

London Borough of Barnet Fostering Service

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 fostering service of Barnet consists of three teams. The recruitment and training team, support and development team and Kinship and permanence team. The fostering service has also included the Barnet link service as part of the support and development. The fostering service aims to provide placements in a family for children who cannot either temporarily or permanently be cared for within their own families. The London Borough of Barnet has approximately 111 fostering households. The fostering service has reduced the number of children and young people supported on behalf of Barnet through external providers.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

At this announced full inspection all key standards were inspected. This is a good service in most respects with some satisfactory features. The health and safety of children in care has been improved by teams working together. The corporate parenting, Children Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) and safeguarding teams work better with the fostering service to improve outcomes for children and young people. Information presented to the fostering panel has improved, giving foster carers and social workers clear guidance of what is expected of them in their respective roles. Child protection concerns are better addressed by all areas of the service and the safeguarding team. Whilst the service acknowledges there is further work to do, this is being approached as a whole service responsibility.

In most cases foster carers and staff feel well supported with opportunities to develop professionally. The management structure allows for staff and carers to air their views and concerns to all levels of management. However, increased scrutiny of matching and placing children outside foster carers' terms of approval is lacking and does not ensure that appropriate placements are made at all times. In addition consultation with less able children and carers of teenagers is limited. Partial targeted foster carer recruitment leaves the service less well equipped to attract suitable foster carers. The current IT system within the service is insufficient leaving a gap in the electronic information available to the fostering service.

Improvements since the last inspection

The fostering service was asked to make some improvements to the service. These were amendments to the Statement of Purpose, a safer caring policy in all foster homes, written foster care agreements, clear training development plans and profiles on foster carers. The service has been able to meet these. The Statement of Purpose now reflects the new skills based approach to fostering enabling the public to be

aware of the level of training foster carers are expected to complete to support children in care. The development of a safer caring policy focuses foster carers and the service on how best to keep children and young people safe. The service has developed a more detailed written foster carers' agreement which all foster carers must sign and comply with to promote safety and confidentiality of children and young people. The training plan has been put in place and is detailed however the evaluation of the plan remains outstanding. The recommendation of a profile on each family is being implemented. There is a commitment to complete this with all newly approved carers and continue with existing carers. Profiles enable children and young people to have an idea of who they are being placed with and where, what the hobbies and interests the foster carers have and who is living in the household. This helps put children and young people more at ease rather than relying on verbal information.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

The fostering service ensures that the health needs of children and young people are addressed. Foster carers are provided with training on first aid, promoting good health and hygiene, and specialist training relating to sexual health and drug use. Specialist training is also provided for Barnet Link scheme carers on all aspects of health care relevant to individual children. The fostering service has good links with the disabled children's services in the borough and the fostering panel medical advisor if guidance is required.

Foster carers are provided with as much information as possible with regards to children and young people's health needs prior to placement. In addition foster carers take responsibility for ensuring that young people are registered with GPs and dentists and attend all health appointments in a timely manner. Children in care are placed with foster carers who make sure that their optimum level of health is maintained.

Foster carers and young people value the good quality support they receive from CAMHS. This is a well-established team of psychologists and therapists who are able to respond to the needs of children in care and foster carers quickly. The fostering service has good links with other specialist health services available to children and young people. Foster carers are encouraged to access such services to help children and young people deal with any difficulties they may encounter.

The corporate parenting team responsible for looked after children has a designated nurse working within the team and an additional nurse completing health assessments. The team monitor the quality and quantity of health, assessments, dental treatment and immunisations. The service has not yet addressed the issue of how older children can keep and take their medical information with them through to independence.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

Barnet Fostering service continues to be suitably managed. All relevant qualifications and records of checks for the manager are in place.

Children and young people can be assured that Barnet Fostering service employs suitable foster carers. Preparation groups and assessments prior to the approval of foster carers make clear the expectations the service has on its carers. Foster carers are expected to ensure that their living environment is suitable for children in care. Health and safety is addressed during six weekly supervisory visits and at the foster carers' annual review.

The fostering service makes great attempts to find a suitable match for children in care. Decisions regarding appropriate placements of children and young people are made at weekly placement meetings. This process highlights the need to recruit particular groups of foster carers, for example those of the Muslim faith. Regular management meetings identify foster carers who need to be provided with additional support to ensure the placement works well. The fostering service makes good use of CAMHS when exploring placement issues. The Barnet Link scheme matches carers to individual children and agreements are reached with the service, parents and carers about the frequency of short breaks and day care support.

Foster carers receive training in safeguarding and protecting children and young people. All foster carers produce a safe caring policy which outlines how children and young people will be protected whilst in their care. From the outset foster carers are aware of the department's expectations in relation to any form of punishment toward children and young people placed with them. Foster carers sign the foster carer agreement which makes clear that corporal punishment is not acceptable.

The fostering service has a system of recording any allegations of neglect or abuse of a child in foster care. However it recognises that the number of allegations is small and that incidences may be under-reported. The local authority designated officer is examining this in more detail. Foster carers know what to do in the event of a child or young person going missing from home. The protocol is clear and followed.

Foster carers are given as much information as is available about children and young people prior to a placement being made. In some circumstances this is not possible as the social services department has scant information on the children themselves. Consideration is given to all other members of the foster carers' household including other foster children to ensure any further placement does not cause disruption. Barnet fostering service has three levels of foster carers who have varying levels of experience and skills. All foster carers are able to move up through the skills levels if they meet the training requirements, and competencies outlined by the fostering service and the Children's workforce Development Council (CWDC).

Children and young people entering foster care are being supported by staff that

have been properly checked to ensure their suitability to work with children and young people. Barnet fostering service have competent graduate trainees and fostering outreach workers that compliment the work being done by the fostering team. These staff are well supported by qualified senior staff within the team who are accountable for all decisions made.

The fostering service panel has strong leadership making clear what expectations the panel has of the fostering service. These refer specifically to safeguarding children and young people, supporting foster carers and presenting detailed, high quality reports to panel. The panel, led by the chair are clear of the regulations and have highlighted issues in relation to placements made outside the terms of approval. Concerns raised express the potential breakdown in foster placements and stability for children and young people. The fostering panel operates professionally and enhances the work done by other areas of the service.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

All children and young people in Barnet can be confident that their foster carers have received training in equality and diversity to help them better understand the experiences of children in care. The service provides fostering outreach workers to assist young people where issues of discrimination and diversity arise. This is in addition to the expertise of foster carers and other disciplines working within the service. The service provided by the fostering outreach workers is highly regarded by foster carers and within the Department. Foster carers also utilise their own networks to educate themselves around the needs of children and young people who have a different racial or cultural background from themselves.

The support provided to children and young people in relation to their education is improving. There is less reporting of foster carers experiencing delays in accessing school places for children and young people. Children and young people continue to contribute to their personal education plans (PEP) and these are being audited by the corporate parenting team. Weekly educational panel meetings consider requests for additional tutoring, study materials and other services identified in the PEP. Computers made available in the homes of foster carers are also rolled out by the corporate parenting team as are laptops for young people seeking to continue with further/higher education.

The education champions scheme continues to support children and young people to achieve their educational potential. In addition, the annual achievement day recognises all the efforts children and young people have made. Barnet has implemented a new apprenticeship scheme for care leavers. This has proved a challenge to all involved and a review of the way in which it has been organised will assist to improve the scheme in the future.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is satisfactory.

Children and young people in care can be assured that the fostering service recognises the importance of maintaining contact with family members and significant others. Training is provided and highlights the need to maintain good records of contact. Foster carers ensure that contact is well managed even in very difficult circumstances. The availability of a well-equipped contact centre helps to improve the experience of children attending contact.

Barnet fostering service is actively working to engage foster carers and young people in all strands of decision-making within the service. Barnet children's service is one of the National Right 2bCared4 pilots. This gives a commitment to young people that they will be fully consulted before any decisions are made about future placements. Other methods of consultation used include foster carers' reviews, looked after children's reviews, representation on working parties, advocacy provided by the children's rights service, and consultation around the design of the young people's centre. It is acknowledged within the service that only the more vocal children and young people contribute to any consultation. Younger children and disabled children do not effectively contribute to the consultations. The fostering service and its partners has a good range of information and advice available to children and carers. These include newsletters, magazines, and letters highlighting forthcoming events.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is satisfactory.

Barnet fostering service provides carers experienced in dealing with young people moving towards independence. A variety of training is provided to carers to ensure they effectively support and guide young people. Parts of the wider service to promote independence are undergoing change and improvement. The 313 centre is currently being refurbished and young people's views about what the Centre should provide are being sought. Discussions and surveys indicate that whilst pathway plans are prepared, foster carers with a good knowledge and understanding of the children in their care feel marginalised. Foster carers and young people raise issues about the need for a smooth transition into independence. In addition young people express concern where they have been supported out of Borough and will be returning to Barnet and linking in with local services and people unknown to them.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The fostering service Statement of Purpose is clear and contains all the required information. The children's guide is not user friendly, giving a less positive image of young people in care just by the nature of its design. The service are well aware of these shortfalls and have taken steps to rectify this whilst completing the foster

carers' handbook.

Barnet fostering have undergone a reorganisation of senior management. This new structure has not yet been embedded so the impact of this remains unknown. The roles and responsibilities of managers from the responsible individual and below are clear to all staff. The fostering service has a system in place for managing unallocated cases due to long term absence. The duty system is robust in managing some of this work where allocation is not a priority ie supporting a foster carer who has a long term stable placement. Better relationships have developed between children in care social workers and supervising social workers since they are working on the same floor to ensure foster carers and children are well supported.

Staff in the service value the supervision they receive from their managers and opportunities for training and professional development. Team meetings and three-weekly meetings available to staff from CAMHS enable professional discussions to take place. Foster carers state that the standard of the service has been raised and a more supportive atmosphere has emerged. Foster carers tend to stay for some time at Barnet. Longer serving foster carers stated that they were happy with the support and training they are provided with and have no reason to leave the service and go elsewhere.

Carers receive information on training courses available. The courses outline which National Minimum Standards, training standards for foster carers and every child matters outcomes are covered in the training. The service provides incentives to carers on the completion of each level to encourage them to increase their knowledge and expertise thereby improving their work with children in care. Training is provided to Barnet link carers from the main training programme and external training is provided by voluntary organisations specialising in disability issues. Whilst the administrative support to the fostering service is stretched, the administration manager is able to cover the work and shift resources as necessary. The separate administration of the recruitment and training team is a cause for concern. Carers state that they often receive information about training late, have been given incorrect details of venues and parking arrangements are not always booked on training courses that have been confirmed and training is sometimes cancelled. The recruitment managers acknowledged that there have been some problems in this area which are being addressed.

The fostering service has a good mix of staff to ensure their responsibilities are carried out. The use of fostering outreach workers and graduate trainees is considered a strength of the service. However changes and movement of staff will significantly impact the way in which the service operates at present due to the reduction in numbers and quality of the work produced.

The fostering service has identified a lack of carers within certain communities. However no robust and creative plans are in place to actively recruit new carers. The Barnet link service is promoted during foster care campaigns and open days to encourage those who wish to provide care but are unable to make such a big commitment. Foster carers receive good support from the service through training

and development, supervision, foster carers support groups, reviews, CAMHS, health and education support, out of hours (where necessary) and fostering outreach workers. Whilst training is evaluated after every session the service has not undertaken an annual review of the effectiveness of training to make sure that training is pitched at the right level for the carers attending or is having a positive impact on children in care.

The newly formed Barnet foster carers association is building additional support for foster carers from foster carers. This group works with the department and has already made a significant contribution to the way in which the department communicates with it's carers. Committee members believe that the fostering service want to listen to the views and concerns of their carers.

Fostering service staff talk of their frustration with the present IT system. This is due to implementation of ICS and the operation of two different systems. This has increased delays in accessing information about children and young people and delayed some foster carers payments. Hand written information is improving, making records more legible and open to scrutiny should children and young people wish to access their case records. Records show that case files are audited fairly regularly and areas for improvement are addressed.

Kinship carers are subject to assessment and training in the same way as other foster carers in the department. The managers and supervising social workers are sensitive to the differences that kinship carers have to other foster carers. Kinship carers state they are well supported and receive information regarding all aspects of the service including kinship support groups, achievement days, and newsletters. Kinship carers are also welcome to attend the foster carers support group and some do so.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Recommendations

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

- develop a health record that gives young people their medical history and moves with them when they approach independence and leave care. NMS 12
- establish a system with the fostering panel to monitor and scrutinise those placements that are made outside the terms of approval and matching, ensuring such placements do not drift NMS 30
- seek ways to improve and extend consultation and involvement of children in care aged 12 and under. In addition seek to consult with disabled children in a meaningful way. NMS 11
- facilitate positive communication between young people, the leaving care service and foster carers to ensure robust plans are made for independence. NMS 14

- put a contingency plan in place to address the shortfalls in staffing when the trainees and fostering outreach workers leave the service in order to maintain a good service to children and young people NMS 17
- improve the recruitment strategy and action for target groups of carers required by the service NMS 17
- streamline electronic systems as a priority to ensure all data and information is available to the fostering service NMS 24