

London Borough of Croydon Fostering Service

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

The London Borough of Croydon's fostering service provides placements for children looked after by the council and short breaks for children with disabilities. The general fostering service consists of two teams, one responsible for the recruitment and assessment of foster carers and the other for the supervision, review, training and support of foster carers. A third team is responsible for arranging placements with in-house and independent foster carers and residential homes. Each team is staffed by a manager and a number of senior practitioners, social workers or placement officers and administrators. Overall management of the general fostering service is provided by the service manager for fostering and adoption. The short breaks service is separately managed as a resource team within the service for children with disabilities.

The London Borough of Croydon has the largest population of any London borough and one of the highest numbers of looked after young people. The fostering service seeks to provide foster home placements for young people from a wide range of racial, cultural and religious backgrounds, many of whom are unaccompanied young people from overseas. This situation places significant demands on Croydon's fostering service.

At the time of the inspection, there were 261 young people placed with 184 Croydon foster carers, including friends and family carers.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

Croydon council is providing a good fostering service, some aspects of which are very good. Foster carers are providing a high standard of care in safe homes. Young people are appropriately placed but the reasons for making placements outside foster care's terms of approval are not always fully recorded. Allegations against foster carers are properly dealt with and the fostering panel continues to be very thorough and effective. Foster carers are doing well at meeting the health care needs of young people and supporting them in their education. Young people's diversity needs are well met by the service and good support is given to young people in maintaining contact with their families. Foster carers are listening to young people and the recently established advocacy, rights and participation service is supporting young people in making their views heard. The assessment, support and supervision of foster carers is strong and a very good range of training is provided. The service is well managed and staff are able and experienced.

Improvements since the last inspection

All of the three requirements made at the last inspections have been addressed and mostly met. The process for authorising placements outside foster carers' terms of approval has improved and these cases are now considered by the fostering panel without delay. The foster care agreement now includes all the necessary items and foster carers are notified of their continuing approval following annual reviews.

Caseloads held by supervising social workers have been reduced and foster carers are now visited more frequently. Foster carers are no longer conditionally approved before checks and enquiries are complete and staff do not commence work for the fostering service before their in-house Criminal Record Bureau (CRB) checks have been obtained by Croydon Council.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Foster carers are doing well at caring for young people's health. Young people say that foster carers support them in their health care and encourage them to have healthy lifestyles. Young people's health care is checked at their statutory reviews and these confirm that young people are registered with general practitioners and attend the necessary dental, optician and other healthcare appointments. Foster carers endeavour to promote healthy living by providing nutritious food and opportunity for physical activity. Signed consents for emergency medical treatment are not on file or with foster carers for all young people.

Annual health assessments are provided for looked after young people. The department is aware of the need to improve on the uptake of these and measures have been put in place to address this. The one designated nurse for looked after children has continued to provide health care advice to young people, foster carers and social workers and links with community health care professionals. However, Croydon Council has a large number of looked after young people and this level of provision allows for only limited targeting of vulnerable young people, advice to foster carers and health promotion.

The local Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service has a dedicated team for looked after young people which continues to provide a service to young people and foster carers. However, young people and foster carers report mixed experiences of this service's intervention and a rapid response is not always possible. There are said to be plans for the expansion of this service for which funding is available.

A good range of training is provided for foster carers on a range of health related topics and training in first aid is part of foster carers' compulsory core training.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The service is well managed by able and experienced staff. Their recruitment references and checks were checked at previous inspections and not inspected again on this occasion.

Overall, young people benefit from very good care in foster homes. Foster carers are caring, empathetic, child focused and demonstrate good understanding of young people's needs. Young people say their foster carers are loving, supportive and take good care of them and this is confirmed by placing social workers. Foster carers' accommodation is generally comfortable. Young people are pleased with their well decorated and personalised bedrooms, which are not shared inappropriately. Some foster carers' homes do not provide a great deal of communal or play space for the number of children accommodated and this is not always fully taken into account when placements are made in excess of foster carers' terms of approval. However, such foster carers are nevertheless providing a good standard of care and compensate for any lack of space by regularly taking young people out. Foster homes appear to be safe and health and safety checks are undertaken every three years and after accommodation moves. The safety of foster carers' homes is confirmed at their annual reviews. Foster homes are said to be inspected annually to ensure they meet the needs of young people but this is not always documented.

All the necessary references and checks are taken up as part of foster carers' assessments. Foster carers CRB checks and those of family members and back-up carers are subsequently updated at regular intervals. A very efficient system is in place to manage this and the service is to be commended for maintaining a dedicated post with responsibility for this important work.

Young people are generally 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 trans-racial placements cannot be made without the agreement of a manager and then of the fostering panel. The service does well at placing siblings together and young people greatly appreciate this. Many unaccompanied young people are referred from the locally based Home Office for same-day placements and a large proportion of placements are therefore made in emergencies. The amount of information provided about young people prior to and at the time of placement varies according to circumstances and how much is known about young people. The service does well at ensuring that placement agreement meetings are held at the outset of placements. These meetings are used to agree the purpose of placements, roles, expectations and day-to-day issues and minutes are retained on file. Foster placement agreements do not currently refer to elements of matching taken into consideration when placements are agreed and any gaps which may indicate the need for additional support.

Foster carers' terms of approval are clear and consistent in the records and foster carers do not report being pressurized into accepting placements. Placements are

sometimes made outside foster carers' current terms of approval and progress has been made in refining the process for approval in these cases. Exemption forms are completed but these do not always give full information in support of applications, though this is said to be given verbally to the approving manager. The same form is used for exemptions to the 'usual fostering limit' but it does not ask for the information specified in schedule 7 to the Children Act. Most applications for exemptions are approved promptly by managers but there is delay in some cases. Applications are then dealt with robustly by the fostering panel, which requires plans for young people and time limits. However, where the panel is asked to approve foster carers to take young people outside their current age range, some additional written assessment and evidence of their ability do so is not always provided though this may be given verbally. Foster carers are informed in writing of panel's approval of exemptions but letters do not include the names of young people where the exemption is to the 'usual fostering limit'. Finally, although the documentation in support of placements outside foster carers' terms of approval is not always sufficiently robust, as described above, there is no evidence that placements are inappropriate or detrimental to young people.

Young people feel safe in placement and foster carers are aware of child protection issues and the importance of safe caring. Training is provided and written guidance included in the foster carers' handbook. Safe caring guidelines are said to be developed for each foster carer as part of the assessment process. There have been a number of child protection allegations against foster carers during the past year. Decisions as to whether allegations should lead to child protection strategy meetings and investigations or to investigations into standards of care are made by the child care teams. Cases where strategy meetings are held are then dealt with in line with the council's procedure. Other allegations and complaints are generally followed up promptly. Young people are interviewed and investigative interviews conducted with foster carers. Decisions about the outcome of these investigations are said to be made jointly by the child care teams and the fostering service.

Foster carers are generally responding positively and constructively to young people's behaviour. Young people report that rules in foster homes are fair and that foster carers' expectations are reasonable. Some foster carers demonstrate excellent understanding, tolerance and skill in dealing with quite challenging behaviour and placing social workers praise them for this. Not all young people are receiving the therapeutic help they need and foster carers attribute this partly to the frequent changes in social worker in some cases. Training is provided in managing challenging behaviour. Restraint has been used by foster carers on two occasions during the past year and managers plan to ensure that foster carer training deals appropriately with this aspect of behaviour management. Young people do not report being bullied. Foster carers are aware of some young people's vulnerability and are vigilant.

The service employs suitable social work and administrative staff who are knowledgeable and committed to providing a good service. Records of permanent staff include all the necessary references and checks, apart from documentary evidence of social work registration with the General Social Care Council in all cases. There are good systems in place for the recruitment of agency, locum and freelance

sessional staff though copies of checks made are not always retained.

The council continues to have a very effective fostering panel. The panel chair is professional, independent and exercises his responsibilities robustly. The panel is properly constituted and has diverse membership, which provides panel with a wide range of experience and skills. The service is aware of the need to recruit a member who has been looked after or whose child has, when a suitable vacancy arises. Panel meetings are well attended, cases are dealt with very thoroughly and appropriate decisions made. The panel is child-focused and ensures that plans are in place for young people. A senior manager acts effectively as the council's decision maker and notifies foster carers and applicants in writing of decisions made. The minutes of panel meetings are clear and thorough, approved by the panel and signed off by the chair. The panel chair meets regularly with the agency's decision maker and fostering managers in order to exchange information and give feedback on the quality of work presented to the panel. Annual training is provided for panel members. Panel members are properly recruited and the necessary references and checks are in place.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The staffing of the fostering service is diverse and the service has done well at recruiting foster carers from different racial and cultural backgrounds in order to reflect the wide range of young people needing placement. As previously mentioned, the council is committed to same-race placement for young people. There are a small number of trans-racial placements, for which management and then panel agreement is sought. Young people are pleased to be placed with foster carers who share their racial and cultural backgrounds, speak their language and know where they have come from. Foster carers are also doing well at supporting young people who do not share their cultural background and religion. Foster carers are getting help from other foster carers and friends over providing the right food for young people and are ensuring that young people have the facilities and support to practice their faith. Foster carers looking after young people with disabilities consider that they are adequately supported.

Excellent support and training continues to be given to Black and Asian foster carers who attend a very active and popular support group, provided specifically for these carers. There is also a dedicated support group for foster carers who are caring for unaccompanied young people. Some foster carers do not fully support the council's same race placement policy and practice and the rationale for running a Black & Asian support group. The service recognises this and its training implications. The support which young people receive with diversity issues and in the practice of their religion is considered as part of their statutory reviews, in foster carers' annual reviews and by the fostering panel. Training is provided for foster carers in equalities and diversity.

Foster carers are giving good support to young people in their education. They liaise

with schools, give encouragement and help with home work and show pride in young people's achievements. Foster carers support young people in their choice of school. Young people say that foster carers encourage them in their education and remind them of its importance. Computers have been provided by the council for two-thirds of its foster carers but the funding for this is no longer available. In some cases, young people have bought their own computers. The fostering service has endeavoured to reclaim and relocate computers when foster carers give up fostering and to provide repair and maintenance for those computers in service.

Most foster carers report that they get help from the fostering service in supporting young people in their education. Foster carers attend school meetings and open evenings, including young people's personal education planning meetings (PEPS). These meetings are not always held on time but this is outside the control of the fostering service. The service has done well at placing young people locally so that they can continue attending the same school and there have been very few cases where a change of school has been necessary due to the location of placement. The number of young people excluded from school is said to have dropped over the past year and school places are identified for young people moving into the area without delay.

A Looked after Children Education Team provides a range of services to support young people in their education. This includes supporting young people in securing school places quickly and when excluded, providing homework clubs and help with reading. The team is concerned about the delay in some young people's PEPs and is addressing this. An annual awards ceremony continues to be held and training is provided for foster carers in education for success.

The council continues to provide family-based short breaks for children with disabilities. This scheme is provided as part of the children with disabilities service and is managed separately from the general fostering service. The short-breaks service was included in the council's previous fostering inspection and was not looked at again on this occasion.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Young people are well supported by foster carers in their contact with birth families and friends. Foster carers work hard at establishing positive relationships with birth families and appreciate young people's feelings about their families and their need to maintain contact. Foster carers are sensitive to young people's sadness at being separated from their birth families and the effect this can sometimes have on their welfare and behaviour. Foster carers are also aware of the needs of asylum seeking young people who often lack information about the welfare and whereabouts of their families. A dedicated local contact centre provides good facilities for young people's contact with their families and the use of this venue is said to have increased. Some contact still takes place in council office facilities, which are said to lack space, toys and other equipment and facilities. However, senior managers are aware of this

shortfall and there are plans for improvement.

Most young people report that foster carers listen to them and take notice of their opinions. Foster carers appear to be communicating well with young people and supporting them in getting their views heard. Some young people have had frequent changes in social worker and as many as five social workers in the past year. In some cases, this has made it difficult for young people to get their views heard and acted upon and has resulted in delays in long term planning. Independent reviewing officers meet with young people prior to statutory reviews in order to hear their views and interpreters are used where necessary. However, a small number of reviews have been arranged at short notice and at times when foster carers are unable to attend. This is outside of the control of the fostering service. The fostering service has done well at including young people's views in foster carers' annual reviews.

A young people's rights, advocacy and participation service known as 'Rightfully Yours' has been developed for the council by the organisation NCH over the past eighteen months. This service has provided advocacy for a significant number of young people and has supported them in getting their concerns dealt with quickly and without the need to resort to the formal complaints procedure. Groups have been run for young people and training provided for staff. A conference was recently held, with the aim of giving young people a voice.

Young people say they know who to speak to if they are unhappy or have a problem and that they know how to complain. Eye-catching written information about expressing concerns and making complaints is provided for young people by the 'Rightfully Yours' service.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

There are no key standards under this outcome and it has therefore not been judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The service's Statement of Purpose is comprehensive and has recently been reviewed and updated. Young people are provided with a guide to foster care and also with a publication entitled 'Living away from Home', which is given to all looked after young people. Both publications are informative and well presented.

The service is well managed by able and experienced managers who work well together. Managers are accessible and supportive and staff have regular supervision. However, the service manager and operational managers for the fostering support and recruitment and assessment teams are acting-up into their

posts and these arrangements have been in place for a number of months. Both acting operational managers were previously deputy managers in their teams and have good knowledge of their services. However, both deputy posts are now vacant and the operational managers are effectively having to carry both workloads, though some management responsibilities and staff supervision is undertaken by senior practitioners in the fostering support team. The workloads for both acting operational managers are heavy and it is to their credit that they have continued to provide effective management. Senior managers are aware of the need to make permanent management appointments and this is in-hand. Managers are accessible and supportive and lines of accountability are clear. The work of staff is monitored through regular supervision and file audits.

As a result of growth in the service over recent years, the fostering support team is now very large. Some staff find that team meetings are unwieldy and too big to be effective and that peer support is lacking. A number of staff are satisfied with current working conditions but others report that a shortage of computers and lack of private space for meetings and phone calls is affecting staff morale. However, there is no evidence that this is currently affecting the retention of staff.

A workload monitoring exercise recently undertaken with the fostering support team has resulted in some reduction in caseloads, which now appear to be reasonable. The staffing of this team is sufficient for the current size of the service but could not cater for any further increase in the number of foster carers. The recruitment and assessment of foster carers is carried out by a small permanent team and a number of sessional staff. There is a small number of children waiting for permanent or long term foster homes and family finding responsibility has been assigned in all cases. This team also undertakes assessments of family and friends as foster carers, within increasingly tight time scales. Given the expansion in this area of work, the service is aware of the need to review the staffing needed. Administrators are in post and roles and responsibility for some administrative tasks are clear. However, it still appears that social work staff are spending too much time on administrative tasks. The managers of the service recognise this and are confident that they have the matter in hand.

The service has successfully recruited 35 new foster carers over the past year and is clear about the groups of foster carers still needed. Recruitment is targeted and information about the service's needs is included in publicity material. Applicants are effectively screened both by telephone and in initial face-to-face interviews. Assessments of prospective foster carers are normally carried out by a large pool of sessional staff. The service's expectations are made clear to these staff through a detailed written specification and their work is supervised and monitored by the operational manager. Assessments are competent and thorough and include analysis of information presented about applicants, in relation to their suitability as foster carers. Assessments address the competencies and include feedback on applicants' participation in preparation groups.

Foster carers confirm that they are very well supported by supervising social workers. They praise their accessibility and concern and some foster carers say they

could not foster without them. All active foster carers have allocated supervising social workers and foster carers are generally visited monthly, in line with the service's Statement of Purpose. There is a comprehensive format for recording supervisory visits. Most records are satisfactory but some do not fully evidence the work undertaken. Unannounced visits are made to foster homes. Managers and supervising social workers operate an out-of-hours service which foster carers find supportive and responsive. Staff have gone out to foster homes on occasions. However, this service can only be accessed through the council's main switchboard and some foster carers report long delays in getting a reply. There are a number of support groups for foster carers, including one for Black and Asian carers, a group for those caring for unaccompanied young people, groups for permanent foster carers and groups run by foster carers themselves in their own homes. New foster carers receive additional support from a successful mentoring scheme. Prospective mentors are assessed and approved by a committee and are expected to attend a dedicated support group. Foster carers also appreciate the parties and other social events and the service has done well at retaining its foster carers.

As previously mentioned, foster carers report differing experiences with support to themselves and young people from social workers in the child care teams. Some report that their foster children have received an excellent and consistent service. However, other young people have had frequent changes in social worker during the past year which have resulted in long term plans not being made, delays in contact issues being sorted out and payments to young mothers with new babies being delayed. This is, however, outside the control of the fostering service.

Foster carers' approval is reviewed annually and reviews are up-to-date. These are carried out by supervising social workers and a comprehensive report format is used. The service has done very well at obtaining feedback to reviews from young people, their social workers and foster carers. Most reviews are comprehensive and some deal very well with difficult issues. However, not all reviews include detailed analysis of foster carers' work, particularly following complaints or allegations and when foster carers have been looking after young people outside their terms of approval. Annual reviews are signed off by managers but there is currently no independent element in reviews. Foster carers are informed in writing of the outcome of their reviews. First reviews, those following complaints and allegations and a random sample of remaining reviews are considered by the fostering panel.

A very good range of training is provided for foster carers, who report that courses are interesting and informative. Foster carers undertake induction training following approval and are then expected to attend core training courses and a specified number of hours training each year. Foster carers have comprehensive training profiles which are updated for each annual review. However, reviews do not always set out what training should be undertaken by foster carers during the coming year. About a third of Croydon's foster carers have gained or are currently undertaking study for NVQ or equivalent qualifications. Foster carers are provided with a comprehensive handbook.

Young people's case records are held in the child care teams and will soon be

available to the fostering service on the IT system. Some information about young people is also held in the fostering service. Supervising social workers try to ensure that foster carers are provided with the necessary written information about young people in their care. Foster carers maintain their own records in line with a comprehensive recording policy and training is provided.

File records are maintained for each foster carer and these include the information listed in the regulations. Records of placements with each foster carer are maintained and signed foster care agreements retained on file. Foster carers' current terms of approval are clear in the records and the foster carers' register is up-to-date. Detailed records concerning the investigation of allegations and complaints are not always accessible on file. All computer and paper records are stored securely.

The assessment, supervision and support of family and friends as foster carers is undertaken as an integral part of the general fostering service and there are currently no dedicated posts. Assessments are undertaken by permanent staff in the recruitment and assessment team. These are thorough and demonstrate recognition of pre-existing relationships and the particular position of these applicants. Friends and family foster carers have allocated supervising social workers and annual reviews. They are invited to attend mainstream training and there are plans to develop dedicated training for this group of foster carers. Friends and family foster carers are also invited to join mainstream support groups.

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
12	provide foster carers with written information about the arrangements for giving consent to young people's medical treatment, particularly in emergencies. (Regulation 17(3))	01/06/2008
6	ensure that young people are only placed with foster carers whose terms of approval are consistent with a proposed placement unless it can be documented and agreed that an exemption is in a young person's best interests. (Regulation 34(1))	01/05/2008
8	ensure that written notification is given to foster carers of approval of placements outside 'the usual fostering limit' include the names of the young people concerned. (Children Act 1989 S 63(12) Schedule 7 (4)(3))	01/05/2008

Recommendations

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

- ensure that services are provided which enable each young person to receive the necessary health care by expanding the designated nurse service. (NMS 12.1)
- ensure that all foster homes can comfortably accommodate all who live there and that annual inspections of foster homes are recorded. (NMS 6.2)
- ensure that written foster placement agreements contain specific reference to elements of matching which were taken into consideration in agreeing placements and identify any gaps and additional support therefore needed. (NMS 8.4)
- ensure that young people are matched with foster carers able to meet their needs and that where the panel is asked to approve foster carers to take young people outside their current age range, some additional assessment and evidence of their ability to do so is documented. (NMS 8.1)
- introduce robust systems to ensure that all staff recruitment checks are recorded and copies of evidence retained. (NMS 15.4)
- ensure that foster carers are able to support young people's full participation in education through the provision of the necessary equipment, including easy access to computers. (NMS 13.5)
- ensure that there is adequate office equipment and infrastructure to enable all staff to carry out their duties effectively. (NMS 26.3)
- ensure that records of supervisory meetings with foster carers reflect the purpose of meetings and the supervision of foster carers' work. (NMS 22.6)
- review the accessibility of the out-of-hours support service to foster carers. (NMS 22.7)
- ensure that all foster carers' reviews are comprehensive and consider introducing a more independent element into the reviewing process. (NMS 21.2)
- include in foster carers' annual reviews, an appraisal of training and development needs for the coming year, which is documented in the review report. (NMS 23.8)
- ensure that full records are maintained of investigations into allegations and complaints against foster carers. (NMS 25.13)