

# Lambeth LA Fostering

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

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<b>Setting address</b>	London Borough of Lambeth, International House; 9th floor, 6 Canterbury Crescent, LONDON, SW9 7QE
<b>Telephone number</b>	020 7926 8543
<b>Email</b>	
<b>Registered person</b>	London Borough of Lambeth
<b>Registered manager</b>	Monica Saunders
<b>Responsible individual</b>	Adesola Adetosoye
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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**

This is a local authority fostering service located in an inner city area, with a highly diverse and mobile population. The fostering service is part of the social care division of Lambeth children and young people's services. It is led by a head of service and includes: a recruitment team; a fostering assessment team; a fostering support team. The majority of looked after children are placed with foster carers provided by the independent sector, in neighbouring authorities. The provision of in-house carers has been growing.

The authority states its commitment to finding and supporting stable and secure foster care placements for children where the identified plan is fostering. The service aims to treat all parties with fairness and respect and to ensure that the services provided meet their diversified needs in relation to race, culture, ethnicity, language, disability, religion and sexuality.

### **Summary**

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This was an announced inspection, conducted over the course of two weeks by two inspectors. All key standards were considered and field activities took place over five days.

Lambeth demonstrates excellent commitment to participation and involvement of children and young people, who have real opportunity to shape the service. There is a strong ethos of inclusion. The promotion of equality and diversity is good. There is good promotion of health and education. The authority strives to safeguard children, with a number of well thought out strategies. There is strong leadership, excellent partnerships and a clear focus on improving outcomes for children.

There have been gaps in the monitoring and controlling of some aspects of the work of the fostering service. This has resulted in the areas for improvement identified. Access to the fostering service by telephone is difficult and a matter which poses problems for carers.

### **Improvements since the last inspection**

The previous inspection, conducted in February 2007, made six recommendations in relation to management and support to carers, safeguarding and premises. These have been addressed. In particular: vetting procedures are now more robust; child protection training and refreshers are provided on a rolling programme for staff and carers; monitoring visits now show how carers support children in relation to the

'every child matters' outcomes. Foster carers' allowances are competitive and support the recruitment strategy. The premises still pose some challenges at times when areas for confidential discussion are needed at short notice.

### **Helping children to be healthy**

The provision is good.

The fostering service promotes children's health and development. It works in partnership with other professionals and key agencies to monitor and enhance health care planning; this has resulted in a number of excellent strategies and initiatives to improve health. For example, the joint working by the looked after children's service, health professionals and carers has successfully encouraged a much higher proportion of young people to participate in the statutory annual health assessments.

Children say that they get the support and advice they need in order to stay healthy; they are involved in informed participation in decisions about their health care plans. Foster carers encourage healthy lifestyles, a nutritious diet, participation in sport and other opportunities for physical activity. Carers ensure that children are registered with a general practitioner, that they attend the routine dental or optician appointments and that they access specialist healthcare when needed. Carers are generally well supported in this task by good training, information and easy access to specialist advice; for example, regarding substance misuse or sexual health.

Overall health promotion has continued to be effective, despite current vacancies in nursing posts. Ensuring equal access for all Lambeth children, the majority of whom are placed out of borough, poses particular challenges. The authority is aware of the areas that still need to be addressed, which are also identified in their latest health report.

### **Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe**

The provision is good.

Children in foster placements benefit from a service that strives to promote their welfare and their social and emotional development. There is satisfaction from most children, carers and other stakeholders, who contributed to this inspection, about the service and how effective the authority is in keeping children safe.

The recruitment campaign of in house carers is starting to offer more choice of local placements. The assessment process for foster carers expects applicants to fully demonstrate their ability to promote a child's welfare and value diversity, as well as their suitability to work with children. To this end a range of relevant checks are undertaken. Employment and education histories for carers are not detailed enough to enable proper identification of gaps, if any. References from employers are only taken if the job involves working with vulnerable groups.

The preparation training is comprehensive in the range of issues covered. The quality

of the assessments has been improving, during the last year, although timeliness of reviews is an issue in some cases.

Timeliness of assessments is a significant issue in relation to family and friends as carers, where a placement has been made in an emergency, under the provision of regulation 38. This means that some children remain for protracted periods in placements where the suitability of carers has not been fully assessed, although frequent visits by social workers and an initial scrutiny by a range of professionals, mitigate this to some extent. The fostering procedures do not fully address the authority's expectations regarding the conduct of such assessments and review of such placements.

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.

Assessments of main-stream carers and recommendations by panel give proper emphasis to terms of approval. Therefore children are usually matched to carers who are suitable to meet their needs. However, on more than one occasion referrals to carers have been made outside of the terms of approval, without clear evidence of why this would have been appropriate.

There is good scrutiny that carers continue to provide safe, healthy and nurturing environments. For example: all looked after children have a care plan in place and most have an allocated social worker; all carers have a named supervising social worker; the periodic monitoring visits address the 'every child matters' outcomes. The authority's expectation, about the frequency for the carer's supervising social workers to see the child, is not met in all cases.

Children benefit from a robust recruitment procedure for staff, aimed at ensuring that a good and anti-discriminatory service is provided, responsive to individual needs. Recruitment assesses that staff are suitable people to safeguard and promote welfare and that they have the appropriate qualifications, knowledge, skills and experience.

Robust systems are in place to manage allegations against foster carers and complaints. However, the log of complaints does not record sufficient information to show patterns and to aid managerial review.

There is a clear strategy in place encompassing community safety and child protection, with strong ownership of responsibilities across the services in Lambeth. In addition, the multi-agency, local safeguarding children's board provides strong strategic leadership to safeguarding practices.

Children benefit from a skilled, well prepared and child focused fostering panel, effectively chaired, so that it acts as a significant, additional, quality assurance mechanism and important safeguard.

There is in depth discussion and analysis of relevant matters and their impact for children's health and development. There is attention to issues of diversity and to carers' ability to create an environment where the child feels happy, valued and can develop a positive identity. The panel gives feedback on the content of reports and presentations by the social workers, thus contributing to improvement in quality of reports. This is also aided by skilled panel advice.

Attendance by some members has been an issue and this has potential to weaken the expertise and consistency of the panel.

Decision making is timely and set at a senior level, thus it enables an objective view of each case.

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

The provision is good.

Children benefit from a service committed to delivering a provision that meets the needs of the different groups living in Lambeth and that is child focused. There is strong use of the voluntary sector and specialist services to increase what is offered to children with disabilities. Overall there is a strong emphasis on inclusion, with positive outcomes. For example, efforts to involve those for whom English is not the first language and reach different faiths are starting to be successful. Children from a wide range of groups are fully involved in consultations and contribute to decisions.

Short breaks for children with disabilities with foster carers are not yet operational, although the service is planned to start soon, in recognition that there is an identified need in the community for such provision.

Foster carers show respect for children's culture and support them in practising religions which differ from their own. This is considered in carers' annual reviews. Training is provided on meeting diversity needs.

Foster carers support education well. Overall Lambeth continues to strive to ensure that children can achieve to their best potential. Children are satisfied with this and particularly with the additional tuitions and the computers provided. Social workers say that education care plans are reasonably good. Truancy and children missing from education are well monitored and addressed.

Carers are offered training to enable them to better promote educational achievement. Literacy classes for carers have been well received and attended.

Carers liaise with schools and help with home work. They make good use of leisure facilities and libraries. Supervisory visits consider how well carers promote education; guide children in the choice of school; liaise closely with teachers to address any issue promptly; attend personal education planning meetings and other school events.

There are innovative strategies to raise support and educational achievements. For example, the recent appointment of a virtual head is an excellent initiative, with great aspirations and innovatively set in social care. The project takes a holistic view of education, working collaboratively with a range of partners, including the children and adolescents mental health services. It aims to complement those carers who are not academic, but can work with the virtual head project by giving the nurturing and confidence that enable children to concentrate on their studies. It plans, also, to support the very academically able.

Leisure facilities are being extended to better reflect the needs of children with disabilities and complex needs, so that they can use more resources.

### **Helping children make a positive contribution**

The provision is outstanding.

Children benefit from a service that recognises that contact is a key issue for both children and their birth families. There are good arrangements in place to support this. There is continuous monitoring of the impact of contact on good outcomes. Thought is given to the purpose of contact, type and frequency.

Carers are expected to and are supported in responding sensitively and positively to culture, race, sexuality, lifestyle or other diversity issues.

Children and young people benefit from a local authority which is making participation integral to all aspects of the service; which recognises its crucial role to provide better protection and more responsive care arrangements; which ensures that children and young people receive recognition for their efforts.

Practices are excellent and have resulted in a wide range of groups fully participating. Creative methods and initiatives are used for involving younger children. For example, the 'math and magic' project was a successful event; the project on 'safe cities', for five to 11 years old, was really enjoyed, but also it enabled younger children to express views on what they want. As a result the authority is considering changes in playground design. The 'wriggle and roar' project, for the under fives, is a partnership with the library service; it offers carers an opportunity to network and see model behaviour on activities such as reading to children, music or making stories.

Thought is channelled on the cultural or support needs of some excluded groups, about the most appropriate strategies to involve them and to counteract the discrimination faced by children as a result of their disabilities.

The authority incorporates incentives into the consultation activities to directly benefit all children and young people who participate. This includes: opportunities for them to learn something new; develop new skills; material incentives such as voucher schemes or lucky-dip prizes; new experiences such as going to a recording

studio or art gallery; opportunities to increase self-confidence and self-esteem; pathways to employment and training.

## **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is good.

Carers receive an agreed allowance to cover the full cost of each child placed with them. The authority has raised the allowances to make them competitive. Thus they better contribute to children's economic well-being and support the recruitment strategy and retention of existing carers.

Carers receive clear guidance and training to enable them to prepare young people to function independently. Young people also benefit from a range of initiatives aimed at developing the confidence and skills necessary for the transition into adulthood and independent living. For example, the corporate parenting team has consulted care leavers to identify needs, ideas and support required for them to achieve economic wellbeing. The leaving care team runs a rolling programme of life-skills workshops. The authority supports a range of opportunities for young people to engage in volunteering activities, including work experience placements and work shadowing.

## **Organisation**

The organisation is good.

Lambeth fostering service is a learning and changing organisation, with strong leadership, excellent partnerships and a clear focus on improving outcomes for children.

This has secured improvements in many areas and success in creating a culture where people are confident in expressing their feelings and in raising professional issues.

There have been 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.

There is a good attitude to growth; good efforts to channel energy and creativity in a common direction. This is not entirely consistent, though, with the high level of temporary positions, including at management level. However, efforts to appoint to permanent posts are starting to show success.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. This is mainly discussed in the body of the report, under the specific outcome areas. There is strong commitment to the delivery of an anti-discriminatory service. The successful initiatives, to enable a wide range of groups of children to have a say and shape the service, is a strong

testimony of Lambeth's genuine commitment to equality and its ability to act on it in practice.

Most main-stream carers feel well supported and benefit from good quality training. Some issues of dissatisfaction quoted by carers relate to the turn-over of social workers in some cases and the lack of a dedicated out of hours fostering support service. The severe difficulties encountered in attempting to contact the fostering service office by telephone is a dissatisfaction that has persisted now for over two years. It has implications for safeguarding, if not addressed. For example, it impinges on the ability of carers to discuss issues promptly with the fostering team, when they cannot contact their own social worker directly.

Family and friends as carers do not always find that the support offered meets their needs.

There is a 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.

The work of the service is underpinned by policies and procedures which are mainly clear. Files are kept securely and with due regard for confidentiality. There is good business support delivered timely by a competent team.

## **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 timely assessments of kinship carers' suitability when the immediate placement of a child is necessary and ensure clarity of procedures. NMS 6. (Regulation 38)
- ensure timeliness of annual reviews of carers. NMS 6. (Regulation 29)
- ensure effective monitoring of all activities of the fostering service and, in particular, regarding members' attendance at panel; supervising social workers seeing the child during visits; details on employment histories for carers; the keeping of the log of complaints. NMS 4. (Regulation 42)
- review the support service to carers outside office hours and support to kinship carers. NMS 22. (Regulation 17)
- ensure that the telephone system enables easy contact from carers or other stakeholders. NMS26 and NMS 21. (Regulation 23)