

Fostering Services (WCC)

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

Westminster Fostering Service provides long term, short term and respite placements for children and young people. Placements are made with in house carers, with independent fostering agencies and with friends or relatives of children and young people. Westminster Fostering is now part of the North West London Fostering Consortium and has signed up to the protocol for sharing foster carers with spare capacity.

The fostering teams and children's social workers are now located within the same building. Foster placements are located within London and elsewhere in England.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

The purpose of this announced inspection was to assess the service against key National Minimum Standards as well as the standard relating to allowances and to gauge improvement to the service since the last inspection. All outcome areas were examined.

Generally, there are positive outcomes for children and young people. Most carers strongly advocate for the rights of children, support their education and help them to aim high and achieve in whatever they do. The education of children in foster care is given a high priority.

Most carers value the support and professionalism shown by their supervising social workers. The training provided for carers is regarded as excellent and relevant to the work carers do. A carer described why they choose to foster for Westminster: '...because of the high standard of training, activities and support to their carers and young people.'

The accessibility and use of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) is highly regarded by both staff and carers. Young people and carers are offered excellent support from this service in a timely manner.

For a few young people, the most difficult part of being fostered is not feeling included as one of the family. Some carers find communication with children's social workers to be insufficient. The service hopes that by placing the fostering and children's teams in the same location, communication between teams will improve and consequently communication with foster families.

Some carers, who look after children across different age groups, feel they are not

consulted about children's futures or listened to. Some kinship carers feel their specific support and training needs are not fully addressed.

There is now an experienced management team and the service is consolidating after a period of change. Westminster Fostering is committed to providing quality placements for those children needing them.

Improvements since the last inspection

There have been significant developments, in a number of areas of the fostering service, in response to recommendations made at the last inspection. Some of the written information given to carers has been updated and there are plans to review the children's guide to the service this year, following consultation with children and young people.

Training and information on education have been made available to carers so that they can better support the education and learning needs of children and young people. Training has also been provided on the Every Child Matters outcomes and these are now embedded in all aspects of the fostering service. The appointment of a senior practitioner, to manage carer training and development, has raised the profile of training and expectations that all carers attend. Regular meetings of the carers' support group are now held, providing carers with consistent support.

The service manager and deputy service manager hold appropriate management qualifications. There are sufficient staff and workloads are now better managed across teams following some re-organisation. Sufficiency of staffing has been affected by some long term sickness absences but agency staff have been used to cover shortages. Better use of resources are now made so that the assessment and support of family and friends carers is effective. Also, a system has been put in place to ensure family and friend carers now receive unannounced visits from supervising social workers at least annually.

A fairly high number of children receive their annual health checks and the service has identified further work which needs to be done to ensure all children take up these checks to promote their good health.

Preventative services and early intervention services have contributed to a general decline in the numbers of children coming into care in Westminster. The service has targeted recruitment to focus on potential carers who have skills to meet the more complex needs of some young people.

Improvements have been made in recording how panel decisions are reached, affording greater transparency and clarity. Information is now provided to children on how they might contact an independent advocate. There is an improvement in the way children's records are stored and managed so that there is a clear chronology of a child's history.

Steps have been taken to improve communication between children's social workers

and staff within the fostering teams. However, the service accepts that this is an area requiring ongoing focus.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Young people's good health is promoted through the provision of appropriate care. Foster carers are active in promoting all aspects of children's health, supporting them to access specialist services where required. Effective links are established with health services, for example, where carers, waiting for newborn babies to be discharged from hospitals into their care, work with hospital staff to fully understand babies' health care needs.

The service reports a fairly high number of routine health assessments and dental checks being carried out on fostered children which helps to promote their good health but is concerned to ensure all children take up such checks. Carers are supplied with health information on the children they care for when, or soon after, they are placed, to help them understand how best to care for the child. General records of children's health are maintained. Whilst there are specific health record books for children aged from birth to five years, there are no specific records which older children can keep and take with them when they move on.

Support from the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) is provided and this is regarded as an excellent facility by both staff and carers which has directly improved placement stability.

Consistent first aid training for carers is provided, including paediatric first aid for those who care for babies, to ensure that children can be treated immediately in an emergency. Further training on relevant health topics is provided to ensure carers can support children to be healthy.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

Carers are supported to keep children safe through regular training in child protection and by developing safe care policies for their households. The service makes clear what kinds of behaviour management are acceptable and safe to use. Carers are aware of children and young people's vulnerability to bullying or being bullied. Detailed information is provided to carers on how to deal with bullying, behaviour management and what to do should a child go missing. Carers feel the service supplies information on children placed with them to enable them to protect the fostered child and any other children they have responsibility for, but that this is not always consistently supplied.

Children and young people are provided with comfortable, homely accommodation with suitable facilities. They are protected by the annual health and safety checks

carried out on the premises where they are living.

The fostering panel performs a good quality assurance function by scrutinising information on prospective carers and making suggestions to improve the overall assessment process. An independent panel chair has been appointed. The panel are involved in developmental days and training within the service.

The process for checking that staff are suitable for their role, is fairly thorough, with Criminal Record Bureau (CRB) checks carried out and renewed every three years and references taken up. Staff are recruited who have suitable experience and qualifications to work within fostering. However, direct checks of references are not evidenced, some references are without a company stamp or slip and there is no evidence of social workers being registered with the General Social Care Council (GSCC).

Westminster provides relevant support for carers where there are gaps in the match between them and a child placed. Specific training is supplied and carers are also encouraged to make links with community resources to address any unmet needs.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The importance of consistent education and achievement is given priority within Westminster Fostering. Carers are supported to help children find education placements, attend education meetings, source additional tuition and encourage young people to view education positively. Some young people have been encouraged to achieve outstanding results. There are very low levels of fixed term exclusions and no permanent exclusions in the past year, which is commendable.

The service is targeting its recruitment campaign to focus on finding carers who can meet the needs of a changing population of children needing fostering placements. Westminster ensures carers are provided with specific training to help them care for those children who are transculturally placed as well as supporting them in additional ways. For example: 'Our supervising social worker has always helped us address any issues or concerns over culture, equality, diversity and disability. She is very knowledgeable. I have learnt a lot from her.' Carers are also supported to make links within their communities to help meet any needs they cannot address.

The short break service provides respite for families of children with disabilities, such as autism. There are no places currently for children with physical disabilities who are wheelchair users. The service is exploring ways of providing a more flexible service, such as within children's own homes, so that all families who would like to use the service have access to it.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is satisfactory.

Young people are encouraged to express their views in a variety of ways. Children are consulted at reviews of their placements and at planning meetings about their futures. Imaginative ways are used to seek the views of those children, who have disabilities, to ensure their wishes are taken into account. The service is developing how it might consult young people with disabilities at the annual reviews of their carers, to ensure their views about their placements can be considered.

Most children and young people are also consulted at the annual review of their foster carers. The service recognises that it might be difficult for some children to fully give their views on a placement whilst they remain resident. An independent reviewing officer has been appointed to consult children and young people, rather than asking carers to assist with this, to try to improve children's consultation. There is not yet evidence of a suitable consultation process for seeking the views of children with disabilities at carer's household reviews.

There are systems in place to consult children on the recruitment of carers. Children and young people are also represented at information events, preparation groups and training sessions. A 'Charter for Placements Standards' is being developed, based on the views of young people. A carer commented on this: 'Young people who I have not cared for or even been involved with have visited me and other carers to use as a benchmark for the standard of care within the fostering service.'

Information is given to children and young people on a variety of organisations which they can approach for help. Information is also provided on how they may make a complaint. Most young people report knowing how to make a complaint. Low levels of complaints are recorded by the service.

Westminster ensures children and young people have contact with friends and families where this is deemed appropriate. Some contact arrangements are set by the court and out of the fostering service's control, such as that between babies and their parents. Some carers feel the impact of frequent or daily contact on babies with their birth families is detrimental to their well being and does not prioritise the needs of the child: '...new borns have their contact set at five to seven days a week...this can be extremely upsetting given that the most important time is the first six months to attach, feel secure and establish a good routine...this has had an impact on babies routine and behaviour.'

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

Carers work with young people to help them develop skills for when they are living independently. Young people report getting help to consider options for their future: 'I have been given lots of advice from my social worker and foster carers who are

very supportive. Also, I have been given lots of leaflets about colleges and university.'

Westminster supports young people to do well socially and educationally and to aim high in their achievements. Carers encourage young people to take part in new experiences and consider new possibilities as part of their preparation for adulthood. A few carers feel they are not listened to or consulted around children's future moves and other matters.

Strong support for young people is provided by the leaving care team. Young people value the user groups which meet weekly to offer support and help to develop their independent living skills as well as providing consultative forums. Carers observe that the team offers good support to those young people who may experience difficulties when moving back into the Borough, such as isolation.

Carers receive allowances promptly but report some delays in receiving expenses. Some kinship carers find the difference in their allowance, compared to professional carers, to be unfair as they consider they are doing similar jobs with the same commitment to the children they care for.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

Full information on what the service provides is available in the Statement of Purpose. The service has identified that the children's guide is not yet sufficient to give children relevant information in a suitable format and plans to develop this.

An extensive and impressive training programme is in place, which is highly regarded by carers. Training is arranged in response to carer's needs. There is an expectation that carers, and their partners, where relevant, must attend a certain amount of training each year. There is flexibility about sourcing appropriate training for those family and friends, who are carers, living some distance from Westminster, which can better suit their needs. Expectations of training for such carers have not yet been set. The service also has a strong commitment to the continuous professional development of its staff.

There are clear lines of accountability within the service. Arrangements for managing the service are now settled after a period of change. Staff are organised and managed effectively, with flexible working across teams to make the best use of resources. The staff group is largely well established, with some staff bringing valuable experience of working across different parts of the service. Arrangements for managing the service are now settled after a period of change.

Staff supervision is provided but this has not been regular enough for a few staff. The provision of administrative support has improved, with administrative staff now allocated to specific teams rather than to a general pool. However, staff feel the service would benefit from permanently employed administrative staff dedicated to

each team who could get to know the work in depth and therefore provide consistent support to staff and carers.

Case records for children are well organised and comprehensive. Administrative records are maintained as required. The service is experiencing an understandable period of flux as information is transferred to electronic systems.

The fostering service employs an adequate number of experienced and qualified staff to recruit, assess and support carers. There is an out of hours service but carers report experiencing problems when trying to use this service. Communication between teams and foster carers is mostly effective, resulting in positive outcomes for young people. Some communication difficulties between children's social workers and the fostering team are reported by carers. The service anticipates that systems of communication will improve now that differing services are located in the same building.

There are good strategies in place to help maintain successful placement stability. Carers benefit from receiving clear guidance on all aspects of fostering in a revised carers' handbook. Supervising social workers make regular visits to carers' homes to provide ongoing support. There are regular support group meetings, although one, specifically for family carers, has lapsed. The service proposes to establish a foster carer association to provide a further means of support for carers. There are arrangements for carers to have back up when they need cover, for example, to enable them to attend training.

A team is now designated to assess and support the particular needs of family and friends as carers. With a skilled team and flexible working across the department, Westminster ensures that the assessment of potential family and friends carers can be carried out. Some carers feel slightly pressured to take Special Guardianship Orders but feel the service respects their decision if they choose to remain as foster carers. There is evidence of absolute commitment and dedication by family and friend carers to provide a secure home and stable future for the young people in their care.

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 providing a health record for all children which goes with them as they move through and out of the care system (NMS 12)
- evidence direct checks of references, their origin and General Social Care Council (GSCC) registration (NMS 15)
- consider extending the short break service to meet the needs of all young people

who wish to potentially use the service (NMS 31)

- evidence that the views of children with disabilities have been sought for fostering household reviews (NMS 11)
- evidence that carers' views are sought and given consideration during planning for children's futures (NMS 14)
- review the out of hours service so that it is accessible to all carers and responsive and further consider the support and training needs of kinship carers (NMS 21)