

# Talawa Fostering Services

Inspection report for independent 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 outcome for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and relevant National Minimum Standards for the establishment.

## 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**

Talawa Fostering Services is an independent fostering agency based in Islington. The agency is owned and managed by its three directors who are all qualified social workers and have extensive experience in working in the field of foster care, child protection, social care management and facilitating social work training. The fostering agency was first registered with the Commission for Social Care Inspections in December 2005. The office premises are ground floor office space, the main area being open plan. There are two adjacent offices, one of which has been converted into a well equipped play area that can be utilised for the purposes of supervised contact. The service provides social work input for the supervision of contact between looked after children and their families. The service aims to provide substitute family placements for children looked after, on a short and long term basis and for the purposes of short breaks. The fostering service caters for the placement of children and young people from diverse ethnic backgrounds and is very well experienced in addressing the particular needs of black children in the public care system.

### **Summary**

The purpose of the announced inspection of Talawa Fostering Services is to assess the service against key National Minimum Standards and gauge improvements made to the service since the last inspection that was conducted 13 months ago. Talawa Fostering Services has made a promising start in establishing itself as a service that meets its stated aims and objectives; the staff group have impressive experience and expertise in the field of foster care, carers are thoroughly assessed and vetted and placements are keenly monitored and supervised. All required policies and procedures are in place. However, the overall quality rating of the fostering service is satisfactory as issues highlighted for improvement are identified in the outcome areas of Staying Safe and Organisation. One requirement in the outcome area Staying Safe is outstanding from the previous inspection and with regard to the outcome area of Organisation, the requirement relates primarily to the lack of formal training opportunities provided to all approved foster carers since the last inspection.

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

### **Improvements since the last inspection**

The previous inspection had highlighted two issues of concern. Firstly, that required recruitment checks for all staff recruited by the agency and members of the fostering panel comply with the regulations. Secondly that all required checks for foster carers are completed and evidenced by the agency prior to their approval. This inspection has found that required checks for some recruited 'independent' social workers remain outstanding as do checks for some members of the agency's fostering panel. The requirement with regard to the vetting of foster carers has been successfully resolved. In addition to the two requirements made at the last inspection two recommendations were also made. One related to the documentation of decisions made at the fostering panel. This issue has been successfully resolved. The other recommendation relates to the format of information contained in the children's guide. This inspection has made a similar recommendation that the contents of this document be reviewed.

## **Helping children to be healthy**

The provision is good.

Talawa Fostering Services has good systems in place to ensure that children and young people placed with the agency's foster carers live a healthy lifestyle and that their health and medical needs are effectively met. Information received as part of the pre-inspection questionnaire indicates that soon after children and young people are in placement, arrangements are made for them to be registered with GP, dental and optical services and where necessary, specialist medical services. Young people's case files evidence that the fostering agency seeks comprehensive background information about the medical and health care needs of young people and foster carers understand that where identified, it is their responsibility to ensure the health care needs of young people are met. This understanding is further enhanced by clear information documented in the agency's foster care handbook, distributed to all foster carers upon 'approval' by the agency. This information is explicit in providing guidance to foster carers about promoting the medical, health care and emotional needs of young people in placement. The fostering agency also has related policies and procedures in place to address the promotion of good health care for children and young people, such as the management of young people's medication and issues related to caring for a disabled young people. Case files evidence good documentation that demonstrate foster carers' competency in meeting the needs of young people living with learning disabilities. Young people confirm that they attend scheduled medical appointments with their carers. The fostering agency's assessment process is thorough in exploring with prospective carers their experience and understanding of issues, such as good nutrition and the ability to provide a nurturing environment. Foster carers confirm that nutritious and balanced meals are offered to young people, which are culturally appropriate. Once placements are arranged, regular supervisory visits are undertaken and as a part of this process, health care issues as they pertain to young people are consistently explored. Foster carers maintain good documentation of medical and health care issues of young people and these records form the basis of further discussion with the placing authority if issues are raised. Foster carers confirm that periodical health and safety checks are undertaken by supervising social workers to ensure that carers' homes meet acceptable health and safety standards. Records of these checks are evident on foster carers' files. The fostering service has very good access to medical expertise; staff share an effective working relationship with one of the local authority's Looked After Children (LAC) medical advisors and have excellent access to medical advice both via the agency's fostering panel and more generally through an effective partnership with a local GP who works collaboratively with the fostering agency. Foster carers will benefit from ongoing training that addresses a range of physical and emotional health care issues for young people in their care.

## **Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe**

The provision is satisfactory.

Talawa Fostering Services have received no complaints or allegation of abuse against any foster carer since the last inspection. The agency's three directors are impressively qualified and experienced in the field of foster care and child protection and have a clear commitment to ensuring the safeguarding and protection of children and young people in placement. The fostering agency recruits independent social workers to complete foster carer (Form F) assessments. Practitioners are qualified social workers who possess additional professional qualifications. Review of staff personnel files indicate that staff are recruited in accordance to the fostering agency's recruitment and selection policies. However, most 'independent' staff

files and those of some members of the agency's fostering panel do not evidence full information as specified in Schedule 1 of the Fostering Services Regulations. Noticeably some staff personnel files do not evidence positive proof of identification, or two written references as a number of files evidence only one written reference. This is not in accordance to safe staff vetting guidelines as outlined in the regulations. The fostering agency's recruitment and assessment of prospective foster carers is a rigorous process and detailed attention is paid to applicants' capacity to provide and sustain a safe, healthy and nurturing environment for children and young people. The assessment process in particular is very comprehensive and subsequent documentation is clear in highlighting applicants' strengths and how any identified weaknesses are to be addressed. Prospective applicants who fail to demonstrate competency at an acceptable standard are withdrawn from the process at the earliest opportunity. The fostering service seeks to attract and approve applicants who can demonstrate they are experienced and highly skilled carers. The service ensures that young people in placement live in suitable accommodation and health and safety checks are periodically undertaken. Foster carers' homes are generally well maintained, warm and welcoming with an array of recreational materials. Young people placed with foster carers indicate that they are happy and comfortable with the accommodation provided and feel safe and secure in their home environment. With regard to the matching process, staff of Talawa Fostering Services are diligent in their efforts to identify the most suitable foster carer for young people requiring placements. For example, the fostering services referral form is explicit in exploring with placing authorities the identified needs of young people and the expectations of any placement to be negotiated. Similarly, the profiles of approved foster carers indicate areas of strengths necessary to support a successful placement. Particular attention is paid to cultural, linguistic, religious and individualistic needs of young people and how these are best met before placements are accepted. Foster carers confirm that they receive comprehensive information about children and young people and have ample opportunity to discuss potential placements with staff of the fostering service prior to agreeing to placements. Foster carers have access to comprehensive information regarding the matching process via the service's Foster Carer's Handbook. Information is clear about matching procedures and the role and expectation of all parties involved. Placement agreements are comprehensive and include full information as specified in Schedule 6 of the Fostering Services Regulations. With regards to child protection, there have been no incidents of a child protection nature or any allegation made against foster carers since the last annual inspection. Staff are experienced child protection practitioners and trainers and comprehensive child protection policies are in place. These include safe caring policies. The entire staff group is committed to ensuring the protection, health and wellbeing of each individual child and young person in placement. Young people comment that they felt safe in the care of their foster carers. Written policies are in place that address young people who are absent from placement without permission and those that address issues of bullying. Clear guidance regarding these policies are documented in the Foster Carer's Handbook and feature in the Handbook for Children and Young People. Foster carers confirm that they received child protection training, primarily as part of Talawa Fostering Services' preparatory core training programme and also via some training external to the service. Foster carers have good access to information regarding the safeguarding of children and young people in their care via the Foster Carer's Handbook and carers' files evidence individual Home Safe Caring policies. Foster carers comment that they feel updated child protection training by the fostering service would prove useful. Directors of the fostering service indicate that there are plans in place for a newly developed training programme that includes child protection training to commence in autumn 2007. The fostering agency's fostering panel is comprised of notable experts in the field of looked after children, adoption and foster care and child

protection. The fostering panel has good access to medical expertise. Discussions with the chair of the agency's fostering panel and review of the agency's fostering panel meeting minutes support the view that the agency's fostering panels are effectively and efficiently organised. The fostering panel has clear written procedures which are implemented in practice and these procedures include processes to manage decision making when there is difference of opinion between panel members. The chair of the agency's fostering panel comments that relevant training has been provided to panel members and additional training is anticipated for the near future. The agency's fostering panel is a useful quality assurance mechanism, particularly in the monitoring and appraisal of assessment reports presented at fostering panel meetings. Documented minutes of these meetings support the view that assessing social workers are provided with guidance regarding the improvement of written reports and encouragement where reports are of an excellent standard. Foster carers confirm that their experience of attending the agency's fostering panel at the point of approval was both positive and valuable.

### **Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do**

The provision is good.

Children and young people benefit from the fostering agency's clear understanding and demonstration of valuing diversity and exploring issues of equality at all levels of the agency's functioning. Written policies and guidelines and training opportunities are in place to support practice. The ethnic and cultural origins of the fostering agency's foster carers are somewhat diverse and the directors are exploring strategies to attract carers from differing backgrounds. Very good information is maintained about the cultural, religious, disability, gender and linguistic needs and experiences of both young people and foster carers. These issues are consistently and robustly explored from the outset with prospective carers and existing approved foster carers. Very careful consideration is given to issues of diversity and equality during decision making around the matching process. Foster carers confirm that issues of identity and self esteem of children and young people in need of foster placements are discussed with them prior to placements being agreed and thereafter formally with supervising social workers. Documentation reviewed on file confirms this practice to be accurate as does written feedback received from representatives of placing authorities. Foster carers' homes and the fostering agency's office premises openly display positive images of multi-cultural society which encourages the positive self image of children and young people. The fostering agency also distributes literature that features images that promote diversity. The fostering service promotes high educational achievement of young people and foster carers are clear about the expectation that they fully support the educational attainment of young people in their care. Good written guidance is available to foster carers about their role in promoting the achievements of young people via the Foster Carer's Handbook. Foster carers indicate that they were aware of their responsibilities in this area of their work and understand the expectation that they are involved and work collaboratively with educational authorities. Young people confirm that they have access to play materials, books etc. in placements that enhance their learning opportunities. Young people's files evidence good documentation of effective monitoring of their educational progress.

### **Helping children make a positive contribution**

The provision is good.

The fostering service promotes well the contact arrangements between children and young people in placement and their friends, family members and significant others. Foster carers are

made explicitly aware of the expectation that they support and facilitate contact between young people and their significant others early in foster carers' training and via written policy guidance. Additionally, the agency's office premises are utilised for the purpose of supervised contact in a designated room of the office space, facilitated by the agency directors. Subsequent written reports are made available to placing authorities about the outcome of such contact. Foster carers comment that this facility is an invaluable resource as it provides a 'safe haven' for all parties involved. Young people indicate that they enjoy visiting the office premises for contact visits and are appreciative of play materials made available during this important event. With regard to consultation, the fostering agency makes good efforts to ensure that the opinion of young people, their parents and involved professionals are sought as the placement progresses. Foster carers confirm that they understand their role in encouraging young people in their care to openly express their views and indicate that supervising social workers keenly adopt this practice also. Prospective foster carers receive training about the importance of consultation with children and young people as part of the agency's preparatory training. This practice is further enhanced by information available in the Carer's Handbook. Young people comment that they feel listened to and that their opinions are taken seriously when shared with foster carers and staff of the fostering agency. Case files contain comprehensive information about a range of issues young people discuss during home visits with supervising social workers; pertinent information is then formally shared with placing authorities, who are appreciative of this input. No complaints have been recorded by the fostering agency since the last inspection and the complaints policy is clear and comprehensive. Foster carers are aware of the agency's complaints procedures as relevant information is clearly documented in the Foster Carer's Handbook, this includes information about the management of any allegations made against foster carers. Young people also have access to information about how to make a complaint as details are available in the handbook provided to them by the fostering service.

### **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is good.

At the time of this inspection, Talawa Fostering Services had been in operation for some 18 months and placements had been arranged for children who were not yet teenaged. Therefore Standard 14, which relates to preparing young people for adulthood was not assessed during this inspection. Staff comment, however, that there are plans in place to provide training and support to foster carers in this aspect of the foster care task in the near future. The Foster Carer's Handbook provides written guidance to carers about supporting the independence of older young people in their care. The fostering agency has written policies with regard to fostering allowances which are well known to foster carers. Comprehensive information regarding allowances and expenses is documented in the handbook. Foster carers confirm that allowance payments are made promptly and at the agreed rate.

### **Organisation**

The organisation is satisfactory.

The fostering service has in place a clear statement of the aims and objectives of the service and the facilities and services they provide. The Statement of Purpose document also clearly sets out services to be provided to children and young people in placement. However, other aspects of the document do not meet fully the requirements of Standard 1 of the Fostering Services National Minimum Standards. For example, more detailed information is required regarding the agency's staffing structure and details of the number of foster carers, number



of children placed and numbers of complaints, if any, that have been received. The fostering service's handbook for children and young people includes useful information about what to expect while in placement and outlines services provided by the agency. The 'children's guide' is a summary of information contained in the Statement of Purpose document and contains information about child protection, education, health and the right to make complaints. However, the document, in places, is not a particularly easy read and may pose some challenges for younger children or children who experience difficulty reading. The organisation of staff within the fostering agency is conducted well. Directors of the organisation are highly skilled and experienced managers and are responsible for the support and monitoring of 'independent' social workers recruited to complete foster carer assessments. There is a clear management structure with clear lines of accountability and the service undertakes periodical self monitoring exercises, such as the formal audit of both young people and foster carers' files. There are systems in place to determine, prioritise and monitor workloads. At the time of the inspection there was minimal administrative support available to the directors, however, given the current operational size of the service, the directors are adequately conducting administrative duties to meet the aims of the service. With regard to the training of foster carers, this is identified as an unmet need by foster carers themselves. No formal training session has been conducted for foster carers since the last inspection outside of individual one to one supervisory sessions. Foster carers indicate that they would welcome training in a range of related subject matters. The directors of the fostering agency indicate this need will be addressed via a planned comprehensive training programme due to commence in the autumn. The lack of formal training sessions or support groups for foster carers over the past 12 months is not an indication of best practice. Foster carers indicate that they feel very well supported by the agency and that they have very good access to staff and that responses are always prompt and useful. There is a clear strategy in place for working with and supporting carers that includes consistent supervision and an out of hours service that is well known to foster carers. The fostering service maintains administrative records as required. There are centralised systems in place to monitor any allegation and complaint and separate files are maintained for staff, young people and foster carers. The quality and adequacy of these records are very good, however, it was noted that written records relating to an unannounced visit to one foster carer's home had not been documented on file. This was an important entry to have been omitted as at a minimum, only one unannounced visit to the placement is required per year. Directors of the fostering service comment that this omission of recording was an isolated oversight. The case files for young people are comprehensively maintained by the fostering service and work conducted is in accordance to young people's placement plans and care plans as drawn up by the placing authority. The fostering service maintains information about young people and foster carers in an appropriately confidential manner and there are policies in place to address access to records. The fostering service ensures that each young person has a permanent, secure and private record of the agency's involvement in their lives.

## **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 meets the Care Standards Act 2000, The Fostering Services Regulations 2005 and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider must comply with the given timescales.

Standard	Action	Due date
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15	follow clear procedures for the recruitment and selection of staff that are in accordance with Schedule 1 of the regulations to ensure children are protected (Regulation 20)	30 November 2007
21	provide foster carers with training necessary for the interests of children placed with them (Regulation 17)	30 May 2008
25	maintain records of all unannounced visits to placements on file (Regulation 42)	30 November 2007
1	include details of National Minimum Standard 1.4 in Statement of Purpose (Regulation 4)	30 November 2007

## Recommendations

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

- consider the revision of the written guide for children to make information more accessible to children and young people.

## Annex

## Annex A

### National Minimum Standards for independent fostering agency

#### Being healthy

**The intended outcomes for these standards are:**

- the fostering service promotes the health and development of children (NMS 12)

**Ofsted considers 12 the key standard to be inspected.**

#### Staying safe

**The intended outcomes for these standards are:**

- any persons carrying on or managing the service are suitable (NMS 3)
- the fostering service provides suitable foster carers (NMS 6)
- the service matches children to carers appropriately (NMS 8)
- the fostering service protects each child or young person from abuse and neglect (NMS 9)
- the people who work in or for the fostering service are suitable to work with children and young people (NMS 15)
- fostering panels are organised efficiently and effectively (NMS 30)

**Ofsted considers 3, 6, 8, 9, 15 and 30 the key standards to be inspected.**

#### Enjoying and achieving

**The intended outcomes for these standards are:**

- the fostering service values diversity (NMS 7)
- the fostering service promotes educational achievement (NMS 13)
- when foster care is provided as a short-term break for a child, the arrangements recognise that the parents remain the main carers for the child (NMS 31)

**Ofsted considers 7, 13 and 31 the key standards to be inspected.**

#### Making a positive contribution

**The intended outcomes for these standards are:**

- the fostering service promotes contact arrangements for the child or young person (NMS 10)
- the fostering service promotes consultation (NMS 11)

**Ofsted considers 10 and 11 the key standards to be inspected.**

#### Achieving economic well-being

**The intended outcomes for these standards are:**

- the fostering service prepares young people for adulthood (NMS 14)
- the fostering service pays carers an allowance and agreed expenses as specified (NMS 29)

**Ofsted considers none of the above to be key standards to be inspected.**

#### Organisation

**The intended outcomes for these standards are:**

- there is a clear statement of the aims and objectives of the fostering service and the fostering service ensures that they meet those aims and objectives (NMS 1)
- the fostering service is managed by those with the appropriate skills and experience (NMS 2)
- the fostering service is monitored and controlled as specified (NMS 4)

**Annex A**

- the fostering service is managed effectively and efficiently (NMS 5)
- staff are organised and managed effectively (NMS 16)
- the fostering service has an adequate number of sufficiently experienced and qualified staff (NMS 17)
- the fostering service is a fair and competent employer (NMS 18)
- there is a good quality training programme (NMS 19)
- all staff are properly accountable and supported (NMS 20)
- the fostering service has a clear strategy for working with and supporting carers (NMS 21)
- foster carers are provided with supervision and support (NMS 22)
- foster carers are appropriately trained (NMS 23)
- case records for children are comprehensive (NMS 24)
- the administrative records are maintained as required (NMS 25)
- The premises used as offices by the fostering service are suitable for the purpose (NMS 26)
- the fostering service is financially viable (NMS 27)
- the fostering service has robust financial processes (NMS 28)
- local authority fostering services recognise the contribution made by family and friends as carers (NMS 32)

**Ofsted considers 1, 16, 17, 21, 24, 25 and 32 the key standards to be inspected.**