

Camden 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 Camden provides comprehensive fostering support for looked after children. The fostering team is an integral part of the children and family services provided in Camden.

Short term and long term fostering, shared care and kinship care is provided. There is a small respite care service available for children with disabilities. Foster carers are recruited, trained and supported by the fostering team. A diverse group of carers is available from a range of social, ethnic and religious backgrounds that match the needs of children and young people in the care system. The work of each foster carer is reviewed annually by the foster panel.

Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

This was a lighter touch inspection because the service received a good outcome at the last inspection. All key standards were looked at. The service has worked hard to maintain standards and improve outcomes for children. The fostering team is well managed and is providing excellent support to carers who have the skills and experience to care for the children placed with them. Education is valued and children are encouraged to lead healthy lifestyles and pursue their hobbies, activities and interests.

The fostering team has moved to more suitable premises in the last year. The team is now based in the same building as the children's social workers and this has proved to be beneficial to both teams who are able to liaise regularly with each other.

The specialist fostering service provided for children with complex needs is proving useful and providing good outcomes for children. The system has caused some confusion among carers regarding what constitutes 'specialist care'.

There are a range of excellent support services available for young people who are over the age of 16 and in general these meet their needs. However young people commented that the amount of changes they experience when approaching leaving care can be difficult for them to cope with.

Improvements since the last inspection

The two actions and three recommendations from the previous inspection have been met. All staff receive regular supervision and appraisals. Staff confirmed that regular

training is available. Children's files are kept in an electronic form which has greatly improved in the last year. The electronic files ensure easy access to information and link children's files with the file of the relevant carer. Full information is available electronically on children and foster carers files. The fostering team has in the last year moved to better premises with improved working conditions. They are based in the same location as the Looked after Children's social worker team and this has proved beneficial for both teams who report improved communication systems and improved working relationships. The Camden Fostering Service is working together with all areas of children's services. The fostering team supports carers to provide care which improves the lives of children looked after and promotes the five 'every child matters' outcomes.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

Camden fostering service ensures that carers are given easily understandable basic health information for each child before placement or within 24 hours of an emergency placement. Health plans seen detail how children's specific and general health issues are to be addressed. Information identifying and addressing health issues related to ethnicity, race, disability, sexuality and religion are clearly recorded.

Particular health needs which may impact on future outcomes for children are identified at the earliest opportunity. Specific action is taken to address these, for example, involvement of specialist health workers such as the Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). CAMHS services can be accessed through Camden's multi agency liaison team (MALT). MALT clinicians offer support to all looked after children in Camden and carry out assessments for children and young people with complex needs.

Camden has a proactive health team for children looked after. Foster carers can receive immediate advice and support regarding any issues identified. The leaving care service provides a drop in for older young people where they can gain advice, support and information about any health topic including healthy living, sexual health and keeping safe. Looked after children nurses run clinics at the drop in centre as and when required. There is a local substance misuse team that young people can access confidentially.

Staff, carers and children have access to training related to healthy lifestyles. Colourful leaflets related to healthy living are available at venues throughout the borough. Foster carers receive comprehensive induction and ongoing training to support them in identifying and addressing children's overall needs. They receive additional training if children with special health needs are placed with them. Carers confirmed that they are confident about their responsibilities and of the responsibilities of key health professionals involved.

Children said that their carers talk to them about health issues. They said they and key family members are consulted about their needs. Written records are kept of

each looked after child's medical background and the percentage of children with up to date health and dental checks is high.

The service actively works to obtain the resources required to promote and secure good health outcomes. It has successfully built partnerships with other key agencies and professionals to continually develop and promote health care. Good outcomes can be demonstrated for the majority of children who are fostered. This is clearly attributed to the overall good practice of the service, which proactively and holistically addresses the needs of looked after children.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

Camden operates a thorough recruitment procedure and ensures relevant checks and references are cleared prior to any appointments of staff or carers being agreed. Managers and social workers have appropriate qualifications for their post and the manager is at present in the process of completing a National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) level 4 in management.

Children are placed with carers who have been appropriately recruited and thoroughly assessed as being suitable to work with children. All relevant checks and Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) disclosures are renewed as required by regulation. Carers are fully informed about health, education, and behavioural needs and the family background of children placed with them and this enable them to provide safe care. Where appropriate following an assessment specialist help or treatment is enlisted to support carers to minimise the effects of any previous significant harm suffered by children.

The matching process is thorough. Children are placed with carers who are identified as being able to meet their needs. Ethnicity, religion, language, sexuality and issues regarding culture and disability are considered during the placement planning process. On occasions where gaps in the match are identified packages of support are developed.

Camden has a range of policies and procedures in place related to safe care, child protection, bullying, dealing with allegations, behaviour management, corporal punishment and children missing from care. Comprehensive, compulsory safe care training is developed for foster carers with regular refresher courses. The foster carers' handbook contains details of the above policies and useful information and telephone numbers for carers to access instant advice and support. Camden's looked after children service works in partnership with the local safeguarding board, children, families and other relevant agencies to ensure children are cared for safely.

Services and activities provided for children and young people looked after are risk assessed. Camden aims to achieve a balance between acceptable risk and the wishes, views and development needs of children so that they can as far as possible live a normal lifestyle. Based on listening to what they say all possible steps are

taken to ensure children are not made to feel different because they are fostered.

Children confirmed that they feel listened to by their carers and at their child care reviews. They said they believe they have a voice. Excellent young people's groups are in place throughout the borough and children work with the looked after children's department to assess services and ensure good practice. There is a children and young people's newsletter and information about services and how to make a complaint is available in different languages at all of the local offices. Children said they know how to make a complaint and they know who to talk if they are upset or unhappy.

The foster panel was observed during the inspection and minutes of previous panels were seen. The panel is effective with excellent management and relevant membership which is representative of the local community. Good outcomes for children can be demonstrated. The panel ensures close scrutiny of approval, deregistration, concerns over care, quality assurance of assessments and reviews of carers' approval.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Camden actively seeks to recruit carers that can meet the diversity needs of the children it cares for. Equality and diversity is covered in the foster carers' preparation groups, during the assessment to foster process and as part of ongoing training and development. Policies related to diversity and equality are available in the foster carers' handbook. Children and foster carers confirmed that the service responds positively to issues of gender, religion ethnicity, language, culture, disability and sexuality. The overall needs of each child are considered during the matching process. If the match doesn't completely meet the child's needs the fostering service will provide support to the placement or consider a placement with carers from an independent fostering agency.

There is a focussed approach to education for looked after children and outcomes have improved over the last year in GCSE and 'A' level results. Of the children looked after by Camden 80% have a Personal Education Plan (PEP). Camden provides a range of excellent resources to support the education process. There is a virtual LAC Academy which supports students and carers wherever they are receiving an education. There is an attendance strategy in place, which looks at children and young people with attendance problems and identifies early intervention methods and support to encourage them to go to school. Older children are able to access a connexions personal advisor through the leaving care service.

Carers confirmed that they attend open days and parents' evenings and that they are very much involved in the education of children placed with them. Children are encouraged to achieve throughout their placement. The leaving care team support young people to access further education and work experience schemes. The achievements of children in foster care are acknowledged and rewarded by Camden.

The impact that changing schools can have on the educational development, achievements and friendships for children and young people is recognised by the fostering team. Every effort is made to ensure children can remain at the same school. Where this is not possible Camden works in partnership with the child and their social worker, the carer, the education authority and where appropriate the child's parent to look at the best alternative education options available.

Camden has a range of out of school activities available and these include leisure and sport. Young people confirmed that they are encouraged to join youth clubs and leisure centres. Younger children are encouraged to attend group activities such as after school clubs, scouts, guides and brownies. Supervising social workers monitor the social and leisure activities of children and young people during monthly home visits. Independent Reviewing Officers also prioritise leisure, sport and social activities as part of the child care review process.

Camden's kinship and respite foster carers are made fully aware of their own roles and the roles of the child's main carer during the placement planning process. All Camden carers are recruited in the same way with references and relevant checks carried out prior to placements being made.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

Establishing, maintaining and developing contact with friends and family is integral to the service provided. This is emphasised through the training and support given to foster carers with regard to the planning, supervision and recording of contact. Children confirmed that their views and wishes are sought and inform the contact plan and review of arrangements.

The service has a participation strategy for the full and active involvement of children at every level. Many examples of consultation with young people were seen throughout the inspection. Young people are involved in senior staff recruitment. A group of young people have been elected and trained to undertake inspections of specific areas of children's services in Camden. They report on these inspections and make recommendations. There is a teenagers to work scheme which recruits looked after children to consult with other children about the services that are available to them. Children are involved in the planning and delivery of 'Total Respect' training which promotes the importance of listening to children in the care system.

Children's participation in discussions and decision making about their own futures is fully integrated into service policy and planning. Children confirmed that they are asked for their views and they believe their views make a difference, for example they said they are placed with carers who can meet their expressed views, wishes and needs.

The fostering service aims to consult with and work in partnership with all those who

are important in the lives of the children they look after. There is a complaints procedure in place which is widely advertised and available in different languages. The procedure includes contact details of advocacy services and independent support agencies. Children and carers confirmed that they are aware of the complaints policy and procedure.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

Children feel that they are well supported to achieve independent living skills. All looked after children who are 16 years or older have a pathway plan. Children and carers said that learning independent living skills is ongoing in an age appropriate way from the beginning of each placement. Younger children are supported to learn basic cooking skills and are encouraged to keep their rooms tidy. Older young people focus more on budgeting, shopping, finance, work experience, further education and the more mundane skills of every day cooking and cleaning. Young people although clear about the plans for them, said that lots of changes happen at the age of 16 and this can be difficult to cope with.

The fostering team has effective links with other local services including the leaving care teams and further education services to ensure where appropriate young people have access to good quality education advice and reasonable accommodation.

Camden has a specialist foster care scheme which supports young people with complex needs. The scheme is successful with good outcomes for the children placed. Carers said the scheme can be confusing, they said they would welcome further information about the difference between foster care and specialist foster care and the allowances paid for each scheme.

All carers including kinship and respite carers receive appropriate allowances and expenses which meet the cost of caring for the children placed with them. Payments are fully explored at the pre placement planning meeting and are subject to ongoing review to ensure they continue to meet the needs of individual children. Clear systems are in place related to allowances and expenses and these are paid on time.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

The Statement of Purpose, children's guide and the policies and procedures for the service are in good order. The organisation has a system in place to ensure these are reviewed regularly and are updated as required. There is a stable management team in place. Managers and social work staff have the relevant qualifications, skills and experiences to carry out their roles. All social workers are registered with the General Social Care Council.

The fostering service has an adequate number of sufficiently qualified staff in post.

Managers ensure that working practice, processes and systems are comprehensive and support overall good outcomes for children. Managers are visible and available to children and carers as well as to staff. Managers take active steps to ensure that they get direct feedback from carers, children and families about the services provided.

The recruitment procedures for staff and carers are rigorous. They are in line with best practice guidance. Procedures include a positive strategy to ensure the recruitment of a range and diversity of staff and carers to meet the needs of children. The recruitment plan includes undertaking all relevant checks CRB's and references as well as a structured induction and training plan. All staff receive appropriate supervision on a monthly basis and this is recorded. Staff also receive an annual appraisal which ensures appropriate training is developed and is accessible throughout the year.

Camden provides a 24 hour emergency on call service to support carers and children. Foster carers receive regular supervision and access to training. Carers have a training profile in place. They are provided with a foster carers' handbook which is detailed and includes the policies and procedures for the service and guidance on what to do in specific circumstances. Carers approval is reviewed annually. Information is sought from appropriate professionals and from children in placement and their social workers. The information received about each carer is comprehensive, it is used to inform the re-approval report which is reviewed at the foster panel.

Children's case records are located on the electronic recording system. They are easily accessible. The system is effective and all information related to children and young people and links with the relevant foster carer file can be accessed in minutes. Children are made aware that they and their parents have the right to see their files on request where this is appropriate. The electronic recording system has greatly improved since the previous inspection. Information is clearly recorded, up to date and easily accessible.

The administrative records for the service are also held electronically. There are separate files for staff, carers, children, complaints and allegations. The service has a quality assurance system in place and all records are monitored and remedial action taken where necessary. All records are stored confidentially. Paper records are stored in locked facilities and electronic records are pass word protected. All electronic records have backup systems in place.

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):

- consider developing a plan, which staggers the leaving care process for young people who may need more time to adapt to the changes that begin to happen when they reach 16 years. NMS 14.5
- consider developing an information leaflet to ensure carers are clear about the differences between foster care and specialist foster care. Including the different payment scales . NMS 29.2