

Greater London Fostering

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

Unique reference number	SC035327
Inspection date	20 March 2009
Inspector	Sandra Jacobs-Walls
Type of Inspection	Key

Address	Greater London Fostering 5 The Courtyard Lynton Road LONDON N8 8SL
Telephone number	020 8347 8741
Email	info@greaterlondonfostering.org
Registered person	Greater London Fostering
Registered manager	Linda Norwood
Responsible individual	Diana Searle
Date of last inspection	7 December 2007

© Crown copyright 2009

Website: www.ofsted.gov.uk

This document may be reproduced in whole or in part for non-commercial educational purposes, provided that the information quoted is reproduced without adaptation and the source and date of publication are stated.

You can obtain copies of The Children Act 2004, Every Child Matters and The National Minimum Standards for Children's Services from: The Stationery Office (TSO) PO Box 29, St Cripins, Duke Street, Norwich, NR3 1GN. Tel: 0870 600 5522. Online ordering: www.tso.co.uk/bookshop

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

Greater London Fostering is an independent fostering agency and is run and managed by its three directors. The stated aim of the service is to 'recruit, train and support foster carers ...to provide the best possible care to children who for many different reasons cannot live with their own families'. The offices of Greater London Fostering are located in Crouch End, within the London Borough of Haringey. The service is in the process of setting up an additional office base in South London.

The staff group consists of two team managers, one senior practitioner and four foster care support workers. The service also employs two reviewing officers and a placements officer and is currently seeking to recruit additional qualified social work staff. The fostering service has a long-standing history of providing social work placements for social work students.

Summary

The purpose of the announced annual inspection of Greater London Fostering is to assess the service against key National Minimum Standards and gauge the service's success in addressing weaknesses highlighted at the last inspection.

Greater London Fostering is a good service that has positive outcomes for children and young people in placement. Staff and foster carers encourage children and young people to live healthy lives and they are protected from neglect and abuse while in placement. The service pays good attention to issues of equality and diversity and consults well with looked after children. Placements encourage the educational achievement of children and young people. Staff and foster carers are very committed to ensuring that children and young people have meaningful contact with their significant others and that teenaged young people are prepared for adulthood.

The organisation is well run with good systems in place to support and supervise staff and foster carers which acts to enhance placement success.

The inspection has identified weaknesses in the frequency and recording of supervisory visits to foster carers, the appropriate matching for each child seeking placement with the agency and the recording and reporting of serious complaints and allegations against foster carers.

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, which was conducted in December 2007, resulted in nine requirements and two recommendations. Requirements made at the last inspection focused on the evidencing of full information with regards to the vetting of staff and members of the service's fostering panel. Safe caring guidelines were not evident on all files and, in one case, the documented guidelines were not in accordance with those outlined by the placing authority. In some instances, placements were being negotiated that did not comply with the approval conditions of the identified foster carer and no formal exemption process was documented. These outstanding requirements have been explored as part of this inspection and all highlighted weaknesses have been successfully resolved.

Previously, the service's children's guide and foster care agreement was not fully compliant with regulations and the induction of some foster carers was considered inadequate. Some staff were in need of additional support to address issues of case recording. These highlighted weaknesses have been successfully resolved.

Notable improvement has been made in helping children and young people stay safe and in the general organisation of the fostering service.

The two recommendations made focused on staff's consistent recording of accidents centrally and the recruitment of personnel to the fostering panel who holds expertise in the field of education. This latter issue is still being explored by directors of the fostering service.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

The fostering service promotes the healthy lifestyle of children and young people in placement. Children and young people's health care issues are explored early in placement start and are monitored well by staff during supervisory visits and other formal arenas such as statutory looked after children reviews. Foster carers confirm that they are aware of their role and responsibility in keeping children and young people in their care healthy and identify the service's foster care handbook as a good source of information. Foster carers indicate that they routinely register children and young people with key health care services and monitor known or suspected health care issues.

Files evidence that children and young people are promptly registered with GP, dental and optical services, and other specialist health services as required. Foster carers demonstrate an excellent awareness of the need to meet the individual medical needs of children in placement; this was very well demonstrated in one instance of the foster carer's management of a very neglected baby who was critically undernourished at the point of placement start and another foster carer in addressing the nutritional needs of a child diagnosed as being obese. In both cases the foster carers worked effectively with health care professionals to ensure the children's health care needs were met fully.

Foster carers comment that training opportunities available to them regularly focus on health care issues such as nutrition, promoting children's health and wellbeing, sexual health and HIV & AIDS awareness. The service has recently revised its medication policies to ensure the safe administration of children and young people's medication. The service maintains a centralised log of all reported accidents that occur in placement. Foster carers understand their responsibility in reporting and documenting accidents promptly to staff and this is well evidenced in the accidents log. The staff group have access to input from a child psychotherapist to assist with issues of care as they pertain to children, young people and their fostering families.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The fostering service protects children and young people from neglect, harm and abuse while in placement. Staff are suitably qualified and experienced to manage the fostering team. Both the registered individual and the registered manager are qualified social workers with extensive experience of statutory childcare work including fostering, child protection and family support. Both also have extensive managerial experience. The service's two team managers are qualified

social workers and are due to undertake formal management training. The senior practitioner and the two reviewing officers are also qualified social workers although the placements officer and the four foster carer support workers do not hold social work qualifications.

Prospective foster carers' recruitment and assessment is rigorous; staff conduct Form F assessments thoroughly. Foster carers comment that, upon expressing an interest in fostering with the service, staff respond promptly and are welcoming. All foster carers spoken with indicate that their assessments were very detailed and explored well their life experiences, skills and knowledge of caring for children and young people. Completed Form F assessments explore well all required competencies.

Foster carers' homes are comfortable, well maintained and conducive to an environment where children and young people are nurtured. Files evidence that annual health and safety checks are consistently completed for each fostering household and that any recommended action is followed up via supervisory visits.

The service's placements officer, in conjunction with directors of the service, is responsible for the matching of children and young people with foster carers. The placements officer has good knowledge of the skills, experience and personalities of many of the carers and so is largely able to make sound decisions in relation to the matching process. Staff pay good attention to matching considerations, such as race, gender, age, linguistic, religious and cultural issues, in making placement decisions. In addition more practical issues such as geographical location, educational needs and composition of potential foster care families are also considered. In most instances the matching of children and young people with foster carers is very well done. However, it was noted that, in one instance the matching of a child with a foster carer who was caring for a number of other very young children was not in the best interest of the child seeking a placement.

There are good policies and procedures in place to address child protection and safeguarding issues of children and young people in placement. Staff and foster carers confirm that the safety of children and young people has a high priority within the agency; foster carers are required to undertake child protection training at differing levels as part of their training and development. Files evidence that all foster care households have documented safe caring policies in place that are specific to children and young people in placement. This was not the case for all placements reviewed during the last inspection. Foster carers confirm that other training opportunities are available to them that address issues of safeguarding. For example, some foster carers have recently attended training focused on managing challenging behaviour of looked after children.

The service maintains a centralised record of all allegations made against carers. Review of this information indicates that the service has serious regard for all allegations and these are managed appropriately. However, it is noted that in two instances that staff failed to notify Ofsted as outlined in the regulations. Written guidance is in place that address bullying and the management of children and young people deemed 'missing' from placement.

The previous inspection highlighted the need for the service to improve information obtained with regard to staff recruitment. This inspection examined the personnel records of all staff recruited since the last inspection; full information as required is evident. Managers comment that this is also the case for staff employed several years ago. The service has sound staff

recruitment and selection policies in place and recruitment practices are in accordance with written guidance. Non social work staff are suitable to work with children and young people. The four foster carer support workers are not qualified social workers but have good experience of working with children, young people and families; their work is closely supervised by team managers. The service is currently recruiting additional qualified social work staff.

During the inspection no fostering panel meeting was observed, however, the inspector reviewed the minutes of three recently convened panel meetings. These evidence that panel deliberation and decision making is both thorough and sound. Staff and managers of the service comment that panel members are diligent in exploring presented issues and this view is shared by some carers. The members of the service's fostering panel perform their quality assurance role well. The previous inspection highlighted the need for panel members' personnel files to evidence recruitment information as outlined in the regulations. During this inspection a selection of panel members' files were reviewed; all files evidence full information as required. No new panel members have been recruited since the last inspection and the service continues to give consideration to recruiting a panel member with expertise in education. Panel members have received relevant training in the past year.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The fostering service pays good attention to issues of equality and diversity. Both staff and foster carers feel issues are generally well addressed at all levels of the service. Staff comment that issues of equality and diversity are explored with foster carers, from the assessment process, through supervision, annual reviews, training and continually thereafter. Some foster carers however, comment that they feel some carers are treated more preferably than others, particularly in relation to the purchase, reimbursement for and distribution of equipment.

The service has a good pool of carers with differing socio-economic backgrounds, race, gender, ethnicity, age and religion and therefore the service has a diverse range of skills to offer children and young people seeking placements. Foster carers reflect the diverse background of the population the service seeks to serve; the staff group, however, is less diverse in terms of race and gender.

As previously mentioned, the service's matching process pays good attention to the holistic needs of children seeking placements, addressing issues of age, gender, race, cultural, linguistic and religious needs. The service's current pool of foster carers includes those skilled in caring for mothers and babies and caring for older care leavers. Staff gave good illustration of where issues of disability and sexuality were well managed by carers. There are sound policies and procedures in place that address issues of equality and diversity and staff and foster carers confirm that training opportunities are available that focus specifically on equality and diversity issues. One carer spoke about support received via the agency to address the specific needs of a young man seeking asylum. Staff provided guidance to support the carer in addressing specific needs in terms of the young person living in a new country, issues of identity, culture, diet and religious needs.

The fostering service promotes the educational achievement of children and young people in placement and staff and foster carers comment that this is a priority area for the service. There is clear written guidance and training opportunities in place that explore educational achievement and this is a keen consideration in placement negotiations. Foster carers are clear about their

roles and responsibilities in addressing the educational needs of children and young people in their care. Foster carers are keen advocates and are very involved with schools, attending Personal Educational Planning meetings, parents evenings, award ceremonies and facilitating young people's change of school. Children and young people have access to a range of learning materials and there is good evidence on file of staff and foster carers working effectively with educational professionals to maximise the educational achievement of looked after children.

The fostering service does not provide short term breaks for children and young people.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Greater London Fostering is committed to ensuring contact is maintained between looked after children and young people and their significant others. Staff and foster carers are clear about this commitment and contact issues consistently feature as part of supervisory visits. Files evidence the complex and sometimes intricate arrangements in place to ensure contact is appropriately facilitated, which often involves numerous family members at differing times. Children, young people and their birth parents' views are well considered in facilitating contact and relevant information about the impact of contact is fed back to placing authorities and the courts. The office facilitates designated space for the specific use of contact, which staff supervise if required.

With regard to consultation, staff make good effort to consult with children and young people in placement. File documentation and foster carers comment that staff spend quality time speaking with and listening to children and young people while in placement. Staff and foster carers feel that regular agency events and social activities further facilitate children and young people's contact with a range of staff within the organisation. Other systems in place to solicit children and young people's opinions include formal looked after children and foster carers' annual reviews. Foster carers also have access to training opportunities that address consultation with children and young people; an example of this is the recently held 'Listening to Children' training.

With regard to the management of complaints, there are sound policies and procedures in place. Children and young people receive information that outlines the service's complaints procedure via the children's guide. Foster carers comment that the foster carer handbook contains good information about complaints. Evidence is available on some individual case files of young people making use of the service's complaints procedure. Staff's management of complaints received since the last inspection is sound and in accordance with written policies. It is noted, however, that not all complaints of a serious nature have been reported to Ofsted in accordance with the regulations.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

Greater London Fostering assists in preparing young people for adulthood. Foster carers receive good written guidance via the handbook about preparing young people to leave local authority care and this is supported by relevant training opportunities. Foster carers speak confidently about the role they play in supporting young people to leave the public care system by helping to equip them with necessary life skills. Managers comment that the service is developing work with foster carers who have good experience of working well with young asylum seekers; the

service has had some success in facilitating young people's smooth transition into independent living.

With regard to payment, the directors indicate that the service has sound financial and administrative systems in place to ensure payments are managed appropriately. Foster carers confirm that they promptly receive payment at the expected rate in almost all instances. Where payment is delayed, this is rectified immediately. Staff encourage foster carers to keep detailed accounts of placement expenditure. Some foster carers comment that they find this a difficult and unnecessary task. They also commented that they felt better provision could be made in the purchasing of equipment, particularly at placement start and in emergency situations. Foster carers felt there was an unrealistic reliance on their support networks and carers 'good will' to ensure equipment is provided for.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The fostering service's Statement of Purpose is a comprehensive document that outlines well the aims and objectives of the service. The children's guide has been amended since last year and is now compliant with the regulations.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The fostering service has sound written policies in place that are well known to staff and foster carers. The service consistently explores issues of equality and diversity with foster carers at the recruitment, assessment and approval stages of foster carers' involvement with the agency. Staff monitor placement issues that address equality and diversity and this is evident on file. Where trans-racial placements are made, staff support foster carers in ensuring that children and young people's holistic needs are met. The matching process explores well issues of identity, race, age, disability, language and religion. The service's current pool of approved foster carers reflects the communities it seeks to serve, although this is not the case for the staff group in terms of race and gender. There are good training opportunities in place to further support the efforts of foster carers in addressing this key aspect of the fostering task.

The fostering service is adequately monitored and controlled; there are systems in place to address practice and administrative issues such as team meetings, consultation sessions with a child psychotherapist, periodic file audit and the quality assurance functions of the service's fostering panel. The service has an effective, well established management structure in place that is understood by staff and foster carers; staff roles are clearly defined although the 'hands on' approach adopted by the directors and managers adds an additional tier of monitoring. There are efficient financial procedures in place.

The last inspection highlighted a number of issues that pertained to the practice of some staff and there has been a relatively high turnover of staff since the last inspection. Staffing issues have been a significant challenge to managers of the service over the past year. It is noted that for some carers the level of supervision in the recent past has been inadequate, in some cases impacting negatively on the quality of care provided to children and young people. For example, some files case tracked during the inspection evidenced that the frequency of supervisory visits was inadequate to meet placement needs. The agency is currently seeking to recruit additional qualified and appropriately experienced social work staff.

The current staff group is adequately organised and managed; managers monitor workloads. Staff indicate that training opportunities, supervision and support is very good within the agency and staff are clear about their duties and responsibilities. Managers encourage field staff to take increased accountability for their work. Staff and managers are enthusiastic about the newly developed staff induction process which is more extensive than previously. Regular staff and team meetings further support the staff supervisory process and staff indicate that training opportunities meet their developmental needs.

The service has clear strategies in place to recruit new foster carers and to work effectively with approved foster carers. There are clear written policies in place that outline strategies to support and work with foster carers and this is further supported by training for both foster carers and staff. Foster carers have good access to the staff group at all times, including outside of core business hours. Foster carers are appreciative of the helpful and welcoming approach of staff throughout the organisation. Increased monitoring and supervision of staff has led to the improved supervision of foster carers. The recording of supervisory visits needs further improvement to better support the supervision of carers. There are effective systems in place to facilitate the prompt review of foster carers and there is good evidence of collaborative working between staff and the placing authority.

Foster carers indicate that the service provides excellent training opportunities, which are often co-facilitated by experienced foster carers. The service has given much consideration to geographical location, venue and the scheduling of training in an attempt to increase foster carers' attendance.

Staff adequately maintain the case files of children and young people in placement; key information is evident on files. Staff make good efforts to retrieve information held by the placing authority and the service's referral process is largely effective in identifying and meeting placement needs. Staff encourage foster carers to embark on life story work with children and young people at the appropriate stage of the placement.

Staff generally maintain administrative records well. Records are permanent and secure and staff manage information confidentially. Records of individual checks and references are well documented on file. However, not all foster carer file documentation is kept current; managers acknowledge that some file entries were recorded a significant length of time after the event. It is recommended that all records of complaints are recorded centrally in addition to on individual files to facilitate ready access to complaint information. The service is in the process of developing improved data collection systems to assist facilitate more detailed statistical data as requested by local authorities and improve the collation of information internal to the organisation.

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
----------	--------	----------

8	ensure that in every instance children are matched appropriately with foster carers who can meet their needs. (Regulation 11)	1 September 2009
9	ensure that staff report all serious complaints and allegations made against foster carers to Ofsted. (Regulation 43)	1 September 2009
21	ensure that the frequency and quality of supervisory visits to carers are adequate to meet the needs of the placement and that file documentation of visits is kept current. (Regulation 17)	1 September 2009

Recommendations

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

- encourage staff to record complaints in a central log in addition to on individual case files. (NMS 25)
- consider further consultation with foster carers with regard to the equity of purchasing, reimbursement and distribution of equipment amongst foster carers (NMS 29)
- consider implementing documentation on file that is explicit in distinguishing supervisory visits from other forms of visits with foster carers (NMS 21)