

London Borough Of Redbridge Fostering Service

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

Unique reference number	SC042597
Inspection date	05/02/2008
Inspector	Joanna Moore
Type of inspection	Key

Setting address	London Borough of Redbridge Adoption Service, Station Road, Barkingside, ILFORD, Essex, IG6 1NB
Telephone number	020 8708 7870
Email	
Registered person	London Borough of Redbridge
Registered manager	Martin Christopher Halsey
Responsible individual	Martin Christopher Halsey
Date of last inspection	25/09/2006

© 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 London borough of Redbridge Fostering Service is part of the Redbridge Children's Trust. The fostering service provides care and accommodation for children and young people living within Redbridge who are no longer able to live with their families.

Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

This was an announced inspection carried out as part of the annual inspection programme. As part of the inspection the inspector visited foster carers and the children placed, met with the complaints officer, staff and managers of the fostering service and field social work team. Surveys were sent to carers and young people.

Improvements since the last inspection

The fostering service has gone through a period of significant change and in order to fully meet the National Minimum Standards needs to improve. The service, however, demonstrates a commitment to improve and has in some areas already begun work.

At the last inspection the service was graded as good with two requirements which revolved around the accurate presentation of information in a timely manner to the panel, and ensuring each foster carer had an annual review.

Three recommendations were made which related to the management of recruitment files, the sufficiency of management arrangements and the need to review foster carer support systems.

The service has yet to ensure that each carer receives an annual review which is a legal requirement. A recommendation is again set to review foster carers' support. In addition to these repeated requirements 11 more actions have been set at this inspection. In addition to the repeated recommendation a further 15 recommendations have been set. The overall grading has been reduced from good to satisfactory.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is satisfactory.

The authority has clear procedures and policies for the promotion of good health care. The carer's handbook guides carers as to their roles and responsibilities and carers benefit from training in promoting health. Basic first aid training is covered as part of carers' pre-approval training, however, not all carers have undertaken recognised first aid training.

Young people and their carers benefit from a clear direct referral system to a variety of health care advisors. The service's internal monitoring systems show 95% of children and young people have had a statutory medical within the past 12 months.

The level of evidence that young people's health needs are met, varies from child to child, for example, files do not always give up to date information about the child's current health. There is no evidence supervising social workers discuss with carers how they are ensuring children's health needs are met. For example, health matters raised in children's reviews, cannot be evidenced as having been addressed through supervising social workers visit notes. Supervising social workers and in some cases carers, are not clear on what medical checks have taken place since the last statutory review. The concerns revolve around the role of supervising social worker and the standard of record keeping throughout the service in ensuring good health outcomes for children.

Feedback from field social workers and schools on the emotional development of children is very positive, for example one comment was: 'A' has bloomed since they went to live with their carer. They were a shy introverted child with low self esteem. Now 'A' has grown hugely in confidence'.

Young People say they are supported by their carers in staying healthy. Feedback from young people included the following comments: 'I play games and football everyday at school and at home'; 'Every day auntie tells me not to eat sweets. Every day uncle tells me not to eat junk food. Every day auntie and uncle tell me to eat my packed lunch'.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is satisfactory.

Foster carers are recruited through a robust vetting system which meets all regulatory requirements and prevents unsuitable people from becoming carers. Carers visited provide a comfortable nurturing environment for the children placed. Children are provided with well decorated rooms supplied with age appropriate toys and books. Young people's comments include: 'I've got a lovely bedroom and toys and nice carers'. Carers receive basic health and safety training as part of the preparing for fostering training. Further health and safety guidance is included in the carer's handbook. Checks on the safety of the carer's house are linked into the

carer's annual review but cannot be evidenced as happening annually.

The fostering service has a bank of carers from a variety of backgrounds and places children with the 'best match' it can. Where transracial placements are made, the need for provision of extra training is considered. Placements made outside of the carer's approval range are referred to the director of children's services as the agency decision maker. However, the reason for the approval range is not always re-evaluated to ensure that the current placement would be appropriate.

The fostering service is 'signed up' to the Pan London safeguarding policies. Staff and carers are aware of the action to be taken should a child make a disclosure. Carers have all completed child protection training as part of their preparing to foster training. Carers, however, have not all benefited from updated child protection training within the past three years. Not all carers were fully clear on the principles underlining safe care. For example, approved by the carer, a young person had on two occasions unsupervised overnight contact with a parent contrary to written contact agreements. This breach of safeguarding was raised by the field social worker in the child's statutory review. There is no evidence that this matter was ever raised by the fostering service with the carer.

Clear guidance is included in the carer's manual around dealing with allegations against them as carers. Carers have been given further information by the fostering network. No carers visited had individual household safe care guidelines drawn up in consultation with the household. All families operate differently and fostered children have varying and very specific needs and experiences. This means that rules around what is ok and what is not ok need to be specific in order to minimise the risk of misunderstanding, triggering distress and to safeguard all members of the household.

Clear policies and procedures are in place which guide carers in the use of sanctions, these clearly outline the prohibited sanctions and controls. Policies are in place for managing allegations of bullying. Young people have access to a children's rights officer to whom they may take any complaints or concerns. Young people report that they feel safe in the homes in which they are placed.

The service has clear and robust systems for the recruitment of staff which safeguard young people. All staff carrying out assessments for the service are qualified social workers.

Panel members are subject to a recruitment process before being approved, however, the process does not on all occasions meet regulatory requirements. For example, records are not available for one panel member requested. The fostering service allows CRB (Criminal Records Bureau) checks to be produced from another employer. CRB checks are not portable and checks carried out for another employer are therefore deemed invalid.

Carers' annual reviews do not always take place within the year of the previous review, the agency is therefore failing to formally review the continuing suitability of

the carer. The fostering service already aware of this shortfall, is in the process of changing the way it conducts annual reviews. Carers say that although in the past they have not attended panel that the panel approval process was clearly explained to them.

The panel meets regularly and panel meeting minutes demonstrate quoracy. There are clear panel procedures which include quality checking the detail of assessments of prospective carers. Where four or more children are placed with a carer, exemptions have been formally granted in line with regulatory requirements. The panel has clear procedures for de-registration of carers where serious concerns exist.

Carers are not always in possession of all current looked after children paperwork which means that they may not be fully aware of relevant issues. Carers are aware of the need to keep young people's records secure and confidential.

Young people say they know how to complain and who to talk to about any concerns they may have. Comments from young people included:

'I always feel safe. Nothing really bad happens like get hit or anything. If I had a problem I would talk to an adult I know'; 'I know how to and whom to make a complaint to'; 'I just feel better and safer and cared for'; 'The reason I feel cared for is because auntie and uncle treat me well and look after me properly. Both tell me the right thing. They help me when I need it. Auntie and uncle's children help me, also they are very friendly like aunty and uncle, I really like them'; 'If I have a problem I tell auntie and uncle'; 'If I have problem I speak to the people in my family and my foster carers'.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The fostering service provides carers from a variety of backgrounds which enable children to be generally matched with carers of either the same or similar culture. Where transracial placements are made the need for provision of extra training is considered.

Diversity awareness is covered in carers' initial preparing to foster training. Carers are then offered further training as part of the overall carer training programme.

Carers say 'the service is good at addressing issues of culture and diversity.

Comments from carers included: 'they make sure the child is put with families of the same culture so that they have the chance to learn their roots.'

Professionals have commented in reports on how well carers build young peoples confidence and self esteem. For example, comments include "A' has bloomed since they went to live at 'Bs'. They were a shy introverted child with low self esteem, now they have grown hugely in confidence'.

Young people say that they feel well supported with their education and are able to ask carers and/or their families for help. Comments from young people included: 'I

can ask my foster carer for help and she will ask her son to help me'; 'I am supported in my education. I am helped to think about my future like what job I would like'; 'I'm always doing study after school also at school as well'; 'Every day auntie and uncle tell me to make sure I study and do my homework. Auntie and uncle say to me make sure you have a good education and do well in studying'; 'my uncle always says no girls study first and aim for the future'.

Carers are offered training on supporting children in education. The fostering service monitors the educational achievements of children as a whole. Such monitoring helps the service understand how well it is supporting children in education and identify any trends. Individual children's educational progress is not monitored by the fostering service during the carer's supervisory visits. Few children visited had an up to date Personal Education Plan held on their file or in possession of their carers thus limiting the carer's full knowledge of what levels of support the child should be receiving from the school.

School reports show children are settled and doing well at school and attendance levels are good. Carers liaise with the school where issues of concern arise. Carers attend school plays, and parents evenings. The fostering service provides group tutoring to looked after children at the key stages. The authority operates a summer school for older young people in the school holidays to give them the opportunity to improve their grades. Carers have arranged private tutoring for children where the carers feel this will enhance their education. School reports note significant improvements in children, for example, 'A' has transformed since the summer. They are now outgoing and participate in a range of activities and have a range of friends'; 'A' now presents as a happy child where previously they would withdraw and look worried'; 'B' is polite and well behaved and now appears relaxed and contented. 'B' talks about their new home and greets their carers happily and excitedly. 'B' appears more confident and enjoys playing with other children. 'B' is now more at ease with nursery staff and enjoys talking to them about the interesting things they do in their new house'.

Children benefit from a wide range of leisure activities. For example, some young people take part in sports activities such as gymnastics, swimming, football or rugby whilst others enjoy arts and crafts clubs. Music, dance and theatre lessons and workshops are also enjoyed by young people. Carers were observed to spend time playing with children and talking about the children's day and demonstrated a clear commitment to helping the children develop.

The authority offers short term breaks to children with disabilities through a contract with Barnardos. The management of this arrangement falls within the remit of the children with disabilities team.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is satisfactory.

Carers receive training in issues around contact prior to their approval as carers. Policies and procedures which acknowledge the importance of contact are contained in the carer's handbook. Supervised contact may occur in the carers' homes or at a local contact centre. Contact arrangements are clearly documented in the placement agreement and are known to carers. Carers, however, have not on all occasions abided by the placement arrangement and have allowed prohibited contact visits, this places children at risk. Carers were not regularly recording the outcome of contact arrangements and their perceived impact on the child. Such documentation is important to monitor the positive and negative effects on the child both before and after contact and may influence decisions made as to the appropriateness of current contact arrangements.

Carers consult with children and young people on all aspects of their day to day lives. The plan for the child's future is discussed with them, for example, moving on into independent accommodation or the searching for a new 'forever family'. Life story work is undertaken with children to help them have a picture of their history in later life.

The fostering service has good systems in place where young people can comment on the services they receive. Young people have the opportunity to attend weekly drop in services. The children's rights officer is available to respond to any concerns. Young people have developed a fortnightly Sunday lunch feedback session. The authority has developed a mentoring scheme for young people who have left care to support those who are due to leave. Young people have led in applications for funding and then decided how the service would best benefit.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is satisfactory.

The fostering service has clear systems in place to ensure foster carers are regularly paid and that allowances are clear to the carer. Each foster carer receives a regular agreed allowance which covers the cost of caring for the child. Allowances paid are reviewed annually and are above the national minimum guidelines. Allowances are paid regularly on time into the carers bank accounts. Carers have the opportunity to increase their annual allowances through achieving an NVQ, undertaking a minimum of five days training and taking foster children on holiday with them as a family.

Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

The fostering service has a clear statement of its aims and objectives. The children's guide to the fostering service is designed in 'bite size' chunks to make it more

accessible to young people. The children's guide informs young people of what they can expect from the fostering arrangement and what it means to be a looked after child. The children's guide also advises young people of whom they can complain to and the role of the children's rights officer.

The organisation has clear systems to monitor the educational achievements of children, complaints and child protection matters. The fostering service has clear systems for maintaining confidentiality of records, however, fails to always put these principles into practice effectively. For example, a carer's personal details were given to a child's family without the carer's permission.

Redbridge Fostering is now part of the Redbridge Children's Trust. Clear structure and accountability lines are in place, but, not all activities covered by fostering are overseen by the fostering manager. Some staff are unclear on who exactly has what roles. The fostering service has identified this confusion and is drawing up new staff responsibilities to clarify the arrangements.

Staff recruitment practices are robust. Staff are issued with contracts and job descriptions. All supervising social workers are qualified social workers. Unqualified support workers fulfil additional supportive roles within the fostering service. Staff receive one to one supervision regularly but there is no system for annually reviewing staff performance. Staff have access to all key policies and procedures Via Redbridge Intranet.

Links between the fostering service and the field work team are not working effectively. For example, field social workers feel that they are not kept informed accurately of vacancies. Comments from carers, supervising social workers, field social workers and the complaints officer evidence that the fostering service and field social work teams do not communicate effectively. The risk of teams not working together cohesively is that issues may not be addressed as each professional believes it to be another's responsibility and the needs of the child may get lost. The fostering service is aware of this issue and is arranging for a link supervising social worker to attend monthly field social work meetings.

The staff undertaking assessments of carers are qualified social workers. The assessment process for prospective carers is detailed and the service is using a nationally accepted framework of assessment.

Carers each have an allocated supervising social worker who visits them to see how they are managing. How often the supervising social worker visits varies greatly according to the wishes of the carer. However, these visits are not always frequent enough to effectively monitor the placement and how carers are managing. For example, some carers say that they are visited every three to four months. Such lengthy gaps between visits limit the effectiveness of support which can be offered to carers and means issues of concern are less likely to be identified early. Unannounced visits are carried out at least once a year.

Visits by supervising social workers fail to evidence that they are supervising and

discussing with carers the quality of the carer's work. These meetings fail to evidence clear purpose and how well the carer is supporting the young person in the five outcome areas, what the carer needs to be doing and any help that the carer may need. Supervising social workers do not always attend statutory reviews in support of the carer.

Foster carers benefit from a flexi care scheme whereby the fostering service arranges childcare cover for a few hours to allow carers to attend training or personal commitments such as a funeral. Foster carer support groups are held by the foster carer association. The fostering service meets with carers separately of the support group. The minutes of the meetings Redbridge hold with carers evidence low morale amongst carers and concerns as to lack of support for carers. The fostering service have responded to this by providing carers with an action plan which includes using an independent agency to offer support and advice to carers and individually agreed packages of support as well as a number of other actions. The fostering service believes these measures will improve carers' morale. Carers have access to monthly drop in sessions with fostering managers to discuss any concerns. Carers say that the telephone on call system works well. Carers have access between 17:00 and 23:00 to two experienced foster carers who are paid to provide telephone advice .

Comments from carers include:

'They supply 24 hours support. A direct contact number/a dedicated person who you can speak to if you have problems. They arrange meetings with other carers so you can exchange experiences. If you have any questions/problems you can always get hold of someone'; 'I have had the same supervising social worker for four years which is good. However, at the placement breakdown meeting the supervising social worker did not attend when I really needed them to especially as the child's social worker was new. The service shows it listens but fails to give practical support when it is really needed. I feel really let down'; 'There have been issues with another carer through which I have been supported by my supervising social worker but the fostering service as a whole have failed to respond to my concerns effectively'; 'I have had five supervising social workers within three years and I would like to see more continuity as I do not always know whom to contact when I need support'.

The fostering service does not always give clear messages to carers on decisions made as to limits on their suitability. For example, one carer was told that they could not have a second child share a room as it was felt in the best interests of the current child to feel it is a long term placement but then were told they could, however, have a second child as respite. A second carer said they had not been made aware as to why the number of children in their care had been changed from three to one.

The log of complaints held in the authority complaints department evidences a clear complaints process which is external to the fostering service. Historically the fostering service has not always responded to complaints by carers in a supportive manner which has resulted in significant proportion being taken through the full Local Authority complaints framework. The complaints officer says that this has

improved in recent months. The complaints records evidence complaints made against the fostering service about inappropriate emergency placements made and levels of support. The complaints officer says they feel that there is a common thread to complaints of lack of support from the supervising social worker, and a failure by field team and fostering to work effectively together. Foster carers are not always clear on the specific roles and responsibilities of the child's social worker and the supervising social worker.

Carers provide basic written reports regarding the child to field social workers prior to each review. Carers are in addition expected to provide information on any significant incidents to the fostering service. Carers, however, are not clearly expected to make regular written recordings on what has been happening in the child's life on a day to day basis. This makes effective monitoring of the child's care difficult.

Carers are expected to undertake a minimum level of training each year. Completion of the training is linked to a carer's allowance bonus scheme. Carers are offered a variety of relevant training which is circulated regularly. Each carer has an individual training profile. The fostering agency does not ensure a minimum regularity for updating basic training such as health and safety, safeguarding or first aid.

Carers say 'The fostering service regularly run courses which provide us with detailed information we would not otherwise have access to'; ' I believe regularly run courses should be run at different levels, for example, introduction and refreshers'. Carers also say that they would like to see a wider variety of courses laid on and more notice of when they are to take place.

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	maintain an up to date record of children and young people's health. Regulation 15	02/06/2008
9	ensure that where breaches in safeguarding protocol occur that these are formally discussed with the carer. Regulation 11	02/06/2008
30	ensure that all persons working for the fostering service are recruited in line with Regulation 20 schedule 1	02/06/2008
10	ensure carers are fully clear of their duty to maintain appropriate agreed contact arrangements as outlined in the care plan. Regulation 14	02/06/2008

20	ensure staff receive annual appraisals. Regulation 21	04/08/2008
21	ensure carers are visited in the first year of a child's placement in the first week, then at intervals of not more than six weeks, subsequently at intervals of not more than three months. Regulation 35	02/06/2008
23	ensure that a review of the approval of each carer takes place at intervals of not more than a year. Regulation 29	07/07/2008
20	ensure staff are clear of their responsibilities to monitor outcomes for individual young people. Regulation 35	02/06/2008
22	ensure that complaints from foster carers are responded to effectively within set timescales. Regulation 18	02/06/2008

Recommendations

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

- ensure that supervising social worker visits to carers evidence how the carer is meeting the health, safety, educational, emotional and social needs of the child (NMS 12)
- ensure all carers complete nationally recognised first aid training, which, is then updated every three years (NMS 12)
- ensure all children have an up to date health plan (NMS12)
- ensure each household has written individual safecare guidelines drawn up in consultation with everyone in the household (NMs 9)
- ensure all carers are provided with all current looked after children information (NMS 8)
- ensure the reason for the age range approval of carers is examined, and any issues addressed, prior to making a placement outside the range of approval (NMS 8)
- ensure panel members receive training appropriate to their role (NMS 30)
- ensure all carers undertake child protection training updates every three years (NMS 23)
- ensure all children have a current Personal Education Plan on file and a copy in the possession of the carer (NMS 13)
- ensure carers record the outcome of each contact visit and the perceived impact on the child (NMS 10)
- ensure visits carried out by supervising social workers are focussed on outcomes for children (NMS 22)
- ensure carers maintain regular recordings of day to day events in the child's life (NMS 24)
- ensure carers are supported by the fostering service at children's reviews (NMS 21)
- review the current systems of support to foster carers (NMS 21)
- ensure confidentiality procedures are followed (NMS 25.8)
- ensure all fostering social workers know the role of the children's social workers and there is a clear understanding about how the fostering social workers and

the childrens social workers work effectively together (NMS 16)