

Kingston Fostering Services

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

Unique reference number	SC039931
Inspection date	21/09/2010
Inspector	Peter Daniel
Type of inspection	Key

Setting address	Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames, Directorate of Learning and Children's Services, First Floor West, Guildhall 2, KINGSTON UPON THAMES, Surrey, KT1 1EU
Telephone number	0208 5476042
Email	fostering@rbk.kingston.gov.uk
Registered person	Royal Borough of Kingston Upon Thames
Registered manager	Jenny Rigby
Responsible individual	Duncan Clark
Date of last inspection	10/09/2007

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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

This 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 close to the town centre, with good public transport links and several public car parks available nearby.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This was an announced inspection. The fostering service has positive leadership. The team manager and practice supervisor are knowledgeable and experienced. Team members are trained and have the necessary skills and professionalism to provide a fostering service. The staff and foster carers provide a child centred service. Foster carers are fully supported and able to meet the needs of children and young people in their care. The service is committed to achieving high standards. Foster carers are very satisfied with the support offered and fed back comments such as 'we are more than satisfied, I am very well supported by the service its small enough to be personal and it cares'. Equally, children and young people who replied to pre-inspection questionnaires gave positive feedback about the care they are receiving: One young person wrote 'I couldn't ask for more but to stay where I am right now. I feel very well taken care of; the fostering team who look after me are great. I feel very happy and stable where I am and cannot thank them enough for how much work and effort they put in'. Another replied, 'they always ask if I am OK and supply me with what I need.' The service has an effective fostering panel that is robust in its assessment and approval of foster carers. There are examples of effective liaison between the fostering team and the looked after team and multi-agency working between the fostering team, health and mental health services and education. The team is motivated to strive for improvement through evaluative and reflective practice. Children and young people are integral to decision making about their lives. The service hopes to develop the issue of participation and recognises the need to embed the full participation of children and young people in their involvement in the corporate parenting panel and children in care council.

This inspection identified two key areas for development. The service has itself acknowledged the need to increase the numbers of foster carers of minority ethnic background. This will enable more enhanced choice for matching. This was confirmed in the inspection's findings. The service plans to develop its role as a member of a local consortium which will help to achieve this. Additionally, the fostering service needs to ensure all foster carers complete the mandatory

Community Workforce Development portfolio within timescales. Overall, there are no breaches of regulations and the majority of the national minimum standards are met.

Improvements since the last inspection

Following the last inspection copies of foster placement agreements have been made accessible to foster carers, written information on safe caring has been provided to foster carers and sufficient experienced and qualified staff have been recruited. The issue of bullying has been covered under the foster carer training programme. Training is also being provided to foster carers under the Community Workforce Development Council (CWDC) portfolio. The service has established a log for recording complaints, concerns and allegations.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

The fostering service promotes the health and development of children in placement. Children have a written health plan and are registered with a general practitioner, dentist and optician. Foster carers ensure all appropriate health checks, medicals and immunisations take place. There are good examples of inter-agency working. A looked after children nurse completes medicals and provides consultation and advice to professionals and foster carers. A child and adolescent mental health services family therapist is available to give advice to foster carers on dealing with specific problems, and delivering wider training. The Local Authority has 11 Children's Centres and each one has a dedicated midwife and dedicated health visitor. Children in care are able to make use of the centres.

Foster carers provide varied and balanced diets and promote healthy eating. Some children are offered life story work. There is plenty of evidence that foster carers are also encouraging children and young people to take part in healthy outdoor activities such as walking, using the gym and swimming.

Foster carers have been offered training in first aid, sexual health and health and safety. They attend the reviews and provide information for the planning and review process. Health and safety checks of foster homes are routinely done. The membership of the fostering panel includes a paediatrician.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

The fostering service has appropriate safeguarding procedures in addition to the local safeguarding children's board inter-agency procedures.

The service has robust recruitment and selection procedures for appointing staff,

foster carers and fostering panel members. Checks of staff files and foster carer's files showed that Criminal Record Bureau checks and references are in place. The service has a system for renewal of Criminal Record Bureau checks.

There is a pool of competent foster carers. The agency has provided relevant training in safeguarding to ensure the ongoing safety of children and young people. Foster carers have attended training in first aid, health and safety, safe caring, child protection, challenging behaviour and bullying. Further training will be offered this year on sexual health and domestic abuse.

Foster carers demonstrated that they know and understand how to respond and report any concern about a child or young person. Foster carers are expected to keep a diary of events. The fostering service has appropriate safeguarding systems in place. These include unannounced visits, health and safety checks, annual reviews and the keeping of a complaints, concerns and allegations log.

Foster homes provide safe, comfortable accommodation.

The service endeavours to carefully match each child to an appropriate placement, taking into account the child's care plan, assessments and religious and cultural needs. The service recognises that in order to improve its choices of matching it needs, as a priority, to increase the numbers and diversity of its carers.

The local authority operates a prevention and resources panel that screens all children coming into care. There is also a permanency action planning group that monitors children in the care system.

Since the last inspection there have been a low number of placement disruptions, indicating placement stability.

The inspection included observation of the fostering panel. The panel is organised efficiently. It is supported by a panel administrator, a panel adviser and a legal adviser. The panel is appropriately represented and was quorate on the day of the inspection. It has access to medical expertise and includes an education representative. The panel is in the process of appointing a young person who has been a part of fostering household to its membership. All panel members have had Criminal Record Bureau checks. Observation of the panel showed it was robust in monitoring assessor's reports and annual reviews. The chair managed the panel effectively and was clear about approval decisions. The panel had received management information and overall it demonstrated its quality assurance function through the monitoring of the range and types of carers available.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The outcome 'enjoying and achieving' includes the issue of diversity. It is noted that

approximately 19% of in-service foster carers are from ethnic minorities (the ethnic minority population within the borough is approximately 30%).

The fostering service has recently completed a comprehensive review of all fostering policies and procedures to ensure a clear focus on the promotion of equality and diversity. The service is in the process of joining a consortium formed of other local authorities. The aim is to share and recruit a more diverse range of foster carers.

The service employs a publicity and recruitment officer who is making considerable efforts to attract local carers including ethnic minority carers. The service is also aware of the need for foster carers who can offer placements for children with special needs. The service undertakes three campaigns a year and has developed links with a local mosque, libraries and a department store.

Some children are placed in trans-racial placements and foster carers are doing their best to promote difference. One foster carer, for example, who is Muslim, is still allowing the non-Muslim children in her care to celebrate Christmas. Others understand the issue of hair care, the provision of skin products and ethnically sensitive diets where ethnic minority children are concerned. Children are having contact with their family of origin where this is appropriate.

The fostering service, through its foster carers, is actively involved in promoting educational achievement. No children are currently in need of alternative education provision. 12 children in care have a statement of educational need. Looked after children have personal education plans which are reviewed by the educational improvement officer.

There are many good examples of foster carers promoting the child's education. Foster carers escort children to school or nursery, read with them, help them with homework, attend personal education planning meetings, open days and parent evenings. Children and young people are encouraged to take part in social activities including football, cubs, cinema, walks, swimming, theme parks, library, camping, shopping and family trips. Children have access to computers within fostering households.

In promoting this outcome, the fostering service has developed positive multi-agency working. It has formed positive links with education and an education improvements advisor gives advice on curriculum, personal education plans and alternative education provision. The latter is the first point of contact for looked after children. In addition, an education psychologist is available to foster carers to offer support on issues in relation to education. The training manager has recently set up a course for foster carers led by the education improvement adviser on the subject of personal education plans. The publicity and recruitment officer works continuously to provide opportunities for children in placement. These have included a photography workshop and work with the library service.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

The fostering service successfully encourages children and young people to maintain and develop family contacts and friendships. There is evidence of good practice whereby foster carers facilitate direct contact with birth families at contact centres or at the family home. Telephone contact is also encouraged as appropriate.

Equally, foster carers are promoting consultation and ensuring children's views are sought over issues which impact on their daily life. Children and young people are invited to fill in looked after children consultation forms and attend their reviews where they have the opportunity to express their wishes and feelings.

Children in placement receive a children's handbook that gives them information on how to raise issues or make complaints nationally and locally. They have access to a children's participation and development officer and there is a 'drop in centre' for young people who are 16 years plus.

The local authority has also developed other initiatives. They include a children in care forum that has developed a local pledge for children in care and a text service and specific complaints process for looked after children.

Young people gave positive feedback about consultation as follows: 'If I had a problem I would talk to my foster parents and my social worker'; 'as I'm turning 16 years, my carers take notice of my opinions. Whenever I have something to say they would listen and if there's a problem we would somehow find a way to solve it'; 'we talk about what I am good at, what I would like to do as a job, we talk about where I want to live, we talk about problems.'

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

The fostering service ensures that the foster carers help young people to develop skills, competence and knowledge necessary for adult living. Foster carers gave good examples about how they help young people with their pathway plan, including help with budgeting and banking, showing them how to cook, keeping their room tidy and personal hygiene. All looked after children who are in full time education are encouraged and supported to stay in placement until the end of the academic year of their 19th birthday to ensure they continue to be supported at key times.

The fostering service pays carers an agreed allowance and expenses.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The fostering service has a Statement of Purpose that was updated in February 2010.

The fostering team is managed by an experienced team manager and practice supervisor. Both have social work and management qualifications and the necessary skills to run a fostering service.

The team is fully staffed and has a defined staff structure. Team members have appropriate qualifications, skills and experience. The composition of the team includes the equivalent of four and a half full-time qualified supervising social workers who are senior practitioners. Most have been employed for a number of years. The team is ably supported by a publicity and recruitment officer, a foster carer training officer (part time) and a business and administration team consisting of a finance officer (part time), a panel administrator (part time) and two administrative officers. The team deploys two bank staff who support supervising social workers in doing assessments.

The staff are managed effectively. There is good team morale and individual team members reported that they feel fully supported. Staff receive formal supervision approximately every four weeks and there is a supervision record. Staff also have an annual appraisal. Team members are offered internal training courses that has included attachment theory, 'form F' training, joint training on safeguarding and court skills.

The fostering panel effectively monitors the service and there is in addition a fortnightly fostering monitoring meeting that scrutinises allocations, referrals and standards and discusses team issues.

The fostering service has effective systems in place for carer supervision and support. Supervising social workers visit foster carers every four to six weeks. There is also regular telephone and email contact. Supervision of foster carers is robust and the agenda includes discussion of the Every Child Matters outcomes. Foster carers are invited to attend a monthly support group. An educational psychologist and a therapist from the child and adolescent mental health services regularly attend and are available to give informal advice. There is a separate group for kinship carers. Foster carers are offered short break care where this is appropriate. Foster carers also have access to out-of-hours support. The fostering service has held three social events this year, a social evening, a picnic and a coffee morning with the mayor.

Foster carers were unanimous about the support they are getting. Their feedback included comments such as, 'my supervising social worker is excellent. She visits once a month. We phone every now and then and we email quite a lot. I feel supported, I am happy with all the support. I haven't got anything to complain

about'; 'I feel satisfied with the support. If I am stuck I will get it from the fostering service. I go to the support group it's really good and helpful'; 'I am satisfied with the fostering service, they are there whenever I need support. I really appreciate that. They look after me and the children. I have no complaints at all. I am absolutely satisfied.'

The fostering service has a clear plan for the training and development of its foster carers. The team has a dedicated training manager whose task is to promote training. The present situation is, that three foster carers have completed national vocational level (NVQ) 3 training and four more are signed up. In addition, all foster carers have to complete the CWDC standards portfolio by March 2011. Ten foster carers are doing the training and approximately another 20 need to commence the training. Whilst the service has been proactive, it is evident that some foster carers have been reluctant and hard pressed to complete the training. The fostering service acknowledges that it needs to give the matter priority since it is possible that some carers will not complete the CWDC portfolio within timescales. Further to NVQ and CWDC training, foster carers are offered a rolling programme of training and have attended courses such as child protection, health and safety, first aid, disability, autism, challenging behaviour, the importance of play, attachment styles, personal education plans and bullying. Most foster carers are pleased with the training on offer but some more experienced carers have made a plea for more in-depth training.

The local authority keeps comprehensive records for children which are held on a computerised system. Foster carers' files showed evidence of good record keeping but this information will need to be integrated with the computerised system. Other administration records are in good order.

The premises used as offices are suitable for their purpose. There is an open plan office which encourages positive working with the looked after children team and also with the adoption team, when a child moves on.

The fostering service has robust financial procedures and sound and appropriate accounting standards. There are systems in place for monitoring all relevant expenditure. A meeting is held weekly that scrutinises placement availability.

The fostering service recognises the contribution made by family and friends and just under 25% of in-house foster carers are kinship placements.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Whilst it is noted that the staff composition of the fostering team is exclusively white and female, the team has sought to maintain awareness of issues of equality and diversity, which was the theme of a training day held last year. A long-term goal is to achieve a more diverse staff team. The fostering service, through its foster carers, is sensitive to issues of race, religion and culture. Examples include the celebration of religious festivals, contact with birth families, the attention to skin and hair care and the provision of ethnically sensitive food. The service acknowledges that it could do better in terms of increasing the diversity of in-house placements to ensure children's placements

reflect their identity and culture. This will ultimately produce better matching of placements and avoid the high use of external placements.

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 all foster carers complete the Community Workforce Development portfolio (NMS 23)
- increase the number of minority ethnic placements available (NMS 7.1)
- ensure that fostering records are included in the fostering module of the local authority's computerised system. (NMS 25)