

London Borough of Bexley Fostering

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

Unique reference number	SC042854
Inspection date	04/02/2008
Inspector	Alex Turner
Type of inspection	Key

Setting address	Bexley Council, Howbury Centre, Slade Green Road, ERITH, Kent, DA8 2HX
Telephone number	020 8303 7777
Email	
Registered person	London Borough of Bexley
Registered manager	Aisha Jafaru-Ehizogie (LA managers are not registered by Ofsted)
Responsible individual	
Date of last inspection	01/02/2007

© Crown copyright 2008

Website: www.ofsted.gov.uk

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

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

About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to assure children and young people, parents, the public, local authorities and government of the quality and standard of the service provided. The inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000.

This report details the main strengths and any areas for improvement identified during the inspection. The judgements included in the report are made in relation to the outcomes for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and the relevant National Minimum Standards for the service.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding: this aspect of the provision is of exceptionally high quality
Good: this aspect of the provision is strong
Satisfactory: this aspect of the provision is sound
Inadequate: this aspect of the provision is not good enough

Service information

Brief description of the service

The fostering service is provided by the integrated Children's Placement Service (CPS), which also provides the council's adoption service. The service is responsible for the recruitment, assessment, support, supervision and review of foster carers for children looked after by Bexley Council. There is a duty team which is responsible for accepting referrals and initiating the process to arrange placements with in-house and independent fostering agency carers. Placements are provided across the range, which includes emergencies, short term, long term, permanency, parent and child and short break stays for children with disabilities.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

The inspection was announced and completed over the course of four days. All of the key National Minimum Standards were inspected. Time was taken to review the action plan produced in response to the last inspection report and seek evidence of its impact on practice. There is no doubt that the service has been through a tumultuous 12 months with significant changes in management and senior social work staff. Whilst practice over this period has in some instances been less than good the service has applied a critical eye to its own performance and taken steps to address shortfalls noted. The service benefits from the support of a solid senior management team and more recently further enhanced by the clear direction and leadership of the current manager. The service is in a good position to consolidate the improvements made over the last 12 months and to establish these improvements firmly in practice.

Improvements since the last inspection

Included in the last report were four requirements relating to standards under staying safe and one requirement under the outcome heading for organisation. Each of these requirements has been acted upon.

In addition to these requirements there was a total of 20 recommendations made covering between them outcomes under staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution and organisation. The fostering service has done well to address each of the recommendations made.

Improvement has also been noted specifically with regards to promoting consultation with children, outcomes for care leavers, the functions of the duty team and in the training and support available to foster carers.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

Children's health is promoted. Health needs are assessed and action is taken to help meet them. Children are routinely supported to access health care services including specialist provision when appropriate. The service has developed partnerships with key agencies and professionals to further develop health care planning. Foster carers receive initial training to support them in identifying and addressing children's health needs. Carers receive additional training if children with special health care needs are placed with them. Carers know their responsibilities in relation to the health of the child placed with them and are aware of the responsibilities of other professionals. Children say that they are given advice about their health such as healthy eating, personal care and the benefits of physical activities.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The persons carrying on and managing the service are suitable to do so.

The service seeks to ensure foster homes can comfortably accommodate all who live there and they are warm, adequately furnished and decorated, and maintained to a good standard of cleanliness and hygiene. Suitability of foster carers' homes is ascertained at the time of carers' initial assessment. Suitability is monitored during supervision and support visits, and is included in foster carers' annual reviews. As part of the process to check suitability, health and safety checks are undertaken. It is often not clear who has carried out these checks or how their competence to do so has been ascertained. The safety of vehicles used by foster carers to transport children is also checked via sight of MOT and insurance documents though the system to do so leaves some potential gaps.

The service is working to ensure that they make placements with foster carers whose skills, knowledge and circumstance are in line with children's needs. Planned placements are achieved by means of information sharing and consideration by relevant professionals, the child and potential carers, their families and other children in placement. Where practicable, children are provided with the opportunity for a period of introduction to a proposed foster carer. Whilst there are clear examples of good practice in terms of matching there are also examples where the matching process has been less than well informed. The service recognises areas where shortfalls have occurred and takes action to help prevent their recurrence.

Training, supervision and guidance covers safe caring skills, managing behaviour, and recognising signs of abuse. Foster carers and staff have an awareness of the principles of safe care. Practice falls short of there being safe caring guidelines for each foster home that are written in consultation with the carer and everyone else in the household. Allegations and complaints are dealt with according to written procedures to do so. Children benefit from the investigation of allegations and

complaints being overseen by the council's safeguarding team.

The fostering service is careful to ensure the people it employs to work with children are suitable to do so. Recruitment and selection procedures are robust and rigorously applied. The process to recruit panel members is in line with regulatory requirements though is much less stringent than that which is applied for social work staff.

The fostering panel helps to ensure that people approved to be foster carers are suitable. The panel is properly constituted and benefits from members that bring a wide range of skills, knowledge and experience in fostering and childcare. The panel provides a clear quality assurance function in relation to the assessment and review of foster carers. The operation of the panel is monitored.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The fostering service values diversity and promotes equality. Training, supervision and guidance cover these topics. The matching process seeks to take into account children's heritage, background, individual circumstances and interests. Examples of effective action to address gaps in transracial placements is evident. Foster families demonstrated some good examples of how these principles and values have been implemented and are contributing to attaining positive outcomes for children. Children who have limited understanding of written English may be disadvantaged to some extent by the omission to provide the children's guide in a format they might find easier to understand.

Educational attainment is promoted. Children are supported to access education services in line with their needs. Ensuring children have access to the internet, the provision of key stage specific briefings to carers and the regular attendance to school events by carers all serve as examples where educational needs are being promoted. Children's achievements are recognised and celebrated by their carers and the fostering service as a whole. Details of the arrangements made regarding education are included in the records maintained.

The provision of short-term breaks for children in foster care has been incorporated into the remit of the fostering service. Policies and procedures informing the operation of this element of the service are under review to help ensure it is inclusive and is incorporated into the main recruitment plan. The role of birth parents is recognised and valued and remains central to the promotion of children's health and education needs.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

Children are encouraged to maintain and develop family contacts and friendships. Contact is included in the factors considered in the matching process. The views of

children or young people are sought and given weight in determining contact arrangements. Children are routinely consulted with on a regular basis. The review of foster carers' approval, post placement feedback and children's care are some of the more formal mechanisms to do so.

Children's views are listened to and acted upon. The fostering service provides some excellent opportunities for children to come together and share their views. Inspection surveys indicate that most children feel that they are usually or always listened to by the foster carers and social workers. Children's views are formally sought during foster carers' annual reviews and during their own care and education reviews. Children are able to make complaints and to have these treated seriously. Children benefit from access to and contact with an independent children's rights officer.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

The foster care service helps children to develop skills, competence and knowledge necessary for adult living. Young people preparing to move to independent or semi-independent living are consulted about their future and encouraged to be actively involved in decisions made. Foster carers are clear about their role in preparing children for independent or semi-independent living. Foster carers are providing young people with age appropriate opportunities to develop independent living skills. Training, supervision and guidance cover this area of care. The principle of maintaining contact and ongoing support for care leavers is established in the wider service provision of the council for example in promoting further education and supported accommodation.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

There is a clear statement of purpose setting out the range of support and services provided. Information for children includes how a child can secure access to an independent advocate and how to complain. The information for children is not particularly suitable for younger age groups or for those who may have difficulty understanding written English.

The direct management of the fostering service has been through a period of significant change during 2007. As perhaps in part a consequence of this, there have been times during the last 12 months when practice has been less than good. It is noted though that the senior management team and a core group of social work staff have remained stable. Together they have worked effectively in bringing about a wide range of improvements to address all of the action points and recommendations included in the last inspection report. The current manager is providing clear leadership and proving to be an asset to the ongoing development of service. This view is one that is shared by many of the council's staff and foster

carers that have provided feedback during the inspection. The service is in a good position to consolidate the improvements that have been made and to establish them firmly in practice.

Contingency measures have been put in place to compensate for staff shortfalls. There is a number of staff including the current manager whose services are procured via social work employment agencies. Recruitment exercises have been carried out and continue to be actioned in order to address this issue. Workloads have been reviewed and a bid for additional staff has been made. Given the added requirements on the service brought about by changes in legislation and more stringent quality standards this initiative would seem to be both timely and reasonable. There is induction, training, supervision and appraisal of staff and foster carers. The process to assess and approve foster carers is in line with recognised procedures to do so. Administrative facilities and resources are in keeping with the needs of the service. Children benefit from having foster carers that are supported by the service. Supervision is regular and touches upon many different aspects of fostering practice. Support with meetings, appointments, engaging with local services and facilities, training and participating in support groups is taking place. Foster carers have complimented the quality, range and accessibility of the support provided and have noted an improvement in this area with the arrival of the new manager.

Written information and other administrative records are being maintained. Records are kept and are accessible in relation to the fostering services and the individual foster carers and foster children. Foster carers were not entirely clear as to the purpose of keeping placement diaries and standards varied both in content and safekeeping. In some cases it was apparent that supervising social workers were failing to read through these during supervision visits. Foster care agreements are entered into between the service and foster carers. There were instances where these failed to articulate foster carers' current approval status. Guidance included in the foster carer agreements regarding electronic records was at odds with that which is included in the foster carers' good practice guide. The written notice used to inform carers of a review of their terms of approval is not wholly in line with all of the points specified in the regulations.

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
25	ensure the written foster carer agreement accurately covers	31/03/2008

	each of the matters specified in Schedule 5. Reg 28(5)(b)	
25	ensure the written notice given when revising carers terms of approval clearly articulates each of the points specified by the regulations. Reg 29(7)(a)&(b)	31/03/2008

Recommendations

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

- ensure that anyone carrying out health and safety checks in foster carers homes are skilled and competent to do so. NMS 6
- ensure that where the foster carer is expected to provide transport for the child, the fostering service ensures this is safe and appropriate to the child’s needs. NMS 6
- ensure that safe caring guidelines are provided, based on a written policy, for each foster home, in consultation with the carer and everyone else in the household. The guidelines should be cleared with the child’s social worker and explained clearly and appropriately to the child. NMS 9
- review the procedures to carry out recruitment checks on panel members. NMS 15
- ensure that written information which is normally provided to children is presented in a format which can be understood by all children with whom it is shared. NMS 1
- maintain records that demonstrate how it is ensured that children are aware of their rights as set out in the children’s guide. NMS 1
- revisit with foster carers and supervising social workers the purpose of keeping placement diaries and the expectations regarding the content, use and proper safekeeping of them and other written information about children that have been placed. NMS 24
- review the guidance included in the foster carers agreement regarding the use of electronic records. NMS 24