

# London Borough of Croydon Fostering Service

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 London Borough of Croydon fostering service currently has approximately 180 fostering households with over 250 approved places for children and young people.

The fostering service seeks to provide foster home placements for young people from a wide range of racial, cultural and religious back grounds, many of whom are unaccompanied young people from overseas. Currently this stands at over 550. This situation places significant demands on Croydon's fostering service. As a result Croydon has created a stand alone service to place the majority of the unaccompanied asylum seeking children and young people in independent fostering agency placements.

### **Summary**

The overall quality rating is good.

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

The inspection was announced and all the key standards were considered. The service has undergone a period of instability with very low morale among foster carers. There is now a new management team in place and foster carers are now feeling quite positive about the future of the service. Since the last inspection a specialist team has been created to accommodate the high numbers of unaccompanied asylum seeking children and young people that present to Croydon as a result of the asylum screening unit of the United Kingdom Border Agency reporting centre being located in Croydon.

Young people are safeguarded in foster homes and their health, education and contact needs are well met. Matching is generally sound however there have been occasions when young people felt that the placements did not meet their needs. The assessment and review of foster carers is of a good standard and the fostering panel functions very well. The support and supervision of foster carers is generally good and the service is well staffed and well managed. Records maintained by foster carers are good. Some policies and procedures are not up to date. The functions of the fostering service are monitored and records are generally well kept.

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

Three actions were set at the last inspection three years ago and most of these have now been met. Consent to medical treatment is now sought at the point of receiving an child into care. Young people are only placed with foster carers whose terms of approval are consistent with the proposed placement. Foster carers are now given written notification of approval of placements outside 'the usual fostering limit'.

Additionally a total of 12 recommendations were made. These covered issues of young peoples health support, their access to computers, the matching process including space in households, out of hours support to foster carers, the quality of foster carers supervisory arrangements and reviews, the complaints process and the recruitment processes. Good progress has been made in all these areas; some aspects of matching and complaints remain unresolved and are restated in recommendations arising from this inspection.

## **Helping children to be healthy**

The provision is good.

Young people receive good health care. 82% of all children looked after have had their medical checks and 93% of looked after children have a personal health plan. Support for the fostering service is provided through a designated nurse and two additional specialist nurses for looked after children. There is also a designated doctor for looked after children.

Foster carers ensure that young people's health care needs are met through prompt registration with a local doctor, regular dental and optical checks and annual health assessments. Additional counselling and support is provided for young people through the child and adolescent mental health services. Informal counselling is provided by the voluntary sector for unaccompanied minors in support of their mental health and well-being and there is also tuberculosis screening for unaccompanied minors. Fostered young people are encouraged to eat healthily, take exercise and to have healthy lifestyles. Sensitive support is given to young people with personal issues such as maintaining good personal hygiene and sexual health.

Foster carers do not always receive adequate information about young people's health care needs. Social workers say that health information is not always available at the time of placement. However every effort is made to acquire the information at the earliest opportunity. Appointments attended are well recorded by foster carers and monitored through social work visits, young people's statutory reviews and foster carers' reviews. Medication is safely stored in foster homes in locked cabinets. Medication is properly administered and recorded. Foster carers undertake regular training in first aid. Training is also provided in other health related topics and comprehensive written guidance is included in the foster carers' handbook.

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

The provision is good.

The fostering manager has been in post for just over one year and has a clear objective approach to ensuring safeguards and promoting the welfare of children and young people is at the top of the agenda in improving the service provided by the authority.

Young people benefit from a fostering service which is staffed by qualified,

experienced and able social workers who undertake assessments of prospective foster carers. Social workers benefit from additional training in this area of work. Criminal Records Bureau checks and renewals are carried out on all staff and panel members.

Foster carers are providing good care. Foster carers demonstrate a good understanding of young people's needs, empathy and commitment. Young people speak positively about their placements. Foster homes are comfortable and well maintained. Bedrooms are only shared in sibling placements in line with the service's policy. Health and safety checks of foster homes are undertaken as part of foster carer assessments and repeat checks are made annually. The safety of foster homes is monitored through regular inspections, including health and safety checks for transport as well as family pets. All health and safety issues are addressed and foster carers are provided with written information relating to health and safety issues and training.

The suitability of foster carers is established through thorough assessments and approval by the fostering panel and monitored through regular visits by supervising social workers and annual reviews. Placement agreement meetings are held at the outset of placements to agree the purpose of and arrangements for placements. Any issues which could reflect on the suitability of foster carers or their accommodation are promptly addressed by the service. Priority is given to placing young people with foster carers who share their racial and cultural heritage and their religion, in line with council policy. Where this is not possible, any additional support or training needed is identified. Foster carers also draw on their own resources and networks to meet young people's identity needs. Permanent matching is carefully considered in planning meetings, statutory reviews and by the fostering panel.

Matching is undertaken by the access to resources team and is normally facilitated by adequate information about young people needing placement. However there have been incidents where children felt that not enough care was taken in matching to appropriate foster carers, and this has led to some negative experiences of fostering. Indigenous children are generally placed with in-house foster carers while most of the unaccompanied minors are placed with independent fostering agencies. The service uses twenty two different independent agencies with approximately five of these agencies taking the bulk of the unaccompanied minors. There is however no formal system by which these agencies are monitored by the service nor systems in place to inform Ofsted if there are concerns about an Independent Fostering Agency.

Young people are safeguarded in foster homes. Child protection policies and procedures are in place that supports the protection of children and young people, however this information is out of date. Foster carers are provided with child protection training and safe caring guidelines. Foster carers are aware of the importance of safe caring and safe caring strategies are drawn up by each fostering household which implements this. Young people are well supported by foster carers in learning to keep themselves safe. Any allegations made against foster carers are robustly dealt with.

Young people benefit from a positive approach to their behaviour and many foster carers demonstrate skill and understanding in this area. Sanctions are rarely used and there is no evidence of inappropriate sanctions being used. Foster carers know that corporal punishment is not acceptable. Young people are not being bullied in foster homes and are well supported by foster carers in dealing with bullying elsewhere. Foster carers are aware of the procedure to follow if a young person goes missing.

The fostering panel is organised effectively to ensure that good quality decisions are made about the approval of foster carers, to promote and safeguard the welfare of children and young people in foster care. No panel members are allowed to begin work until all checks have been satisfactorily completed. The fostering panel is constituted according to the Fostering Service Regulation and has 10 members, the chair is independent of the service.

Clear guidance is in place with regards to panel members' term of office and this is adhered to by the fostering service. Written policies and procedures, implementing the practice about the different functions of the service are in place. However some of these policies have not been updated in the last year. From observation foster carers and social workers are given clear and constructive feedback at the end of each assessment by the chair. There are good links between panel adviser, chair and decision-maker. The fostering panel is quorate and draws upon expertise from education, however nobody from the health sector is currently a member. The fostering panel provides effective quality assurance in relation to the assessment process to ensure that there is a consistent approach in assessments across the service that is fair to all applicants.

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

The provision is good.

This local authority accommodates children and young people from diverse communities. This is reflected in the recruitment of the fostering staff and carers. Foster carers are recruited from a wide range of racial, cultural, religious and economic backgrounds. The fostering service promotes equality and diversity through training for social workers and foster carers. Documentary evidence seen supports the view that the service is committed 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 attention to issues of diversity and there is an expectation that foster carers demonstrate an ability to value diversity in their care for children and young people placed.

The fostering service promotes education for children and young people. Close working between the fostering service and the looked after children's education team ensures that all children and young people in the service have a personal education plan. The fostering service gives a high priority to meeting the educational needs of each child or young person in foster care and ensures that they are encouraged to

attain their full potential. There is good written guidance available to carers regarding their roles and responsibilities in ensuring children achieve educational expectations. The local authority is in the process of setting up the virtual school to ensure that there is a system in place to monitor the attainment and progress of looked after children and to ensure that all looked after children have effective personal education plans and access to support to champion their needs,

The fostering service provides short breaks for children and young people. Children and young people are matched with a carer according to their needs. The short break carers primarily look after children and young people with disabilities. The fostering service recognises that the parents remain the main carers for the child or the young person being placed.

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

The provision is good.

The fostering service support and encourage children and young people to maintain and develop family contacts as set out in their care plans. Foster carers understand the importance of maintaining these relationships and are generally positive about the arrangements made for contacts. The Borough has two designated centres where contact can take place if this forms part of the child's care plan. Issues raised in contact are recorded and discussed in supervisory visits.

There are appropriate systems in place to consult children and young people, for example, children and young people's views are considered at the placement planning meetings. They are consulted during the LAC reviews. Children and young people said that fostering carers and social workers consult with them and discuss their concerns and issues. Children and young people are given information about the complaint's procedure and have access to various advocacy services. The service has set up a children's council for looked after children as a direct result of listening to young people.

### **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is good.

The fostering service closely works with foster carers to ensure that care plans identify what is in the best interest of each child. Pathway plans are put in place for 16 years olds, however processes to promote independent living are not defined by the service and there are no guidelines for foster carers to follow. Foster carers do encourage and support young people to develop life skills, for example, looking after personal spaces, travelling, budgeting, saving and shopping.

Allowances and expenses are paid to all foster carers for enabling them to support children and young people to achieve good outcomes. Foster carers have been through a difficult period during the reform and refocus of the service. Some carers express feelings of being under valued and the morale within the service was very



low. There is now a new management team in post and expectations are high and foster carers are now more positive about the future of the service.

## **Organisation**

The organisation is good.

There are good systems and support for staff, foster carers, children and young people in place. At the time of the inspection there were 596 children in foster care of these 278 children have internal placements with the local authority, while the remainder approximately 318 children and young people have external placements mainly with private fostering agencies.

The Statement of Purpose which sets out the aims and objectives of the service. Young people are provided with a guide to foster care, however this has not been updated in the last year and not all foster carers children and young people have been given a copy of the handbook.

The service has an effective management structure with clear lines of accountability and responsibility. The structure of the fostering service has recently been reviewed and changes in staffing arrangements have contributed to improvements in the support, supervision and review of foster carers and to improved morale amongst staff and foster carers. There are policies and procedures in place to ensure that assessments, reviews and suitability checks on carers are carried out on-time and to a good standard, however, some policies and procedures are out of date including the service safeguarding policy.

The service is fully staffed and staffing levels are adequate for the current size of the service. There is ongoing recruitment of new foster carers and there are plans to further increase the numbers and diversity of in-house foster carers. Assessments of prospective foster carers are comprehensive, address the competencies and include analysis of information presented. On-going training for staff contributes to continuing improvement in the assessment process. Staff are well supported and supervised in their work and their performance is appraised annually. Some activities of the fostering service are effectively monitored. However, some additional monitoring is needed in order to ensure overall quality performance.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Young people's backgrounds and identity are considered in matching and most young people are placed with foster carers who share their heritage. Where children are placed with foster carers who do not share their racial and cultural identity then additional resources are put in place to ensure that the needs of the child are met. Training for foster carers in equality and diversity has not been provided recently but some foster carers have benefited from training in caring for young people with disabilities.

Young people are placed with foster carers who are generally well supported by the service. However there is no longer independent support for foster carers when an allegation against a foster carer is made. Supervisory visits are normally carried out

at monthly intervals but there have been some longer gaps. Supervision notes cover the key areas of the individual needs of children, for example, health, education and family contact. Visits by the children's social workers to the foster homes are inconsistent and children say that they are unable to build relationships with them due to the frequent changes of social workers.

The quality of supervisory visits to foster homes is evidenced through comprehensive records. Additional support is provided to foster carers through a support group. The service runs an out of hours service and a helpline. Foster carers raise issues and negotiate with the service's managers through a local foster care association; regular open meetings for foster carers and managers are held. Foster carers' continuing suitability is reviewed annually. Reviews are comprehensive, evaluative and incorporate the views of social workers, foster carers and their own children. Reviews are considered by the panel.

The training undertaken by foster carers is monitored and recorded. Most foster carers undertake adequate training and some foster carers attend a good range of courses. Foster carers' training is considered as part of their annual reviews and any training needs highlighted. A number of foster carers have completed the National Vocational Qualification at Level 3 and the service has done well at providing training to foster carers in the recently introduced Children Workforce Development Council (CWDC) standards and in developing support to foster carers in completing this course.

Foster carers are generally provided with information about the children in their care. However there are occasions where foster carers feel that relevant and necessary information about children has been withheld. Foster carers are now maintaining comprehensive records about young people's welfare and progress. Carers who are unable to write their reports in English, can do their daily reports in their mother tongue and then it is given to the fostering social worker who arranges for it to be translated into English. This positive development provides an ongoing record for all young people. Foster carers are aware of the importance of confidentiality and store records securely.

Files hold foster care agreements and terms of approval, notifications made following foster carers' reviews and records of all placements made with each foster carer. The suitability of family and friends as foster carers is thoroughly assessed. Assessments and decisions made about the suitability of applicants take into account the importance of pre-existing family relationships and the needs of young people. Family and friends foster carers benefit from the same standard of support, supervision, training and review as mainstream foster carers.

Fostering staff are well supported by regular supervision and appraisals from their line managers. Weekly team meetings take place which promote good communication amongst the staff team. Social workers have opportunities to attend both internal and external training for their professional developments. The office is suitable for its stated purpose. It is an open plan office which affords regular interaction between fostering staff and managers. Administrative staff informed the

inspector that facilities and equipment provided to them are sufficient to do their work. They support the fostering team very effectively.

## **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 young people are appropriately matched to carers with the appropriate skills and experience to meet their needs (NMS 8)
- ensure the fostering service provides regular training for carers and young people in preparing for independent living (NMS 14)
- ensure that there are clear written requirements of what is expected of foster carers in terms of preparing children and young people for independent or semi-independent living (NMS 14.1)
- establish clear procedures for monitoring all key activities of the fostering service and ensuring quality performance (NMS 4.1)
- ensure that the children's guide is revised and supply a copy to each foster parent approved by the fostering service provider and (subject to his age and understanding), to each child placed by it. (NMS 1.5)
- ensure that there is independent support to the foster carer during an investigation (NMS 22.9)
- ensure that complaints and representations are recorded and monitored and the outcome evaluated to inform future provision of services (NMS 22.8)