London Borough of Greenwich Fostering

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

Unique reference number: SC042855
Inspection date: 24/02/2009
Inspector: Elisabeth Brunton
Type of inspection: Key

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Date of last inspection: 17/01/2007
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 Greenwich's fostering service provides placements for children looked after by the council. It consists of three teams, one of which is responsible for the recruitment, assessment and review of foster carers, a second for the support, supervision and training of foster carers and the third team arranges placements for young people. Each team is staffed by a manager, deputy manager and a number of social workers or placement officers and administrators. Two social workers within the fostering service have particular responsibility for family and friends foster carers. Overall management of the fostering service is provided by a service manager.

At the time of the inspection, there were 140 children and young people placed with 101 Greenwich foster carers, including family and friends.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

The inspection was announced and all the key standards were covered. A number of foster homes were visited and young people spoken to. Young people are receiving good care in Greenwich foster homes and their health, education, contact and identity needs are well met. Matching is generally sound and the fostering panel operates very well. The assessment and review of foster carers is of a high standard. Foster carers are very well supported by a range of services. The supervision of foster carers is normally adequate, though less frequent during staff changes. The service is well managed and staff are able and committed. The recruitment of staff and panel members is generally sound though not all documentary evidence is retained. Most functions of the fostering service are robustly monitored and records are well maintained.

Improvements since the last inspection

Three requirements and a number of recommendations were made as a result of the previous inspection of Greenwich's fostering service in January 2007. The requirements all related to the recruitment of staff and panel members. Staff recruitment records have improved and are now sufficiently well organised. Greenwich Council now obtains its own Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks before staff and panel members start work and there is no portability of checks. The necessary references and checks are now obtained for prospective fostering panel members though a recommendation is made concerning some lack of documentary evidence of identity and interview.
Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Young people in Greenwich foster homes are receiving good health care. Foster carers ensure that young people are registered with general practitioners, attend the necessary dental, optical and other healthcare appointments and have all necessary immunisations. Young people are encouraged to have healthy lifestyles and are provided with nutritious food and opportunities for physical activity. Foster carers counsel young people about the risks of smoking and drugs and support them in maintaining good sexual health. Babies receive very good care and attention, some of whom have specific health care needs. Their weight, feeding and general health is closely monitored by foster carers, in liaison with health visitors. Foster carers ensure that they are made aware of important information about young people's health care needs but written information is not always promptly provided.

Training is provided for foster carers in a good range of health related topics such as first aid, mental health and drug awareness, health and nutrition and sexual health. Comprehensive written guidance is included in the foster carers' handbook.

Good health care for looked after young people in Greenwich is also promoted by designated nurses who provide advice and guidance to young people, foster carers and social workers. This service ensures that young people receive all the necessary immunisations and does well at encouraging young people to participate in annual health assessments. A dedicated team within the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) provides additional support to a significant number of looked after young people and their foster carers. This service is able to respond fairly promptly to referrals and particular attention is paid to young people's attachment issues.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The service benefits from able and experienced managers whose CRB checks are regularly updated.

Young people receive good care from suitable foster carers. Foster carers demonstrate understanding of young people's needs and the ability to meet them. Young people comment that they 'always feel well cared for' and 'my foster carer treats me well and takes good care of me'. Any concerns about standards of care given are robustly addressed. Foster homes are comfortable and sufficiently spacious and young people are pleased with their well decorated bedrooms. The safety of foster carers' accommodation and transport is ensured through annual inspections and the importance of maintaining a high standard of health and safety is stressed in the foster carers' handbook. All necessary checks are undertaken on prospective foster carers and their households before they are considered for approval. CRB and medical checks are then regularly updated.
Young people are well matched with foster carers who can meet their needs. Placing social workers comment 'it's a fantastic match' and 'she (the foster carer) can meet all her needs'. Matching is based on adequate information about young people's needs, together with consultation with foster carers and their supervising social workers. Emergency placements are arranged for a significant number of young people who do not always find this an easy experience. The matching process takes account of young people's racial, cultural and religious backgrounds and young people are generally placed with foster carers who share their identity, in line with council policy. Trans-racial placements are sometimes made outside office hours by the emergency duty team but these placements are normally brief.

Placements are made within foster carers' terms of approval, unless managerial and panel approval is given for an exception to this. Placement agreement meetings are held at the outset of placements, where the purpose of placements, roles, expectations and day-to-day issues are agreed. Any additional support needed for trans-racial and trans-cultural placements is also discussed. Measures have been put in place to ensure that these meetings are always held promptly. The stability of placements has improved over the past year and relatively few placements have disrupted.

Young people are safeguarded in fostering placements and foster carers are well aware of the importance of safe caring. Assessments and reviews of foster carers focus on foster carers' ability to safeguard young people. Foster carers record the measures they will take as safe caring policies. Young people and placing social workers also confirm that foster carers support young people well in learning to keep themselves safe. Foster carers are supported by training and written guidance. There have been a small number of child protection allegations against foster carers during the past year, which have been robustly dealt with, in line with the council's procedure. Thorough investigations are carried out and independent oversight is provided by the local authority's designated officer. The fostering service is made aware of any incidents or accidents in foster homes and any concerns about young people's welfare are promptly addressed.

Young people benefit from placement with foster carers who respond constructively and effectively to their behaviour. Placing social workers describe foster carers as 'very good at setting boundaries' and 'good at diverting and distracting her'. Young people feel that rules and expectations are fair and there are few reports of sanctions being used. There were two incidents of restraint during the past year. These were necessary to safeguard the young person and were properly recorded and notified. Young people and foster carers are well supported by the service provided by CAMHS, together with training and written guidance. Young people do not report being bullied in foster homes and foster carers are supporting young people well in dealing with any incidents elsewhere. Foster carers are responding appropriately to young people who return home late or go missing and inform the necessary people, in line with written procedure included in their handbook.

Staff employed to work in the fostering service are suitable, qualified and able. Assessments of prospective foster carers are undertaken by permanent, qualified
staff who receive very good induction into this area of work, support, supervision and training. There is a thorough procedure for the recruitment of staff and fostering panel members which includes all the necessary references and checks. Though safeguards are in place to ensure the authenticity of references, validation of references by telephone is not always evidenced. Prospective panel members are said to be interviewed but interview records are not always retained on file. CRB checks for staff and panel members are regularly updated.

The council's fostering panel is operating very well and making sound decisions, in the best interests of young people. The panel is effectively chaired by an experienced, knowledgeable, independent chair, the panel is properly constituted and its meetings are well attended. A diverse membership provides the panel with a wide range of experience and skills. Additional independent members are being sought. Cases are dealt with very thoroughly and discussion is child-focused, with emphasis on safeguarding and the health, education and identity needs of young people. Panel advisers ensure that any further work on cases required by panel is undertaken. A senior manager acts effectively as the council's decision maker and panel meetings and decisions are well minuted. Panel undertakes regular training as a group and provides feedback to the fostering service.

**Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do**

The provision is good.

Young people benefit from placement in foster homes where their individual needs are well met. Foster carers encourage the development of interests, talents and self-confidence. A diverse group of staff and foster carers reflect the heritage of young people needing placement. As previously mentioned, most young people are placed with foster carers who share their racial and cultural backgrounds and they are pleased about this. The majority of trans-racial placements are brief. Foster carers are doing well at supporting young people in developing a secure sense of identity even when they not ideally matched. Good support is provided by supervising social workers, other foster carers, training and written guidance and interpreters are provided where necessary. The assessment of prospective foster carers, foster carers' and young people's reviews ensure that foster carers are meeting young people's identity needs. Foster carers caring for young people with disabilities have the necessary equipment, support and information.

Young people are well supported in their education by foster carers who appreciate the importance of education and want young people to fulfil their potential. Young people are pleased that foster carers 'want us to do well'. Foster carers liaise closely with school, attend parent's evenings, personal education plan and other meetings and advocate on behalf of young people with schools, where necessary. Young people are able to remain at the same schools due to careful matching and escort provided by foster carers and through the foster carers' support task group. The necessary facilities and equipment for homework are provided in foster homes, including the use of computers. Younger children's development is promoted through interaction, activities and the provision of play materials.
An education support team for looked after young people provides advice and guidance to young people, social workers and foster carers. A small number of young people benefit from additional education and social input through attending a council-run Saturday School. There is also an annual awards ceremony to celebrate the achievements of looked after young people, some funding is provided for hobbies, interests and educational activities and young people's attendance at school is closely monitored. The educational achievement of looked after young people in Greenwich is said to be slowly improving.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Young people are well supported by foster carers in their contact with birth families. Foster carers show good understanding of young people's feelings about their birth families and the importance for them of contact. Foster carers endeavour to establish good relationships with birth families and maintain positive attitudes, even when allegations have been made against them. Family and friends foster carers do well at balancing the sometimes conflicting needs of different family members and giving priority to young people's welfare and needs.

Excellent support is provided by the foster carers' task group which arranges for foster carers to provide escort to and supervision of contact, following the necessary training. The assessment of prospective foster carers, social work visits, young people's statutory reviews and foster carers' reviews all monitor foster carers' support of contact and ensure that young people's needs are met. Training and written guidance is provided for foster carers.

Young people confirm that they can talk to their foster carers. Foster carers establish good rapport with young people who can talk to them about personal issues. One young person says that she can 'talk to her (the foster carer) about anything'. A placing social worker describes another foster carer's communication with a younger child as 'highly appropriate and she (the foster carer) always listens and responds to her (the child)'. Young people's views are sought as part of social work visits and statutory reviews, a high proportion of which are attended by the young people themselves. Supervising social workers regularly talk with young people as part of supervisory visits to foster homes and young people's views on their placements contribute to foster carers' reviews. An opportunity for foster carers to consider young people's participation was provided at the recent foster carers' conference.

Young people know who to talk to if they are unhappy or have a problem and information on how to make a complaint is very accessible. Young people are pleased that foster carers advocate on their behalf to secure services where necessary. Advocacy is also provided by a voluntary organisation. Complaints from young people are generally dealt with before reaching the formal stage. A voluntary organisation is being commissioned to provide a participation and involvement service for looked after young people in Greenwich.
Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

Young people are well supported by foster carers in acquiring the skills necessary for independent living and in developing confidence and social skills. Foster carers ensure that young people have everything they need before moving into their own accommodation. Many young people benefit from continued support from foster carers after they have moved on. Foster carers are working well in partnership with social workers in helping young people to prepare for independent living and in line with their pathway plans. Detailed written guidance and training is made available to foster carers. Funding is available for vulnerable young people and young people going into higher education, to remain in foster care beyond the age of 18.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The service has a comprehensive and up-to-date statement of purpose which includes all the necessary information. The children’s guide gives full information about what young people can expect from fostering and is well presented. Copies are given to young people when they are placed in foster care, together with written information about being looked after by Greenwich Council.

The fostering service is well managed by a stable and experienced management team. Roles and responsibilities of managers and staff are well defined and there are clear lines of communication and accountability between managers, staff and foster carers. Procedures are in place for monitoring and quality assuring the key functions of the fostering service. Effective systems ensure the promptness of events such as foster carer reviews, unannounced visits to foster homes and the updating of foster carers’ CRB and medical checks. Managers also effectively monitor foster carer assessments and reviews, so that a high standard is maintained. Foster carers' files are audited periodically in order to monitor the frequency of supervisory visits and the promptness of placement agreement meetings. However, it has been recognised by the service that not all files are audited regularly and there are plans to address this.

Staff in the fostering service are experienced, qualified and able. The service is now fully staffed and there are sufficient staff for the current size of the service and competent administrative support. The service continues to recruit new foster carers and there is ongoing publicity and other recruitment activities. The independent fostering sector is also extensively used for Greenwich young people and there are very few young people waiting for placement. Assessments of prospective foster carers are of a high standard. These are competency based, analytical and very thorough.

Staff have job descriptions and access to clear policy and procedure. Managers are
accessible and staff feel well supported in their work. Formal, one-to-one supervision of staff takes place regularly and newly appointed staff are very well supported and inducted into the work.

Young people are placed with foster carers who receive good support from their fostering service. Comments made by foster carers include ‘our supervising social worker is excellent’ and ‘they (the fostering service) are always there when needed’. All foster carers have allocated supervising social workers and are provided with a good range of additional support such as a choice of support groups, out-of-hours support, respite, an informative handbook and generous allowances. Foster carers also praise the practical support provided by other foster carers through the very well organised task group. Most foster carers are visited regularly by supervising social workers. Visits are focused, young people are seen and visits are sometimes unannounced. A small number of foster carers were visited less regularly during a recent period of staff changes. The service is good at addressing any shortfalls in foster carers' work.

Foster carers' approval is thoroughly reviewed each year by social workers who are independent of the team responsible for the support and supervision of foster carers. Reviews are competency based and incorporate the views of young people and their social workers. Some reviews are considered by the fostering panel and all reviews are signed off by the agency’s decision maker. Foster carers are informed in writing of the outcome of their reviews. Following annual reviews, foster carers receive a financial reward for attending the required training and support groups and for meeting other targets set at their previous review.

Young people benefit from placement with foster carers who are well trained and qualified. A very good range of training courses is provided. Foster carers are expected to attend certain courses and this is made clear during their assessments and subsequent annual reviews. Most foster carers attend sufficient training and find courses interesting and informative. Training is held during evenings and weekends and child care can be provided by the foster carers' task group. Three-quarters of Greenwich's foster carers have obtained or are studying for NVQ qualifications and the service is making excellent progress towards ensuring that all foster carers meet the new training, support and development standards.

The promotion of equality and diversity within Greenwich's fostering service is good. Young people are placed with foster carers who can meet their individual needs. Most placements are with foster carers who share young people's racial and cultural heritage, in line with council policy. This is not always the case with emergency placements made out-of-hours, as previously mentioned. The fostering service has a diverse staff group and fostering panel. The range of foster carers recruited reflects the diversity of young people needing placement. Young people's individual health, education and contact needs and their equality and diversity needs are well met. Assessments of prospective foster carers and their subsequent reviews ensure that foster carers can meet the diverse needs of young people.

Young people's case records are held in the children's teams and are accessible to
the fostering service. Foster carers ensure that they find out important information about young people placed with them. However, they do not always receive the necessary written information. Young people are provided with photographs and life story work undertaken by foster carers, together with their social workers. Foster carers maintain separate records about each young person’s welfare and progress. Records are stored securely in foster homes and information is shared appropriately with social workers. Comprehensive, well-organised files are maintained for foster carers and all the required records are kept.

Young people benefit from placement with family and friends foster carers who have been thoroughly assessed and reviewed, with sensitivity to pre-existing family relationships. Family and friends foster carers are giving good care and are doing well at meeting young people’s needs. Robust supervision and support is provided. Family and friends foster carers have access to mainstream foster carer training and more specialist training is being developed. They also benefit from having their own support group.

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):

- ensure that all the required checks are carried out on anyone seeking to work for the purposes of the fostering service, including fostering panel members (Regulation 20, Schedule 1 and NMS 15).
- arrange for more young people to have the opportunity to meet prospective foster carers before moving in and reduce the frequency of emergency placements (NMS 8.7)
- ensure that young people are placed with foster carers whose racial and cultural backgrounds match their own, including placements made in emergency situations out-of-office-hours (NMS 8.5)
- provide all foster carers with the necessary supervision (Regulation 17(1) and NMS 22.6)
- establish a system for regularly monitoring the quality and adequacy of records and specifically records of supervisory visits to foster homes (NMS 25.3)
- ensure that relevant written information about young people and their needs is shared with foster carers, including information about their health and signed consents to emergency medical treatment (NMS 12.3 and 24.1)