

London Borough of Barking & Dagenham Fostering Service

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

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Inspector	Sharon Lewis
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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

The fostering service provides planned and emergency foster care for any child under the age of 18. Children receive individualised placements which are short-term or long-term. A specialist short break respite service supports children who have a disability. Children also benefit from placement with their family or friends within kinship arrangements. Children who have behavioural challenging needs receive a contracted service from an independent fostering agency. The culturally diverse staff team includes a team manager, deputy manager, qualified social workers who undertake supervision and recruitment duties.

The Group manager Placements has the overall responsibility of the fostering service. This Group manager is accountable to the Divisional Director, Safeguarding and Rights, Children's Services. The Divisional director is also the agency decision maker.

At the time of this inspection 118 children were placed with the service. Children benefited from 76 approved fostering households.

Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

This announced full inspection was undertaken to ensure the children within the fostering service receive the best possible care, in addition to examining the compliance with the previous requirements highlighted at the last inspection. The inspection focused on the key standards for fostering, in addition to standards relating to independent living and payments to foster carers. All outcome areas were examined.

The fostering service demonstrated a marked improvement. The fostering service is well managed and has a sustained track record of high performance. Outstanding judgments relate to the outcomes areas of the Organisation, Enjoying and Achieving and Making a Positive Contribution. The other outcome areas were all judged to be good.

Improvements since the last inspection

The fostering service has successfully addressed all requirements and recommendations from the last inspection. The service was asked to review and present to the fostering panel all carers operating outside of their approval. Children benefit from better placement planning. The practice of them being placed with foster carers out of their category range is rarely undertaken. It was requested that foster carers receive the child's necessary statutory paperwork. The team manager

closely monitors the provision of this information. This enables foster carers to better meet the needs of the children in their care. At the last inspection all foster carers did not have an allocated social worker. Each foster carer now receives individualised support from a named social worker. Previous recommendations requested amendments to documentation and further development of training. Foster carers benefit from a new handbook and a reviewed training programme.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Children benefit from a range of initiatives which demonstrate a commitment to improving their health. Children and foster carers have access to the awarding winning Looked After Children Health and Education Service (LACHES). Foster carers are made aware of the importance of health, dental and optical checks for all children in their care. This includes registration with a doctor and attending health appointments. The majority of children have up to date dental checks and medical checks.

Children and foster carers attend multi agency health promotion events. Nurses hold drop-in events at a local centre. The designated Children in Care Nurse provides direct liaison with and support to foster carers. The Children and Adolescent Mental Health Service worker holds monthly consultation sessions for foster carers. These sessions provide an opportunity for foster carers to discuss challenging behaviours children may be exhibiting.

Foster carers and staff receive training which equips them with the skills to discuss sexual health. Young people have access to a specialist drugs worker in the LACHES. Foster carers receive basic health promotion training. The foster carers handbook also relevantly addresses substance misuse, physical, emotional and sexual health. Foster carers undertake first aid qualifications, however some are not up-to-date. The fostering service acknowledges the need for foster carers to receive further health related training. Plans are in progress to address this area of development.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

Children receive assurance that the fostering service is managed by suitably qualified and experienced people. Managers describe their 'passion' for children's social work. Children benefit from the introduction of new ideas and innovative practice.

The fostering service seeks to promote and protect children's physical, mental and emotional welfare. Children generally thrive within nurturing homes. Foster carers offer quality care, within set boundaries. Foster carers work in partnership with professionals to manage challenging behaviour. The fostering service appropriately manages poor care practices. These may result in further training or the eventual de-registration of the foster carer.

Children benefit from the fostering service's matching procedures. The fostering service matches appropriately to meet each child's individual needs. The fostering service strives to ensure each placement meets the child's racial and cultural needs. Where a suitable 'in borough' placement is unavailable, the service considers independent fostering agencies. If a transracial placement is made, additional support is readily available.

The fostering service effectively safeguards children. There are good partnerships with the local safeguarding board. The service manages child protection concerns and referrals well. Whistle blowing and complaints policies support an approach which addresses the overall context and environment of children's safety. Children have their own specially designed complaints guide. This document is clear, colourful, culturally reflective and includes names of advocacy services.

Recruitment procedures and policies protect the employment of unsuitable people. The organisation has recruitment and selection policy standards. The organisational development plan includes a 'safer people for safer services' policy. The efficient use of deregistration procedures enable the fostering service to discharge unsuitable foster carers.

The fostering panel demonstrates good outcomes for children. Panel frequency increases to accommodate the high volume of assessments. Panel discussions are pertinent and focus on the needs of children. Panel seek specialist guidance to ensure the following of good practice. The agency decision maker also evidences their autonomy and a commitment to safeguarding issues. The fostering panel has an experienced independent Chair. Panel membership includes expertise in education, health, fostering and the voluntary sector. The fostering panel reflects diverse cultures and is predominately female. There is no openly gay or lesbian representation on the Panel. Fostering staff and panel members receive training in assessing same sex couples.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The fostering service excels in the opportunities available which enhance children's life chances. The fostering service actively seeks to recruit carers that can meet the diverse needs of the borough's children. Policies, procedures and practice promote gender, religion, ethnic origin, language, culture, disability and sexuality issues. Training, guidance, assessments and support reflect the diverse needs of children. The organisation also promotes equality through the Anti Discrimination Charter.

Children are succeeding in raising expectations and achieving in education. A high number of young people are attending university. Young people have the opportunity to attend university taster days. Exam results through all areas, are continually improving. Children benefit from the provision of computers, a homework club, booster classes, residential courses, individual tuition, learning mentors and a range

of other programmes. The borough promotes innovative and creative approaches to education, which address the individual child's needs. External verifiers recognise the borough's achievements, resulting in awards for the LACHES team.

Children are able to pursue their career aspirations and unique talents. Fostering households encourage children to participate in various activities and maximise their potential. The Annual Children in Care Achievement Award Celebrations provides recognition of children's efforts and achievements.

Children with disabilities benefit from comprehensive short break procedures and a designated short break co-ordinator. The procedures highlight disabled children as being 'first and foremost children' with their own 'individual characters, preferences and needs'. Foster carers receive guidance, training, equipment and support to meet complex needs. Families benefit from a flexible, service which enables weekend breaks, day care only or an overnight stay depending on their specific needs. Children have the opportunity to broaden their horizons, make new friends, develop independent living and participate in varied activities. Parents equally receive a valued break from their caring routines. Arrangements recognise that parents remain the main carers for the child. Long term links provide stability and the building of strong positive relationships between the birth and foster family.

The service plans to increase the range of respite options for children who have a disability. The service also hopes to develop fostering as a preventive resource to support children in the community. The aim being for foster carers to act as buddies for families of children in need. This may extend to arranging flexible respite breaks for families in crisis.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

Fostering procedures and practices acknowledge the importance of contact for children. Contact is seen as critical for enabling children to retain a sense of their roots and origins. Foster carers help children make sense of their family relationships and enable successful contact arrangements. During the preparation training foster carers are able to fully explore this matter. The fostering service encourages foster carers to have contact in their own homes, or to supervise contact at other venues. Contact arrangements form part of the placement plan.

The service has a participation strategy for the full and active involvement of children at every level, including creative methods to establish the views of younger children. The service involves young people in the recruitment of foster carers and staff. Young people form a marketing group which directly influences foster carer's recruitment planning. A child's logo design is used on all foster carer recruitment marketing material.

There are groups or other opportunities for children to meet up together. Children participate in a marketing group, youth council and have their own social club.

Children's participation in discussions and decision making about their own futures is fully integrated into service policy and planning and the service has developed imaginative methods of enabling this. An example is a competition to rename the Leaving Care team. Children's suggestion results in the change to the 'Learn 2 Live' team.

Groups of children provide consultation and advice to the fostering service provider and this has a direct impact on policy and practice, on evaluation and change. Children with experience of the fostering system have a role in the planning and delivery of training of staff and carers. They receive support to undertake this responsibility and find the experience rewarding and valuing.

Staff and carers develop opportunities to think in new ways and to acquire the confidence to try new approaches, so as to support all children in effectively participating. A range of age appropriate questionnaires enable children to feedback their views into the statutory review system. These culturally reflective questionnaires are available on the children's website. Children additionally benefit from their involvement in family group conferences.

The service works in partnership with parents. Where the service provides short breaks, the service ensures that it complements the roles and responsibilities of parents and parents are fully involved and feel listened to. The service meets the needs of children as well as parents. Placements only proceed where the child is happy and their needs can be appropriately met.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

The fostering service prepares young people to develop the skills they need for adulthood. The service has effective links with the other local services, including the leaving care team. Pathway plans detail young people's needs. Foster carers receive allowances, information and training to continue to offer a high degree of support to young people with independent living. Young people benefit from the flexible service which enables them to remain in placements after the age of 18.

Foster carers receive competitive allowances which exceed the national minimum rates. Foster carers benefit from prompt payments. Enhancements are available for complex needs. One off payments are payable when completing mandatory training, National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) training and for referring someone who is later approved. Ongoing monthly payments reward those foster carers who assist with peer mentoring and buddying. All foster carers are not fully aware of additional financial support which may assist them in meeting children's needs.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

The Statement of Purpose clearly outlines the vision and values of the fostering service. Service delivery and the day to day practice of managers and staff demonstrates a commitment to continual improvement. Foster carers, staff and children identify positive changes. Young people benefit from an informative filofax which relates to the 'Every Child Matters' outcome areas. Foster carers receive a handbook which includes changes in legislation, procedures and reflects good practice.

The fostering service effectively focuses on the best outcomes for children. The organisation has external verification from winning at the Children and Young People Services Awards 2007 for the Best Corporate Parent and LACHES team. They were also winners at the Association for Public Service Excellence Awards 2007 and receiving best achievement in Children's Services at a local government award ceremony. Experienced, dynamic management strengthen the service and provide clear leadership. Managers express a creative drive to improve working practices, processes and systems. The organisation hold regular management meetings and there is a clear back-up system to cover managers' absences.

Managers evidence a proactive approach to partnership working. The fostering managers attend the North East London Consortium with neighbouring boroughs. The fostering service also facilitates regular meetings with their independent fostering agency providers. The service operates within a culture of openness and inclusion. Managers are visible and available to children, carers and staff. Children have access to their own website which includes relevant information on being looked after, fostering, reviews and contact numbers.

Staff benefit from a range of comprehensive policies and procedures which promote children's needs. An integrated computerised recording system enables clear case tracking and recording. Fostering social workers and children's social workers clearly understand their roles. They work closely in partnership for the best interests of the child.

The fostering service has a strong management commitment to the continuous development of staff and foster carers. Foster carers receive financial incentives to complete their NVQ training and to become assessors. Children participate in the structured induction and training plan of foster carers. Future training will also incorporate the new Children's Workforce Development Council Standards.

The organisation continually monitors the service to ensure it relevantly meets children's needs. A recent publication outlines the progress made concerning the Children and Young People's Plan. The fostering service has a measurable set of objectives. Managers recognise what the services does well and has an action plan to build on their success. The Members' Corporate Parenting Group additionally

scrutinises the organisation's corporate parenting responsibilities.

Children benefit from a diverse staff team which reflects various cultures and expertise. Staff receive ongoing training, regular supervision, team meetings and away days. Great efforts have been made to recruit more Black and Asian carers to meet the needs of the borough's children. The fostering service uses a competency based assessment process for carers.

The fostering service acknowledges the importance of appropriately supporting their foster carers. There are various support groups including an established foster carer's association. Arrangements are in place to further introduce support groups to include individual preparation groups and diverse cultural needs. A regular newsletter informs foster carers of new developments within the service. Foster carers benefit from regular focused meetings with their supervisory social worker. The family group conference service assists with supporting problematic issues. Foster carer conferences and award ceremonies formally recognise the professionalism of the fostering role. The organisation assists with the practicalities of fostering. A preferential arrangement with the Housing Department enables a specific number of foster carers to obtain more suitable properties. There is also a designated kinship care staff member who oversees and supports kinship 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):

- provide foster carers with a wider range of health related and first aid training [NMS 12]
- inform foster carers of the additional financial support they may receive, to assist them in meeting children's needs [NMS 29]
- consider extending the diversity of representation on the fostering panel [NMS 30].