

London Borough Of Redbridge Fostering Service

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

Unique reference number	SC042597
Inspection date	25/02/2010
Inspector	Elisabeth Brunton
Type of inspection	Key

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Date of last inspection	05/02/2008

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About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to assure children and young people, parents, the public, local authorities and government of the quality and standard of the service provided. The inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000.

This report details the main strengths and any areas for improvement identified during the inspection. The judgements included in the report are made in relation to the outcomes for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and the relevant National Minimum Standards for the service.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding: this aspect of the provision is of exceptionally high quality
Good: this aspect of the provision is strong
Satisfactory: this aspect of the provision is sound
Inadequate: this aspect of the provision is not good enough

Service information

Brief description of the service

The London Borough of Redbridge's fostering service is part of the Redbridge Children's Trust and provides placements for looked after children and young people. The service consists of two teams, one of which is responsible for the recruitment and training of foster carers and the other for their support, supervision and review of approval. Each team is staffed by a manager, a number of social workers or placement officers and administrative support. Overall management of the fostering service is provided by a service manager.

At the time of the inspection, there were 104 children and young people placed with 60 in-house foster carers, including family and friends.

Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

The inspection was announced and all the key standards were considered. Significant improvements have been made in the service since the last inspection. Young people are safeguarded in foster homes and their health, education and contact needs are well met. Matching is generally sound, though not always within foster carers' terms of approval. Young people's equality and diversity needs are satisfactorily met. The assessment and review of foster carers is of a good standard and the fostering panel functions very well. The support and supervision of foster carers is generally satisfactory and the service is fully staffed and well managed. Records maintained by foster carers have significantly improved. Some functions of the fostering service are monitored and records are generally satisfactory, though some additional records are required. The recruitment of staff and panel members is still in need of improvement.

Improvements since the last inspection

A total of nine actions were set and 16 recommendations made at the last inspection, two years ago and most of these have now been met. Safeguarding is now promoted by the introduction of written safe caring strategies for foster carers. Foster carers support young people in maintaining family contact and now maintain comprehensive records about their welfare and progress. The support provided for foster carers has improved and their approval is reviewed annually. Complaints from foster carers are responded to promptly and foster carers are expected to undertake core training.

Three recommendations previously made have not yet been fully met and these are repeated. Some placements continue to be made outside foster carers' terms of approval without the proper authorisation. Some gaps in staff and panel member

recruitment checks remain. The regularity of supervisory visits and the recording of these have improved but there is still some shortfalls.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Young people receive good health care. Foster carers ensure that young people's health care needs are met through prompt registration with local doctors, regular dental and optical checks and annual health assessments. Foster carers support young people in seeking advice about any health care concerns. Additional counselling and psychiatric support is provided for some young people by a community psychiatric nurse, employed by the trust or through referral to the community adolescent mental health service. Young people and foster carers are provided with additional support and advice over health related issues by the nurse for looked after children. This nurse also ensures that young people have annual health assessments. Fostered young people are encouraged to eat healthily, take exercise and to have healthy lifestyles. Sensitive support is given to young people with personal issues such as maintaining good personal hygiene and sexual health.

Foster carers receive adequate information about young people's health care needs. Health care provided in foster homes and appointments attended are now well recorded by foster carers and monitored through social work visits, young people's statutory reviews and foster carers' reviews. Medication is safely stored in foster homes in locked cabinets provided by the fostering service. Medication is properly administered and recorded. Foster carers undertake regular training in first aid. Training is also provided in other health related topics and comprehensive written guidance is included in the foster carers' handbook.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is satisfactory.

Young people are well cared for in foster homes and some foster carers are providing excellent care. Foster carers demonstrate good understanding of young people's needs, empathy and commitment. Most young people speak positively about their placements. Foster homes are comfortable and well maintained. Bedrooms are shared only by siblings, in line with the service's policy. Health and safety checks of foster homes are undertaken as part of foster carer assessments and repeat checks are now made annually. However, the safety of vehicles used by foster carers to transport young people is not currently checked by the service. Foster carers are aware of the importance of health and safety and the equipment needed to safeguard young children is in place in foster homes. Training and written guidance in health and safety is provided for foster carers.

All the necessary checks are carried out on foster carers and their households before approval and these checks are regularly updated. Effective systems are in place for ensuring this happens. The suitability of foster carers is established through thorough

assessment and approval by the fostering panel and monitored through regular visits by supervising social workers and comprehensive annual reviews. Any issues which could reflect on the suitability of foster carers or their accommodation are promptly addressed by the service.

Young people are generally matched with foster carers who can meet their needs and some matches are very good indeed. Matching is undertaken by a well-managed placement service and is normally facilitated by adequate information about young people needing placement. Priority is given to placing young people with foster carers who share their racial and cultural heritage and their religion, in line with council policy. Where this is not possible, any additional support or training needed is identified and foster carers are drawing on their own resources and networks to meet young people's identity needs. Permanent matching is carefully considered in planning meetings, statutory reviews and by the fostering panel. Young people are sometimes placed with foster carers outside their terms of approval and without the approval of managers or the panel. Placement agreement meetings are held at the outset of placements to agree the purpose of and arrangements for placements.

Young people are safeguarded in foster homes. Foster carers are aware of the importance of safe caring and safe caring strategies are being drawn up by each fostering household. Young people are well supported by foster carers in learning to keep themselves safe. Any allegations made against foster carers are robustly dealt with. Foster carers' continuing suitability is then reviewed and considered by the panel. Young people benefit from a positive approach to their behaviour and many foster carers demonstrate skill and understanding in this area, with support from the service. Sanctions are rarely used and there is no evidence of inappropriate sanctions being used. Young people are not being bullied in foster homes and are well supported by foster carers in dealing with bullying elsewhere. Foster carers are aware of the procedure to follow if a young person goes missing but no incidents have recently been reported. Foster carers undertake regular training in safeguarding and are provided with written guidance.

Young people benefit from a fostering service which is staffed by qualified, experienced and able social workers and placement officers. This includes those staff who undertake assessments of prospective foster carers, who benefit from additional training in this area of work. Regular checks with the Criminal Records Bureau are carried out on all staff and panel members. No new permanent staff or panel members have been appointed during the past year. However, staff and panel member recruitment prior to that was not always sufficiently thorough. All the necessary checks are made before agency staff undertake work for the service.

Young people are safeguarded by the work of a very effective fostering panel. The panel is well chaired, properly constituted and its diverse membership provides the panel with a good range of experience and skills. The panel fulfils its quality assurance role very well. Cases are considered thoroughly, further work required where necessary and sound recommendations made. Panel members benefit from regular training.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is satisfactory.

Most young people benefit from placements with foster carers who share their racial, cultural and religious backgrounds. Young people's diversity needs are satisfactorily met and foster carers are drawing on their own resources and networks to provide support to young people whose heritage they do not share. The service has not yet identified additional training or resources to provide this input, if needed. Young people are encouraged by foster carers to develop individual interests and talents and to grow in self confidence. Satisfactory care appears to be given to fostered young people with disabilities and some training for these foster carers is scheduled.

Young people benefit from support and encouragement from foster carers in their education. Foster carers liaise closely with schools and support young people in their choice of schools. Young people are provided with support and the necessary facilities for homework, including access to computers. Foster carers ensure that younger children have the necessary stimulation. Some young people also benefit from the additional support and advice provided by a virtual headmaster and teacher for looked after young people. School attendance is monitored and additional tutoring provided. Education outcomes for young people are said to be improving slightly.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Young people are well supported by foster carers in establishing and maintaining family contact and foster carers endeavour to build positive relationships with birth families. Young people benefit from foster carers' awareness of the importance of family contact and their sensitivity to young people's feelings about their families. Foster carers' support of young people's contact is monitored through social work visits and reviews. Training is provided for foster carers in this aspect of their work.

Young people benefit from generally good communication with foster carers. Foster carers encourage young people to express their views and these are listened to and respected. Young people's views are sought by their social workers, at statutory reviews and by supervising social workers, as part of their regular visits to foster homes. Young people's views about their placements are now also sought by questionnaire at the end of placements and as part of foster carers' annual reviews.

Young people are also supported in making their views known about being looked after by the council. This is facilitated by a participation worker and children's rights officer, both of whom are employed by the council. Young people participate in a children in care council and share their views about services provided through consultation exercises, texting and blogging on the council's website. Young people know how to complain and any complaints made are properly dealt with, in line with

the council's procedure. The children's rights officer supports and advocates for young people in raising issues and making complaints.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

Young people are well supported by foster carers in developing the skills needed for independent living and are helped to grow in self-confidence. Young people also benefit from continued support from foster carers after they move on and sometimes, well into their adult lives. Training is provided for foster carers in preparing young people for independent living.

Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

The aims and objectives of the fostering service are clearly set out in its Statement of Purpose which is regularly reviewed, updated and approved by elected members. Young people are not currently provided with written information and guidance about being looked after, as the guidance previously used is awaiting review. Young people placed in the service's foster homes are given a leaflet which tells them how to complain and where to access independent advocacy. However, young people are provided with little written information about what the fostering service sets out to provide for them.

The service has an effective management structure with clear lines of accountability and responsibility. The structure of the fostering service is currently under review but interim changes in staffing arrangements have contributed to improvements in the support, supervision and review of foster carers and in the management of the placement service. The service is well managed by able and experienced managers. With the support of a consultant, sound systems have been established to ensure that assessments, reviews and suitability checks on carers are carried out on-time and to a good standard. Effective management has contributed to a number of improvements in the service since the last inspection and to improved morale amongst staff and foster carers. Staff are well supported and supervised in their work and their performance is appraised annually. Some activities of the fostering service are effectively monitored. However, some additional monitoring is needed in order to ensure overall quality performance.

Young people benefit from qualified, experienced and able staff being employed to work for the fostering service. The service is fully staffed and staffing levels are adequate for the current size of the service. Local publicity has resulted in the ongoing recruitment of new foster carers. There are plans to further increase the number and diversity of in-house foster carers with additional funding to be made available. Assessments of prospective foster carers are comprehensive, address the competencies and include analysis of information presented. They are effectively quality assured by managers and the panel. On-going training for staff contributes to

continuing improvement in the assessment process.

The promotion of equality and diversity is satisfactory. Young people's backgrounds and identity are considered in matching and most young people are placed with foster carers who share their heritage. Young people's individual needs are well met. Foster carers use their own resources and networks to meet the equality and diversity needs of young people who do not share their heritage. Training for foster carers in equality and diversity has not recently been provided but some foster carers have benefited from training in caring for young people with disabilities.

Young people are placed with foster carers who are generally well supported by the service. Supervisory visits are normally carried out at six-weekly intervals but there have been some longer gaps. Regular unannounced visits are also made. The quality of supervisory visits to foster homes is normally evidenced through comprehensive records but this is not always the case. Additional support is provided to foster carers through a support group, a council-run out-of-hours service and a helpline provided by foster carers. Foster carers raise issues and negotiate with the service's managers through a local foster care association and regular open meetings for foster carers and managers are held. Foster carers also benefit from the support provided by individual membership of the Fostering Network, an informative handbook and regular social events. Foster carers' continuing suitability has been reviewed during the past year and there has been a significant improvement in this aspect of the service. Reviews are comprehensive, evaluative and now incorporate the views of young people, their social workers, foster carers and their own children. Reviews are considered by the panel where necessary.

Foster carers are provided with a good range of training. Courses are informative and well publicised. Prospective foster carers are expected to attend pre-assessment training and regular training in core topics is compulsory for approved foster carers. Foster carers are also expected to participate in a certain number of training events each year and a financial incentive is provided. The training undertaken by foster carers is monitored and recorded. Most foster carers undertake adequate training and some foster carers attend a good range of courses. Foster carers' training is considered as part of their annual reviews and any training needs highlighted. The service has done well at providing training to foster carers in the recently introduced training, support and development standards and in developing support to foster carers in completing their portfolios.

The fostering service is able to access information about young people from their electronic case files. Foster carers are also generally provided with this information. Foster carers are now maintaining comprehensive records about young people's welfare and progress, using recording formats recently introduced by the service. This positive development provides an ongoing record for young people. Foster carers are aware of the importance of confidentiality and store records securely.

Comprehensive paper and computer records are maintained for young people, foster carers and staff. Most of the required records relating to foster carers are maintained. However, the foster care agreement does not always include foster

carers' terms of approval. Also, evidence of notifications made following foster carers' reviews is not always retained on file and records of all placements made with each foster carer, including the required information, are not maintained.

The suitability of family and friends as foster carers is thoroughly assessed. Assessments and decisions made about the suitability of applicants take into account the importance of pre-existing family relationships and the needs of young people. Family and friends foster carers benefit from the same standard of support, supervision, training and review as mainstream foster carers.

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 any transport provided for young people is safe and appropriate to their needs (NMS 6.8)
- only place young people with foster carers where the terms of their approval is consistent with the proposed placement, except in the case of an emergency or immediate placement (Regulation 34 (1)(b))
- not employ or allow a person to work for the purposes of the fostering service unless it is established that they are fit to do so (Regulation 20 (1) & (3); NMS 15.3))
- develop services to ensure that foster carers can be provided with any additional training, support and information necessary when trans-racial or trans-cultural placements are made (NMS 8.6)
- include in the children's guide to the fostering service, a summary of what the service sets out to do for young people (NMS 1.5)
- ensure that supervising social workers meet regularly with foster carers and that full records of supervisory meetings are maintained (NMS 22.6)
- establish clear procedures for monitoring all key activities of the fostering service and ensuring quality performance (NMS 4.1)
- ensure that copies of all required documents and information are included in foster carers' case records. (Regulation 30(1)(2) & (3))