

Islington Fostering Service - Children and Families

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 Islington's fostering service provides a range of placements and care packages for looked after children and young people. The primary role of the service as outlined in the Statement of Purpose document is 'the recruitment, assessment, training, support and supervision of locally based foster carers and the provision of suitable placements for children and young people looked after by the London Borough of Islington'. The fostering service is committed to providing quality placements for children and young people who are unable to be cared for by their birth families.

At the time of the inspection, the re-structuring of Islington's Children's Social Care division was imminent, due to be implemented from 1 April 2008; this has implications for the future management and organisation of the borough's fostering service. Despite this however, the fostering service demonstrates a keen commitment to working effectively and in partnership with children looked after, carers, families and other professionals to ensure that the needs of children in placement are met. Under its current structure the range of placements provided by the fostering service include permanence, short-term fostering, respite care, kinship, special guardianship and private fostering. The specialist adolescent fostering team is a newly developed service. Its aim is to specifically meet the needs of teenaged young people who require intensive input from a range of local services in order to support and maintain foster placements or stabilise the home environment where young people remain cared for by their birth family.

The fostering services office premises is based in Highbury; bus and rail links are good. The service also makes use of other local community based premises to facilitate fostering events, training, support groups etc.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

The purpose of the announced inspection of the London Borough of Islington's fostering service is to assess the service against key National Minimum Standards and gauge improvement to the service since the last inspection that was conducted 11 months ago. The inspection process was conducted over six days; its scope was wide ranging.

Overall Islington's fostering service is judged to be a good service. It offers a prompt response to enquiries about fostering from the public and provides sound assessment of prospective foster carers. The support and supervision of approved foster carers is good and training opportunities for carers is impressive. The staff

group is well established; managers and social workers are qualified and very experienced in the child care field. The safeguarding and protection of young people is sound and newly developed programmes targeting adolescents have made a promising start. The progress of children and young people accessing services via the fostering service is well monitored and outcomes for young people are positive.

Improvements since the last inspection

The previous inspection resulted in three requirements and two good practice recommendations. Areas of concern included the monitoring of contact arrangements, the appropriate recording of placement visits and the evidencing of placement plans on file. These issues have all been resolved. The two recommendations highlighted the need for improved communication between staff of the fostering team and other children's teams within the department and the improved presentation of children's files. These issues have also been successfully addressed.

Since the last inspection there have been significant developments in a number of areas of the fostering service and further developments are anticipated with the restructuring of children's social care services. Most significantly in the last 12 months has been the developments made to services provided by the fostering service to looked after adolescents. The Adolescent Multi-Agency Support Service (AMASS) provides a highly intensive package for the young person and their parent / carer to help support and maintain the young person either in the foster placement or at home/in planning a return home where the stability of the placement is at serious risk of failing without such input.

In addition, the newly established Grosvenor Fostering resource service, as part of a multi-agency approach, provides a range of planned services which enable young people to remain in local foster placements, making use of local resources and services.

The fostering service is in the process of re-establishing the arranging of placements as the responsibility of the fostering task and not as it is currently managed, external to the service. Significant developments in the IT management of information and data bases will give rise to a more integrated system that will assist access to information within the fostering service and children's social care services overall.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

The London Borough of Islington's Fostering Service promotes well the health and development of children and young people in placement on a number of differing strategic and practice levels. This is evidenced by the reported 100% of Looked After children and young people who have received an annual health check during the previous 12 months, 86% of looked after children have up to date health plans and

there are encouraging figures for young people accessing dental services. The department has good working partnership with the local Primary Care Trust and recently introduced an Enrichment Project that encourages and supports young people to participate in community based activities that promote development in their physical health such as dance, football, basketball etc. A designated worker is employed to facilitate and oversee the operation of the project.

Files reviewed as part of the inspection process, illustrate well the commitment of managers, staff and foster carers to ensure the health care needs of young people are effectively monitored and addressed. So for example, medical and health care issues of young people in placement feature as a consistent agenda item in fostering agreements, placement planning and supervisory visits. Keen attention is paid to the immunisation histories of young children in placements and there is good evidence of input from specialist services such as sexual health, substance misuse services and in one case reviewed, Great Ormond Street hospital. Health care and medical information are managed sensitively and confidentially.

Foster carers demonstrate a good understanding of their role in promoting the healthy lifestyles of young people in their care and confirm that specialist and more general health care services are accessed by young people early in the placement. They also confirm that they are provided with good written information regarding the promotion of healthy lifestyles and that this was further supported by valuable training opportunities. Foster carers have access to training on child development and the emotional development of young people, emergency first aid, sex and sexual relationships in addition to core training focussed on health issues.

Files reviewed evidence that health care needs of children and young people are identified early in placement negotiations and are explored at placement agreement meeting. Treatment and progress is regularly monitored by staff. Young people confirm that they are promptly registered with GP practices and attend routine dental and optical check ups. Statutory Looked After Children (LAC) reviews also prominently focus on young people's health care needs. A returned questionnaire from a foster carer states, 'There are regular discussions/training at baby groups on diet/healthy lifestyles for children. This is regularly updated and we have an excellent health advisor who is always willing to give ideas and advice'.

There is evidence of effective collaborative working between the fostering service and other disciplines within the department that have an interest and obligation to promoting the healthy development of young people looked after. So, for example, the service has excellent access to psychiatric, psychology and other specialist provisions, particularly in the work of the newly developed adolescence programme, Adolescent Multi Agency Support Service (AMASS). The fostering service has good links with the LAC nursing team, Community Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) and health advisors. The fostering service employs a clinical psychologist on a part time basis to assist support carers manage general placement and behavioural issues. The fostering panel has access to medical expertise via the designated medical advisor.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The fostering service has sound safeguards in place to protect young people in their care and promote their safety. Managers and staff of the fostering service are well qualified and experienced in the field of child protection, the fostering task and supporting children in need. Staff of the fostering service are generally established team members who work effectively to achieve positive outcomes for young people in placement. One staff member commented, 'The core values that we have in the team are held firm - it's the culture of good practice'. The vetting of staff of the fostering service is robust and all personnel files reviewed evidenced full information, including updated CRB checks as required by the regulations.

The fostering service employs a recruitment project officer who is responsible for strategic planning of the recruitment of local foster carers. The targeted recruitment drive has focussed on outreach to community based resources to publicise the department's need for additional foster carers and seeks to establish links with local resources and existing partners. Elsewhere in the fostering service, staff are responsible for coordinating regular information sessions with the public in an attempt to further attract prospective foster carers. Introductory information and literature is clear about the realities of the fostering task; foster carers comment that initial home visits by staff inform and support their understanding of the role and responsibilities of foster carers.

Foster carers' homes provide a safe, healthy and nurturing environment for young people in placement. Young people comment that they are generally happy with the environment of their (foster) homes and feel comfortable there. Documented risk assessments include health and safety issues; one file reviewed highlighted the need for window restrictors to address the potential self harming behaviour of the young person in placement. Files reviewed contained some evidence of health and safety checks being completed on annual basis, but this was not consistent for all files seen.

With regards to the matching process, the fostering service recruits foster carers from a diverse and broad range of the local community who are assessed in relation to their ability to meet the needs of a diverse range of children and young people. There are sound policies and procedures in place for planning, selecting and matching the placements of young people with foster carers who can meet their identified needs. Files reviewed contained good documentation of the needs of young people and placement objectives. The ethnic, cultural, linguistic, religious needs and experiences of young people together with often some very specific needs are matched with foster carers assessed as having the knowledge, skills and experience to manage and meet the identified needs of young people. A good example of this is the matching of foster carers with older young people who are deemed 'difficult to place' due to their persistent behavioural issues. Selected foster carers for the adolescent programme is based primarily on the ability of the foster carer to work effectively with the young person and an array of support services to encourage placement stability and enhance placement success. One returned

questionnaire from a foster carer states 'They really try to match families culturally - the boys placed with us matched our family really well and I think that has been good for the boys'.

Where the experiences of identified carers do not match exactly with the experience and needs of young people this is openly explored during the placement planning process and additional support is made available as necessary. One file reviewed contained documentation of the foster carer's request that the birth mother share recipes of the young person's country of origin to ensure that meals provided in placement were culturally appropriate and to the young person's liking.

Islington's fostering service protects each child and young person in placement from abuse and neglect. Staff of the fostering service have extensive child protection experience and there are good training opportunities to further support individual staff development. There are sound policies and procedures in place that address child protection and effective safeguarding of young people. These include policies focussed on bullying and protocols to address young people who abscond from placement without permission. Foster carers' comment and files evidence that carers are familiar with these policies and take appropriate action in accordance to written guidance. Unannounced home visits to foster care placements are conducted and safe caring policies are contained in the foster care agreement. Managers of the fostering service acknowledge the need for more individualised safe care policies to be devised.

Initial core training and subsequent training is provided to foster carers that is focussed on child protection issues. Foster carers confirm that child protection is a consistent feature of both training and support group meetings. It is anticipated that there will be increased joint training opportunities for staff of the fostering team and foster carers. This is to further encourage effective collaboration and consistency in levels of understanding and practice. The recently developed 10 week training programme focused on promoting positive relationships and managing challenging behaviour has proved very successful as a joint training venture. Future training development is planned to include fostering staff, foster carers and other staff within the borough's children's social care service.

Managers of the fostering service effectively monitor allegations made against foster carers; these are promptly and appropriately managed in accordance with safeguarding procedures and the safety and well being of young people involved is the paramount focus of the process. Where an allegation has been made, foster carers receive clear information about the process and have access to external support and legal services. Foster carers confirm that they have received training with regard to the service's management of allegations. The fostering service has a robust complaints procedure in place that is well known to staff, foster carers and young people.

During this inspection, no fostering panel meeting was observed, however, the minutes of three recently convened panel meetings were reviewed. Meeting minutes are very comprehensive and contain good detail of panel discussion and deliberation;

Islington's fostering panel performs a quality assurance function, ensuring that the assessment and approval of foster carers is rigorously conducted. The fostering panel is organised efficiently and effectively. The panel meets on a fortnightly basis, panel members have the required expertise and panel meetings are held in quorum. Training for panel members are held periodically.

Foster carers confirm that they have the opportunity to appear in person at panel meetings for initial approval and annual re-approval. A number of foster carers, while appreciative of this opportunity, comment negatively on the current venue of the meetings. One foster carer comments, 'Its held in a dark room in the town hall, its like a dungeon. Everyone sits at this long table it's scary and intimidating'. Another foster carer said of the panel 'The people were lovely, but the room was gloomy'. A number of other foster carers shared and expressed this view.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Islington's fostering service ensures that children and young people and their families are provided with foster care services which value diversity and promote equality. The work of the recruitment project officer makes use of a collaborative approach with community based organisations and influential community groups. This has resulted in the recruitment of foster carers from very diverse backgrounds who are able to meet the specific cultural needs of looked after children and young people, in particularly those who are seeking asylum or arrived in UK as unaccompanied minors. The fostering service has a dedicated team established to address the specific needs of this population of looked after young people. The fostering service continues to provide a gender specific support group for male carers to better address any specific needs.

The ethnic and cultural origins of the fostering service's carers is very diverse and comprehensive information is maintained about the cultural, religious, disability, gender and linguistic needs and experiences of both young people and foster carers. Issues of diversity and equality are extensively explored during the assessment process of prospective foster carers and feature prominently thereafter with approved foster carers during supervisory visits. Foster carers have access to good training opportunities that address issues of diversity and equality; foster carers confirm that they have access to training focussed on sex and sexual relationships, issues of identity and the promotion of positive self image and a 10 week training course that explores issues around challenging behaviour. Training and practice in this area of work is further supported by written policies and guidance.

The office premises of the fostering service openly displays positive images of multicultural society and the staff group is generally a fair reflection of the communities it seeks to serve. Literature produced for the promotion of the service features images that embrace diversity and equality.

The file review of one young person diagnosed with a learning disability demonstrated the foster carer and staff's commitment and efforts to ensure that issues of disability remained a high priority while monitoring the placement, so much so, that the original diagnosis is currently being questioned. It is anticipated with the pending departmental review of services to disabled children that the fostering service will expand its range of provision to disabled young people in need of specialist care.

The fostering service promotes the educational achievement of children and young people and gives high priority to meeting their education needs and negotiating placements that do not disrupt young people's educational development. Foster carers demonstrate a good understanding of their role in promoting young people's educational achievement; their efforts are supported by training and written guidance. Foster carers are encouraged to register young people with library services and extra curricular activities at schools. Foster carers talk of the complex efforts made to ensure young people, as far as is practicable, continue to attend the same schools they did prior to the foster care placement. The educational progress of young people in placement are routinely discussed during supervisory visits.

Young people confirm that foster carers are keenly involved in their education by, for example, attending school parents' meeting and monitoring their school attendance. File reviews indicate the effective working relationship between foster carers, staff of the fostering team and education services. In particular the work of REACH (Raising the Educational Achievement of Children and young people in public care) has been instrumental in monitoring and supporting the educational needs of looked after children. One returned questionnaire from a foster carer states 'The REACH team in Islington are brilliant!'. Statutory LAC reviews focus on monitoring the educational needs of young people and ensure Personal Educational Plans are in place. Where appropriate additional funding can be made available to develop personalised packages of support with schools and other agencies. The service's Grosvenor resource unit offers support to looked after young people in order to improve their educational outcomes. This can include escorting students to and from school to encourage improved attendance and the provision of extra curricular activities.

The fostering service acknowledges and celebrates the achievements of young in its care via a special annual celebratory event. The AMASS service for looked after adolescents and those young people living at home in need of intensive support packages, enlists educational resources and other training and employment agencies to encourage young people's achievement. One returned questionnaire from a young person currently in a foster placement states, 'I am doing very well in school and I am happy'. Another returned questionnaire received from a foster carer comments, 'We're encouraged to make sure that the baby/toddlers are taken to regular playgroups/swimming/activities/parks etc. We're given information on activities during school holidays available for children in Islington'.

With regards to short breaks, the fostering service is currently in the early stages of developing these services, primarily to address the needs of disabled children and

young people.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The fostering service places a high priority on supporting and maintaining relationships between looked after children and young people and their friends and family members. This ethos is understood by staff and foster carers and is supported by written guidance and training. Files reviewed evidence the department's commitment to supporting families to remain together and where this is not possible, seeking initially to identify extended family members to resume care. The fostering service is proactive in securing permanence for children and make appropriate use of kinship foster placements, Special Guardianship and Residence Orders. The fostering service monitors and supports private fostering arrangements in line with current legislation.

Foster carers confirm that they understand their role in maintaining meaningful contact between young people in their care and their families and friends; there is extensive evidence on file of intricate contact arrangements being undertaken in accordance with established care plans and court orders. In one file reviewed, alternative carers were identified to support existing contact arrangements as the long term foster carers were unable to do so due to religious obligations.

It is clear that in establishing contact arrangements, the wishes of young people and their family members are taken into consideration. Where difficulties arise, files evidence that discussions are held with the appropriate parties to help resolve issues. One file reviewed indicated that a parent had been denied contact with the child in placement due to a known history of violence. Young people separated from family members as in the case of some unaccompanied minors and young people seeking asylum, attempts are made using international agencies to help locate birth families.

The office premises of the fostering service contains designated space specifically for the purpose of contact and there is a designated staff member in place to co-ordinate supervised contact on the premises. Supervisory visits address issues of contact and foster carers confirm that they are encouraged to document the impact of young people's contact with their birth families in order to assist the decision making progress. Foster carers consistently comment that their efforts to support contact arrangements are compromised by the lack of adequate parking facilities in the borough as a whole.

Islington's fostering service consults well with children and young people in placement and seeks to involve birth family members and friends in the decision making process as appropriate. Recent training provided to foster carers was entitled 'Listening and Connecting to Looked After Children'. Files evidence and young people comment that they have good opportunities to share their views and opinions with their foster carers and staff of the fostering service. Documentation seen on one file

indicated that the young person had refused to engage with the referred counselling service but was wanting to share conversations of a sensitive nature with the carer. The file entry states 'X is talking a lot with F (the carer)'. A returned questionnaire from one young person in placement states 'H (the carer) is like a mum to me and she cares about how I'm feeling and my worries'.

Staff demonstrate a commitment to meeting with young people in private as a routine feature of placement visits. These encounters are well documented on file and where issues present, these are taken seriously and appropriately addressed. One manager commented 'Staff try to meet children on alternative visits - alone.' Young people are encouraged to participate in statutory LAC reviews and comment on their feelings about foster care placements via the annual reviewing process of foster carers. Young people indicate that they have some knowledge of staff of the fostering service other than the assigned supervisory social worker and that they have some knowledge of the role of managers particularly in relation to making complaints.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

Islington's fostering service supports the efforts of other children and young people's teams to ensure that young people are prepared for adulthood as they leave local authority care. Plans are in place to address the educational, training and employment needs of young people preparing to live independently in the wider community and foster carers play a key role in this transition. Some foster carers indicate that they continue to offer primarily emotional support to young people who were formerly in their care; other foster carers are unhappy that placements sometimes seem to end abruptly once the young person turns age 18. Foster carers confirm that they assist young people develop basic life skills and support them to save funds and budget and develop skills in self care and household management.

All foster carers interviewed comment that they received foster care payment and reimbursement for expenses promptly and at the expected rate. One returned questionnaire from a foster carer states 'They phone when you have a new placement, promptly to check the pay is OK for extras. You're not having to keep going on'. Managers of the service confirm that the rate of payment to carers has increased for carers of young people aged over the age of 12 and that there are further enhancements for carers completing NVQ awards and for those carers who work with young people with identified significant behavioural issues. One returned questionnaire from a foster carer states, 'I have an excellent link worker; the financial package for the children is good and support is very good from the office. Our allowance is broken down, so we as foster carers know what we have to use for the children's activities'.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The fostering service's Statement of Purpose is a comprehensive document that outlines clearly the aims and objectives of the service and the facilities and specific services provided. The document includes all information as outlined in the National Minimum Standards. At the time of the inspection the service's Children's Guide was under review and being considered for translation into additional community languages in order to meet the diverse needs of the developing local population of looked after children. The service's foster care agreement document is also currently under review; some agreements seen on file are outdated.

Staff of the fostering service are organised and managed effectively. There is a clear management structure in place and managers have extensive skills and experience and qualification in managing the fostering task. There are systems in place to encourage key tasks are performed in a timely fashion. Managers indicate that this function of the service, the triggering of key events, will improve as access to more sophisticated IT systems are made available in the very near future. The proposed re-structure of the Children's Social Care division will act to stream line services and so, for example, re-assign decision making for initial placement referrals to the fostering team. At the time of the inspection, a children's team external to the fostering service coordinated and managed this task. The fostering service incorporates a dedicated team that effectively addresses the needs of kinship care placements in line with current legislation.

The fostering service employs an adequate number of very experienced and qualified staff to recruit, assess and support carers to meet the identified needs of young people in placements. This includes a designated reviewing officer who monitors and co-ordinates the annual reviewing process of approved foster carers. The review of two foster carers' files evidenced that their annual reviews were overdue. The staff group is largely a well established team of permanent workers who work cohesively to ensure positive outcomes for young people. As a result, staff enjoy a level of autonomy in their work and indicate that support and supervision from line managers are of a high standard. One staff member said the line manager was 'always willing to listen to staff and consider changes. I have some autonomy and working in a flexible way makes it enjoyable. We can try new things'. Another staff member commented 'The teams are very good; as colleagues we support one another with feedback and de-briefing'. Training opportunities for staff are good, the same staff member said 'I've had heaps of training!'

There are excellent strategies in place for working with and supporting carers that ensure the holistic needs of children and young people are met and help maximise placement stability and success. The assessment, support and supervision of foster carers is robustly conducted by staff and this is greatly appreciated by Islington foster carers. One foster carer said of the assessment process 'It was very in depth - much more than I thought it would be, but it gave me plenty of opportunity to consider and think. The core training made me examine my reasons for fostering'.

The role of the supervising social worker is clear and understood by both foster carers and young people. A returned questionnaire from a carer states 'My supervising social worker is outstanding'. Training opportunities for foster carers is impressive and meet the needs of foster carers as identified by supervising social workers and foster carers themselves. The assessment and approval process of prospective carers and the reviewing process for existing foster carers pays good attention to individual developmental needs, which are well addressed via the training strategy for the service. Foster carers confirm that they have the opportunity to participate in NVQ training.

The support and supervision of foster carers is consistently of a high quality on a number of differing levels; one foster carer said 'A lot went on with me, she (the supervising social worker) was always there, even out of hours'. Home visits for the purpose of supervision of individual foster carers is comprehensively recorded on case files. Attendance at support group meetings are good and foster carers confirm that they find this an invaluable resource. Specialist input, advice and information such as psychological services is readily available to foster carers as is independent, external support.

A worker of the adolescence service commented 'It's a unique service - coming in and helping carers create solutions. Resources are good and there are positive pay offs, you get to see carers grow. It's positive to be part of the process'.

Case records for children and administrative records are generally maintained as required, some files however did not evidence clear documentation of approved exemptions or clearly establish the dates of foster carers' approval/re-approval. One case file reviewed evidenced a very detailed treatment plan in accordance with the requirements of the adolescent programme, but failed to evidence the overall care plan for the young person, which is useful in gauging placement progress.

The service's out of hours provision operates effectively and offers reassurance and support to carers outside of the service's core hours of business. Communication between staff of the fostering service and children and young people's allocated social workers is generally good and there are plans in place to further improve communication through joint training initiatives. One returned questionnaire from a foster carer states 'Detailed discussions take place about the young person's needs and it is expected that all agreed actions are followed through by all parties involved'. One manager commented 'Some of the working relationships between the fostering staff and children's workers are brilliant!'.

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
6	ensure that annual health and safety checks are completed for all foster carers' homes (Regulation 11)	01/08/2008
25	ensure that files evidence documentation that verifies formally agreed exemptions (Regulation 11)	01/08/2008
21	ensure that all foster carers' annual reviews are conducted at intervals of not more than one year. (Regulation 29)	01/08/2008
24	ensure that case files evidence young people's established care plans. (Regulation 11)	01/08/2008

Recommendations

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

- develop safe caring policies that address the needs of individual young people in placement (NMS 9)
- consider changing or improving the venue of fostering panel meetings (NMS 30)
- consider updating existing foster care agreements evidenced on case files (NMS 22)
- develop systems to better highlight the dates of foster carers re-approval on case files (NMS 25)