

# London Borough of Harrow Fostering Services

Inspection report for LA 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 outcomes for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and the relevant National Minimum Standards for the service.

## 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

The service is a local authority fostering service. The types of placements provided include short term, long term (permanency), kinship care and family link (short break) placements. The fostering and family link team is part of the children's services within the borough's social services department.

### Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This announced inspection covered all the key standards. Outcomes for children are good. The health, education and participation of children are effectively promoted by the foster carers, supported by the fostering service.

The service has made great improvements in the overall delivery and level of satisfaction of all stakeholders. There is good monitoring of systems to ensure the service is responsive to need. The recruitment and retention of both foster carers and permanent staff are favourable. There are robust procedures in place for dealing with complaints and allegations and providing good quality care to children and young people.

The service continues to develop as the needs of children and young people change. The service seeks additional ways of supporting looked after children and young people in the borough. One member of staff said, 'This is a very different place to three years ago.'

### Improvements since the last inspection

There were six actions made in the last inspection report, all of which have been addressed.

The panel minutes now make clear the reasons why the recommendations for applicants' approvals have been made. This gives the agency decision maker a clear indication that decision making is agreed by the panel and is transparent. Children and young people's views are sought and contribute to the foster carers' review. A better overview about how the foster carer is providing care and meeting the standards expected by the service is recorded and monitored. Carers are provided with additional support and training to compensate for any gaps in matching. This helps to stabilise placements. Early identification enables early referrals to relevant services for additional assistance. Carers' attendance at training is better monitored and absences are shared with the supervising social worker. They can then address any barriers to learning with foster carers directly and in a timely fashion. All foster

carers are in receipt of the foster carers' handbook which is now in the process of being updated again since the previous inspection.

### **Helping children to be healthy**

The provision is good.

Children and young people benefit from a service that ensures all areas of health are fully addressed. Foster carers understand the requirement to ensure children and young people have access to universal health services such as doctors, opticians and dentists. Developments in the service have enabled access to looked after children's nurses, a play therapist and child and adolescent mental health services. This service, while directly provided to children, also provides support to social workers and foster carers in understanding and managing a variety of issues presented by children and young people.

The fostering services provides information to foster carers about the presenting needs of children and young people. This allows foster carers to have a good idea about what to expect during the placement. Foster carers are provided with guidance on encouraging children and young people to adopt and maintain a healthy lifestyle. Training is available to assist foster carers to discuss areas of sexual health and promote the benefits of healthy eating and taking exercise.

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

The provision is good.

The fostering service is well managed by a service manager whose experience, leadership and direction are valued by the fostering teams. A number of positive comments were made by foster carers and staff working in the service. One colleague said, 'He is very child focused and will always find a way of sorting some difficult issues, he should be commended for that.' Management roles are clear, with a strong mix of strategic and day-to-day management.

Recruitment of foster carers is undertaken by the fostering teams and this gives a clear sense of ownership of the service. Staff state that they enjoy these aspects of the job, which are varied and interesting. All prospective foster carers go through an extensive assessment process, including the fostering panel, before being recommended for approval. The foster carers provide safe and nurturing care to young people. One young person said, 'She is a good foster carer', and described things the foster carer had done to offer support. The foster carers seen in their homes are child centred and knowledgeable about the needs of those they are caring for. There are a number of carers who have a long-term commitment to the young people they foster and who expect them to be part of their family for some time to come. This commitment has provided good outcomes for the young people. Foster carers and staff are subject to stringent checks and references, including Criminal Records Bureau checks to ensure their suitability. Systems are in place to ensure the checks are updated appropriately every three years.

The fostering service promotes the safety of children by regular monitoring of foster carers' homes. An annual health and safety checklist is completed as part of the foster carers' review. Visits to a sample of foster carers during the inspection showed that foster carers provide children and young people with clean, comfortable accommodation that meets their needs. For example, babies and toddlers have easy access to suitable toys and books and older children have their own rooms. Good quality guidance is given to carers about how to keep the fostered child and their own family safe.

The matching process is clear and effective. Any gaps in matching are recorded and strategies to address the gaps identified. This provides young people and carers with honest information about suitability and available options. Matching is well understood by the staff. Placement officers play an important role in identifying a suitable match and sharing the information with children's social workers and supervising social workers for consideration. Where possible, young people are consulted about areas of matching that are important to them. The increased recruitment of in-house foster carers has resulted in a reduction in the use of independent fostering agencies. However, where a match cannot be found in-house, independent fostering agencies are identified to meet the needs of the young people. Careful monitoring of these placements is carried out ensuring the standard of care for all children and young people is equitable. Carers feel matching works well for them and do not feel under any pressure to take unsuitable placements.

Training for foster carers includes child protection and provides carers with a clear process for raising concerns about children and young people's safety. The fostering service has a good relationship with the local authority designated officer who contributes to the training of staff and foster carers. The foster care agreement contains full information about non-permissible sanctions. There are clear management systems in place for the monitoring of allegations and their outcomes. The high profile of this work is helped by the recruitment of staff to the team who have past experience of specialising in child protection. Additional training needs have been identified around allegations against foster carers, and plans are in place to provide this.

Staff are appropriately qualified for the roles they are undertaking and there is a clear commitment to supporting staff professional development. The selection process is clear and a range of checks required are undertaken to ensure staff are suitable to work in the service.

Discussions by the fostering panel are inclusive and thorough, as are their reasons why recommendations are made. The membership of the panel is stable. There is one outstanding vacancy and a potential panel member has been identified. The panel members come with a variety of experience and backgrounds. Feedback forms are provided to applicants and social workers who visit the panel. This enables panel members to explore the experience of visitors and make changes to practice where appropriate. Past comments have ensured that seating arrangements of panel members are fully considered. The panel does not routinely receive information

about any placements made outside of the terms of approval or comment formally on the quality of assessments as part of their quality assurance role. This leads to confusion about the expectations of the panel regarding supervising social workers. The service is aware of this shortfall. Panel minutes are well written and detailed.

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

The provision is good.

The fostering service values diversity and foster carers are encouraged to celebrate differences and respect individual choices. Carers say that diversity is covered in training provided and in their supervision. Diversity and meeting specific needs are recorded in children and young people's profiles and form part of the placement agreement. Recruitment information and advertisements include the diverse range of children and young people requiring support from the service.

Part of the education service concerned with the needs of looked after children is located in the same building as the fostering service. This has improved communication between the services and provides a swifter response to educational issues arising for children and young people. The service undertakes detailed monitoring of personal education plans and checks that all eligible children and young people have access to personal education allowances to pay for additional tuition in core subject areas. Young people are encouraged through participation groups to share their feelings about developments in the service, particularly about the provision of individual support and where this should be accessed. Foster carers take an active role in promoting education. Young people say that they are helped by their carers to attend school and complete homework. Carers and young people are encouraged to have high aspirations and aim for university or college following school.

The short-break service has expanded through a targeted recruitment drive for contract carers. The team are supporting carers to provide a more flexible service that will meet the needs of an increased number of children with disabilities. Foster carers are provided with specialist training as well as training specific to the needs of the children who are assessed as part of the family link service. Literature pertaining to these services is clear to both parents, carers and children. Parents continue to have the overall responsibility for children, and carers are carefully matched to children and young people.

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

The provision is good.

Contact with family and friends is seen as vital to the success of foster placements and carers are made aware of this from early on in the preparation and assessment process. Carers escort children and young people to the designated contact centre to facilitate this. Records show that contact is arranged and recorded allowing social workers to assess any positive or adverse effects contact is having on children and

young people. However, in some instances these arrangements have not worked effectively leaving the foster carers' position compromised.

There is a clear commitment to ensuring that the voice of children and young people in foster care is heard. Children said, 'I can talk to my foster carers when I want, they do listen to me.' Foster carers are provided with both general and specific training on communicating with children. The local authority has a participation strategy and young people have been involved in training, recruitment and service development. There is a Children in Care council, 'Your Voice Your Choice' advocacy project and 'Young Voices' that meet regularly. Their opinions are sought on particular topics at various times. In addition, children and young people are well supported to express their views through their own reviews and those of their foster carers.

There is a robust process for managing and recording complaints. All complaints have a learning objective following their conclusion to assist the fostering service to avoid the repetition of mistakes. There is also a mediation service to assist children and young people find satisfactory resolutions to their complaints. Evaluation forms completed by young people demonstrate its success. Children and young people have access to independent visitors who are matched to them and spend quality time engaging and getting to know them. This part of the service continues to grow.

## **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is good.

Children and young people are well supported to develop age-appropriate self-care and independence skills. Children are always helped to think about the future. Foster carers benefit from training that enables them to support young people making transitions. Some young people are able to remain with their foster carers post-18 years of age. Services of specialists such as alcohol and drug awareness are available to young people.

A number of young people are provided with higher educational allowances beyond statutory school age to support their wish to continue with higher education and degree courses. Senior managers hold regular meetings to look at the services provided to young people due to leave care. Where necessary, additional resources are provided to ensure a smooth transition into adulthood.

The teenage placement strategy intends to bring together a number of service developments provided to young people soon to leave the care system. This will enable a joined-up, seamless approach for young people. This development includes the setting up of a semi-independent unit, a crisis intervention service with specialist support, the use of foster carers to provide supported lodgings and specialist foster placements addressing the needs of teenagers moving on to independence. Consultation has and continues to take place with all involved, and most importantly with young people.



## Organisation

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The fostering service places a high priority on addressing issues of equality and diversity. Foster carers said that 'training is regularly offered and is of a high standard'. Children's social workers confirm the importance placed on such issues to prevent placement disruption and breakdown. Placements are sufficiently monitored to ensure needs are met in all areas. Literature for children and young people is produced in age and ability-appropriate formats.

The fostering service has an accurate Statement of Purpose that clearly explains the aims and objectives. All areas as outlined in the national minimum standards for fostering services are covered. The management structure and decision-making process are well set out and there is good information about how to make a complaint. There are many additional reports and leaflets available to further clarify the services provided. Children and young people have a children's guide available to help explain what they can expect from the fostering service.

The managers of the service are competent at monitoring the work of the fostering team. The whole service is committed to improvement and the service plan in place highlights the key tasks for the year. This gives staff a clear understanding of their role and the targets they are working to. The administrative systems set up in the teams are supportive and well organised. They are vital to the smooth running and monitoring of the provision.

An experienced and competent staff team work in the fostering service. While there are some concerns about the pending service review, supervising social workers say the support and supervision are very good. Foster carers and social workers feel the service has become more professional over the last few years and are proud to work for the service. However, they acknowledge that there are some discrepancies in the way they work and are keen to address these through joint training with the fostering panel, team meetings and supervision. Staff are provided with opportunities to develop their expertise and take on additional projects.

The service makes good use of its partnerships in the North West London Consortium, sharing their own good practice and attending working parties in the area of fostering and adoption.

The support provided to foster carers is clearly detailed in the foster care agreements. Foster carers have seen an improvement in the support and this has been due to a stable staff team and the accessibility of supervising social workers and the relationship established with the service manager. Supervision to carers is provided at a minimum of six weekly, but the team are responsive to individual situations and contact can be daily if required. However, foster carers stated that they do not feel able to access respite care when they feel they need a break. The provision of respite care is mentioned in the foster carers' handbook. Senior managers have made a commitment to ensure foster carers understand that they can seek respite from the role of caring and will publicise this in the foster carers'

newsletter.

Both the staff and foster carers benefit from a strong commitment to training. Foster carers have a comprehensive training programme with a system for recording the training undertaken. Foster carers are supported to complete the Children's Workforce Development Council standards using a workbook designed by the training officer. The completion of workbooks is slow despite workshops and individual assistance provided by the service. One supervising social worker said: 'The training input is invaluable, foster carers feel they can approach him directly.'

Foster carers have an active and well-attended association in place to support foster carers and make their voice heard by the service. The association meets regularly with the service manager. The chair of the association said, 'Our relationship with the service is excellent, they listen and work with us.' Foster carers are also able to draw upon the support of external organisations and share experiences and practice as part of the consortium.

Children are enabled to understand their history by foster carers who recognise the importance of recording and keeping memorabilia. Life story work is encouraged and social workers are supported with training to complete this. The use of electronic records is effective and valuable for capturing data. Changes to the main server will improve accessibility.

The service assesses family and friend carers. There are good systems to consider the possibility of placing young people with family and friends before a stranger placement is identified. The service has had great success in enabling kinship carers to apply for special guardianship orders. Initial suggestions of such an order prompt a meeting with the prospective guardians and the birth families. This allows the team to provide information and make clear to both parties what is involved. Currently the service supports a very small number of kinship placements. There are no specific support groups for these carers so they access consortium groups. Kinship carers are included in all training and support offered to other approved carers.

## **What must be done to secure future improvement?**

### **Recommendations**

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

- ensure that fostering panels provide a quality assurance function in relation to the assessment process (NMS 30.5 and breach of regulation 26.2)
- ensure the panel monitors the range and type of carers available to the authority in comparison with the needs of children (NMS 30.7 and breach of regulation 34.1)
- support the foster carer in dealing with any difficult contact issues that may arise.

(NMS 10.7)