

London Borough Bromley 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

Bromley Fostering is a Local Authority Fostering Service that provides short term and long term foster carers for children and young people. The service also provides a Short Breaks Scheme and Kinship Care. The service has approximately 134 in-house foster carers and the majority of Bromley's looked after children population are placed with Bromley's own carers. The service is based in Joseph Lancaster House at the Civic Centre, Bromley.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

Bromley Fostering Service is a well run service and staff and foster carers are being effectively managed and supervised. Foster carers feel they are fully supported and are meeting the overall needs of children in placement. The majority of children are placed with the Borough's own foster carers. There is a robust fostering panel. The overall impression is that Bromley Fostering is an organisation committed to achieving good standards and developing a culture of improvement.

The actions and recommendations within this report include the further strengthening of the administration of Criminal Record Bureau checks, improving relations between Management and the Bromley Foster Carers Association, improving record keeping in relation to foster carer's files and reviewing the in-house training programme for foster carers and the Family Based Short Break Respite Service.

Improvements since the last inspection

Since the previous inspection, Bromley Fostering Service has made important improvements and has consolidated its existing good practice. There is now a fully staffed service and all cases are allocated. The service now has a system for renewing Criminal Record Bureau checks. The service has established effective systems for monitoring annual reviews and unannounced visits. Relationships between the Fostering Team and Commissioning Team have been strengthened and there is better matching of placements. The inspection noted that funding has been agreed and the fostering service plans to recruit 'specialist carers' for the more challenging young person.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Bromley Fostering promotes the health and development of children in placement to a good standard. Foster carers ensure that when a child is placed they are registered with a General Practitioner, Dentist and Optician. Evidence showed that Looked After medicals, dental and optical checks are being carried out. 84.4% of children in foster care have had an annual health check in the last 12 months. Examples were seen of referrals to the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS). 27 children have been referred to CAMHS, the enuresis clinic, speech therapy and a dietician. Bromley foster carers have a positive relationship with CAMHS and regularly request advice and consultation.

Health and safety checks of foster homes are up to date. Foster carers have been offered training in first aid, drug awareness and substance abuse. Foster carers advise young people on sex education. Foster carers promote a healthy, balanced diet and give advice to children and young people about healthy eating and exercise. Foster carers provide ethnically sensitive food where appropriate.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

Bromley Fostering Service has safeguarding policies covering Safe Caring, Child Protection, Anti Bullying, Unauthorised Absences and Complaints.

The service has sound recruitment and selection procedures for appointing staff, foster carers and fostering panel members. Staff files showed the following were in place: Criminal Record Bureau (CRB) checks, list 99 checks (where appropriate), two references, and interview pro-forma, professional qualifications and General Social Care Council registration.

The service has made improvements in the way it administers CRB checks and renewals. It has established a data base and checks of all 134 foster carers were examined. The vast majority have an up to date CRB check. Two were noted to have an overdue CRB, and one was relying on an existing CRB from her work place, although portability does not exist. There are six families whose CRB checks were overdue but who do not have children in placement. The Local Authority assured the inspector that no children would be placed until the paperwork had been received from the Criminal Record Bureau. The overdue checks are the consequence of oversight by Supervising Social Workers not processing paperwork. To avoid this in future, the service will centralise the process of CRB applications through its administration team. A recommendation has been included to ensure this happens.

Unannounced visits take place to foster carers once a year. There has been an improvement in the number of annual reviews carried out. The previous backlog of annual reviews has been cleared and only three remain outstanding.

The service ensures that foster carers provide a safe, healthy and nurturing environment. Health and safety checks are being undertaken annually as part of the annual review. The foster homes seen by the inspector were comfortable, homely and suitable to meeting the needs of children and young people.

Foster carers are offered Child Protection and Safe Caring training.

The fostering service has received 16 complaints during the past year, nine of which were of a child protection nature. All were dealt with robustly and referred to a strategy meeting. Four have led to consideration to de-register and in four cases additional support was offered to the carers.

It was noted that Child Protection enquiries are not being notified to Ofsted under Schedule 8. This has been included as an action.

The fostering panel was assessed at the previous inspection and fully met the standard. The panel continues to operate robustly and efficiently. It has diversified its membership which now includes representation from Disabilities, Education Psychology, Adoption, Fostering, Nursing, Management and Quality Assurance. The panel membership has appropriate ethnic minority representation.

Discussions with the Head of Service confirmed that the fostering service is establishing a Specialist Fostering Service to meet the needs of more challenging children and young people.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Bromley Fostering Service through its foster carers is actively involved in promoting educational achievement. Foster carers drive children to school, attend Personal Education Plan meetings, help children with homework and liaise with teachers. All school age children in placement have a Personal Education Plan. The November monthly monitoring audit showed there are no permanent exclusions in the Looked After Children population. An Education Psychologist sits on the fostering panel.

Young people are being encouraged to take part in social activities including swimming, football, cooking, camping, scouts, the Duke Of Edinburgh Scheme, after school clubs, visiting museums and libraries, shopping and going out for meals.

The Bromley Foster Care Association holds a Christmas party and organises day trips.

20% of foster parent households are from ethnic minorities and reflect the ethnicity of the numbers of children placed. The service values diversity and aims to provide same race placements wherever possible.

Bromley Fostering Service provides a Family Based Short Break Respite Service for children with disabilities and special needs. The Fostering Team has a Senior

Practitioner who supports respite carers and who has links to the Children with Disabilities Team and the Disability Panel. There are currently 12 respite carers but this number is likely to be reduced because of pending retirements. It was noted that the service is not meeting existing need and there is a waiting list. A recommendation has been included to review the provision of the short break service to ensure it is adequately meeting the needs of service users.

A Family Group Conferencing Panel aims to place children and young people with a relative or friend where possible.

Questionnaires sent out to children and young people confirmed that they are happy with the care provided in their respective placements. This view was further confirmed by young people interviewed.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The fostering service encourages children and young people to maintain and develop family contacts and friendships. Foster carers facilitate direct contact with birth families at contact centres or at the family home. Telephone contact is also encouraged as appropriate.

The fostering service also promotes consultation and ensures that the opinions and views of children are heard. Children and young people are attending their own reviews and have the opportunity to express their wishes and feelings. A monthly monitoring form was seen that showed that all looked after children participated in their reviews in November and all took place within timescale. Children and young people complete a consultation form for the review.

Children in placement receive a Children's Guide that gives information on how to complain and how to refer to the Children's Rights Officer. The impression gained from discussions with foster carers is that they are ascertaining the views and wishes of children.

The Council is planning to implement a Children in Care Council to ensure children and young people can relay their experiences of care directly to the Director of Children's Services and the Lead Member.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

The fostering service encourages young people towards independence and foster carers prepare them for independent living and adulthood. Foster carers support young people to learn independent living skills such as budgeting, preparing meals, doing their own laundry, self care and personal hygiene. A Connexions Personal Adviser based in the Leaving Care Team provides an overview of young people

between the ages of 16 and 19 and monitors pathway plans in relation to training and employment. Monthly audit monitoring sheets showed that all outstanding pathway plans have been identified and were to be completed before March 2008. The Local Authority pays fostering allowances that are at least at the level of the Government's National Minimum Allowance and are in line with other agencies.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The fostering service has a clear statement of purpose. The service has 134 in-house foster carers. The Local Authority has 260 looked after children. 187 children are in foster placements, the majority placed with Bromley's own carers.

There is a competent workforce and the fostering service has adequate numbers of staff with appropriate qualifications, skills and experience. The service is managed by the Head of Care and Resources who has overall responsibility for Fostering and Adoption, Looked After Children and Leaving Care. The day to day management of the fostering service is the responsibility of the Group Fostering Manager. There is one full time Assistant Team Manager. There is also a part time Assistant Team Manager who has recently been appointed, but is not yet in post. There are six Senior Supervising Social Workers and two Supervising Social Workers. There are two Assistant Supervising Social Workers who are unqualified but have been put forward for social work training. They work alongside Supervising Social Workers. Two fulltime agency Administrative staff support the team. There is a Resource Development Officer who also is attached to the Adoption Team. The fostering service has made real progress in addressing the staff problems it encountered last year and currently has no staff vacancies. All cases are allocated.

The service has effective monitoring procedures in place. These include the Register of Complaints and Concerns, the Audit of Key Performance indicators, monitoring systems re CRBs, looked after reviews, looked after medicals and unannounced visits. As referred to under 'Staying Safe' it was noted that events and notifications as listed under Regulation 43, Schedule 8 are not being routinely recorded or notified to Ofsted.

All staff are properly accountable and supported. Staff receive regular supervision and team meetings are held fortnightly. Staff are offered training through Bromley's Learning and Development Programme. Staff mentioned that they had attended British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) training on writing Form Fs and a course on Training the Trainers.

The vast majority of foster carers who were interviewed plus those who responded to the questionnaire were satisfied with the support they are receiving from the fostering service. Foster carers are visited every four to six weeks, although records on file showed in some instances the gap was wider. Support is also offered to foster carers via the Bromley Foster Care Association (BFCA). The BFCA also holds coffee mornings which are more informal gatherings. There is also a Black Workers support

group. The BFCA has an important role to play in providing support to foster carers and contributing to discussion on the future provision of services. It was noted that only about 25% of foster carers attend BFCA meetings. It has been voiced by some carers that this is because meetings are held during evenings. Other foster carers suggested that the group is 'cliquey'. There are differences between management and the BFCA but parties have expressed a desire to work together and improve communication and trust. A recommendation has been included in this report to ensure that efforts are made to facilitate positive relationships between management and the BFCA.

The fostering service gives priority to training its foster carers. Foster carers are encouraged to do NVQ training and approximately 10 places are offered each year. 44 foster carers have achieved an NVQ level 3 in Caring for Children and Young People and 12 are currently studying the NVQ course. Five have achieved other relevant qualifications. In addition, foster carers are offered ongoing training to develop skills. Courses offered have included the following: attachment, working with parents with mental health problems, managing challenging behaviour, first aid, assertion skills, working with stress, active listening, influencing skills, and substance misuse. Bromley foster carers have also undertaken training with CAMHS on a range of relevant mental health issues. The Local Authority's Education Psychologist will be offering training on attachment.

Foster carers raised a number of issues regarding training. These included the difficulty in some instances on getting on to a course, the fact that some training is too basic, comments that courses are held at such times when carers cannot attend and the lack of child care cover and/or crèche facilities.

Mention was made that respite foster carers have specific training needs of their own and training should be provided to accommodate their needs, for example, moving and handling, and autism.

It has been recommended that the issues raised within this report are discussed as part of an overall review of training for foster carers.

The fostering service is doing its best to ensure that each child is carefully matched with a carer capable of meeting his/her needs. Matching of short term referrals and respite is done by effective information sharing and consultation between the Fostering Team and the Children's Commissioning Team. The Fostering Team undertakes matching for long term referrals and one of the team is specifically designated to carry out long-term family finding. Area teams have to fill out a comprehensive referral form. There have been comments that some children may be left in short term placements longer than anticipated. It is understood that approximately six children are waiting for long-term placements. Where children are in short-term placements but need to transfer to a permanent family, these placements are usually converted to long-term placements to avoid disruption.

The files holding case records of foster carers show that there is an urgent need to improve record keeping in relation to foster carer's files. Information on file was

extremely difficult to find and there was a lack of order. There were examples of gaps in recording and recording not being up to date. An action has been included in this report to ensure better organisation of foster carers' case records and for files to be structured and organised into appropriate sections.

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
9	ensure that any notifiable incidents as listed under Schedule 8 are notified to Ofsted as indicated in column 2 of the table (Regulation 43 (1).	30/04/2008
25	ensure better organisation of foster carer's records - Regulation 30.	30/04/2008

Recommendations

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

- ensure that Criminal Record Bureau checks are managed efficiently, preferably through the administration team - NMS 15.4
- ensure that the fostering service has adequate numbers of staff and sufficient numbers of respite carers to meet the needs of service users - NMS 17.1
- ensure that positive relationships are facilitated between management and the BFCA - NMS 22.7
- ensure that the fostering service undertakes a review of training to meet the varying needs of foster carers- NMS 23.