

London Borough of Brent Childrens Services Placement

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

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Inspector	Muhammed Harunur Rashid / Sandra Jacobs-Walls
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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 Brent fostering service works in collaboration with the area children's social work teams to ensure welfare of children placed in foster care. The fostering service also works closely with other professionals within and outside the council. The service works within a child centred, multi-disciplinary and anti-discriminatory framework. There are five fostering teams and one independent reviewing officer, which each have specific function and role within the placement service. They work together to provide a range of placements using Brent resources and private and voluntary providers.

The Commissioning and Resources Team finds and commissions care placements for children and young people requiring Looked After Children's (LAC) placements.

The fostering service's office is based in Wembley High Road and is accessible by public transport. The service provides staff offices and also have rooms available for interviews and meetings. The ground floor office has access to wheelchair users.

Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

At this announced full inspection all key standards were inspected. Achieving Economic Wellbeing was not inspected.

This is a satisfactory service. Children and young people's welfare is enhanced by the good relationship that exist between staff, foster carers, children and young people. Children and young people's health care needs are met. Efforts are made to keep them safe and they are attending school regularly. The fostering service works closely with a wide range of agencies in order to meet the assessed needs of children and young people. Foster carers and staff are supported by the management team.

Improvements since the last inspection

Previously the service was required to ensure that Criminal Record Bureau (CRB) and medical checks of foster carers were updated and renewed on time. There was a backlog of foster carers reviews and improvement needed for foster carers training and number of unannounced visits. The foster carers panel minutes were in need of review as was the complaints procedure. Better liaison was needed between staff of the fostering service and other children's teams. Development was needed regarding the support for foster carers subject to allegations and the development of the kinship team.

Most of these issues have been resolved. However, issues remain with regard to unannounced supervisory visits, the backlog of foster carers reviews and the management of allegations against foster carers.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

The fostering service has comprehensive policies and procedures in place to promote the health of children and young people in foster care. The fostering service closely works with other agencies, such as Looked After Children's (LAC) Team and Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) Team in order to meet children and young people's health care needs in full. Foster carers are well supported and encouraged through the provision of health care training. There is good health information in the foster carer's handbook. This helps to develop foster carers knowledge and skills to meet children and young people's individual health care needs.

Foster carers maintain records of all medical appointments children and young people attend. Records of medication administered are kept by foster carers and medication is safely stored so as to promote children and young people's wellbeing. Foster carers purchase first aid equipment and attend first aid training.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is satisfactory.

Managers and social work staff of the fostering service are well qualified and experienced in the fields of the fostering task, adoption, child protection and supporting children in need. Some managers possess formal management qualifications. Brent's fostering service has recently restructured and this has resulted in the expansion of the overall service. Subsequently, the fostering service has recruited somebody to the newly developed managerial post of Principal Officer. Currently, managers who hold the Principal Officer and the Head of Children's Placement Services posts are in 'acting up' positions. The fostering service consists of five teams, each led by a team manager. One post is currently filled by an agency team manager.

Teams of the fostering service is generally well established, consisting of permanent team members who are committed to achieving positive outcomes for young people in placement. The vetting of staff is robust and all employed staff personnel files evidence full information as required. However, this was not the case for members of the service's fostering panel. While all Criminal Record Bureau checks are evidenced, other checks such as positive proof of identity and evidence of relevant qualifications in identified areas of expertise are not evidenced.

The fostering service has policies and procedures in place that address issues of safe guarding and child protection. Staff of the fostering service have extensive child

protection experience and confirm there are training opportunities to further support staff development in this area of their work. There are policies in place that address issues of safe caring, bullying, absconding from placement and the management of complaints.

Foster carers have access to safeguarding and child protection training as part of preparatory training to become approved foster carers and periodically thereafter. Individual safe caring policies were evident for the files of some foster carers, but not consistently for all. This was also the case for unannounced visits by supervising social workers; not all foster carer files evidence at least one unannounced visit per year to the placement as required.

The fostering service maintains central records of allegations made against foster carers. While the service has procedures in place to address and manage allegations it was clear that in some cases procedures were not followed fully as outlined in written policy. It was noted that the policy document 'Managing allegations against staff and volunteers working with children and young people' remains a draft document.

In one case it was noted that the required 'end of investigation meeting', highlighted to occur late in 2007, is still outstanding at the time of this inspection. Despite this, however, the foster carer has resumed an 'active' status, and therefore is available to have young people placed. Issues regarding communication, co-ordination and resolution of noted concerns between the fostering service and other services within the department are explored elsewhere in this report.

The service's centralised record of allegations made against foster carers highlighted that three allegations had been made in the last 12 months. It was noted that none of these allegation had been reported to Ofsted as required by the regulations.

The fostering service generally provides suitable foster carers for the placement of Looked After Children. The assessment of prospective foster carers is comprehensive and robust; Form F assessments are detailed and well considered. Required vetting checks on foster carers and key family members are largely in place.

Staff confirm that the health and safety checks for the homes of foster carers are routinely conducted as part of the foster carers reviewing process. Foster carers' homes are warm, well furnished and maintained to a good standard of cleanliness and hygiene. Where necessary the fostering service supply foster carers with fire equipment and provide funding for first aid kits. The Foster Carers Handbook contains guidance in relation to health and safety matters and supervising social workers review foster carers practices during supervisory visits. Foster carers also have access to relevant health and safety training.

With regards to foster carers' annual reviews, the service aims to conduct the review of foster carers six months following initial approval and then annually. If necessary, annual reviews are held before the 12 month timeframe. While there has been

significant improvement in the service's ability to review foster carers on an annual basis it was noted that some annual reviews were conducted significantly later than they were due.

Policies and procedures are in place that address the service's matching process. The short term team works closely with the borough's Commissioning and Resources Team, (CRT) whose role is to identify and commission placements for Looked After Children and young people. Staff of the short term team assists CRT on a daily, duty basis to facilitate the suitable matching of young people to available foster carers.

The fostering service recruits foster carers from a diverse and broad range of the local community. Prospective carers are assessed in relation to their ability to meet the needs of a very diverse population of looked after children and young people. Files reviewed contain documentation of the needs of young people and placement objectives. Good efforts are made to match the ethnic, cultural, linguistic and faith needs of young people together with the skills and experiences of foster carers. Other more specific needs of looked after children are given consideration, for example, issues of disability. The newly operational Fostering Extra team advise on the placement of young people who present with significant challenges. Where the experiences of identified carers do not match exactly with the experiences and needs of young people, this is openly explored via the placement planning process and via supervisory visits. Additional support is made available as necessary.

The fostering service's fostering panel was not observed during the inspection. However, panel meeting minutes of three of the most recent panel meetings were reviewed. Panel meetings are quorate; panel discussion and the recording of panel deliberation and decision making is clear and detailed. Brent's fostering panel performs a quality assurance function, ensuring the assessment and approval of foster carers is rigorously conducted. The fostering panel is organised efficiently and effectively; training for panel members is held periodically. Prospective and approved foster carers are routinely invited to attend the fostering panel in person.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The fostering service promotes diversity and equality through various training for staff and foster carers. This involves inclusion of equality and diversity as part of the mandatory training. The service provides training focused on sexuality and sex education to staff and foster carers. Foster carers receive specialist training in order to care for children with disabilities. The service encourages its staff and foster carers to express and celebrate their differences and richness through cultural diversity days throughout the year. There are policies in place that promote equality and diversity.

The fostering service promotes education for children and young people. The service closely works with other agencies for achieving best outcomes for children and young people. All children have Personal Education Plans. Foster carers encourage and

support children and young people to attend schools. They support children and young people with their homework. Exclusions from school amongst fostered children is very low and there is a strategy in place to support this. A number of schemes, such as, after school booster classes are in place to support young people to gain good results in GCSE. Evidence shows that 50% of fostered children have achieved five or more GCSE or equivalent in the last 12 months and 18 former fostered children are attending various university courses.

The fostering service provides short-term breaks for children and young people including those who are disabled. Appropriate policies and procedures are in place for the service and a designated person has been identified in order to develop the service further. The short-term breaks service does not have its own panel, as a result all referrals go through the main fostering panel for the recommendation of approval or disapproval. Allowances paid to family link workers are not competitive with other local authority allowances. The management of the service informed the inspectors that this will be reviewed in due course.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The fostering service encourage children and young people to maintain and develop family contacts as set out in their care plans. Foster carers are provided with training on understanding contact issues for children and young people. A good range of resources are available to the fostering service to promote contacts. Issues raised are recorded and discussed in supervisory visits.

There are appropriate mechanisms in place by which to consult children and young people, for example, they are consulted during the LAC reviews and supervisory reviews. Young people informed the Inspector that foster carers and social workers consult with them and discuss their concerns and issues. Children and young people are given information and publicity about the complaints procedure and have access to various advocacy services, such as, Brent Youth Parliament.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

The fostering service's Statement of Purpose document is a comprehensive document that outlines clearly the aims and objective of the service and the facilities and specific services provided. The document is fully compliant with all required information as outlined in the National Minimum Standards.

The service produces two Children's Guides, one for children, and the other for older looked after young people. Both guides contain useful information about foster care, however, additional information regarding keeping young people safe, leading healthy lifestyles and updated information about making complaints would be useful and more reflective of information contained in the comprehensive Statement of Purpose.

The fostering service has a clear management structure with clear lines of accountability. Teams are generally well managed and organised. However, there is concern for current (temporary) staffing shortage in the short term team and the impact of recent changes to the team's operation.

It is noted that there is in excess 25 foster carers with 10 young people in placement without an allocated supervising social worker. Managers indicate that there are plans to assign a 'named' worker to help establish consistency and continuity of collaborative working. However, it is clear that foster carers who do not have an allocated supervising social worker are at a disadvantage; for some carers, the frequency of visits are sometimes reduced and delays in annual reviews are more frequent with this group of carers. Staff comment that it is a 'struggle' to establish effective working relationships. This is an unsatisfactory situation and is further compounded by staff of the short term team, on a duty basis, being jointly responsible for negotiation and co-ordination of referrals for foster care placements. This role is shared with Commissioning and Resources Team off site and is a result of the department's recent re-structure. Senior members of staff indicate that further review of the structure and management of the team is necessary to promote effective service delivery. Prompt implementation of plans to address difficulties faced by the short term team will assist to resolve identified issues.

With regards to administration the fostering services utilises an electronic recording system, Framework I, which has been widely available and operational to other sections of the department for some three years. The system has been available to the fostering team for just over 12 months.

Staff indicate that the move towards a 'paperless' method of working has greatly improved the work of administrators and enabled social work staff and managers to access wide ranging information and a greater ability to monitor and manage service data. While the electronic system is an improvement to manual recording it is clear that there is a need for further development of Framework I to ensure staff of the fostering team share the advantages of an efficient IT system. It is of concern that some staff comment that Framework I does not fully assist them in conducting their duties for the fostering service in a manner similar to that enjoyed by other teams in the department. The collation of statistical information is sometimes cumbersome, resulting in the collation of inaccurate information. Some staff indicate that restricted access to pertinent information acts to impinge on the execution of their duties. Staff's ability to produce accurate statistical information about key foster carer vetting checks proved difficult during the inspection. This is an unsatisfactory situation.

Inspectors were equally concerned in reviewing the management of an allegation made against a foster carer, the inability of key staff to address or even acknowledge an incident of a child protection nature during the foster carer's annual review. This is of concern since a strategy meeting had been convened, a section 47 investigation had been initiated and a 'standard of care' meeting had been held. It is unclear whether the omission is due to unfamiliarity with framework I, which should have alerted staff to the ongoing investigation, or whether this is due to weaknesses in the handover process. Nonetheless, the omission is a serious one in need of review.

The fostering service has an adequate number of sufficiently experienced and qualified staff. An exception to this is with regard to the foster carers' annual reviewing process. The facilitation and co-ordination of foster carers' reviews is the responsibility of the (permanent) reviewing officer post. The post holder is also largely responsible for the co-ordination of foster carers' training and some policy development. The service employs independent social work staff on a locum basis to assist in conducting foster carer reviews. Improvements are noted in consistency and the timely fashion in which annual reviews are now being conducted. However, if the reviewing process is to continue to improve and maximise its effectiveness, additional resources need to be secured.

Staff speak enthusiastically about their roles and responsibilities and are very committed to working effectively with foster carers and other professionals to ensure positive outcomes for children and young people in foster care placements. Support, supervision and training opportunities for staff are good. Staff and foster carers indicate a need for improved communication and collaborative working with representatives of other children's teams, for example, Looked After Children within the department to further encourage the very best outcomes for Looked After Children and young people.

The fostering service has a clear strategy for working with and supporting carers. Supervisory visits are regular and consistently monitor and address issues highlighted in the outcomes of Every Child Matters. Foster carers have access to good training which is supported by well written guidance via the Carer's Handbook. The service continues to develop its training programme for foster carers and has plans in place to offer more specialised training. National Vocational Qualifications training is also available to foster carers. The out of hours provision is effective and well known to foster carers.

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 foster carer households have safe caring policies in place (Regulation 8)	31/10/2008
22	ensure that at least one unannounced visit to placements are conducted annually (Regulation 8)	31/10/2008
16	ensure that foster carers' annual reviews are consistently conducted once every 12 months (Regulation 8)	31/10/2008
22	ensure that all procedures with regard to the management of allegations against foster carers are completed prior to decisions being made about foster careers resuming care for children and young people (Regulation 12)	31/10/2008
20	ensure that Ofsted are notified of all child protection enquires and serious complaints made against foster carers as per Schedule 8 of the Fostering Services Regulations (Regulation 43)	31/10/2008
30	ensure that personnel files for all members of the fostering panel evidence full information as outlined in Schedule 1 of the Fostering Services Regulations (Schedule 1)	31/10/2008
16	ensure that effective systems are in place to determine, prioritise and monitor workloads of the short term team (Regulation 35)	31/10/2008
25	ensure that electronic IT systems are further developed to meet the administrative needs of staff of the fostering team (Regulation 8)	31/10/2008
25	ensure good systems are in place to ensure that key information pertaining to the safeguarding of young people in placement is made available to the annual review process (Regulation 8)	31/10/2008
21	ensure that sufficient resources are available to support the foster carers, annual reviewing process (Regulation 29)	31/10/2008

Recommendations

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

- consider updating the contents of the service's Children's Guide, including information about making complaints (NMS 1)
- develop strategies to encourage improved communication and collaborate working between staff of the fostering team, foster carers and staff of other children's teams within the department (NMS 21).