

# London Borough of Barking & Dagenham Fostering Service

Inspection report for local authority 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 fostering service provides planned and emergency foster care for individual children and sibling groups aged from birth to 18 years, in short-term, long-term and respite care placements. At the time of this inspection 208 children were placed with 130 approved foster carers. Currently two children are looked after by family and friends foster care arrangements.

The culturally diverse fostering staff team includes a team manager, a deputy manager, and 10.5 qualified social workers who undertake assessments, recruitment and supervision duties of foster carers.

The group manager of placements has the overall responsibility of the fostering service. This group manager is accountable to the divisional director, children's complex needs, social care and children's services. The divisional director is the agency decision maker.

The day-to-day management of the work of the fostering agency is undertaken by the fostering team manager.

### Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

This is an outstanding service. Children and young people greatly benefit from a range of well-planned services. The childcare teams in the borough are committed to working together and there is support throughout children's services to be work flexibly, share resources and deliver high quality services to children in care. The 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 multi-agency assessments and the subsequent provision of services for the whole range of children and young people; links between health, education, safeguarding and learn-to-live services are particularly well established.

One recommendation to improve practice has been made; this relates to updating the foster carers' handbook.

### Improvements since the last inspection

The local authority fostering service was required to ensure that foster carers are provided with a wider range of health-related and first aid training, and to inform foster carers of the additional financial support they may receive to assist them in meeting children's needs. The service was also asked to consider extending the diversity of representation on the fostering panel.

The service has acted upon these. These steps help to promote the welfare and the quality of care for the children and young people in foster care.

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

The provision is outstanding.

Children and young people live in a healthy environment and their health care needs are very well met. The fostering service has comprehensive policies and provides guidance to foster carers to meet children and young people's health care needs. Children and young people's files provide good information about their health care needs. The service works in partnership with health providers, and children have access to these services. There are excellent links to the community health services looked after children team. This is co-located within children's services and works closely with community paediatricians. As a result annual targets for health and dental checks are high. This is monitored through the health outcomes checks as part of the independent reviewing officers' annual reports. A full-time emotional well-being coordinator, who is a psychiatric nurse employed by the child and adolescent mental health service, is based in the fostering team. This person undertakes direct work with foster children to assist them to access emotional well-being services in and outside the borough. The nationally recognised Pitstop programme is designed to give emotional support to both young people and their carers when placements are under stress, and includes a clinical psychologist, for specialist support.

Foster carers are well supported and encouraged through the provision of various specialist health care training and support provided by the service. This helps to develop their knowledge and skills to meet children and young people's individual complex health care needs.

Foster carers ensure that children and young people attend their medical appointments. They maintain good records of all medication administered to children and young people. Medications are safely stored in the homes. Foster carers are provided with first aid equipment and they attend first aid training.

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 support and encourage children and young people to eat healthily and ensure that their dietary needs are well met. They encourage and support young people to keep fit and active by attending local gymnasiums.

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

The provision is outstanding.

Children and young people live in a family environment where competent foster carers provide a nurturing, stable and safe environment. Children and young people

surveyed by the local authority and Ofsted said that they feel safe in fostering placements. Comprehensive policies and procedures are in place to protect children and young people from harm and ensure they are safe and secure. Promotion of safe care is a focus for the fostering team throughout carers' recruitment, assessment and post approval. Good implementation of safe care ensures that upheld allegations are minimal, placement stability has improved, and the numbers of children who are putting themselves at risk by going missing are low, all of which are evident in their current performance. There are opportunities for young people to attend a young people's safety group and they can feedback directly to the Local Safeguarding Children Board should they have any concerns. The fostering service closely works with the Local Safeguarding Children Board. Fostering staff and carers have access to their advanced safeguarding training. A children in care nurse provides child protection supervision to school nurses and health visitors in the borough to develop their awareness in safeguarding areas. The fostering service conducts carers quality reviews to determine they are suitable to continue as foster carers and their household continues to be suitable.

The service has an updated e-safety policy. A specific workshop on e-safety was delivered at the 2010 foster carers' conference. All carers have been issued with DVDs regarding internet safety.

The fostering service has a robust missing children procedure, which links across agencies effectively, and includes protective returning home support. A clear missing protocol for children in care was presented to the foster carer network group, where it was adopted. All children who go missing from their foster placements are reported to relevant professionals. There is a robust system in place to review the records of looked after children who go missing from care for safeguarding purposes. Vulnerable young people are given runaways cards which includes the out-of-hours duty number and also the national runaways charity number. The children's rights officer visits the placements and makes appropriate recommendations to prevent repeat episodes.

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

The provision is outstanding.

The fostering service provides caring and stable placements to children and young people in the community by giving them an informed choice about their care through a high quality fostering service. This enables children and young people to strive towards achieving maximum outcomes. Children and young people enjoy sound relationships in their placements. Foster carers are provided with extensive training and guidance in promoting relationships and managing challenging behaviour. This helps foster carers to develop knowledge and skills in order to provide an inclusive environment and culture to promote positive behaviour.

The placement stability in both short-term and long-term placements has had a clear impact on the 'enjoy and achieve' outcomes. School attendance of children and young people has improved, persistent absenteeism has declined and exclusions are

lower in the borough than nationally. The excellent links to the education service and Barking and Dagenham virtual school bring together a range of skilled professionals who work collectively to support educational attainment of children and young people in care. Children and young people have access to a range of educational resources to support their learning, such as access to a tutor, or the use of a library that helps them achieve their full potential in respect of their educational aspirations. Foster carers facilitate young people's attendance at school and maintain regular contact with them so that they have up-to-date information about each child and young person's educational progress so that they can support them with this. As a result an improved number of young people have achieved 5 A\*-C GCSEs. Over the last three years 27 care leavers have gone to universities.

Foster carers ensure that children and young people are engaged in hobbies and interests which boost self-esteem and learning development. Children and young people can participate in various activities within the home such as art and craft materials, games, books and DVDs. The extensive gardens of foster homes provide a safe and secure space for children and young people to run around, and high quality play equipment, such as swings and trampolines, is provided. All activities are planned, risk assessed and carried out to ensure the children and young people are able to enjoy the activity safely. There is very good access to leisure and recreational opportunities for children and young people in the wider community. They have free access to the borough's four leisure centres. Children and young people also have access to a wide range of leisure activities via the children in care groups run by the children's participation and rights team in addition to the activities organised by their carers. The foster carers' network group funded by the council arranges joint activities and outings for carers, their own children and foster children.

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

The provision is outstanding.

The fostering service, the local authority and its partners have a strong commitment to seeking and listening to children and young people's views. The engagement forums and consultation mechanisms for children and young people in care are excellent. The London Borough of Barking and Dagenham has won the local government's chronicle award in 2011 for the way they consult with local children and young people and their parents to deliver significantly improved outcomes. This was achieved for using innovative ways to engage with all children and young people, including specific groups such as children in care, children with learning difficulties and minority ethnic groups, in ways that move away from traditional forms of consultation.

The promotion of equality and diversity is a real strength of the service. Equality and diversity are reflected in recruitment literature and advertising, all of which emphasise the need for foster carers from a range of backgrounds. There is a file of 46 country profiles to inform and enable placement officers and social workers to increase their understanding of different issues for minority ethnic children. The expertise within the staff team and their different backgrounds and languages help

to promote equality and diversity in its service delivery.

Foster carers offer excellent support in enabling young people to have a positive self-view and to enable them to develop emotional resilience and an understanding of their background. This particularly relates to children and young people who have a negative view of their racial identity. Foster carers work diligently to promote positive images and exposure that relate to children and young people's individual religion, race and culture. This includes helping children and young people to challenge negative stereotypes so that they can positively embrace and gain acceptance of themselves.

Contact is positively promoted for foster children. The fostering service ensures that children and young people are able 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. The contacts are taking place under supervision at various places within the borough and also at carers' homes. This ensures meetings are comfortable for all relevant parties and makes contact successful.

There is a clear policy in place to welcome children and young people into foster carers' homes and leave the homes in a planned and sensitive manner. Foster carers have innovative ideas for welcoming a child in foster care by developing DVDs which provide information about the placements, facilities available and introducing household members. Young people spoken to and feedback received by Ofsted state that they feel loved and valued by the foster carers and their family members.

### **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is outstanding.

The fostering service has a comprehensive policy on preparation and planning for adulthood. They prepare young people very well for adulthood and leaving local authority care. Preparation for transition to adult life starts early and is tailored to meet the needs of each individual child. For instance, young people are given goals such as cleaning their rooms and being responsible for their personal health care, as part of the programme. Foster carers are involved more in the pathway planning process and understand that they can act in the role of personal advisors for foster children and young people. Foster carers run a variety of workshops in their homes for young people to develop various independent living skills and raise awareness of safeguarding for the preparation of future semi-independent and independent living. The learn-to-live service for care leavers in the borough offers advice and support to young people in seeking employment, education and training. In order to ensure continuity of care and preparation for independent living, young people can remain in the placements beyond their 16th birthdays where appropriate.

As part of future independent living, foster carers encourage and support young people to save money each week. The service encourages and offers incentives to young people for attending college and also offers a bursary of £2000 per year for



attending colleges or universities.

The outcomes for care leavers in the borough have improved significantly. The vast majority of them are accommodated in suitable accommodation.

## **Organisation**

The organisation is outstanding.

The fostering service is child-focused, providing a high level of support to foster carers. The childcare teams in the borough are committed to working together and there is support throughout children's services to work flexibly, share resources and deliver high quality services to children in care. The co-location of social care children's teams and the fostering service brings a significant improvement in working together for the best outcomes for children. There is a strong ethos within the management structure and all are clear about their roles and responsibilities and all work flexibly and in cooperation with each other to ensure best outcomes for children.

The updated Statement of Purpose clearly defines the service provided to all children and young people and it details the support available for foster carers. The fostering 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. The local authority's policies and procedures reflect an understanding of ethnicity, culture and issues of diversity, and procedures and practice are underpinned by this awareness. The service provides a service tailored to meet the specific individual needs of children and young people that considers all aspects of diversity. The fostering service comprises a diverse staff group who are equipped to advise on particular socio-cultural and religious issues to support the team members, foster carers, and children and young people in care. Staff and foster carers support children and young people to make personal choices and access community resources.

A robust recruitment policy and procedure protects children and young people. The local authority's human resources department conducts all relevant checks required by regulation on fostering staff, carers, panel members and volunteers.

The fostering service's recruitment strategy to increase the number of in-house fostering households from diverse backgrounds has been a great success and this ensures that children are provided with local placements with carers who are capable of meeting their holistic needs. The relatively small team undertakes all aspects of the fostering service, taking account of the number of children they have in care, which currently stands at 421. Payments to foster carers are fair and paid in a timely way. Where a child or young person is eligible for benefits, foster carers are encouraged to apply for these benefits to ensure that young people receive financial assistance to contribute to their upbringing.

The service has a stable and active fostering panel that operates effectively, ensuring that all stages of a foster carer's career are professionally monitored and managed. There are clear procedures in place for the panel and the panel fulfils its quality assurance function, ensuring a high quality standard of assessment is maintained. The panel consists of individuals with a wide range of backgrounds, knowledge and experience.

The training and development of staff and foster carers are of a high quality, which ensures that they have a high level of competency to meet the needs of children and young people. Training programmes provide good value for money and equip both staff and foster carers with information relating to professional, legal and practice developments. These are up to date and reflect the policies and legal obligations of the fostering service. The learning and development programme is regularly evaluated for its effectiveness. Comments from evaluation forms confirm the high level of training offered. One participant stated, 'very well delivered training and very easy to follow'. Another said, 'very much enjoyed the content and delivery; valued the information regarding resources and learning', and, 'this was an incredibly useful training that has given me the knowledge and confidence in my role'.

Foster carers receive the training and development that they need to carry out their role effectively. They are supported to achieve their Children's Workforce Development Council training in a timely manner, which ensures that they are equipped with a range of skills and knowledge to enable them to have an excellent understanding of the needs of children and young people in their care. Foster carers also receive regular and additional training in matters that enables them to meet the specific needs of young people, such as advanced safeguarding, and HIV and AIDS. The implementation of Fostering Changes has generated very positive feedback from foster carers and has been instrumental in stabilising fragile placements.

There is a 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 with foster carers.

The service maintains a central list of all allegations made against foster carers. A complaint 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 an additional service to disabled children in the borough.

Foster carers' and children's case records are well maintained electronically. Good documentation with regard to the foster carers' annual reviews is available. The term of approval and foster carers' agreements are kept in the electronic files.

Family and friends as carers are provided with the support that they require to meet the needs of children and young people placed with them. Family and friends' carers are asked about their existing knowledge of the foster child's behaviour and are

provided with information about the child that is held by the fostering service. This means a full picture of the child or young person's background and needs are set out in order that a care plan of their individual needs can be set. Family and friends as foster carers are offered the same financial support, training and assistance as with all foster carers approved by the fostering service.

There is a foster carers' handbook available and the fostering service is in the process of updating this document.

## **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 the foster carers' handbook is updated in accordance with the new regulations and national minimum standards. (NMS 25.9)