

Fostering Services (LBHF)

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

Unique reference number	SC048521
Inspection date	27/02/2009
Inspector	Rossella Volpi / Colette Elliott-Cooper
Type of inspection	Key

Setting address	Barclay House, Effie Road, London, SW6 1EN
------------------------	--

Telephone number	0208 7532300
Email	
Registered person	London Borough of Hammersmith & Fulham
Registered manager	Carolyn Cousins
Responsible individual	Andy Ferguson
Date of last inspection	07/08/2006

© Crown copyright 2009

Website: www.ofsted.gov.uk

This document may be reproduced in whole or in part for non-commercial educational purposes, provided that the information quoted is reproduced without adaptation and the source and date of publication are stated.

You can obtain copies of The Children Act 2004, Every Child Matters and The National Minimum Standards for Children's Services from: The Stationery Office (TSO) PO Box 29, St Crispins, Duke Street, Norwich, NR3 1GN. Tel: 0870 600 5522. Online ordering: www.tso.co.uk/bookshop

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 Hammersmith and Fulham fostering service is set up to provide appropriate, safe, high quality placements for looked after children. A service manager leads the service, which is part of the Complex Needs Division. An assistant director leads the division and a divisional manager oversees it.

The fostering service includes the recruitment, assessment, monitoring and support of short and long term foster carers. There are also four specialist foster care services: a treatment foster carer team, that is clinically overseen by the Maudsley Clinic at Kings College, London; a kinship team, that arranges and supervises placements with family and friends as carers; a team arranging short breaks with foster carers for children with disabilities; the Parents and Carers Together (PACT) team, that offers short breaks with foster carers as a prevention to family breakdown.

Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

This was an announced inspection, conducted by two inspectors. All key standards were considered and field activities took place over six days.

Children benefit from an authority that provides a range of different types of fostering placements, most of which meet their racial, linguistic, cultural and individual needs. There is excellent promotion of health and education, effective consultation with children and attention to the specific needs of young people leaving care.

The authority endeavours to protect children, with a number of well thought out strategies. There are few, but significant issues in some aspects of the more detailed work of the fostering service, mainly in relation to assessments and quality assurance, that weaken safeguarding.

Improvements since the last inspection

The previous inspection, conducted in August 2006, set three actions and five recommendations, which have been addressed. In particular, vetting procedures for staff are now more robust, although a new recommendation arises from this inspection. Child protection concerns are properly investigated and recorded. Consultation with children is now effective. There are separate case records for each child looked after.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

The fostering service is excellent at promoting the health and development of children.

Carers are well guided by a multi-disciplinary team of professionals and receive excellent training; thus the great majority of carers are highly effective at meeting children's health needs.

Children are satisfied with the help and advice they get from their carers. For example, they commented, 'I always get healthy food and in my home you are not allowed junk food' and 'These tips for being healthy really help me to achieve my goals'.

Carers ensure that children are registered with a general practitioner and attend statutory medical reviews, dentist, optician or hospital appointments. If appropriate, they enable informed participation in decisions about health needs. These and wider health issues are also promoted through the newsletter and in the regular periodic supervision sessions.

Carers are expected and thoroughly supported to help children in considering matters such as the risks associated with drugs or alcohol consumption, safer sex and to create a healthy living environment. For example, there is a strict smoking policy for main-stream carers; the service is actively working with kinship carers, to encourage them to give up smoking; those children with carers living within the borough have free access to a range of sport and leisure activities; there is training in relation to sexual health and healthy eating; and carers and children in one of the specialist teams also have access to a chef.

Two psychologists are based within the fostering service to provide training and consultation to foster carers. This has added highly both to the understanding and to the quality of care provided to meet children's emotional and mental health needs. Direct access to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) has improved, with looked after children receiving high priority, when referred.

The looked after children nurses (LAC nurses) are a strong team with excellent understanding of the emotional challenges faced by children in foster placements. They work alongside children and young people to offer targeted help and advice. Unaccompanied asylum seeking children receive dedicated support. The LAC nurses provide outstanding outreach work, particularly to adolescents who do not wish to attend medicals. The team aims to see all looked after children, including those placed outside the borough, who are the majority.

As a result, there has been a sharp improvement in areas such as immunisations, health assessments and dental checks.

There are initiatives for care leavers over 18 years of age to offer focused support as part of preparation for independent living. The team is fully involved in giving guidance to carers of children with complex needs and in working with individual children in schools, with positive outcomes.

Overall, there is a highly effective partnership between a range of professionals, focused on ensuring that children in foster placements receive timely and good health services that meet their individual and specialist needs.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is satisfactory.

Children receive a service that is sound overall. The authority has a range of good strategies, projects and some excellent initiatives, to promote children's welfare. There is satisfaction from most children and carers about much of the service. There are few, but significant weaknesses, particularly regarding some aspects of assessment of suitability of carers and panel procedures. These have the potential to pose some risk to children, although the very good support and training that has been offered to carers has mitigated this to some extent.

Children feel well cared for and say about their foster placements, 'This place is good'; 'I like my foster mum'; 'Good food, good living atmosphere, good options, much educated family'; 'She is a coping person that looks out for me'; and 'I am happy with what I have at the moment'.

Robust systems are in place to manage allegations against foster carers and the independent visitor scheme has been strengthened.

Children know how to complain; they say that they are able to raise issues and are confident that carers listen to their opinions and concerns. For example, they said, 'In the family I am living with I can tell them anything without hesitating'; 'My opinion matters to her'; and 'I speak of my problems to my closed ones'.

The co-location and partnership amongst the social work teams, education in care, health and CAMHS staff bring a holistic approach to safeguarding with positive outcomes for children. For example, the restorative work done by the CAMHS therapists in the fostering team has been effective, in individual cases, in stopping bullying; much work is progressed with education, carers and parents to address issues facing looked after children.

The PACT scheme is very much valued by its users and has had positive outcomes in helping families in periods of crisis. For example, illustrative comments are, 'PACT is wonderful for children; they are looking forward to have a short break and then are looking forward to going back to their family' (Carers) and 'PACT is a wonderful idea and really a valued service. Without it the child would not be where he is now. The carers will never be forgotten' (Parents). Comments from children indicated the strong appreciation for the support received and that they consider the service

helped them 'progress, settle, change behaviour and start to feel that they can make something of their life'.

There is a good range of short breaks for children with disabilities, free to families. Carers feel well supported and able to work in partnership with parents, so as to meet children's needs well and ensure that they have fun during the breaks.

Children in treatment foster care benefit from their placements. There is a clear assessment of needs, attention to behaviour and sharing of skills, and all carers and staff know the children well. Equality is given due emphasis, mainly around the work done with birth families. There is a specialist family therapist in the team to enable the establishment of positive links between families and their children. Although this is an especially difficult task, there is some engagement.

Children are placed with carers whose assessment and continuing approval is subject to scrutiny by people who have a good understanding of the needs of children and of diversity and equality and who receive appropriate training and advice. For example, all looked after children have a care plan in place and an allocated social worker; all carers have a consistent supervising social worker.

All social workers are qualified professionals. There are statutory reviews of the child, chaired by independent reviewing officers. Furthermore, placements' disruption has been low and there have been excellent outcomes in securing permanent solutions for an increasing number of looked after children. There is a protocol in place that foster carers' supervising social workers will see the children periodically during their visits and this is monitored. The authority's expectation regarding periodic unannounced visits is not met by all fostering teams. The regular monitoring visits to mainstream carers focus appropriately on relevant issues. However, the way these sessions are recorded does not always evidence how carers support children in relation to the 'Every Child Matters' outcomes.

The preparation of carers is comprehensive in the range of issues covered. Assessments of carers are of variable quality. Some lack enough evidence, detail or analysis regarding why the carer is suitable and risk assessments of carers' premises are not always timely. Inconsistency in quality is particularly evident in the assessment of kinship carers, where timeliness is also issue and for mainstream carers. Variability in competence of existing carers is a matter that has been brought up by stakeholders and, in particular, that not all foster carers are competent enough to reflect all needs of children, including those arising from education or health.

Assessments of short break carers for children with disabilities, PACT carers and treatment foster carers are generally good, with consideration and skill focused into proper analysis of competency and into matching. Equally, endings are well planned.

The panel acts as an additional scrutiny tool, in that it carefully considers the assessment of carers and is prepared to defer cases, or to recommend cancellation of approval, when it is not satisfied that the carers are able to safeguard children, based on the information presented. There is an experienced social care professional

chairing the panel and diligent members with a variety of experiences, who come to the meetings prepared and who contribute to the discussion. However, weaknesses regarding policies, procedures and constitution impinge on the soundness of the recommendations by the panel and, therefore, ultimately on safeguarding children.

There is well considered decision making that is undertaken within the expected timescales. It is set at an appropriately senior level, so as to enable an objective view of each case and the capability to take action in response to general issues or patterns arising. However, such decisions rely on the recommendations of a panel which is not always quorate and, as such, lacks the range of contributions and inquiry that a properly constituted panel brings. Much of the documentation regarding panel processes and related policies uses incorrect terminology and, as such, does not clearly demonstrate the status of the carer and who makes the decisions.

There is attention to matching children's needs with carers' competencies and this is generally well achieved in the specialist fostering services. However, there is a widely felt concern, amongst mainstream carers, that the lack of appropriate information about the children to be placed compromises their ability to care safely for them, at times. For example, they say, 'Sometimes I do not get full information about the background of the children and this creates problems' or that there is 'often very poor reporting of the actual problems of the child, so placements and carers can be easily mismatched'. Overall, a significant number of carers rate the information received about the child, before placement, as inadequate.

The service's aim to provide same race placements is usually achieved for black children. Where a trans-racial or trans-cultural placement is made, matching considers how all needs arising from ethnicity can be addressed. At present, there is targeted recruitment of white carers for white teenagers, that is the main identified shortfall and carers for children with complex disabilities. The service has recently increased the number of men and of white applicants as foster carers, thus is making progress towards a more diverse group of carers, to better meet needs.

Vetting of staff and carers is in place to protect children, by ensuring that those working for the fostering service are suitable. This is mostly robust. There is good practice in renewing checks for those long standing panel members appointed before the tightening of the recruitment procedure. There is not always a clear record kept of all steps taken to vet suitability. Employment and education histories for members of panel and for carers are not detailed enough to enable proper identification of gaps, if any.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Young people benefit from a service that values diversity.

Assessments, including the consideration by the panel and the decision maker, give

due emphasis to carers' commitment to equality and diversity. Its crucial role, in ensuring the well-being of the child in placement, is addressed in training and in the range of support carers receive.

Other aspects of the work of the service in promoting equality are: the recognition of the importance for children to maintain contact with friends and significant adults; the consideration and recording of children's views, when matching, particularly for permanent placements; and the short breaks with carers for children with disabilities and for those at risk of family breakdowns, all of which acknowledge and respect parents as the main carers of the child.

Children benefit from excellent services that promote their educational achievements and encourage them to pursue a range of leisure activities, in and out of the borough.

Children consider that they have the right help so that they can be successful in their education. For example, they say, 'My carer is very good with homework and I have a computer'; 'I love my school'; and 'I get great help when needed'.

Carers, including those out of borough, receive good support around literacy. Carers liaise with schools and help with homework. They make good use of leisure facilities and libraries. There is a renewed emphasis on holidays, after children raised this as an issue. Reviews of carers consider how well they contribute to educational achievements for the children placed with them.

There is effective work by the CAMHS therapists, based in the fostering team, in skilling carers and working with schools to support placements, for example, in looking at issues of bullying at school and resolving conflict.

Overall, there is a comprehensive strategy and a range of projects to offer good targeted support to looked after children. There is also a robust system in place to manage those children who truant and to monitor those missing from education.

The 'Life Chances' team, with its focus on the education and health of looked after children (LAC) and the Virtual Head Teacher for LAC, show significant commitment and a realistic allocation of resources. For example, children with learning disabilities receive good targeted support, in local schools; there is a strong focus on literacy and numeracy, using the 'letter box' club for Year 7 and 9; there is a plan in place to work with Year 3 to 6; there is a study club for Year 9 GCSE; and there is a Saturday club for unaccompanied asylum seeking young people.

Those young people engaging in further and higher education are encouraged, through financial, practical and emotional support and there is a significant number going to university.

However, provision for those who do not have the ability to obtain GCSEs is limited, in that there is not always sufficient attention to basic numeracy and literacy for these care leavers. The support offered to gifted and talented children is described

as being ad hoc and is an area for development. The education team monitors the quality of personal education plans (PEPs), but the focus is mainly on the under achievers.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Children say that carers consult them and their views are acted upon. For example, they commented, 'My opinion matters'; 'If I have any opinions or something I need to tell, even if it is not important, they still listen'; and that carers always listen about 'food, clubs, study, picnics and going out'.

The service engages with children and acts on their opinions, so that these inform both the children's plans and fostering practice. The children's rights service is effective in providing advocacy and support in resolving complaints.

There are a number of resources that provide regular opportunities for children and young people's views to be heard. The placing social worker sees the child alone when visiting the foster carer. The independent reviewing officers meet children on their own before reviews. The service also provides written feedback to inform the child's statutory review. However, stakeholders commented that this is not always received.

The emphasis on working with families and empowering them, particularly evident in the two short-break fostering teams, shows effective consultation and collaboration between children, parents and carers. The child's views and their input into planning for their progress is an integral part of the programme in the treatment foster care team.

The children's rights service facilitates the inclusion of children and young people in the meetings of the authority's corporate parenting group. Therefore, through this forum, those with senior authority in the council hear the views of various groups of children and young people directly.

The authority is looking to expand opportunities that are less formal for all age ranges. For example, one recent corporate parenting session organised a boat trip with children, carers and councillors, to enable discussion in a more informal setting with younger children.

Maintaining and developing family contact and friendships is integral to the service provided. Carers' preparation for fostering emphasises that carers are part of a network including, where legally allowed and appropriate, birth families. This is also reinforced through the training and support that carers receive. To this end, there is monitoring of carers' ability to encourage and enable appropriate contact and of their attitude towards families whose lifestyles might be different from their own.

There is training and discussion with those caring for asylum seeking young people

about the particular issues they face, often with a lack of information about the safety and whereabouts of their relatives and friends.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

Young people are well encouraged to develop the confidence and skills necessary for the transition into adulthood and independent living. They are consulted about their future and supported to participate in decisions and implementation of their leaving care plans. The partnership between social workers and therapists, all based in the fostering team, has been effective in assisting young people's pathways and in helping them make connections in the community.

Carers receive clear guidance and training to enable them to prepare young people to function independently.

Overall young people are well supported for preparation for independent living. For example, the 'Breakaway' group offers intensive five days workshops; outreach workers are provided for young people, including continued support to foster carers; there is a system in place for young people to bid for housing; and a 'Life Chances' team has been created for care leavers to ensure that there is a clear focus on the needs of young people.

There is good access to services to promote sexual health for care leavers. There is support for pregnant young women and young parents, although some stakeholders consider that teenage mothers do not always feel comfortable in using the existing provision.

Although there are differing views and discontent from a minority of sources, overall stakeholders are satisfied that young people are supported to remain in fostering placements until adulthood, if appropriate. In fact, the authority has arrangements with foster carers regarding allowances to continue after the young person reaches the age of 18, when necessary.

Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

There is well qualified and experienced management, committed to run the service in the best interests of children.

This has enabled a fostering provision that is sound overall, but with a number of excellent strategies, effective in progressing many areas relating to children's welfare and development. There is also a range of imaginative projects to promote consultation and partnership with families and to meet diverse and individual needs. There is good scrutiny by members. There is much respect for management at all levels, including from carers and children.

There has been excellent progress in finding permanent placements for looked after children. There has been success in enabling families to remain together and the work of the short-break care team has significantly contributed to this outcome.

There is very good support and an excellent training programme for carers.

There have been a few, but significant gaps in the monitoring and controlling of some aspects of the work of the fostering service, which has resulted in the areas for improvement identified in safeguarding.

However, there is good collective commitment and responsibility to fostering, with passionate management and staff. Thus the service is well set to exercise effective leadership, to enable omissions to be rectified and closer scrutiny to be exercised. Furthermore, the authority is part of the North West London Fostering Consortium, resulting in the sharing of concerns and of good practice.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. This is mainly discussed in the body of the report, under the specific outcome areas. Overall, there are clear aims, backed by effective monitoring, to achieve a range of placements that meet the racial, linguistic, religious and cultural needs of individual children. Carers are aware of their responsibility to assist in meeting diverse needs and this is promoted through training, supervision and reviews. Interpreters are available for children and parents for whom English is not their first or chosen language. There is a clear commitment to equality in employment.

There is a comprehensive statement of the aims and purpose of the fostering service and a children's guide. Therefore, children, families and other stakeholders are informed of what to expect. However, there is no guide suitable for younger children; the one in use is inaccurate in relation to the name and contact details of the inspecting authority and therefore it does not enable children to contact Ofsted or the children's rights director, if they want to raise issues.

The work of the service is underpinned by policies and procedures which are mainly clear, with a few exceptions, as discussed above in the section entitled 'Staying Safe'.

Files are comprehensive, kept securely and with due regard for confidentiality.

There is good business support delivered timely by a competent and committed team.

Management information systems are not yet developed enough to fully support senior management's reviews and analysis of performance and trends.

Overall, staff consider that they receive good supervision and training opportunities. However, business support staff have not had recent opportunities to attend courses to develop their career options, although they are encouraged to attend courses designed to help them with their present role and tasks. There is some general

discontent about recent changes in conditions of employment, which staff described as being not family friendly.

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
6	ensure timely assessments of kinship carers' suitability when the immediate placement of a child is necessary. Regulation 38(2)	01/07/2009
30	implement and maintain clear procedures for the operation of the panel and ensure that its composition is consistent with regulations. Regulation 24, 25, 26	01/07/2009
4	ensure effective monitoring and controlling of all activities of the fostering service and ensure quality performance. Regulation 42	01/07/2009
16	operate clear structures and systems to ensure that assessments, approvals and reviews of carers are managed and implemented effectively. Regulation 27	01/07/2009

Recommendations

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

- ensure that carers are provided with the information they need to care for children safely. (NMS 9)
- ensure that records retain evidence that all required checks have been satisfactorily completed for staff and panel members and that files are well organised. (NMS 15)
- review education support for gifted and talented children and for those leaving school without GCSEs. (NMS 13)
- compile a children's guide suitable for younger children and ensure that any guide in use is accurate. (NMS 1)
- develop management information systems to fully support senior management's review and analysis of performance and trends. (NMS 4)
- review the record of carers' supervision sessions to evidence how well carers support children in relation to the 'Every Child Matters' outcomes. (NMS 21)