groups are

provided approximately every three months across different venues and locations, although some scheduling in advance would ensure foster carers are able to plan and this would support their attendance. Kinship Connect provide support to kinship foster carers and are commissioned to offer services three days a week and hold support groups. Foster carers are able to be referred to 'pioneer foster carers' who support the service development and delivery. These are experienced foster carers who offer mentoring and are strong advocates for foster carers and promote working as a team around a child. Additional support measures are in place or are in development to support the well-being of foster carers through focus support sessions and access to an employee assistance programme.

The local authority is reviewing its building arrangements and location of staff teams across children's services. The fostering service has transferred to another office location which is shared with other services operated by the local authority provider. This information needs to be updated on the service's statement of purpose.

The fostering service has access to office accommodation for two days a week and staff are able to 'hot desk' in the allocated areas. The premises is suitable and fit for purpose. The office space provides accommodation for the staff team in a large, open plan area with smaller offices which can be used for a variety of purposes. There is a conference room with access to information technology communication systems.

The building is secure, the main front door is locked and accessible via a keypad. The local authority provider ensures regular health and safety, fire safety checks and fire drills are undertaken and there is oversight and follow up to health and safety audits and fire risk assessments. All records are digital and stored securely. The service has suitable safeguards and contingency planning in place to protect them.

Arrangements are in place to ensure facilities and equipment used by foster carers for the provision of care and support to children are suitable and safe. This is assessed during the initial assessment of foster carers. Ongoing health and safety checks are completed during visits to foster carer's homes by their supervising social worker, along with any pet assessments. The delay in completing annual reviews of foster carer's approval does not ensure scrutiny of health and safety issues as part of the review process.

Leadership and Management

The statement of purpose provides information about the service's aims and objectives, policies, procedures, and quality assurance. This requires updating to ensure information is provided as required by regulation and reflects changes to the service provision. The service guide for children also requires updating and consideration should be given to the format to ensure it is accessible to younger children who use the service. Foster carer profiles are available but need to be kept under review. The service needs to ensure children receive information about their fostering arrangement prior to or following their placement. Information is reported to be available in Welsh, but this was not made available to this inspection. These are areas identified as requiring improvement.

The absence of a service manager has impacted on the provision of the service with no consistent oversight to review and develop service objectives. The delegation of tasks and responsibilities from managers to senior staff needs to be reviewed to enable managers to focus on the development of the service and to ensure it meets the requirements of the regulations. There is a well-established core team of staff who are experienced, competent, knowledgeable and support the overall function of the fostering teams in relation to their specific role and responsibilities. Staff are described by one manager as having a "can do" attitude and are committed to providing a good service.

Staff recruitment files indicate there are robust processes in place to ensure the suitability and appointment of permanent and agency social workers. The request for references for staff appointments made from within the local authority needs to be aligned to the fostering regulations. Staff receive regular supervision, although there were some shortfalls with a small number of staff. Annual appraisals have not been completed. Team meetings take place regularly and provide a platform to share information and consider current issues. Staff told us they feel well supported by their managers and the senior management team who are accessible and responsive. High caseloads were sighted as having an impact on their ability to complete core and statutory responsibilities as support to foster carers is given priority.

The service needs to make improvements to monitor and review the quality of care provided by foster carers. An annual review of the quality of care was completed in March 2023. This is not within the six month review period as required by the regulation and has not been updated. Recommendations of the review for future planning and developing the service were identified but it was unclear what action and progress had been made. Whilst the local authority gathers information in relation to the educational progress of all care experienced children; information to demonstrate the attendance, progress and academic attainment of children placed with foster carers is not readily available and gathered by the service to monitor and inform outcomes for children using the service. Action to collate information about training completed by foster carers has more recently been prioritised and the completion of learning and development records are in the process of being completed. These are areas identified as requiring improvement.

The fostering panel ensures assessments are scrutinised by panel members to confirm foster carers are safe, suitably fit, and competent to undertake the role. The panel chair is

diligent; decision making is robust and well documented and panel records demonstrate careful consideration of issues. Prospective foster carers attend panel and receive confirmation of their approval status. There have been changes to the panel chair and in the panel membership with some continued vacancies. However, the panel has remained quorate and able to proceed with regular panel meetings which are held virtually. Recommendations of panel to the Agency Decision Maker are timely. Opportunities for panel members to attend training needs to be given further consideration and the function of the panel should be included in the service's quality of care review.

Arrangements for the annual review of foster carer's approval has not taken place within required timescales. Newly approved foster carers have not been consistently reviewed following their first year of approval or following allegations and considered at panel. A significant number of annual reviews are out of timescale. The impact of this is there is no evaluation of the care provided by foster carers and there is a lack of independent scrutiny by the fostering panel of the quality of care provided to individual children. Steps have been made to address this deficit with the appointment of an agency social worker with responsibility to complete annual reviews. However, this is unlikely to be effective due to the substantial number of foster carers approved by the local authority provider and the considerable number out of timescale. A system needs to be developed to prioritise and take action to address this concern which is a serious shortfall in the service provision.

Records of children placed with foster carers are maintained electronically. However, these were not always accurate and updated to ensure children have an exact history of their care should this be required in later life. Information about children's access to short break stays and the periods they were away from their main foster placement were not clearly recorded. The service's audit of information is also identified as in need of improvement.

The service has policies and procedures in place to support managers and staff to achieve the aims of the service and support children to achieve their personal outcomes. Some policies require updating in line with current guidance and some remain in draft form. The complaints procedure needs to be specific to the fostering service and not a corporate policy. This does not meet the requirements of the regulations to outline specific processes for those using the service and is identified as an area requiring improvement.

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