

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 the London borough of 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 purpose 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 purpose 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 Service was to assess the service against key national Minimum Standards and gauge the service's success in addressing outstanding issues highlighted at the last inspection. The inspection process was conducted over the course of four days; its scope was wide ranging. Overall, Talawa Fostering Service is judged to be a good service. It expertly matches Looked After Children with foster carers who are able to address well their identified needs. The service seeks to recruit and train high quality foster carers. Training and support to foster carers are good and placement progress is carefully monitored and reported upon. The assessment process of prospective carers is thorough as is the vetting of all staff working for the service. Keen attention is paid by staff to the Every Child Matters outcomes.

The overall quality rating is good.

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

Improvements since the last inspection

The previous inspection had resulted in four requirements and one recommendation. The requirements highlighted weaknesses in the consistent training for foster carers, the appropriate vetting of individuals working for the purposes of the fostering agency, completion of annual unannounced visits and the revision of the Statement of Purpose document. All these issues have been successfully resolved. The one recommendation made at the previous inspection was in relation to the revision of the service's Children's Guide, this has also been successfully resolved.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

The fostering service promotes the health and development of children and young people in its care. Foster carers confirm that they receive clear written information and training from the fostering agency regarding health care issues and they assist in meeting children's health care needs. Foster carers frequently arrange and accompany children to health care and medical appointments, the outcomes of which are well documented. Files evidence that children register

with key medical and health care providers soon after their placement starts; there is keen monitoring by staff of issues pertaining to children's health. Children's physical and mental health needs are consistently monitored via supervisory visits and are appropriately recorded on file. Statutory medicals and immunizations being routinely conducted. Issues of disability are sensitively managed and very well monitored by foster carers and staff of the fostering agency; practices are in line with the social model of disability. Foster carers understand the need for good nutrition and offer children an excellent range of meal choices that meet their cultural needs and taste preferences. Children confirm that they enjoy meals provided by their carers.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

Children in placement with Talawa Fostering Service are kept safe from harm and neglect. Directors of the service are highly qualified and experienced social work practitioners, managers and trainers in the field of foster care in particular. Other staff working for the fostering service are also well experienced and appropriately qualified. The fostering service makes available foster carers who provide a safe, healthy and nurturing environment. This is achieved by a rigorous screening, recruiting and vetting process of all prospective foster carers and excellent support once they are approved as foster carers. Foster carers' homes are comfortable, appropriately furnished, decorated and equipped to meet the developmental needs of children in placement. Children enjoy their home surroundings. Annual health and safety accommodation checks by staff ensure that foster carers' homes are maintained safely. Foster carers confirm that they receive clear guidance pertaining to health and safety issues. With regard to the fostering service's matching process, there are clear and robust procedures and practices in place. Files evidence the consistent completion of documented matching tools which outline placement objectives and how the proposed match seeks to achieve these. Any identified gaps are carefully explored with all parties. Foster carers confirm that they receive good information about children in need of foster care placements prior to placement negotiations; this is to ensure that foster carers are clear about placement objectives and are appropriately skilled to provide a successful placement. Directors of the fostering service are similarly clear that where no appropriate match can be offered placement requests are refused. Files evidence the directors of the fostering service diligently pursue missing information held by the placing authority, in an attempt to have an overview of all placement needs and to ensure identified foster carers are well informed and suited to meet children's identified needs. The effectiveness of the service's matching process is further enhanced by the consistent completion of placement meetings and written agreements at the earliest opportunity to encourage placement success. Placement negotiations give careful consideration to the ethnic, cultural, age, gender, sexuality, race, linguistic, religious and the specific needs of children in order to ensure children's holistic needs are addressed. Where gaps are noted in the matching process, foster carers are given appropriate support to enhance placement stability. The fostering service has comprehensive child protection and safeguarding policies and procedures in place. Foster carers confirm that they receive written guidance and quality, ongoing training that address issues of child protection. Additionally, the safeguarding of children in placement is a consistent agenda item of supervisory visits. Files evidence discussion and guidance provided by staff that address issues of safeguarding and all files evidence safe caring policies. Since the last inspection of Talawa Fostering Service there have been no child protection enquiries and no allegations made against foster carers or staff. There are policies and written guidance in place for foster carers that address issues of bullying, behaviour management and procedures relating to children

deemed missing from placement. The fostering service's complaints procedure is robust and well known to carers; written information is available to children and young people via the Children's Guide. The service has received no complaints since the last inspection. The appropriate vetting of staff working for the fostering service was highlighted as a weakness at the previous inspection. The personnel records of independent social work staff and members of the fostering panel reviewed during this inspection confirm that full information, as required by the regulations, has been successfully obtained. No foster care panel meeting was observed as part of the inspection process. The service has convened only one fostering panel meeting since the last inspection; another meeting was due to be held one month following this inspection. The last foster care panel meeting minutes were reviewed which confirms that the meeting was quorate, discussions were thorough, well documented and there is evidence of clear decision making. Panel members are experts in their chosen fields; the fostering panel plays a crucial quality assurance function in ensuring carers assessments are robust, sufficiently explore key areas and are appropriately detailed.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Talawa Fostering Service clearly values diversity and this aspect of the fostering task is keenly demonstrated at all levels. Valuing diversity and addressing issues of equality is clearly a strength of the service and children seeking placements benefit from the agency's well established policies and practices. Foster carers confirm that they receive written guidance and training that address issues of diversity and equality; the directors comment that further training is planned to specifically explore diversity and equality issues of placements. Files evidence consistent exploration of children's self-identity issues particularly during supervisory visits. There is good documentary evidence to support the view that the service has a commitment to anti-discriminatory practice at all levels; policy guidance is consistent in addressing varying issues related to equality and diversity including sexuality, disability, gender and race amongst other areas. The service's recruitment, assessment and review of foster carers pays good attention to issues of diversity and there is an expectation that foster carers demonstrate an ability to value diversity in their care for children. The educational achievement of children in placement is a priority area for the service. There is good written guidance available to carers regarding their roles and responsibilities in ensuring children achieve educational expectations. Files evidence and foster carers comment upon their keen commitment to encourage the best educational outcomes for children in their care. Foster carers are very involved in children's educational progress, by attending parents evening, personal educational planning meetings and in one instance, researching and identifying a local school for the child in placement. Supervisory visits and formal statutory forums monitor and address the individual educational needs of children in placement. One child spoke very enthusiastically about friends she had made at the new school she recently transferred to with the help of her foster carer. The service does not offer a short break service.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Contact between children in placement with Talawa Fostering Service and their significant others is another priority area for the service and this is highly promoted by the service. Foster carers understand the importance of children in their care maintaining contact with their families and foster carers receive guidance and are very supportive of agreed contact arrangements.

Supervisory visits encourage foster carers to explore and comment on the impact of contact on children in their care. Files evidence and foster carers comment on the often intricate arrangements in place to ensure that children in placement maintain contact with their parents and siblings in particular. As part of its office premises the service has designated space for the purpose of supervised contact. Directors of the service are the supervisors of such contact and subsequent reports are made available to the placing authority and the courts. Supervisory contact reports are well considered, include commentary on direct observation and are evidenced based. The fostering service promotes consultation with all parties involved in the placement of children, but particularly with the children themselves. Foster carers understand the need to explore openly the wishes and feelings of children and this is achieved sensitively and consistently. Children indicate that they spend much of their time speaking with their carers and that the focus of many of these conversations is in regard to their happiness and well-being. Children clearly enjoy a trusting relationship with their foster carers and positive changes to the children's presentation and self-esteem is acknowledged by directors of the service, representatives of the placing authority and some birth parents. Files evidence quality interaction between supervisory staff and children during home visits; this practice is consistent and children's views are well documented.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

During the inspection, two children were in placements with Talawa Fostering Service; negotiations for other placements are ongoing. Both children are under the age of ten; there are no young people preparing for adulthood. However, the service's Foster Carer Handbook provides clear guidance to foster carers about the management and needs of young people preparing to leave local authority care. It is also anticipated that relevant training is to be provided by the service shortly. The service's Foster Carer Handbook provides written information to foster carers about financial and tax information and also contains details of allowances and expenditure procedures. Files evidence a financial section of both foster carers' and children's files and there are systems in place to monitor financial transactions. Foster carers comment that they always receive financial payment promptly and at the expected rate. Reimbursement for monies spent as part of the fostering task is also well managed by the service.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

The previous inspection noted that the service's existing Statement of Purpose failed to comply with the regulations. During this inspection the revised Statement of Purpose was reviewed. The revised document outlines the aims and objectives of the service and contains comprehensive information which is fully compliant with the regulations. The previous inspection had also recommended amendment to the service's Children's Guide, which was considered in places to be challenging for young people to read. The revised Children's Guide is a user friendly, easy read, creative document containing useful information to older Looked After Children about being in care, the court system, life story work and disability. For younger children the service is currently working on developing a children's story that details the feelings and experience of an animal character being received into care. This is a very sensitive, meaningful and creative piece of work that captures well the experience of children about to be Looked After. The Children's Guide also provides children and young people in placement with good information about the fostering service in general, how to make complaints and the contact details of

nationally based independent child advocacy agencies. Talawa Fostering service is still in the infancy stage of its ongoing development. The three highly skilled directors play distinct roles in the running and management of the service. As a result expertise and high standards are maintained; the service is well monitored and its functioning and operation well controlled. For example, placement monitoring is meticulously conducted, files evidence periodic auditing and the very effective fostering panel ensures that high calibre applicants are approved as foster carers for the agency and that quality assurance measures are stringent. The directors are supportive of each others efforts and are committed to promoting the best possible outcomes for children in placement. The fostering agency has a clear and effective strategy for working with foster carers which is explicitly documented in the Foster Carers' Handbook and elsewhere; foster carers understand this strategy well and appreciate the efforts of the organisation. One foster carer commented when asked about the service's management 'they are professionals; they know what they are doing, so we know what we are doing'. Another foster carer said 'Its like a family, no matter what, they always ask us first how we are doing - you don't get that everywhere'. Foster carers are particularly appreciative of the level of support they receive via the directors. One foster carer commented of the service's out of hours provision, 'No matter what time you call them, even in the late evening, they are there and ready to listen and help'. Children also indicate they enjoy the attention and support of the directors' input. The training of foster carers was highlighted as a weakness at the last inspection. Since this time the service has developed an ongoing training programme that focuses on key issues of the fostering task. Foster carers confirm their participation in training focussed on safe caring and sexual abuse in recent months. All foster carers files contain individual training profiles and a proposed training schedule for Autumn 2008 has been scheduled. Children's case records are comprehensive and information is appropriately detailed. Where key information is missing, the directors ensure persistent follow up with the placing authority. Foster carers indicate that they feel this persistence is essential in providing them with an accurate picture of children in their care which acts to enhance placement success.

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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Recommendations

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

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.