

London Borough of Sutton Fostering Services

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

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Inspector	Cheryl Carter / Caroline Wilson
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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

Sutton Fostering Service is a Local Authority fostering service that provides emergency, short term and long term, kinship and specialist placements for children and young people. The service also provide an out of hours service which means that foster carers can provide emergency placements and respite foster care for planned short term breaks. There are also a number of foster cares approved to look after the children of relatives within their extended family.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

The inspection focused on the key National Minimum Standards and recommendations made at the last inspection.

The fostering service has very clear policies and procedures in place. Equality and diversity is promoted in the fostering service. Children's health needs are a priority. The fostering service works very closely with the health and education professionals to ensure that the health educational needs of children are met. The inspector recognised areas of good practice in these areas.

The service is well managed . There were some new recommendations made at this inspection. Recommendations made at the last inspection have all been taken on board.

Improvements since the last inspection

Criminal Record Bureaus Checks for all foster carers have been updated. Foster Carers are now recording significant daily events for each child in their care. There is now a system in place to inform Ofsted of significant incidents.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

Children's health needs are met via a range of resources provided by the Fostering Service. The fostering service work closely with the Looked after Children (LAC) health team who has responsibility for making sure that children in foster care have access to the full range of services. Children's files have health care plans with children's medical history. Foster carers receive training and support provided by the fostering service to ensure that the health needs of children are being met. Foster

carers have training in First Aid and other health issues.

The LAC team work closely with other professionals including two psychologists. The Local Authority is committed to promoting the health of Looked After Children and has taken steps to support all looked after children. Children have access to a number of resources including primary health care services and CAMHS. All children are registered with a local doctor. Health needs of children are recorded on file and significant health needs are recorded on the LAC forms.

In most cases foster carers are given relevant information regarding children's health. However a small number report that placing social workers do not always give enough background information on children when they are initially placed which in some cases could take months to be provided. The fostering service is aware of this issue. Foster carers are able to promote the day to day health and well being of a child and this is appraised during the assessment process, training and monitoring visits.

The service supports foster carers and monitors how children are cared for to ensure that the service is meeting the needs of the child.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The fostering service manager and the management team and staff are suitably qualified and experienced. Staff files contain completed application forms, proof of identification, written references and Criminal Record Bureau (CRB) clearance and proof of qualifications which meets with the relevant legislation.

Foster carer's homes are of a good standard, comfortable warm and well decorated. Health and Safety checks are carried out as part of the assessment process to ensure that children placed with foster carers are protected and that the environment in which they live meet safety standards.

Children are provided with an opportunity to comment on the quality of care that is provided by their carers as the service ensures that social workers meet with children on an individual basis once a month.

When considering a placement the child's racial, cultural, religious and linguistic needs are taken into account in the matching process, however there are not enough carers from minority ethnic groups and this has resulted in some trans-cultural placements. In these circumstances carers are provided with the additional identified support such as training to compensate for any gaps in the match between the young person and the foster carer. These placements are reviewed monthly.

All staff and foster carers receive training in safeguarding children and young people. This training is regularly updated. Policies on how to deal with an allegations of abuse against a carer and permissible measures of control and discipline are in place.

There are also policies on bullying and unauthorised absence. These policies form part of the foster carer's handbook. In the policy relating to managing behaviour mention is made that carers may have to restrain a child. The policy on restraint is included in the foster carers handbook. It is unclear whether there is any training on restraint or whether restraint training is available.

The London child protection procedures are followed where there is an allegation of abuse made against a foster care. Support for the carer is available from Sutton foster carers' association. Records are kept of child protection allegations, the investigation and outcomes so that the service can monitor and identify any themes and patterns of allegations made. There is no auditing of minor complaints made by children to ensure that all complaints made are taken seriously and addressed in relation to relevant guidelines and procedures.

Panel minutes are detailed and provide sufficient evidence to demonstrate the proceedings or the reasons for the recommendations made. The panel members receive training to ensure that they effectively provide a quality and assurance function in relation to the assessment process. Fostering panels have access to medical expertise as required. In addition one of the independent members is a former foster child and there is also a foster carer on the panel.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The fostering service attempts to address issues of diversity. The placements manager and the fostering manager highlighted the work done to promote awareness of diversity. Most social workers spoken to say they are satisfied with the way the service promotes diversity and equality, however from the evidence gathered and discussions with some foster carers the issues of trans-cultural placements was raised. 27% of foster carers in Sutton are from minority communities, this is excess of the proportion of Looked After Children, however there are occasions when children are placed with foster carers that do not match their racial or cultural identity.

All children of school age have personal education plans. Sutton has an Education worker who gives children and carers additional support and tuition. Education and promoting educational achievement is a priority. All the children in foster care have an education placement, and the initiatives that are in place for the Looked after Children have resulted in marked improvement with school attendances, education and examination results. Children's achievements are recognised at an annual ceremony.

Children placed for short term breaks are protected by the same policies and procedures as those placed for long term foster placements. In particular, birth parents remain central to the promotion of health and educational needs where appropriate.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

Contact with family and friends are encouraged and promoted. Foster carers are clear about their roles in relation to children maintaining contact with their birth parents and significant others. Children are able to have contact with their parents and siblings where it is safe to, in accordance with care plans. Contact arrangements are monitored regularly, particularly when potential difficulties are anticipated.

Children have a variety of opportunities to express their views. The child can speak to their carers, their social workers and there is information about other independent agencies such as Child Line and Ofsted. Children are also encouraged to contribute to their reviews by filling in their questionnaires prior to their review meetings and by attending their reviews. There are young people forums whereby children have the opportunity to voice their opinions and the service also run a group for the birth children of foster carers to discuss issues that may arise for them.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

Pathway planning for children looked after lacks clarification of professional roles and dates that tasks must be completed, to ensure that children develop skills, competence and the knowledge necessary for adult living. There is a disparity of experiences of effective support in this area. Some foster carers felt that independence training delayed and impacted on the service provided. In addition, aftercare could be improved to help children who may have housing difficulties. Other experiences were more positive, where Pathway Planning was undertaken at an appropriate age for the child and foster carers were supported in providing children in their care with age and developmentally appropriate opportunities for learning independent skills.

Foster carers receive an allowance and agreed expenses for each child placed. Payments are made promptly and at the agreed time.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The Statement of Purpose is very detailed and sets out the vision and values of the service. This is made available to staff and foster carers. The Statement of Purpose has recently been updated to include up to date information about the fostering service. Children have an understanding of what the service sets out to do for them as they are all provided with a copy of the 'Children's Guide'. The fostering service benefits from staff and foster carers that are committed to achieving the best outcomes for children and there are good support systems in place. The leadership of the service is robust with a qualified and experienced staff team. The foster carers

records are well maintained however some children's records are poorly organised and do not contain all the information about the care and progress of a child.

The service is monitored effectively and is well managed. The manager and deputy manager is experienced and provide support to the fostering team. There are clear lines of accountability and a back up system to cover managers' absences.

There is a staff team with qualified, skilled and experienced workers. The staff are well motivated and are very committed to supporting foster carers and the children they look after. The inspector received four responses to questionnaires and these were very positive about this service.

Foster carers are happy with the support systems that available within the Local Authority. There is a duty system operated by the service so support is available by telephone, including out of hours. Foster carers are supported by their peers. Support groups available include, the foster carers support group, Teenage fostering group, Children with disabilities, and Black carers' support group. The supervising social workers and foster carers are very positive about the value of the support groups and felt that this is an opportunity for foster carers to support each other and share experiences about issues that arise in their day to day caring.

The supervising social workers are well supported by their managers . The team also have good organisation and administrative support and a computerised data system.

Supervising social workers are able to meet timescales of foster carers assessment and approvals. Case loads are manageable. Supervising social workers have an understanding of the role of placing social workers. This has improved since representatives from the LAC Team attend the Fostering team meetings and a Social Worker from the Fostering Team attends the LAC team meeting. This exchange occurs monthly.

Foster carers are provided with a copy of the Foster Carer Handbook, that contains information that keeps them up to date and informed about what the service expects of them and to enable them to look after the children placed with them. The foster carers' handbook and foster carers' agreement details how foster carers will be supported by the service.

Foster carers records are monitored by the supervising social workers. Children's records are maintained by the placing social worker and are accessible in the hard copy format and via the PARIS computer system. There were some gaps in the Looked After Documentation on some children's files. Some were in a poor condition, difficult to follow and showed no evidence of management monitoring either to identify practice issues or concerns. The Borough is moving towards a paperless system for recording and storing of all information relating to children and their care.

Foster carers are given the necessary equipment to care for children and young people. Foster carers are generally aware about the reasons why the child or young person was being fostered, however, as previously mentioned, information was

sometimes difficult to obtain from the placing Social Workers.

Confidential information about children is stored in a lockable cabinet by foster carers and the Local Authority. Foster carers use a diary to record information about the children in their care.

Foster carers are aware of the complaint process and how complaints are monitored. The fostering service keeps records of allegations of abuse and complaints, however complaints that are seen as less serious are not always recorded.

Foster Carers who are family members receive the same service as other carers. They are regularly visited by supervising social workers and value the support offered to them. They are assessed through the usual procedures and have access to the same training and support opportunities as mainstream foster carers.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Recommendations

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

- ensure that foster carers have all the relevant information relating to children's health needs (NMS 12 & 24)
- ensure that all complaints, regardless of how trivial are recorded with dates, and with outcomes of any investigations(NMS25)