

London Borough of Harrow Fostering Services

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

Unique reference number	SC042990
Inspection date	24/09/2007
Inspector	Tola Akinde-Hummel / Angela Hunt
Type of inspection	Key

Setting address	London Borough of Harrow, Social Services, 429-433 Pinner Road, HARROW, Middlesex, HA1 4HN
Telephone number	020 8863 5544
Email	
Registered person	London Borough of Harrow
Registered manager	
Responsible individual	Arlene Bridgewater
Date of last inspection	27/03/2007

© Crown copyright 2007

Website: www.ofsted.gov.uk

This document may be reproduced in whole or in part for non-commercial educational purposes, provided that the information quoted is reproduced without adaptation and the source and date of publication are stated.

You can obtain copies of The Children Act 2004, Every Child Matters and The National Minimum Standards for Children's Services from: The Stationery Office (TSO) PO Box 29, St Crispins, Duke Street, Norwich, NR3 1GN. Tel: 0870 600 5522. Online ordering: www.tso.co.uk/bookshop

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 service is a local authority fostering service. The types of placements provided include short-term and long-term (permanency), kinship care and family link (respite care) placements. The fostering and family link team is part of the children's services within the borough's Social Services Department.

Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

This key announced inspection was conducted over five days and included an observation of part of a fostering panel meeting. The London Borough of Harrow fostering service aims to provide safe and appropriate foster carer placements for their Looked After Children.

The objectives of the service are to identify and co-ordinate placements, to recruit, assess, train and support carers who reflect the needs of Harrow's Looked After Children and to raise the profile of fostering in Harrow.

This is a service which, ten months ago, was a poor service with major shortfalls. Work has been undertaken to raise the standard and begin to maintain consistency.

Improvements since the last inspection

There have been significant steps taken to improve the service. The standard of records relating to the checks and references conducted on staff appointed is better and there is now evidence in support of the required checks on staff being done. A permanent staff team has been established and a permanent fostering manager recently recruited.

A major refurbishment of the premises accommodating the family placement service has taken place. Work with regard to this is due to be completed towards the end of this year.

A training programme for staff and foster carers has been initiated and some training has started. The backlog of foster carer's annual reviews has been addressed and improvements made to the quality of reports submitted to the fostering panel. New panel members have been recruited. The quality of the fostering panel minutes has got better and further improvements are planned. Should they wish to, this will allow young people to understand how decisions about their future is made. Staff members are now better supported through the supervision arrangements and training now established. All foster carers now have an allocated supervising social

worker and a system of regular supervisory visits and contact is now in place. Communication between the staff group and between the family placement service and foster carers is much improved. Initiatives have recently been introduced, such as newsletters and support groups, to promote this further.

The service has established an effective system for recording and tracking the progress of complaints and the previous shortfall in records relating to this being poor has been addressed. The electronic recording system in place is now better understood by staff and record keeping is improved. The high numbers of foster carers that had been put on hold for an undue length of time due to either care practice issues or outstanding child protection matters have now been addressed. The recruitment of a placement officer and improved use of the electronic recording system has resulted in a move towards better utilisation of the authority's own carers and has helped towards retaining foster carers. The handbook for foster carers has been subject to a major review and core policies which were previously missing have been developed. A launch of the new foster carer's handbook is planned shortly.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Young people are safeguarded through the provision of appropriate health care including access to specialist services where required. Foster carers play an active role in promoting all aspects of a fostered child's health. Advice is available to foster carers and a specialist paediatric nurse is responsible for overseeing Looked After Children's healthcare needs. The role of the specialist paediatric nurse includes supporting children and their foster carers to access appropriate health care resources. Records of a child's individual health are kept. Children's healthcare is further promoted through the LAC (Looked After Children) nurse now being a member of the fostering panel.

There continues to be good links with CAMHS (Children's Advisory Mental Health Service), with the specialist paediatric nurse being able to make referrals.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is satisfactory.

The interim fostering team manager and interim service manager have both worked hard to make the changes needed. Improvements in communication and the responsive and accessible management style have resulted in staff being better supported. A newly appointed fostering manager and service manager are both shortly due to start. A phased handover is in place to ensure that they are both appropriately guided and supported in meeting the challenging demands of their roles.

Young people are provided with comfortable accommodation and suitable facilities. The health and safety checks conducted as part of the assessment process ensure that young people placed with foster families are protected through the

appropriateness of the environment in which they live.

In reviewing the terms of approval of foster carers, there was little evidence that the views of young people are sought and of their participation in the decision making process. Children/young people's Social workers do not form part of the review of the approval of a foster carer.

While the young people's racial, ethnic, cultural, religious, and linguistic needs are taken account of in the matching process, there is a deficit in white carers to match demand. A recruitment campaign to address this has taken place. There is an awareness of the need to support carers to enable young people to be provided with the best possible care, however there has been a delay in providing carers with training in understanding diversity and differences. Where placement with a family of similar ethnic origin and religion is not possible, carers are not always provided with the additional support needed, such as training, to compensate for any gaps in the match between the young person and carer.

Staff and foster carers are now provided with training in safeguarding young people and more training is planned. Policies on how to deal with an allegation of abuse against a carer, and acceptable measures of control, restraint and discipline have now been developed. There are also policies on bullying and unauthorised absence that have recently been reviewed. These policies form part of the new foster carer's handbook and are to be distributed to foster carers shortly. The London child protection procedures are followed and where there is an allegation of abuse made against a foster carer, support for the individual is available from Harrow foster carers association. The backlog of cases that had previously been put on hold due to an allegation of a child protection nature or concerns about practice has now been addressed. Records kept of child protection allegations provide a clear audit trail of cases, investigations conducted and outcomes.

There are clear staff recruitment and selection procedures in place and the required checks are completed to ensure the appropriateness of staff. The checks and references required by regulation are done. All posts are now permanent. Staff have a good understanding of their roles and responsibilities and the induction and training for new staff has helped this.

The service has written policies and procedures outlining the roles and responsibilities of the fostering panel. The guidance in place makes clear that the panel's role is to make a recommendation which is then passed to the decision maker for a decision. However some letters to foster carers referred to the panel making decisions. In addition, the letter sent to the carer in cases where the fostering service provider is no longer satisfied with their continued suitability is confusing. The confusion relates to the process of making written representation within 28 days of the date of the notice.

The panel chair encourages panel members to raise issues and ask questions to assist in the decision making process. The fostering panel has some new members. This includes two male members and the LAC nurse. The quality of panel minutes

has improved, however, they are still not sufficiently detailed. For example, they do not provide sufficient information to demonstrate the proceedings or the reasons for some of the recommendations made. The panel administrator is due to attend training on further improving this aspect of the work.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is satisfactory.

Some training in diversity and differences for staff has taken place. However, training in this aspect of care for foster carers has been identified in the past, and has not taken place. Dates planned for this were cancelled and future dates have been set. This deficit is evident particularly in cases where placement with a family of similar ethnic origin, linguistic and cultural background is not possible.

The importance of continuity of education and promoting educational achievement is given priority. Foster carers continue to be supported in being helped to meet the young person's educational needs. Of the foster carers visited, it is clear that appropriate facilities are in place to support a young person to do homework so as to attain their potential.

The family link service is responsible for providing short terms breaks and respite for children with disabilities. There are good links between the family link service and the children with disabilities team. A representative from the family link service is now attending the complex needs panel to look at whether they can recruit to the needs of the service. The family link service remains strong but continues to struggle to recruit sufficient carers to meet demand. There are eleven family link households and three prospective households being assessed. In order to improve training available to carers, links are now in place with one of the authority's residential units. Support for carers is further promoted by a carer's support group that has recently been established.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Young people are encouraged to express their views in a variety of ways. The young people can speak to their foster carers, their social workers and can turn to other organisations for advice and support. There are two young people's guides in place, one for younger children and the other for older children. These contain information on a number of places where a young person can turn to for help. The guides include the contact number for childline as well details of other support organisations. A cross party initiative set up by the borough called 'npower' enables young people to have a voice across the borough. This is open to looked after children. A new advocacy service, 'your voice your choice' is also available to young people.

Contact with family and friends is actively encouraged and promoted. Young people

and carers spoke of letters, telephone calls and meetings to maintain young people's relationships and keep family bonds alive. This helps to keep a sense of the young person's sense of their origins active and may keep open options for family relationships in later life.

While consultation mechanisms are in place, steps to ensure that the opinions and views of young people at the time of a foster carer's annual review are absent. Work undertaken on concerns and complaints has resulted in a significant improvement in how complaints are dealt with. There is now a designated individual in the family placement service (FPS) who takes responsibility for recording complaints received, monitoring the action taken and providing a link between the FPS and the complaints team.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

Foster carers are clear as to what is expected of them in preparing young people for independent or semi-independent living. A specific chapter in the newly developed foster carers' handbook has been given to the aspect of young people moving on. Foster carers spoke about work undertaken in preparing the young people in practical and financial skills and knowledge. This included household skills, household budgeting and applying for a course of education. The leaving care team continue to provide a good level of support and guidance to foster carers in preparing young people to move towards adulthood.

Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

The statement of purpose sets out what the service provides and how. A recently appointed manager with the relevant experience and qualifications is shortly due to take up post. Prior to this the interim manager has worked hard to make the changes needed and has been central to influencing the improvements required.

There are procedures and systems in place to monitor and control the services activities. Regular meetings between the finance officer, the placement officer and contract manager has been influential in effecting change and in remedying matters. The electronic recording systems have resulted in improved efficiency and accuracy of payments to foster carers. A robust management structure is now in place that is responsive and effective.

There are now a lot more service level agreements in place to make sure there are safe systems in place and that the local authority is getting value for money. Staff are well supported by the management arrangements in place. Recent training for staff has resulted in a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities. A permanent staff team together with the training now in place for staff has improved the quality of support afforded to foster carers.

The workforce strategy has had a positive impact on improving support and training for staff. Staff spoke of having a good induction and of being well supported by managers. In addition an appraisal system is in place for staff which identifies individual training and development needs. Staff spoke highly of the training delivered on the role of the supervising social worker. Staff demonstrated a commitment to the FPS and spoke keenly of their work with foster carers. In turn, foster carers feel better supported and spoke highly of their contact with supervising social workers. Comments made included that staff are professional, supportive, responsive and helpful. The quality of record keeping has got better as staff have become more familiar with the electronic recording system in place.

Carers training has now started to take place. A number of foster carers have not taken up any training (statutory or otherwise) to date. While the written information on statutory training for foster carers indicates what training must be undertaken and when, there is currently no system for monitoring, controlling and enforcing this.

The overall standard of records is much improved. There is now separate and clear records kept for complaints and allegations. Records for staff are better organised and children's and carers records on the electronic recording system more fully completed as people become more familiar with the system.

The kinship co-ordinator is now in post and the kinship care continues to be valued and well run.

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
30	make sure that written notifications regarding the outcome of reviews by fostering panels are accurate and clear (Regulation 29)	30/11/2007
30	make sure that the fostering panel minutes clearly indicate its proceedings and the reasons for its recommendations (Regulation 25)	30/11/2007
11	make sure that the opinions and views of young people are sought at the time of a foster carer's annual review (Regulation 29)	14/12/2007
22	ensure that carers are provided with the additional support needed, such as training to compensate for any gaps in the match between the young person and carer (Regulation 17)	30/11/2007

23	ensure carers' attendance at training where required and that the statutory training stipulated is undertaken by carers (Regulation 17)	30/11/2007
21	improve the provision of information for foster carers, for example, by ensuring that the recently developed foster carer's handbook is made available to all carers (Regulation 17).	30/11/2007