

London Borough of Islington Fostering Service - Children and Families

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

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Inspector	Muhammed Harunur Rashid / Mark Blesky
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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 Islington's fostering service provides a range of placements and care packages for looked after children and young people. The primary role of the service as outlined in the Statement of Purpose document is the recruitment, assessment, training, support and supervision of locally based foster carers and the provision of suitable placements for children and young people looked after by the London Borough of Islington.

The range of placements provided by the fostering service includes permanence, family based short-breaks, respite foster care, family and friends as foster care and special guardianship.

The fostering services office premises is based at Halliford Street which is off Essex Road. The premises is easily accessible by bus, under ground and rail links. The service also makes use of other local community based premises to facilitate fostering events, training and support groups.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This is a good service with some aspects judged as outstanding. Children and young people benefit from a range of well planned services. The general organisation around working practices is good and the fostering service is functioning well. Good support for all children and young people are in place. Services are tailored to meeting the needs of children and young people. Foster carers are well supported and have good communication networks with the services. Care is enhanced by multiagency assessments and the subsequent provisions of services for the whole range of children and young people; links between health and education are particularly well established.

Improvements since the last inspection

The fostering service was asked to ensure that foster carers files include documentation that verifies formally agreed exemptions, young people's care plans, foster carers agreements and information about foster carers re-approvals. The service was also required to ensure that foster carers annual health and safety checks and their annual reviews are completed. The service was further recommended to develop safer caring policies and consider changing or improving the venue for fostering panel meetings.

The service has acted upon these. However, a new omission has been identified in this inspection as all foster carers annual reviews were not completed.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Children and young live in a healthy environment and their health care needs are well met. Children and young people's files examined provided good information about children and young people's health care needs. The service works in partnership with health providers and children have access to these services. Excellent links exist to the child and adolescent mental health services that prioritise a service to looked after children. Children benefit from the effective and prompt access to the service. This provides intensive community outreach to address assessed issues of looked after children. Children also benefit from the fostering service's access to other specialist provision. Carers are provided with effective support from the adolescent multi agency advisory service team through group supervision and intensive visits to support improved outcomes for children and young people. Foster carers are provided with a good range of information, advice and guidance through contact with health professional and training to meet children and young people's needs.

Foster carers provide a comfortable and safe environment for children and young people. The homes visited were warm, furnished and maintained to a good standard of cleanliness and hygiene. Foster carers purchased first aid boxes and fire blankets. They have attended first aid and medication administration training.

Young people's health files are inconsistently maintained. It is difficult for a carer to find information quickly, the medical consent in four cases could not be found. Medication storage facilities in the home are not always suitable. One child had chicken pox and the fostering agency had not been informed by the carer. However, the foster carer had informed this to the child's social worker and the contact service. Health care appointments are kept and carers ensure that the young people receive the necessary treatments and interventions.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

Foster carers provide a nurturing, stable and safe environment for children and young people in their care. Children and young people surveyed by the local authority and Ofsted said that they feel safe in the fostering placements. The fostering service has a comprehensive child protection policy and procedure and foster carers are provided with child protection and safer caring training in order to protect children and young people. The fostering service provides appropriate support for foster carers working with children who have been sexually exploited. The targeted youth support service and metropolitan police work in partnership with the children looked after service to safeguard welfare of children with known gang affiliations or offending behaviour that may place at risk. Children and young people have access to an advocacy service and independent visitors should they have any

concerns or worries. The fostering service conduct carers quality reviews to determine whether they are suitable to continue as foster parents and their household continue to be suitable.

A suitable missing from care policy is compliant with the new regulation and is being implemented, consistently with the delegation of responsibility requirements. The new policy and its implications have been discussed with the Islington foster carers association in partnership with the safeguarding service. There is a robust system in place to review the records of looked after children who go missing from care for safeguarding purposes. Social workers convene a missing from care meeting with foster carers and the police to explore safeguarding as well as develop strategies to prevent repeat episodes of missing from care. The fostering service has an out of hours duty service which operates 24 hours a day to support carers when children go missing.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Children and young people enjoy sound relationships in their placements. Foster carers are provided with an extensive training on promoting relationships and managing challenging behaviour. This helps foster carers to develop knowledge and skills in order to provide an environment and culture to promote positive behaviour. Written policy on managing challenging behaviour and guidance are available to foster carers. Children and young people were seen to be relaxed in the company of foster carers who effectively manage children and young people's behaviour in a calm and professional manner.

The promotion of the educational attainments of children and young people is the real strength of the service. The excellent links to the education service and Islington Virtual school bring together a range of skilled professionals who work collectively to support the educational attainment of children and young people in care. As a result an improved number of young people have achieved 5 A*-C GCSEs. A significant number of foster child are attending various university courses. Two care leavers interviewed informed the inspector that, they themselves would not attend universities if they would not be in care in Islington. They said that their foster carers valued education and promoted a learning environment. Foster carers communicate well with schools that they found their foster carers to be proactive and effective in supporting children's learning.

Foster carers ensure that children and young people are engaged in hobbies and interests which boost self esteem and learning development. Foster carers are creative in their approach to supporting interests, for example, an actor from the television show East Enders acts as a mentor for a young person who is difficult to engage and whose favourite show is East Enders. The fostering service holds an annual foster care award ceremony in order to recognise and reward its foster carers for their on going commitment to training, development and the improvement of their skills in meeting the individual needs of foster children. Celebration events for

looked after children and care leavers also take place annually. In which young people are recognised for a whole range of achievements which are both academic and vocational. The events are child friendly with age appropriate entertainment with some entertainment provided by the children themselves.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

The fostering service promotes effective consultation with children and young people. There are excellent arrangements for consulting children and young people and other. There is a shared understanding of the needs of looked after children and young people across the partnership network and a commitment to meeting the priorities and objectives that supports the achievement of positive outcomes. The service ensures that looked after children and young people have greater access to the key decision makers allowing their views to be heard and incorporated into service planning and delivery. The care leavers, foster carers and fostering staff advised the inspectors that the children in care council has been proactively involved in work both locally and nationally to ensure that the voices of children and young people in the care of Islington council are continually heard at all levels. This has included meetings with the minister for children and other parliamentary officials as well as involvement, by the chair of the in care council, in the Munro review focus groups.

The promotion of equality and diversity is a strength of the service. Equality and diversity is reflected in recruitment literature and advertising all of which emphasise the need for carers from a range of backgrounds to foster. This enables the service to recruit foster carers who reflect the diversity of Islington's looked after population, including carers who have disabilities, same sex couples and foster carers of all ages who can meet a range of needs. Fostering literature is available for translation into several languages and a translation service is used to support communication where English is a second language. The service ensures that prospective foster carers to understand the realities of working with a diverse range of children and young people is embedded in pre approval training and followed through in Form F assessments.

Contact is strongly promoted for looked after children. The fostering service makes sure that children and young people in foster care are encouraged to maintain and develop contacts and friendships as set out in their care plans. Foster carers have received training on understanding contact and issues for children resulting from contact. Issues raised in contact are recorded. The contacts are taking place under supervision at various places within the borough and also at carer's home. This ensures meetings are comfortable for of all relevant parties and make contact successful.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is outstanding.

The fostering service prepares young people very well for adulthood and leaving local authority care. There is a comprehensive policy and training on preparation and planning for adulthood for young people in care. A rolling programme of multiagency training on preparing children and young people to leave care is co-facilitated by looked after young people. Foster carers are involved more in the pathway planning process and understand that they can act in the role of personal advisors for looked after children. A corporate career scheme for young people in care and care leavers provides access to employment opportunities, work experience placements and employability skills development; helping young people to take their first steps towards a chosen career. Some of these opportunities are 'ring fenced' to be advertised to young people in care.

As part of the future independent living foster carers encourage and support young people to save at least £12.50 a week. The service encourage and offer incentives to young people for attending college and also offers a bursary of £3000.00 per year for attending universities.

The success of a council wide corporate parenting approach to delivering services has resulted in considerable benefits. At least five carers have successfully moved to larger accommodation resulting in long term stability for children. This has been achieved with support from housing partners who although recognise the constraints of working with limited housing stock fully meet their responsibilities to looked after children.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

Overall, good arrangements for supporting staff, foster carers, children and young people are in place. The Statement of Purpose clearly defines the services provided to all children and young people and it details the support available for the foster carers. The service has developed a guide for children and young people in foster care which is appropriate to the age and ability of the children and young people using the service.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. Staff and foster carers have attended equality and diversity training. The local authority's policies and procedures reflect an understanding of ethnicity, culture and issues of diversity and procedures and practice is underpinned by this awareness. The fostering agency provides a service tailored to meet the specific individual needs of children and young people that considers all aspects of diversity. Staff are recruited from various minority ethnic groups and have very good understanding of children's and young people's dietary, religious and cultural needs. Staff support children and young people to make personal choices and access community resources.

The service is well managed with an effective management structure in place. There are clear lines of accountability in place. There are effective management systems in place for monitoring referrals, completing assessments for approval or disapproval and reviews. Fostering staff are well supported through the provision of training, regular supervision and annual appraisals. However, some foster carers say that they felt a news letter may provide greater opportunity to raise various practice issues and enhance communications between carers and the agency.

Children and young people are supported by a good mixture of skilled and experienced foster carers and staff. Supervising social workers conduct regular supervision of foster carers. Supervision notes cover all areas of individual children's needs.

There is policy and procedure in place that facilitate an appropriate match between the carers and children. Where trans-racial placements are made carers are supported in meeting the cultural, dietary, language and other needs of children placed with foster carers

Robust recruitment policy and procedure in place. The human resources department of the local authority carries out all relevant checks on fostering staff, carers, panel members and volunteers required by regulation to protect children and young people from potential abuse.

The fostering panel is well managed with a strong chair. Quality assurance functions are integral to the panel and the panel members undertake training to develop their skills regularly. The panel chair confirmed that she will look at any comments or actions by the decision maker and any panel decisions that are challenged are reviewed and lessons learned. The panel chair demonstrates a good understanding how issues of diversity and there is a clear understanding how issues of diversity may impact on the placement and young person. Panel records are clear and concise and demonstrate that the panel functions effectively and consistently.

Training is available for all foster carers, although it was noted that some carers are more difficult to engage. Although some delay had occurred at the time of the inspection training schedules had been agreed and course dates scheduled. Workforce development council training has been completed by 35 carers and 58 portfolios have been signed off with more completing in May 2011.

The service maintains a central list of all allegations against foster carers. A complaints system is in place and any complaints or representations are promptly and thoroughly investigated.

The service is developing a short breaks service for children with disabilities and this will provide the additional services to the disabled children in the borough.

Foster carers' and children's case records are well maintained. The terms of approval and foster carers' agreements are kept in the files.

Good documenting with regard to the foster carers annual reviews are available. However, one foster carer's review did not take place as the supervising social worker was on leave for 4 weeks.

The foster carer manual was last updated in 2004, and references the fostering standards prior to the current national minimum standards 2011.

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 children's health is promoted in accordance with their placement plan and foster carers are clear about what responsibilities and decisions are delegated to them and where consent for medical treatment needs to be obtained (NMS 6.5)
- ensure that the fostering service has and implements a written policy that clarifies the purpose, format and content of information to be kept on the fostering service's files, on the child's files and on case files relating to health assessments, medical consent forms and foster carers agreements (NMS 26.1)
- ensure that upon approval, foster carers handbook is updated in accordance with the new regulations and national minimum standards (NMS 25)
- ensure that review takes place not more than a year after approval, and thereafter whenever the fostering service provider consider it necessary, but at intervals of not more than a year (Regulation 28.2)