

London Borough of Sutton Fostering Services

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

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Inspector	Caroline Wilson / Cheryl Carter
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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

Sutton Fostering Service is a local authority fostering service that provides emergency, short term, long term, kinship and specialist placements for children and young people. The service also provides an out-of-hours service, which means that foster carers can provide emergency placements and respite foster care for planned short-term breaks. There are also a number of foster carers approved to look after the children of relatives within their extended family.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This was an announced full inspection in which all key national minimum standards were assessed. This is a good service, with some outstanding features. The organisational aspects of the fostering service are outstanding due to the innovative service that management offer to its service users. This is particularly in areas such as training, listening to the views of young people, and foster carer and staff support. The fostering service performs higher in this area than in the outcome group of staying safe, as being a local authority service, they are bound by the authority's processes, policies and procedures, rather than being able to have those of their own.

Carers feel well supported by this fostering service and speak highly of the staff and management. They report that the agency strives to provide them with a high level of support which allows them to care for young people well and ensure that their needs are met. The fostering service is excellent at celebrating young people's achievements and at enabling young people to reach their full potential in relation to their education. They also have excellent health and training for foster carers that helps support young people to achieve stability in their placements. The fostering service also have excellent training opportunities for its staff and foster carers, especially in relation to tailoring training to the specific needs of young people. Young people's views and opinions are valued highly and there are a number of forums in which their opinions can effectively be sought to improve their experiences of being in care.

The fostering service's recruitment policies and procedures are robust and promote young people's well-being by ensuring that staff are safe to work with young people. There are excellent arrangements for ensuring that diversity is valued and for ensuring that young people's particular interests are encouraged.

An area in which the fostering service can make improvements is in relation to complaints, to ensure that the date in which the outcome of any complaint is

completed is recorded, to enable an assessment of whether or not they were completed within specified timescales.

Improvements since the last inspection

No actions were set at the last inspection.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

The fostering service has close links with their looked after children's clinical psychology service. This service provides focused and diverse assessments of young people which help in a number of areas, including enhancing foster carers' understanding of young people or helping with permanency planning. This has helped stabilise a number of placements which otherwise may have broken down. There is also a specialist service which supports young people who have more significant mental health problems, such as personality disorders, self-harming or those who have difficulty controlling their emotions.

Health needs are reviewed annually at the looked after children's review. Foster carers say that young people are registered with a local General Practitioner and dentist and see these professionals where necessary. Many foster carers are impressed with the fact that young people have access to the borough's leisure centres so they have the opportunity to get involved in a range of sporting activities to keep them healthy. Results from young people's surveys state that they think that the fostering service is good, or is usually good, at giving them advice about keeping them healthy, although one young person felt that at times fostering staff, 'talk about it for a long time and repeat themselves about it.'

Young people have their health needs promoted and protected through excellent support from the fostering service. Foster carers say that they are given the information they need about young people's health needs and this helps them to meet these needs. However, sometimes there is a delay in getting this information from the looked after children's social workers, which means they do not have all the relevant information about young people's background in a timely fashion.

Foster carers are knowledgeable about the safe administration and recording of medication. The paediatric service also provides foster carers with medication training on specific issues, for instance if they are providing care for young people with disabilities.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The fostering service has staff recruitment policies and procedures that are robust and offer good protection to young people using the service. The Human Resources

staff have a good understanding of these and implement them effectively. All staff recruitment files looked at had full and satisfactory information in relation to staff to ensure that they are safe to work with young people.

There is an effective panel that serves to monitor the quality of the fostering service and review assessments made of potential foster carers. This helps to ensure a consistent approach in assessment across the service. The panel is made up of professionals from a range of social care backgrounds as well as those who have medical and educational expertise. The fostering service makes good efforts to ensure that young people are appropriately matched with foster carers who can meet their needs, especially in relation to languages spoken. One panel report states that, 'the strength of the placement is that the young person is able to communicate with the foster carer.'

The fostering service match families well to their foster children so there is a good chance that the placement will be successful. Placement decisions take into consideration young people's ethnicity and cultural backgrounds. Where young people are placed with families with a different culture to their own, good efforts are made to enable the young people to be provided with care that helps them to develop a positive understanding of their heritage.

Young people are protected from abuse and neglect. All carers and agency staff members have received training in child protection and abuse and are clear about their responsibilities regarding this. The local authority of which the fostering service is a part, has a written child protection policy which promotes young people's welfare. Fostering staff and foster carers have a good understanding of how these procedures work in practice. Foster carers are given clear information about appropriate behaviour management and safe care. Management systems are in place to ensure that good practice is followed in relation to any allegations of abuse and to monitor the action taken in relation to this. Clear guidance is given to carers regarding young people going missing and this helps to keep young people safe.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Young people who are looked after have excellent chances to reach their full potential in relation to their education. Foster carers provide an environment in which young people's education and learning are valued. They attend parents' evenings and help young people with their homework, where appropriate. Young people are provided with a yearly allowance which they can use creatively towards their education, for example, towards extra tuition fees or for sports equipment. As such, the academic achievements have improved over the last three years. In addition 99% of young people chose to go onto further education, while 1% went on to seek employment. Support for young people to pursue further education is excellent as there is a generous package to support them through education through to degree level. Young people's individual educational achievements are celebrated through presentations at awards ceremonies.

The fostering service values diversity and foster carers are made aware of young people's individual needs and this helps to ensure that these needs are met. A high majority of foster carers believe that the fostering service effectively promotes diversity; 15% of foster carer survey responses said that they were outstanding in this area, while 65% thought that they were good. One foster carer stated, 'we had a young person from a different ethnicity to us and the fostering service have regularly questioned how we are meeting their needs. This was good as we were able to really think about what we were doing right.' This assists young people to build on their self-esteem and promote their sense of identity. Each young person with a disability receives specific services and support to enable them to live a full a life as possible. Where necessary and appropriate, adaptations are made to foster carers' homes.

The fostering service offers short breaks for young people in their care. Where this is the case, birth parents remain central to the promotion of the young person's health and educational needs. Policies and procedures are in place that are implemented in practice to meet the needs of young people receiving short-term breaks.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Young people's welfare is enhanced through the promotion of appropriate contact by the agency. Carers are clear about contact arrangements as this information is clearly recorded. The fostering agency's remuneration policy sets out the financial support that is provided to the carers to ensure that contact takes place at the required frequency and in the most suitable place.

The fostering service is excellent at ensuring that young people are consulted about the service they receive from an organisational level downwards. Young people in foster care have the 'Decision Busters' group in which they can air their views about decisions that the local authority makes and to ensure consistency of care for young people. For instance, young people's views have been sought on how they will be actively involved to influence policy and how they will create opportunities for disabled young people. This group is influential and has already effected change in a number of areas for young people. Some young people are also going to be trained in being involved in the process of foster carer selection, called the Youth Panel. The fostering service acknowledges that young people in care can offer a valuable insight into the skills, requirements and demands of a foster carer and want them to contribute their views to the overall assessment process through the Youth Panel.

The feedback from young people's surveys evidenced that they are not very confident about making individual complaints. Half of them were clear about who they could speak to, and one stated that they were concerned that their trust would be broken. Complaints received are dealt with by the complaints procedures; however, it is unclear whether these are addressed within relevant timescales, as the date when the complaint is completed is not available.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

There are good arrangements for ensuring that young people are prepared for adulthood while they are placed in foster care. Foster carers are supported in the preparation of young people for independence. For example, they are encouraged by their supervising social worker to support young people by encouraging them to manage their money and by undertaking appropriate household tasks. Both foster carers and staff have identified delays in the intervention of the leaving care team that may affect the future plans for young people leaving care.

The fostering service pays carers an allowance as specified. The remuneration policy sets out what expenses are paid and in what circumstances, in areas such as travel and emergency clothing allowances for young people.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

The organisation of this service is outstanding. There is a strong commitment from the registered provider to provide a high quality service to young people and foster carers. One foster carer said, 'I would not hesitate to recommend anybody to be a foster carer for this service.'

There is a clear management structure, with clear lines of accountability. Staff are managed by people who have appropriate skills and qualifications. All staff spoken to spoke highly of the approachability of the management team which enables them to provide a good level of support to foster carers. Staff report that they receive regular and effective supervision. There is on-going training and development for both foster carers and staff members. Training that is offered is excellent. Training for foster carers encompasses mandatory training such as safeguarding and health and safety. Training is also offered in relation to the current needs of the young people, such as foetal alcohol syndrome or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Each supervising social worker has an area of specialism, for instance, working with young people with disabilities, and they regularly provide training and advice for their colleagues in these specific areas. Foster carers spoken to were highly complimentary of the quality of training on offer. Recent recruitment campaigns have been successful in identifying potential foster carers. There is a thorough foster carer recruitment process and this helps to ensure that only suitable people are recruited to care for young people.

Support is provided for foster carers through regular supervision, support groups, training and telephone communication. Support groups in place offer both general and specialised support, which take account of issues of diversity.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. Young people are treated as

individuals and this ensures that individual needs are met. The matching process pays close attention to young people's needs in relation to their culture, ethnicity, religion and sexual identity.

There is a Statement of Purpose and young people's guide which provide stakeholders with the information they need about the service. However, staff and young people have identified that in its current format the young person's guide is not accessible for all young people using this service and it is scheduled to be redesigned and reformatted in the next financial year. Young people will be involved in this process through their Decision Busters group.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Recommendations

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

- ensure that all complaints are recorded with the date of the outcome of any investigation. (NMS 25.13)