

London Borough of Waltham Forest Fostering Service

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

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About this inspection

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

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

The inspection judgements and what they mean

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

Service information

Brief description of the service

The aim of the London Borough of Waltham Forest's fostering service is to provide a quality fostering service to meet the needs of the diverse local community. They are committed to the provision of a range of placements and placement choice. Fostering services include task centred (short term), shared care/respice, pre-adoptive, permanent placements and placements with friends and family for children between birth to 18 years who are looked after by the local authority Where the needs of children and young people cannot be met from within the local authority fostering service, provision is commissioned from independent fostering agencies. These agencies are monitored by the Access to Resources team and also through arrangements made within the Pan London agreement.

The London Borough of Waltham Forest embraces diversity and difference in all aspects of its work and strives to provide foster carers who reflect the racial mix of the local community.

Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

The purpose of the announced inspection was to assess the service against key national minimum standards and gauge the service's success in addressing issues highlighted at the last inspection.

The fostering service is judged to be satisfactory. It has maintained effective systems for consulting with children, young people and foster carers and has access to a proactive children's rights service. Children and young people are able to maintain contact with their families and the service has a proactive Foster Carers' Association. The specialist fostering service provided for young people with complex needs is expanding along with the kinship care and both are providing good outcomes for children and young people. Carers and staff understand their roles and responsibilities with regards to promoting equality and diversity.

The areas of improvement identified relate to the fostering service not having a clear and concise system to monitor issues such as child protection, complains or allegations. The Statement of Purpose need to be reviewed and updated and copies of the children's guide was not accessible to all. The fostering panel for sometime does not have proper administrative support; therefore records did not accurate reflect all proceedings and the recommendations made. Additional to this individual foster children records were not available and training, mainly for the supported lodging carers was not available.

Improvements since the last inspection

Two actions and three recommendations from the previous inspection have been met. All staff personnel files have documentation to verify their identity, exemption approvals are reviewed appropriately and carers receive appropriate support when there is a change in a child's care. Recommendations met relate to carers agreements, unannounced visits and the foster carer's handbook being up dated. The two actions are partially met relating to carers who have been de-registered and carers having access to appropriate training to support the child or young person in their care.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Foster carers are provided with all the medical information they need to care for children before a placement begins. This includes as full a description as possible of the health needs of a child or young person being placed with them and consent for to receive medical treatment. If details of the healthcare needs are not available before placement, a high priority is given to ensuring that the information is obtained and passed to the foster carer once the placement is made. Foster carers said that they have at times requested additional information from the hospitals as well as the health visitor, with the support of their supervisory social worker, to ensure that the child or baby's continuing care and support is maintained once placement begins.

Children's health is satisfactorily monitored and promoted. Children and young people confirmed that their carer talks to them about their health and they are routinely involved in reviews concerning their overall health and care needs.

Supervising social workers ensure that health services available, including specialist services to meet children's needs. Matching ensures that a child or young person will continue to receive the specialist health care services they need. The fostering service provides specialist foster care for young people aged between 10 to 16 years with complex health needs and where their behaviour can be challenging and their life experiences have prevented them from forming positive relationships.

Foster carers receive initial training to support them in identifying and addressing children and young people's health needs. Foster carers said that they attend safer caring, first aid, which is open to all their immediate family. Additional training is provided to carers who support children and young people with specialist care needs such as extreme behavioural difficulties where one to one support is needed.

The fostering service is proactive and recognises that healthcare is not only related to the children and young people being looked after. All foster carers and their family are given a free leisure pass to enable them to access any of the leisure facilities within Borough to keep active and help support children in leisure pursuits without the additional cost.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is satisfactory.

Children and young people are placed with carers who have been appropriately recruited and thoroughly assessed as being suitable to work with children. However, some carer's link support workers, assessment and Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) disclosures, have not been consistently carried out when there has been a change in the carers household arrangements. All other relevant checks and CRB disclosures are renewed as required by regulation. Foster carers are fully informed about health, education, and behavioural needs and the family background of children and young people placed with them, this enable them to provide safe care. Where appropriate specialist help or treatment is enlisted to support carers to minimize the effects of any previous significant harm suffered by children or young people.

The fostering panel is well established and has clear written policies and procedures, which are implemented in practice, about the handling of their functions. Each meeting held is quorate. The suitability of all panel members is checked prior to their appointment. However, two of the three files seen had no information recorded as to when checks were completed. Training for panel members is addressed in the service's policies and procedures manual, but evidence relating to training was not available. For some time there has not been a permanent administrative support for the panel, therefore copies of minutes were not available for meetings. Recommendations recorded on minutes were not a accurate reflection of what was discussed. Therefore, letters sent to foster carers confirming the recommendations outcomes were at times incorrect. The fostering panel receives management information about the outcome of foster carers' annual reviews. However, not all reviews were found to be completed within the timescales as required by regulation. All decision made by the panel are in the best interest of the child. However, when there is a child protection element to the recommendation being made, it is not clear whether advice or support had been sought from the local authority's child protection team. The management team is aware of the issues and are reviewing the situation.

The fostering service has a good range of policies and procedures in place related to safe care, child protection, bullying, and dealing with allegations, behaviour management, corporal punishment and children missing from care. Comprehensive, compulsory safe care training is developed for foster carers with regular refresher courses. The foster carers' handbook contains details of the above policies and useful information and telephone numbers for carers to access instant advice and support. The fostering service, works in partnership with the local authority child protection team, children, families and other relevant agencies to ensure children are cared for safely.

Foster carers' homes seen provide a healthy and nurturing environment for children and young people. Children and young people comment that they are generally happy with the environment of their (foster) homes and feel comfortable there. Not all annual household reviews including health and safety audits were completed annually.

The current manager has been in post for approximately two years and is qualified, suitable and experienced in the field of child protection, the fostering task and supporting children and young people in need. The manager's overall approach is positive, transparent and flexible, ensuring that the welfare of children and young people placed within the service are promoted. The fostering service operates a thorough recruitment procedure.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The fostering service has recruited a number of carers that can meet the diverse needs of the children placed. Where trans-racial placements are made the fostering service does provide the foster families with additional support and training. Foster carers spoken to understood that at times children and young people are placed outside of their cultural group. They also understood that culture is not restrict only to a child's language, religion or food, but to their holistic needs and what they want. Carers confirmed that they ask for and receive help from the fostering service and from each other. This help enables them to provide positive experiences for children and young people. The fostering service arranges events for fostering families and provides information about cultural events and festivals in the borough and in the wider community.

The fostering service works actively with foster carers to promote educational achievements with children. The service ensures that carers are given a clear, easily understandable plan for meeting the educational needs of the children and young people placed with them. These are reviewed in personal education planning meetings attended by social workers and carers and in child care reviews. Carers confirmed that they understand their own responsibilities regarding the education of children; they support education by attending education reviews, parent's evenings, school events and festivals. Carers are, also required to have a quiet area and appropriate facilities for children to do homework. Children and young people are provided with a computer for school work. Some children and young people are on fixed term exclusions from school but none have been permanently excluded. Foster carers and social workers understand the importance of education. They encourage children and young people to attend school and educational achievement is rewarded and recognised within the Borough.

There is a children's short break scheme which is still in the developmental stage and is not fully operational.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The service has improved in maintaining and promoting family and friends contact. The fostering service provides a specialist contact room on site, which is used

regularly by parents. Contact and what it means is part of the core training provided to foster carers. Children and young people's views and wishes are sought with regard to contact and are considered when making the arrangements. Children, young people and carers confirmed that they have been fully informed about contact arrangements. They said they believe they are listened to if they are unhappy with the arrangements. Children confirmed that they feel able to express their views about the care they receive. They believe their views make a difference so that as far as possible they are placed with carers who meet their expressed views and needs.

The fostering service demonstrates that systems for children and young people to participate in discussions and decision making about their futures has improved. Evidence of this was that young people gave a talk at one of the welcome evenings for prospective foster carers. The service is fully inclusive of children and young people who for any reason may be harder to engage, for example children and young people with communication difficulties have access to interpreters to help them express their views. All children and young people have access to the children's rights service. This service actively supports children and young people in the care of the local authority. Children and young people said they have access to advocates through the children's rights service, this service is well used by the young people within the Borough. They said they understand who they can talk to if they want to make a complaint or they are experiencing problems with the services they receive.

There is a participation strategy in place for the full and active involvement of all children in the planning, managing and evaluating services and activities. Feedback from young people confirms that their contributions are taken seriously and acted upon such as being involved in the recruitment of foster carers, being an active voice in community forum groups and advocate to other children and young people. Support and training is offered to children and young people so that they can contribute effectively.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is satisfactory.

Young people are assisted to learn independent living skills by foster carers who have been trained to support them through this process. However, not all carers in this field have been adequately trained. Young people have access to the children's rights service. This service actively supports young people through the leaving care process. It offers training and work experience opportunities. Young people confirmed that they are fully involved with the recruitment and training of staff and foster carers. Foster carers confirmed that they are supported to understand their role in helping young people develop skills for independence. Allowances and training available enable foster carers to offer appropriate support for young people during the transition to adulthood period.

The review process for supported lodgings carers do not take place on time and the system is not kept up to date. Where this concern had been identified the service has begun to resolve this.

The fostering service is beginning to work together with other local services and to specifically develop links with the leaving care teams. The working together initiative is helping to bridge the gap between the services. However, this needs future work to ensure this is working well.

Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

The Statement of Purpose is reviewed annually. However, it does not fully cover all the guidance as set out in national minimum standard. The children's guide is attractively presented. There are two children's guides and both are presented in a colourful pictorial format and written in street and text script. However, children and young people spoken to said that they did not receive anything from the service when they were first placed in care. They all unanimous said that any information, support and advice they had received was via the children's right office or their carers which they found positive and rewarding. Carers and social workers also confirmed that they were not aware of the children's guide.

Staff are organised and managed in a way which delivers an efficient and effective foster care service. Regular team meetings are held. There are adequate numbers of staff working for the service and support systems are available for foster carers. Where staffing vacancies have arisen this has been appropriately covered by agency staff. The fostering service has a recruitment policy and strategy aimed at recruiting a range of carers to meet the needs of children and young people for whom it aims to provide a service. There are clear roles for managers and staff and well established lines of communication and of accountability between managers, staff and carers. However, this has not been consistently managed such as in the case of recommendations made at panel.

The fostering service has an active Foster Carer's Association that mainly takes the lead on organising social activities and events. The association meets regularly to enable carers to have a voice in service's development. Carers spoken to said that they are well supported, by the fostering service especially by their supervising social worker. In acknowledging the support, achievements and care given by carers, the service recently held a 'Foster Carers and Kinship recognition evening'. Those carers who attended the event, felt that all their hard work had been appreciated.

Support to foster carers is satisfactory. The fostering service provides a 24 hour emergency on call service to support carers, children and young people. Carers receive regular supervision and access to training. Carers have a training profile in place and a majority of the carers are undertaking the Children's Workforce Development Council training. Since the scheme started three carers have completed their qualification. There is no training in place for carers who support young people who are 16+. Carers approval are reviewed annually. However, this has not been consistently managed, to ensure all reviews are completed within the specified timescale as required by regulation.

Children's case records are located on the electronic recording system. The system has been in place since April 2010 and is not fully operational. Therefore, at the time of the inspection not all the children's records requested could be seen. The administrative records for the service are also held electronically. There are separate files for staff, carers, children, complaints and allegations. However, there is no clear quality assurance system in place that ensures all records are monitored and remedial action taken where necessary, such as the child protection, allegations and complaint records which were not evaluated to show trends or patterns if any. All records are stored confidentially. Paper records are stored in locked facilities and electronic records are password protected.

Local authority fostering service's policies and procedures for assessing, approving, supporting and training carers recognises the particular contribution that can be made by and the particular needs of family and friends as carers. Since the last inspection a number of carers have been approved as kinship carers and this is growing all the time.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The fostering service is part of a wide diverse community and this is reflected in the team supporting the carers. Carers and staff understand their roles and responsibilities with regards to promoting equality and diversity. Every effort is made to place children and young people within their own cultural, racial, linguistic and religious communities, wherever that is possible. Where this is not possible, plans are put in place to keep the child's culture alive. Children with disabilities are placed in an environment that recognises and caters for their disability, and at the same time promotes their social inclusion. The differences in child rearing practices, family values and attitudes, across the different cultural communities living within the Borough, is respected and understood.

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 the welfare of children placed or to be placed with foster parents is safeguarded and promoted at all times this refers to decisions made when de-registering a foster carer. (breach of regulation 11 (a) NMS 30)
- ensure a review takes place not more than a year after approval and thereafter whenever the fostering service provider considers it necessary, but at intervals of not more than a year (breach of regulation 29(2) NMS 30)
- ensure that the fostering panel maintains an accurate written record of its proceedings and the reasons for its recommendations (breach of regulation 25(1) NMS30)

- review the service's Statement of Purpose to reflect the NMS (NMS 1.4)
- supply a copy of the children's guide to each foster parent approved by the fostering service and (subject to their age and understanding), to each child placed by it (breach of regulation 4 (c) NMS 1)
- ensure that there are systems to monitor the quality and adequacy of records, and remedial actions are taken when necessary (NMS 26)
- ensure appropriate records are kept and are accessible in relation to individual foster children (NMS24)
- ensure that foster parents are provided with training, advice, information and support as appears necessary in the interests of child or young person placed with them. (breach of regulation 17 NMS 23)