

London Borough of Havering Fostering Service

Inspection report for local authority 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 London Borough of Havering's fostering team aims to provide a comprehensive range of fostering services to: children and young people who are in public and private foster care; foster carers; supportive foster care (short breaks for children with disabilities); kinship carers (family and friends); and private foster carers. The London Borough Of Havering's fostering service is a part of the children and young people's service.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

The fostering service provides good, personalised care for children and young people, taking into account their individual needs. Children and young people's views have been sought about the quality of care they receive and this feedback has led to improvements to their care. Children and young people feel able to express their views and wishes openly with their carers and they also feel listened to. The fostering service is good at engaging with foster carers, meeting young people's educational needs, ensuring that they lead healthy lifestyles and supporting young people in making decisions about their everyday lives.

The shortfalls identified as part of this visit relate to the independent panel members' recruitment checks not being fully undertaken by the service. Also, usual fostering limit exemptions are not always reviewed appropriately according to the Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 4 for Fostering Services. Annual reviews for foster carers have not taken place as required, and additionally, foster carers' training portfolios are not in place. The impact of these shortfalls on children and young people who use the service is minimal.

Improvements since the last inspection

At the last inspection one statutory requirement was made. This related to the fostering service ensuring that all persons working for the service have two written references undertaken and that telephone enquiries are made to each referee to verify the written references. This has been partially met at this inspection. There is clear evidence that recruitment records of the social workers and foster carers' checks have been undertaken by the fostering service. However, records for the independent panel members show that checks such as references and employment history information, have not been fully undertaken as part of this process.

The recommendation made relating to the fostering service reviewing the accessibility of training to all foster carers was also inspected and there is clear

evidence that this is now in place. However, foster carers' files had no portfolio to evidence what training they have undertaken.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Children and young people are healthy and live in an environment which meets their needs. Foster carers demonstrate a solid commitment to ensuring positive healthcare outcomes for children. Foster carers ensure that children and young people have a healthy diet and an active lifestyle. Pregnant young women are supported in accessing maternity services and understanding how their lifestyle choices potentially impact upon their unborn child. Children and young people receive the appropriate support from all medical professionals that they require. Where specialist support, such as counselling and behavioural therapy, is required the fostering service ensures that this is in place. Children and young people with disabilities receive support from foster carers who are competent to manage their complex health needs. The fostering service ensures training is provided to foster carers in key areas such as promoting health, first aid and food and nutrition; however, this is not always clearly evidenced.

Foster carers ensure medication is stored securely, thus ensuring children and young people are safeguarded from accidental ingestion of medication. The fostering service provides good levels of support to foster carers of children and young people with complex medical needs, for example, by attending appointments to support carers where appropriate. Supervising social workers are fully aware of the health needs of each child and young person placed. The fostering service has effective systems to monitor the overall health of children and young people placed with the fostering service.

Foster carers' homes are spacious and maintained appropriately, allowing children and young people the opportunity to thrive. The fostering service is, on occasion, innovative in ensuring that children and young people with disabilities are provided with accommodation and equipment which meets their needs. For example, adaptations to one foster carer's house were funded by the authority in order to enable the foster carer to provide placements to children who are wheelchair bound. Children and young people enjoy access to a range of activities appropriate to their age and development which help them grow and develop. Supervising social workers monitor the safety of the building during their periodic visits and carry out unannounced visits ensuring foster carers' homes remain appropriate and safe to meet the children and young people's needs.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

Children and young people's safety and welfare are at the centre of the service delivered by the fostering service. Children and young people feel safe with their

foster carers and have developed strong attachments to the people who they feel will protect them from harm. Children and young people and their parents highlight the difference their foster carers have made to their lives in making them feel loved, valued, safe and wanted.

The joining together of the fostering service and children's social workers in one building has enabled teams to communicate more effectively, thus raising, at an early stage, any areas of concern. The fostering service maintains clear links with the Local Safeguarding Children Board. Staff, and foster carers have access to clear guidance regarding safe caring and child protection. Staff and foster carers have access to a variety of safeguarding training and confirm they have attended this. It is not always clearly documented when foster carers last undertook such training and how regularly this has been updated. The lack of clear recording of such key training means that some foster carers may not have received up-to-date training regularly.

Where incidents of a child protection nature occur, the service effectively and consistently acts in accordance with agreed safeguarding protocols to ensure children and young people's safety remains paramount. Staff and foster carers encourage children and young people to be concerned about their safety both within and external to the placement. For example, when going out late they keep foster carers informed of where they are. Foster carers follow the local missing from care guidelines and ensure that children and young people are welcomed upon their return home.

The fostering service has developed training for foster carers and engaged the services of a psychologist to help support carers in developing ways of managing young people's challenging behaviour. It is hoped this will help reduce the number of placement breakdowns for young people who display challenging behaviour.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Relationships between the children, young people and the foster carers are sound. Children and young people refer to the positive relationships they have developed with their carers. It is evident that some foster carers have had an effect in ensuring positive outcomes for young people and improving children's life chances.

In most instances children and young people behave appropriately within the foster carers' households as carers are able to enforce fair and consistent boundaries. However, placement breakdown figures are quite high for adolescents who are very challenging, although the fostering service is able to seek placements outside of the fostering service to support this. The fostering service has therefore identified this as an area which needs improvement and is attempting to redress this situation by providing a variety of support to carers, for example, further training to carers, access to a psychologist and respite care. The role of the psychologist is to help foster carers develop individual ways of setting and maintaining boundaries and helping carers reflect on what has worked and why.

Foster carers' homes are suitable and sufficiently spacious to give children and young people the space they need to relax and engage in age-appropriate activities. For example, young people have space to play games and play in the garden on the trampoline. Children and young people are able to enjoy a range of activities both inside and outside of the foster home. Children and young people who have specific interests and talents, such as drama, are provided with the equipment and support to participate fully in their chosen activity. The fostering service provided a group of young people with the opportunity to travel to France to enjoy a variety of new challenges at a therapeutic activity centre.

The agency provides good support to promote positive educational outcomes for children and young people. Children and young people are supported to do well in school, and foster carers are aware of each child's educational progress and goals. Foster carers ensure children and young people have access to an array of play and learning materials to encourage appropriate development. The fostering service has effective systems for monitoring the educational outcomes of children and young people through the virtual headteacher role. Children and young people know that their carers will be there to watch their school plays, attend parents' evenings and cheer for them on sports day.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Children and young people are welcomed into foster carers' homes and are treated with the same care and respect as the carers' birth children. Children and young people's feelings are taken into account about all aspects of their care.

Children and young people all have someone to talk to about things which are worrying them. They can talk to their social workers and a children's rights officer as well their foster carer. Foster carers help children and young people to understand there are those occasions when what they want may not happen, and why. The fostering service encourages young people to feedback on the service, either through the 'decipher group' or via questionnaires, which are mainly used as part of foster carers' reviews.

Children and young people are supported to develop a strong sense of self-esteem and emotional resilience. Foster carers sensitively support children and young people through dealing with attachment issues, placement changes and coming into care. Foster carers are clear about their role and responsibility in promoting contact between looked after children, their families and significant others. Social workers commented on how contact arrangements have improved, especially over the past year. Social workers addressed how foster carers are able to meet complex contact arrangements with sensitivity and minimal support and this is seen as a strength of foster carers becoming more professional. Contact arrangements are always consistent with local authority care planning and court orders relating to contact. Carers raise any issues of concern regarding contact, with appropriate agencies.

Children and young people are supported in keeping memory boxes and undertaking life story work to help them to understand their background and where they come from.

Children and young people are actively involved in the local community in the same way any other child of the family is involved, and feel part of the carer's family.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

The fostering service ensures there are comprehensive arrangements for preparing and supporting young people to make the transition to independence. Foster carers ensure that the correct support and care are in place which is conducive to meeting the young person's individual needs and well-being. One young person said that their foster carer has helped them turn their life around by listening to them, supporting and giving them the strength to move on; they now see their foster carer not only as a friend but as their mum.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

Supervising social workers have the appropriate qualifications and experience to competently support foster carers. Supervising social workers have been recruited in order to ensure greater stability for children and young people. Safeguards to ensure that staff are fit to work with children and young people are good and ensure that full and satisfactory information is available about staff. These safeguards are also in place for fostering households. However, independent panel members' checks, such as references and employment histories, have not been consistently undertaken.

The Statement of Purpose clearly sets out the aims and objectives of the fostering service. It gives those interested in the service a clear understanding of how it intends to recruit and support foster carers and staff to promote the welfare of children and young people. The children and young people's guide has recently been updated and was produced with the help of the children in care council group; it is now produced in a child-friendly format for children of all ages.

The fostering panel comprises a core group of members who make recommendations about the approval and review of foster carers. The fostering panel also undertakes a quality assurance role which ensures that assessments are of good quality and undertaken within a timely fashion. Panels are quorate. Reports are presented to panel members prior to the panel date. There is always adequate time for additional information to be requested to prevent any delay to recommendations being made in relation to foster carers' approval or reviews. Any queries or concerns are highlighted by the fostering chair and effectively acted upon by the fostering team. The chair of the panel states that he has seen a number of improvements that have led to improved performance. This includes a consistent and clear approach with regards to

reports presented to panel. However, when an exemption is made in relation to the usual fostering limit, it is not always clear that the appropriate guidance has been followed to ensure that the placement is appropriate and safe.

Annual appraisals of panel members, to review panel members' performance against agreed objectives, are undertaken by the service manager. However, records of training, and training needs are not compiled. Foster carers always have the opportunity to attend their reviews and have their views heard during this process.

Reviews and visits to foster carers are not always undertaken annually as required by law. The service manager and team manager are aware that there is drift and have introduced a monthly monitoring system to manage this strategically.

The premises are suitable to meet the objectives set out in the Statement of Purpose. For instance, meeting rooms can be booked for meetings and interviews of potential foster carers to ensure that sensitive information can be discussed in private. In addition, designated members of staff are available to answer initial queries and to ensure that literature is sent out to potential foster carers in a timely manner.

Matching of children and young people with foster carers is good and maximises the likelihood of a stable placement. Foster carers are provided with information about the child or young person prior to them being placed in order that they can undertake their role effectively. Where there is a crisis or potential breakdown of placement, the fostering service intervenes. It provides additional support and guidance from other professionals, such as a psychologist, who explore with carers what are the issues and how to make the placement better for all parties.

There is a comprehensive training programme available to all foster carers. This includes training in safeguarding, child development, equality, diversity and discrimination. However, there was no consistent record maintained of each foster carer's training. Foster carers' appraisal of performance is discussed during annual reviews and evidence of training undertaken is recorded but this also is not consistently maintained, especially training undertaken by each carer in a two-carer household. Foster carers spoken to said that they can access any training they wish due to the new booking process and they all felt the induction training, especially the attachment training, was very good. Foster carers who complete the Children's Workforce Development Council training, receive an additional enhanced payment.

The aims of the fostering service are: to provide the best possible placements; to support, train and supervise all carers so they can meet the diverse needs of children and young people; and to gate-keep resources within a financial framework which meets the needs of the service. These are reviewed regularly to ensure that they are providing 'best value' for their service and meeting the aims and objectives of the service being provided. The council is working in partnership with neighbouring boroughs to explore commissioning initiatives to further enhance their service provision in a cost-effective way.

Payments to foster carers are fair and paid in a timely way. Foster carers are clear about the fostering service's payment structures and all are happy as the new payment structure is robust, comprehensive and very clear.

The fostering service's child protection procedures are reviewed by the Local Safeguarding Children Board and the Local Authority Designated Officer. The fostering service ensures that children in their care are fully protected and any allegations are handled sensitively.

Family and friends foster carers are provided with information about the assessment process. They know what is expected of them, how they will be assessed, including the criteria that will be used, and how particular issues for family and friends foster carers will be addressed. They are offered the same support as foster carers during the assessment process and beyond.

The fostering service ensures all children's files are kept safe and secure. There is clear guidance in place that clarifies the purpose, format and content of information to be kept by the fostering service on a child's file and on case files relating to foster carers, which all carers are aware of and follow.

Each foster carer is supervised by a named, appropriately qualified social worker, who they meet with regularly. Good cover arrangements are in place, should the supervising social worker be absent. This includes use of the duty system and out-of-hours service. Foster carers are provided with a handbook which covers policies, procedures and other information that relates to their care task. The handbook is in the process of being updated to include the new national minimum standards for fostering services and information relating to making a complaint.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. There is a commitment to equality and diversity and working in partnership with parents, especially for children and young people with disabilities. The fostering service is child centred and is outward looking, flexible, adapting to new ideas and ways of working. It is responsive to individual needs and the service is committed to learning and making continuous improvement.

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 reviews of foster carers' approval are sufficiently thorough to allow the fostering service to properly satisfy itself about their carers' ongoing suitability to foster (NMS 13.8)
- ensure foster carers maintain an ongoing training and development portfolio which demonstrates how they are meeting the skills required of them by the

fostering service (NMS 20.5)

- consider how it will vary, impose, cancel or review any exemption to the usual fostering limit (Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulation volume 4: Fostering Services 5.50)
- ensure all people working in or for the fostering service, and the central list of persons considered suitable to be members of a fostering panel, are interviewed as part of the selection process and have references checked to assess suitability before taking on responsibilities. Telephone enquiries are made to each referee to verify the written references. (NMS.19.1)