

Southwark LA Fostering

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

This is a local authority fostering service located in an inner city area with a wide range of racial and cultural diversity. It provides fostering placements for children and young people looked after by the council. The service also provides respite breaks for children with disabilities who live with their families.

Overall management of the fostering service is provided by a service manager. The fostering service is staffed by a team manager, two practice managers, a senior practitioner with responsibility for the family link service and a team of social workers and administrators.

At the time of the inspection, Southwark council had 206 approved fostering households which provided 452 placements; 291 children and young people were in placement.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

The inspection was announced and carried out by one inspector over six days. Four foster homes were visited and the young people placed there spoken to. Supervising social workers for these foster homes were interviewed and placing social workers spoken to. The service manager, fostering manager and practice managers were interviewed, together with other social work and administrative staff. A meeting of the fostering panel was attended and the panel chair interviewed. Discussions were also held with a group of young people placed in Southwark's foster homes and with a group of foster carers. The children's safeguarding manager, children's rights officer and the looked after children education team manager were also spoken to. Records were looked at, including foster carers' and children's records. Questionnaires were sent out before the inspection and 16 completed questionnaires were received from foster carers and ten from young people in placement.

Southwark council is providing a very good fostering service. The service is well managed and staff are able and experienced. Foster carers are providing good care in comfortable homes, though some additional attention needs to be paid to the safety of foster carers' accommodation. Foster carers are doing very well at meeting the health care needs of young people and supporting them in their education, with the help of a range of services provided by the council. Young people's diversity needs are well met in foster homes and good support is given to young people in maintaining contact with their families. Foster carers are listening to young people who are supported in making their views heard.

Care is taken over the matching of young people with foster carers but placements are sometimes made outside foster carers' terms of approval without the necessary authorisation. Southwark council has a very professional and effective fostering panel and allegations against foster carers are properly dealt with. Assessments of prospective foster carers are thorough and foster carers are very well supported and supervised. An excellent range of training is provided and foster carers' approval is regularly reviewed. Some friends and family foster carers are approved and supervised in line with the regulations but the service must ensure that this is so in all cases. Records are mostly comprehensive and well maintained.

Improvements since the last inspection

There have been a number of improvements in the service since the last inspection and most of the requirements and recommendations made have been met or are in-hand. A system is now in place to regularly update foster carers' Criminal Record Bureau (CRB) checks and their medicals are updated more frequently. Placement planning meetings are now generally held at the outset of placements. Closer liaison between departments now ensures that training for foster carers is comprehensive and well organised. Foster carers are now notified of the outcome of their reviews.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

Young people say they get the support and advice they need in order to stay healthy. Foster carers ensure that young people are registered with general practitioners and attend the necessary dental, optician and other healthcare appointments. Foster carers encourage young people to lead healthy lifestyles by providing nutritious food and opportunity for physical activity.

Annual health assessments are provided for looked after young people and the looked after children nurse and foster carers have successfully encouraged a higher proportion of young people to participate in these assessments during the past year. A dedicated team jointly funded by the Children and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) and Southwark Social Services, known as Care Link, undertake direct work with young people and give excellent support and training to foster carers. Young people and foster carers also benefit from advice and guidance from a sexual health advisor and from the Children Looked After Health Project, which targets particularly vulnerable young people. Young people's health care is monitored at their six-monthly reviews. Foster carers are provided with training on a range of health care and health promotion topics and informative articles are regularly included in the foster carers' newsletter.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The references and checks undertaken by the council when the managers of the fostering service were appointed have been inspected on previous occasions. The service manager confirms that CRB checks are renewed every three years for all managers and staff working in the service. The service manager, fostering manager and practice managers continue to demonstrate that they are suitable people to be providing and managing a fostering service.

Foster carers are providing good care. They demonstrate care and concern for the young people placed with them and good understanding of their needs. Young people say they are integrated into foster carers' families and feel well cared for. Foster carers' accommodation is generally comfortable and sufficiently spacious. Supervising social workers are now expected to undertake annual health and safety checks of foster carers' homes. However, recent checks were not seen on all files. Most foster carers are very aware of health and safety issues but a small number of outstanding issues were noted. Foster carers are provided with all the necessary equipment and additional safety equipment is provided in those situations where foster carers and children could be at risk from birth families.

All the necessary references and checks are taken up as part of foster carers' assessments. Foster carers' CRB checks are subsequently updated at regular intervals and a system is now in place to facilitate this. Not all CRB checks for other members of foster carers' households and back-up carers are regularly updated. However, a system is currently being set up to ensure that this is done. Foster carers medical checks are now updated at least every five years. However, updated medical checks are not always undertaken before long-term placements are agreed with older foster carers by the fostering panel or when children of a different age range are placed with foster carers where there are already identified health issues.

Young people are well matched with foster carers and this is confirmed by young people and placing social workers. The matching process takes account of young people's racial and cultural backgrounds and the service does well at placing young people locally and together with their siblings. Foster carers are usually provided with adequate information about young people and do not report being pressurized into accepting placements. Placement agreement meetings are normally held for new placements, at which expectations, roles and responsibilities are agreed.

Foster carers' current terms of approval are not always clear in the records. They are sometimes changed at foster carers' annual reviews and signed off by the manager. However, these reviews do not always include sufficient assessment of a foster carer's ability to provide placements for a different age range or a greater number of young people. Young people are also sometimes placed outside foster carers' current terms of approval without a manager's authorisation or approval by the fostering panel. Exemptions are agreed where foster carers exceed the usual fostering limit.

Foster carers are aware of child protection issues and the importance of safe caring. Young people feel safe in placement and placing social workers share their confidence. Training is provided for foster carers in child protection and safe caring and written guidance included in their handbook. There have been a small number of child protection allegations against foster carers during the past year. These have been dealt with promptly and thoroughly and in line with the council's procedure. Foster carers are provided with training in how allegations against them are dealt with and have access to independent support through membership of the Fostering Network. Foster carer's reviews following allegations and the completion of child protection investigations are not normally considered by the fostering panel. A comprehensive risk assessment format has been developed for foster carers and their supervising social workers to complete for each foster home.

Foster carers are responding thoughtfully and constructively to young people's behaviour, with excellent intervention and support from the Care Link service, as previously mentioned. Young people report that rules in foster homes and foster carers' expectations of them are fair and reasonable. Social workers consider that foster carers are using effective strategies for dealing with young people's behaviour with little use of sanctions. Foster carers have benefited greatly from the excellent training provided for them in behaviour management. No young people report being bullied in foster homes and written guidance is provided for foster carers on what to do if a young person goes missing.

The agency employs suitable social work and administrative staff and those spoken to during the inspection were knowledgeable, able and committed to providing a good service. Staff recruitment records were seen at the last inspection when the council was found to have a robust and thorough procedure for vetting prospective staff. No new staff have been recruited since the last inspection and staff recruitment records were not inspected on this occasion.

The council has a very professional and effective fostering panel. The panel is properly constituted and its membership is diverse in terms of experience, racial background and gender. The panel chair is independent, qualified and experienced and exercises her responsibilities robustly. The fostering manager acts as professional advisor to the panel and the panel has access to medical and legal advice, if required. Panel meetings are well attended and panel members take their responsibilities seriously. Cases are dealt with very thoroughly, pertinent issues raised and appropriate decisions made. The panel is child-focused and expects to be informed about young people's views of any decisions the panel is being asked to make. Foster carers attend panel and the effective chairing and conduct of panel meetings enables them to contribute fully. By deferring decision-making on cases where it considers further work is required, the panel helps maintain a high standard in the assessment and review of foster carers. A senior manager acts as the council's decision maker and is guided by the panel's recommendations. The panel chair meets quarterly with the fostering managers and the agency's decision maker in order to exchange information and give feedback on the quality of work presented to the panel. Panel members undertake regular training jointly with the fostering service's staff. The minutes of panel meetings are clear and thorough and foster

carers and applicants are notified in writing of decisions made. There is a comprehensive written policy and procedure for the panel but this does not include full guidance on decision making in situations where all panel members are not in agreement.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The service has a same-culture placement policy and has recruited foster carers from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds. Diversity needs are considered in matching and young people are placed with foster carers who share their racial and cultural backgrounds, wherever possible. Additional support is provided to placements where this is not possible. The service is aware of the need to recruit additional carers from certain racial and cultural backgrounds in order to improve this aspect of matching and targeted recruitment is undertaken. Foster carers show respect for young people's choice of religion and support them in practising religions which differ from their own. The support which young people receive with racial and cultural identity issues and in the practice of their religion is considered in young people's statutory reviews and foster carers' annual reviews. Training is provided for foster carers in anti-discriminatory practice and working with diversity.

Foster carers encourage young people in developing their interests and talents. Targets are in place for young people's participation in hobbies and activities and this is monitored through statutory reviews. The fostering service provides grants for activities such as horse riding and ice skating and for equipment such as keyboards. Young people with disabilities and their families have access to respite placements provided by family link carers. These carers report that all the necessary equipment is provided by the fostering service for the use of young people.

Young people are receiving very good support from foster carers in their education. They report that foster carers encourage them in their education, provide help with homework and access to libraries, support and guide them in the choice of school and try to sort out any problems they have in school or college. Foster carers show pride in young people's achievements and work hard at encouraging reluctant young people back into education. They also liaise closely with schools, attend personal education planning meetings (PEPS) and other school meetings. Young people have facilities for study in foster homes, including the use of computers with internet access provided by the council. Young people in foster care have access to services provided by the council to support them in their education. The looked after children education team provides tutors at key stages, attends PEP meetings, negotiates with schools over suspensions and gives advice over school choice and other educational issues. Young people receive awards at an annual ceremony and GCSE and A-level exam results are reported to have improved this year. The council is also piloting a project designed to improve young people's reading. Foster carers are provided with training on supporting young people in their education.

A family link project within the fostering service recruits carers to provide respite

care for young people with disabilities. This service was included in the council's previous fostering inspection and was not looked at again specifically on this occasion. There is a waiting list for this service but the size of the project is limited by its current staffing level.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Foster carers give good support to young people in their contact with birth families. They appreciate the importance to young people of maintaining contact with family and friends and work hard at establishing positive relationships with birth families. Foster carers are sensitive to the needs of asylum seeking young people and the lack of information these young people often have about their families. Young people are encouraged to make friends and invite them to their foster homes. Support is provided by a dedicated contact team who assist with escorting young people and supervising contact. Training is provided for foster carers in contact and working in partnership.

Most young people say their foster carers always listen to them and take notice of their opinions. Foster carers appear to be communicating well with young people and ensuring that their views are heard and taken into account. Young people know who to speak to if they are unhappy or have a problem. A children's rights officer supports young people in getting their voices heard and independent advocacy can be provided by an independent organisation. A group of looked after young people meet together in a network known as 'Speaker Box' which provides a regular and informative magazine. Speaker Box reports to the council's corporate parenting panel and has influenced some change. Independent reviewing officers meet with young people prior to statutory reviews to check whether they have any complaints or concerns and to ensure that their views are heard in reviews. The fostering service is aware of the need for young people's views to be more directly incorporated into foster carers' annual reviews and this is in-hand.

Young people are given written information about the agency's complaints procedure and say they know how to complain. A small number of complaints have been made about the fostering service during the past year and these have been properly investigated. The manager is to be commended for meeting with young people to discuss the outcome of their complaints. However, complaints are not always resolved within the timescales laid down by the regulations and council procedures.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

Foster carers' allowances are above the minimum rates recommended by the Fostering Network. Allowances are paid directly into foster carers' bank accounts and no delays are reported. Enhanced allowances are paid where young people have special needs or placements are particularly challenging. Allowances are reviewed

annually and foster carers receive detailed information about the breakdown of their allowances. During the course of the inspection, foster carers raised some issues relating to allowances. The service has been made aware of these issues and may wish to consider them.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The service has a comprehensive Statement of Purpose, which has been recently reviewed and updated. Both the young people's guide and children's guide are well presented and contain all the necessary information.

The service is well managed by able and experienced managers and has benefited from having a full and stable management team which meets regularly. The management structure of the service appears to be adequate for the current staffing establishment and size of service but could not support further expansion. Lines of accountability are clear and staff receive regular supervision. Managers are accessible and support staff well through direct involvement in the work where necessary.

The council employs sufficient social work staff for the current size of the service but, as previously mentioned, current staffing levels are not sufficient for further expansion. Two of the social work posts in the fostering service have remained vacant throughout the past year, despite attempts to recruit. This has inevitably had some impact on the frequency of supervisory visits to foster homes and on recording. Social work staff appear to be able and effective and the service does not have a problem retaining staff. All but three of the social work staff are qualified and two of the unqualified social work staff are being supported by the council through social work training. The third unqualified worker has many years experience. All unqualified staff receive the appropriate support and supervision. The council provides an excellent range of training for staff and some staff in the fostering service are being supported through training leading to the post-qualifying award.

The administrative staff in the fostering service are managed from outside of the fostering service and there appears to be some lack of clarity over roles and responsibilities within this part of the service. There are two vacant posts within the administrative team and the transfer to a computer based recording system has been time consuming. Some delay in the setting up of effective administrative systems, organisation of records and accurate imputing has resulted.

Assessments of prospective foster carers are carried out by permanent staff and a small number of sessional staff. Assessments are competent and thorough and include analysis of information presented about applicants, in relation to their suitability as foster carers. Sufficient subsequent assessment of a foster carer's ability to provide placements for a different age range or a greater number of young people does not always appear to take place, as previously mentioned.

Foster carers are well supported and supervised by the service. Supervisory visits normally take place at six-to-eight week intervals although there have been some longer gaps. Staff shortages have inevitably led to some staff having high caseloads and some foster carers receiving their support and supervision from the managers. Foster carers praise the support given by their supervising social workers and the accessibility and responsiveness of the service as a whole. Supervising social workers also maintain contact with foster carers by phone and email and supervisory visits are constructive. Unannounced visits are made to foster homes and foster carers have access to support out-of-hours. A number of foster carers attend regular support group meetings, which they find supportive and informative. There is a dedicated support group for African carers and one for recently recruited foster carers provide by the Care Link service. Membership of the Fostering Network is provided and this offers an additional source of information and support. Foster carers also appreciate the parties and other communal events and the service has done well at retaining its foster carers.

Foster carers' approval is reviewed annually and reviews are generally up-to-date. They are carried out by independent reviewing officers which gives a welcome degree of independence. Reviews are comprehensive and include the views of foster carers and supervising social workers. The views of young people in placement during the previous year and of their social workers are not always made available to contribute to reviews. However, the service is taking steps to remedy this. Reviews normally include training undertaken by foster carers during the past year but do not always set out what training should be undertaken in the coming year. Completed reviews are signed off by the manager and first reviews are considered by the fostering panel. It has already been noted that foster carers reviews following child protection allegations and investigations do not normally go to panel. Foster carers are informed in writing of the outcome of their reviews.

Foster carers are offered a very good range of training and the take-up of courses has been fairly good. Foster carers report that training courses are interesting and informative. The service now expects foster carers to complete a number of core training courses within two years of being approved. Training for foster carers is organised and provided by the council's training section and there is now much closer liaison between this department and the fostering service. A sizeable proportion of Southwark's foster carers have obtained NVQ level 3 qualifications and some are studying for NVQ level 4. Foster carers do not have individual training profiles but this work is said to be in-hand. Foster carers are provided with a comprehensive handbook.

Written information concerning young people in placement is held in the child care teams and available to the fostering service on the IT system. Foster carers report generally receiving adequate written information about young people. Foster carers maintain their own records and some carers are to be commended for taking photographs and keeping full records of events. Foster carers also provide written information for young people's statutory reviews. Guidance on recording is provided through training and in the foster carers' handbook.

File records are maintained for each foster carer and these include the information listed in the regulations. However, not all files include records of all supervisory visits made to foster carers. The service is in the process of transferring from paper files to recording on the Care First IT system and this has inevitably been a time-consuming transition. Records of placements with each foster carer are maintained but some have gaps and the reasons for placements ending are not included. Signed foster care agreements are retained on files but foster carers' current terms of approval are not always clear in the records, as mentioned under a previous standard. The foster carers' register is not up-to-date. All computer and paper records are stored securely.

One of the social workers in the fostering service undertakes many of the current assessments of friends and family who wish to act as foster carers. These assessments are comprehensive, accompanied by the necessary checks and are considered by the fostering panel. These foster carers sign foster care agreements, are reviewed annually and receive supervisory visits. However, there are a number of friends and family foster carers who were approved before this member of staff came into post in 2004. It has not been possible to find out, as part of this inspection, whether full assessments have been undertaken in these cases and whether these foster carers have been approved by the fostering panel. It has also not been possible to ascertain whether CRB and other checks were carried out at the time of approval and subsequently updated. These foster carers do not appear to sign foster care agreements or receive support and supervision from a supervising social worker. Placements with these foster carers are said to be considered annually by the council's placement panel but annual reviews are not carried out.

Friends and family foster carers are paid allowances which are in line with those recommended by the Fostering Network. Those who are supervised and supported by the fostering service social worker have access to training but there has been no dedicated training for this group. They are not invited to support groups. A questionnaire was recently sent to this group of foster carers seeking their views about the training and support needed but there was said to be little response.

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
6	promote the health and development of young people placed with foster carers by ensuring that adequate safety standards are maintained in all foster homes. (Regulation 15(1))	01/02/2008
6	ensure that young people are only placed with foster carers	01/02/2008

	where the terms of foster carers' approval are consistent with the proposed placement. (Regulation 34(1))	
11	arrange for complaints in relation to young people and their outcomes to be monitored by the responsible person, with particular reference to the need to resolve complaints within the time scales laid down by the regulations. (Regulation 42(1))	01/02/2008
25	ensure that a record is maintained of the placements made with each foster carer, which includes all the necessary information. (Regulation 30(3))	01/03/2008
25	ensure that the register of foster carers is accurate and includes all the necessary information. (Regulation 31)	01/03/2008
32	review all friends and family foster carers to ensure that their assessment, approval, foster care agreement, and annual review is in line with the regulations. (Regulations 27, 28, 34 & 29)	01/04/2008

Recommendations

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

- arrange for foster carers' homes to be inspected annually. (NMS 6.2)
- arrange for foster carers to have updated medicals prior to placement decisions being made, where this is in the best interests of young people. (NMS 8.1)
- ensure that all foster carers' current terms of approval are clear in their records in order to facilitate matching. (NMS 8.1)
- submit foster carers' annual reviews to the fostering panel following child protection allegations and investigations. (NMS 9.1)
- amend the written procedure for the fostering panel to include decision-making when all members of the panel are not in agreement. (NMS 30.2)
- ensure the service has an appropriate level of administrative support. Also, that roles and responsibilities are defined and the management of the administrative team promotes the development of the fostering service as a whole. (NMS 16.10)
- arrange for foster carers' annual reviews to include an appraisal of training and development needs which is documented in the review report. (NMS 23.8)
- ensure that foster carers' files include records of all supervisory meetings (NMS 22.6)