

Kingston 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

Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames Fostering Service is a Local Authority fostering service that provides emergency, short term, long term, kinship and specialist placements for children and young people.

The service is based in Guildhall 1, within the main Royal Borough of Kingston offices. Little parking is available within the Guildhall complex, but the offices are within easy access of the town centre and public transport. Several public car parks are available nearby.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This inspection is a proportionate announced inspection in preparation for the fostering service to receive a full key inspection as part of the new three-yearly inspection cycle for fostering services.

The inspection focused on key National Minimum Standards and requirement and recommendations made at the last inspection. As there are no key National Minimum Standards under the outcome for economic wellbeing this outcome is not assessed.

Responses to questionnaires, from placing social workers, foster carers and children and young people and discussions with foster carers over the telephone are included as evidence.

The following requirements were made at the last inspection:

National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services 7, that the provider must ensure that children and their families are provided with foster care services, which value diversity and promote equality. The fostering service must have clear policies about trans-racial and trans-cultural placements and a clear statement about how equality is promoted in the fostering service.

National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services 8, that the fostering panel must undertake the role of monitoring exemptions to approved placement numbers and categories.

National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services 15, that the provider must ensure that any people working in or for the fostering service, including panel members and other external staff, are suitable people to work with children. The provider must ensure that no staff are appointed until all statutory checks to assess suitability, (as specified in the Regulations) are completed by the provider.

Checks must include: criminal records certificates; identity; obtaining a full work

and/or education history; exploring any gaps in the curriculum vitae; references; verification of qualifications if relevant; verification, if reasonably practicable, of reasons for leaving previous positions involving children or vulnerable.

National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services 16, that the Registered Provider is required to facilitate the provisions for appointing additional administrative staff. National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services 26, that the Registered Provider must undertake a review of the accommodation for the following reasons: to provide an area where staff can take a proper break from their work; to provide a separate room for staff to carrying out tasks such as report writing; to provide a room which is suitable and consistent for children/young people when meeting with therapists and other professionals.

Recommendations made at the last inspection were:

National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services 7, that the Registered Provider should consult with the Social Work Team about their views on equality and diversity.

National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services 8, that a review should be undertaken regarding the way in which information is exchanged between the Children's Social Work Teams.

National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services 8, that the procedure used when placing children with carers, outside of the agreed terms of approvals, should be reviewed to ensure that the process is consistent with the Children Act 1989 and the Fostering Services Regulations 2002.

National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services 9, that the Registered Provider should ensure that one known young person is given proper feedback about the outcome of the investigation undertaken regarding the allegation they made.

National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services 14, that a formal procedure should be established to ensure sound coordination and objective review of the pathway plans between the young person, the Foster Carer and the young person's social worker, to ensure more accuracy in assessing needs for the future.

National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services 16, that the Registered Provider should take the necessary action to ensure that positive working relationships are established and maintained between the Children's Social Work Teams and the fostering service.

National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services 32, that the Registered Provider should continue in its efforts to establish effective liaison between the fostering service and the housing department to consider the needs for housing of kinship carers.

Improvements since the last inspection

A high quality DVD has been produced by the Royal Borough of Kingston. Children and young people in care, including children and young people in foster care placements, describe their experiences of being in care. This is a positive and open film that presented the children and young people's views honestly.

An updated foster carers' handbook is available.

An updated equal opportunities and diversity policy statement is available and a better description about the support provided to foster carers who undertake trans-cultural/ trans-racial placements is included in the reviewed foster carers' handbook. Foster carers confirm that they attend training in equality and diversity, and that many of them are undertaking trans-cultural/trans-racial placements.

Action is taken to reduce the use of exemptions to foster carer's approval. The fostering panel monitor the use of exemptions, and data is forwarded to the Responsible Individual each week. Three exemptions are in place, and supporting social workers take variations to the foster carer's approval to panel rather than use long term extensions.

Personnel records are neat and orderly and contain the required checks and recruitment records.

Placing social workers confirm that communication is improving between social work teams and the fostering service. The Integrated Children's System (ICS) is in place, and although access is still to be fully rolled out, forms and information is being printed and forwarded from this system when referrals are made to the duty team.

Fostering service road shows are taken to the social work teams to raise awareness of their work, and to boost relationships.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Foster carers' questionnaires report that the fostering service supports them to meet the children and young people's health needs. Placing social workers spoke positively about the health care provided by foster carers, within questionnaires received, some stating that foster carers 'had an excellent record' in promoting health.

Skills to foster training provides foster carers with an introduction to their roles and responsibilities with regard to meeting children and young people's health care needs. Specific and specialist training is provided to foster carers as required, for example because of the small number of carers who would need training in medication administration, one-to-one training will be arranged with the hospital for foster carers who may need to administer.

Records show that children and young people are supported to attend dental appointments and other health care appointments. Annual looked after children health assessments are completed.

Specialist support is available from community mental health teams and counselling as required. Referrals can be made to other specialist services through the Local Authority.

Generally information provided about the children and young people is generally

good, although concerns are identified when the children or young people are from outside of the London Borough of Kingston, or are previously unknown to the Local Authority.

Children and young people state within questionnaires that their health is promoted, and the promotion of healthy eating is specifically highlighted.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is satisfactory.

There has been no change to the management of the fostering service since the last inspection, where the manager was found to be suitably qualified and experienced. The manager actively builds on their knowledge and experience by being involved in research projects, regularly attending conferences and forums and is a member of the British Association for Adoption and Fostering.

Foster carers' homes are assessed for safety and suitability prior to approval, and regularly reassessed. The fostering team are proactive in supporting foster carers to find different or more appropriate housing. Health and safety and safe caring is included in the skills to foster training.

Risk assessments are completed to ensure that any placement is safe for the foster family and the child or young person.

Discussions with the fostering team demonstrate that careful consideration is given to matching children and young people with the foster carers. Placement meetings ensure that appropriate consideration is given to the matching process.

Referral documentation contains information about the needs of the child or young person, and why the placement is being made. Where a decision is made that a trans-racial or trans-community placement is the best placement to meet the children and young people's needs then additional support is put in place.

A foster placement agreement is available in hard copy for placements made prior to the introduction of the ICS electronic database. The manager confirmed following the inspection that a placement information record is used from the ICS and that this document replaces the Looked After Children documentation previously used as part of the placement agreement. As these are managed by placing social workers, hard copies of these are not available on the foster carer's files. Increasingly information is being shared between the teams on the ICS system, or using printed copies of these documents. Placing social workers commented within questionnaires that the fostering service keeps records well maintained.

The fostering service follows the London Safeguarding Board procedures, and copies of these are available via the London Borough of Kingston website. Sound guidance is provided to foster carers with regard to how to respond to an allegation of abuse and what happens if an allegation is made against a foster carer.

Foster carers complete training in safeguarding and safe caring during skills to foster training, and safeguarding updates are provided as part of core training. The foster carers and the fostering service respond appropriately to disclosures and concerns.

Action is being taken to support foster carers to develop safe caring guidelines.

Expectations about acceptable punishments and that corporal punishment is not acceptable are made clear, with behaviour management forming part of the skills to foster training. However, written guidance is not available.

Countering bullying awareness training and support is provided to foster children and young people. Questionnaires reflect that children and young people do not feel bullied in their foster placements, although bullying may occur in school. However, they know who to talk to if they have concerns. Although countering bullying is discussed with foster carers during supervisory visits, systems, procedures and guidance are not in place to recognise, record and address incidences of bullying.

Foster carers know how to respond to the absence of a child or young person.

The Royal Borough of Kingston's personal department manages recruitment in liaison with the fostering service manager. Sound recruitment procedures are in place, and personnel files sampled are in good order. At least two written references are obtained and these are followed up by telephone. Enhanced Criminal Records Bureau disclosures are received prior to the member of staff taking up post.

All social work staff are qualified, and are registered with the General Social Care Council. All have completed post qualifying training and are designated as senior practitioners.

Specialist and therapeutic services are provided by other teams within the Royal Borough of Kingston.

As no concerns were identified about the functioning of the panel at the last inspection, a fostering panel meeting was not observed. Minutes of the fostering panel meetings are available, and demonstrate that the meetings are quorate.

Although newly appointed last year, the panel chair is experienced and knows their role and that of the panel members well. They bring together the panel members for training, as a group, and with supervising social workers. Improvement has been made in reports submitted to panel through the panel's role in quality assurance.

A requirement was made at the last inspection for the panel to take a role in the monitoring of exemptions. Few exemptions are in use, with most being applied for short periods of time so the respite or emergency placements can be made. All exemptions are recorded and monitored on a weekly basis, and where a longer term exemption is required, the supervising social workers promptly reviews the foster carer's approval at panel.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

No concerns were raised within questionnaires about meeting the specific cultural or ethnic needs of the children and young people, or the foster carers.

A requirement was made at the last inspection with regard to ensuring that children and their families are provided with foster care services, which value diversity and promote equality and having clear policies about trans-racial and trans-cultural placements and a clear statement about how equality is promoted in the fostering service. This was to include consultation with the social work team.

Guidance is provided by the fostering service about this in the fostering handbook and an updated policy statement is available. Consideration is given to the best placement possible for all children and young people. Wherever possible, support is provided to foster carers and the children and young people to ensure that trans-racial and trans-cultural placements are successful.

Individual or personal education plans are available. The fostering handbook and skills to foster training guides foster carers about their role in the promotion of education. Foster carers receive support to purchase school uniforms and to assist children and young people to attend school trips.

The fostering service can access specialist support for the children and young people as required. However, a small number of foster carers did raise some concerns about the support that they received and delays in access to tutors and specialist support.

Short break/respite placements are appropriately arranged for children and young people.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Contact arrangements are agreed with foster carers, and plans are made, wherever possible, prior to the placement beginning. Contact is actively promoted by the foster carers and they raise concerns where changes to contact arrangements are needed or risks are identified.

The fostering service supports foster carers financially to meet transport costs and overnight costs for contact meetings and introductory meetings when children and young people are moving to a new placement or for adoption.

The Royal Borough of Kingston actively involves children and young people in the developments within the local authority, for example as part of the 'Recruit Crew'

who assist with recruitment and selection. Looked after children are also increasingly involved in providing training.

Although a small number of foster carers who responded to the questionnaires did not feel that children and young people wanted to be consulted or were consulted well, placing social workers felt that this was an area that the service was good or improving at.

Children and young people state that they feel that their opinions are listened to. They are also consulted about their views as part of foster carer's annual reviews and the child or young person's review.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The updated statement of purpose is a detailed document that provides a clear statement of the aims, objectives and facilities provided by the fostering service. Appendices provide policies and procedures for foster carers and the fostering panel.

A separate foster carers handbook is available, and has been updated and reprinted. Foster carers are also provided with a copy of the published book 'Foster Carers Handbook'.

Simple guides are available for children and young people, as well as a separate children's complaints leaflet. A mini CD-ROM is also available. This is a useful tool for children and young people in care, using cartoons, guides to being in care, and useful links and contact numbers to provide them with information they may need. These are currently out of production.

A high quality DVD is being launched by the Royal Borough of Kingston for looked after children and young people. This DVD involved a range of children and young people, including children and young people who are in foster placements. The children and young people's views are presented in an open and honest manner.

Foster carers were of a mixed opinion as to how the fostering service has changed since the last inspection, with 40% stating in questionnaires that there had been no change or a change for the worse, and 33% stating that there is an improvement in the service. New foster carers felt that they had joined an outstanding service and longer term foster carers felt that the support provided was less personalised and they are unhappy with the lack of out of hours support. However, it is noted that all foster carers have appropriate access to the emergency duty team out of hours

rather than a direct link to supporting social workers. Questionnaires from placing social workers also present split views, raising similar comments to the foster carers.

The fostering team is fully staffed, however the team still feel that they are working at full capacity, and concerns are identified about other areas of work, for example private fostering and guardianship assessments, that they are being asked to complete on top of their day-to-day work. Social workers continue to complete administrative work, and any administrative support is shared with the adoption team, and the team managers whose personal assistant also undertakes administrative work for the fostering and adoption teams.

Additional staff had not been appointed as required at the last inspection, and there is a lack of clarity over roles and responsibilities, actual workload and the tasks that the team are to undertake.

The fostering team took road shows to the social work teams to raise awareness of their work, and to build relationships.

The use of office space continues to be reviewed, and alternative arrangements for meetings are being considered.

The foster carers handbook and foster carers agreement details how they will be supported by the fostering service.

Children's records continue to be maintained by the placing social workers and are accessible in hard copy format, and via the new ICS system. The fostering service is yet to receive full access to ICS, although action is taken to ensure that information is shared. Foster carers feel that generally sufficient information is provided to them. Placing social workers confirm this view, stating that information is shared during placement meetings, within the placement agreement and at reviews.

Foster carers are provided with diaries and guidance on how to hold information. These are reviewed during supervision sessions.

Records are maintained as required. Please also see comments under staying safe with regard to foster placement agreements.

Sensitivity is given to pre-existing relationships with family members, and assessments are undertaken by the fostering service in order to promote kinship care, this often includes the production of court reports. The fostering service is able to demonstrate how they actively work with kinship carers in order to support placements to be successful. Support and training is offered to kinship carers as to all other foster carers, and kinship carers reflect this in responses to questionnaires.

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/s meets the Care Standards Act 2000, Fostering Services Regulations 2002 and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider(s) must comply with the given timescales.

Std.	Action	Due date
8	ensure that copies of the Foster Placement Agreements are accessible to all staff and foster carers,	12/11/2007
9	provide written information to foster carers on acceptable management of behaviours,	12/11/2007
17	ensure that there are sufficient experienced and qualified staff to meet the needs of the service by undertaking a functional analysis of the roles and responsibilities of the fostering team.	12/12/2007

Recommendations

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

- ensure that systems and procedures are in place to recognise, record and address any incidences of bullying and to help foster carers cope with it,
- produce Royal Borough of Kingston specific written guidance to support any training provided to foster carers with regard to their roles and responsibilities.