

Royal Borough of Kensington & Chelsea Fostering Services

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

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Setting address	Kensington & Chelsea Citizens Advice Bureau Service, 140 Ladbroke Grove, LONDON, W10 5ND
Telephone number	020 7598 4506
Email	
Registered person	Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea
Registered manager	
Responsible individual	Libby Blake
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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 Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea provides a recruitment, assessment, support and supervision service for foster carers, for a diverse range of children. Children's needs are met through both short and long-term placements. Children also benefit from kinship care with relatives and friends and parent and child placements.

The fostering team is based within a Social Services office in Ladbroke Grove, directly opposite the underground station. A range of social work teams are based in the building, which promotes exemplary partnership working. At the time of this inspection there were 63 children in fostering placements.

Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

The service demonstrates a substantial commitment to children. There is an excellent focus on valuing diversity and enhancing lives. Creative and innovative practice meets children's holistic needs exceptionally well. Staff work in unity to promote the welfare of children. Senior leadership empowers children, foster carers and staff to positively influence change. Staff demonstrate a dedication and passion to their respective roles. There is a culture of excellence as the service continually strives for further improvement.

The service is forward thinking and proactively addressing challenges. Strong management, a shared vision and a dynamic dedication to corporate parenting contributes to an outstanding fostering service. The only shortfall is in relation to fully updating the panel procedures. This is in progress and does not impact on the quality of care. The fostering panel functions effectively and practical arrangements reflect the new regulations and standards.

Improvements since the last inspection

At the last inspection the service was asked to address three recommendations. The service has successfully addressed all areas which further improves the practice. Panel membership is now more diverse. Family and friends placements receive a greater level of support. A change in the cycle now ensures recommendations from the fostering annual report are incorporated into the team action plan. This synchronises with the children's plan, the annual independent reviewing officer report and wider strategic plans. All changes demonstrate the service's strong commitment to children.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

Children benefit from extensive health care arrangements, which meets their needs exceptionally well.

These comprise of a comprehensive range of working practices, services, events, training and practical support focused on improving health outcomes. Children contribute to their health plans and receive their own personal copy. Excellent partnership working amongst social care and health professionals ensures their health plans are proactively implemented. The early identification of specific health needs prompts the involvement of specialist services.

A highly effective and resourceful virtual health clinic is dedicated to meeting the holistic needs of children. The team includes psychologists and is led by an extremely experienced and competent nurse. There is an efficient approach to meeting children's emotional and psychological health. Staff sensitively remove any stigma or cultural differences related to therapy and mental health. Children undergo regular screenings for any difficulties regarding their mental well-being. An intensive, positively acclaimed 10 week course equips foster carers with the skills needed to address emotional health and associated behaviours.

The service creatively engages children and foster carers. Examples are the health promotion conferences. One of these is concentrating on sports in anticipation of the forthcoming Olympic games. Foster carers have access to telephone advice at anytime. Health professionals are able to undertake home visits; for example, to discuss sexual health with teenagers. Practical support is also available to manage incidents involving challenging behaviour.

The foster carers' induction comprehensively addresses health issues and they receive ongoing training. This includes first aid, drug awareness, therapeutic communication, nutrition and general health awareness. An additional bonus is the programme of sex, relationships and education training. Foster carers also receive valued training and equipment if children with special health care needs are placed with them.

Children live in warm, nurturing foster homes which are maintained to a high standard. The service earnestly addresses room sharing issues. This includes supporting fostering carers in their application for larger accommodation. Foster carers encourage a healthy lifestyle, through diet, daily choices and exercise. Leisure cards are available for young people to access a wide range of facilities. Children receive encouragement to take pride in their appearance; this is evident through their clothing and culturally reflective skin and hair care.

Children achieve significantly improved health outcomes. The vast majority of health and dental checks are up-to-date. No children placed with an in-house carer has a substance misuse problem. The service robustly evaluates itself and innovatively focuses on securing the best outcomes for children. An example of this is the

recruitment of a psychology based life coach to provide a counselling service to children.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

Children benefit from the strong safeguarding ethos which permeates throughout the service. There is substantial awareness training for both foster carers and staff. The Local Safeguarding Children Board provides an extensive range of training. This covers different levels of safeguarding, safer recruitment, domestic violence, substance misuse, neglect and sexual exploitation. There is an excellent focus on mental health and emotional abuse. The organisation has a learning culture based on the wish to promote best practice. An example of this is the training on the lessons learnt from serious case reviews.

The promotion of children's welfare is very high on the service's agenda. There is a very comprehensive risk management process and a range of safe caring initiatives. These systems are effective and ensure children receive the necessary protection within each placement. There is a very clear procedure for responding to, documenting and monitoring safeguarding concerns. Where necessary foster carers are taken to panel and their approval terminated. All are clear about respective roles and responsibilities in safeguarding children and work effectively in partnership, resulting in excellent safety outcomes for children.

There is a pro-active approach to addressing the dangers of the digital age. Foster carers receive relevant training and computers have the necessary internet safeguards. Foster carers discuss issues with children and monitor their use of the internet and mobile phones. This helps to protect young people from cyber bullying and other forms of abuse. Professionals and foster carers are highly aware and sensitive to the effects of bullying and its significance for children. The service is extremely responsive and promptly addresses any perceived bullying.

Children live within safe and secure homes. Each placement has very comprehensive, clear, regularly updated safer-care guidance. This protocol facilitates warmth and the development of safe attachments and close relationships while ensuring healthy boundaries are maintained. Children rarely go missing or are absent without authorisation. Older children occasionally may be out later than expected, however, they keep in contact with their carer by mobile phone. There is a highly effective updated missing persons procedure. This procedure works extremely well due to the strong partnership working with the police.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Children receive excellent life enhancing support, which is responsive to their individual needs. Children thrive within their foster homes. They receive exceptional

care based on strong structured boundaries. This impacts positively on children's behaviour and helps them develop courtesy and good social skills. Fostering households are inclusive and actively welcome children, regarding them as members of their own family. A child stated that their care is 'all positive, they always do things in my best interests.' A professional commented that a foster carer 'shows great empathy, understanding, kindness and warmth.' Children move into and out of the foster home in a well planned manner. Foster carers' profiles provide a picture of them and enable children to obtain relevant information regarding their proposed carer.

Children benefit from innovative initiatives which contribute to their educational attainment. The virtual school team is a dynamic resource, which is at the heart of the exceptional educational outcomes children achieve. Children receive support to maximise their potential. The service has a systematic approach to the ongoing assessment of children's educational needs and respond to these proactively. The cohesive co-ordination within the department is forward thinking and prioritises educational needs. An example being that each child's personal educational plan is scheduled to coincide with their statutory review. The timetable is also linked to their school year groups which enables effective transition planning.

Children have very good school attendance, low levels of exclusions and improved exam results. Staff and foster carers value education and understand the importance of their role in enabling children to achieve. A child commented that they are 'encouraged to succeed educationally for a better life.' Excellent liaison enables children to secure places in their preferred school. Foster carers benefit from extensive support which helps them support young people with learning. Examples of this support are stimulating training, education conferences and reading projects. All fostering households have a computer and foster carers receive the necessary information technology training.

Children have their own virtual school website, which provides learning links and individualised support. An example of this support is assistance with their personal statement for university. A child stated that they would 'like to thank the virtual school.' Tuition is available for each child. This includes Saturday schools for revision and support for children whose first language is not English. Meticulous monitoring provides daily reporting on children's absences, excessive lateness and exclusions. This enables proactive intervention with foster carers, social workers and the education welfare department.

Children enjoy a wide range of extra curricular activities. These include educational trips to museums and the theatre. Further examples are learning animation, music production, street dance, sailing and rock climbing. Children benefit from the organisation's strong commitment to improving their life chances; a substantial budget is dedicated to this area of work. This enables children to pursue specific activities of their choice and nurture their talents and provides them with new opportunities for enjoying and achieving. An activities co-ordinator post has also been introduced to purposefully engage with children. There are excellent projects, events and resources available for children. These assist with their personal

development thus raising their self esteem, resilience and confidence. Examples of the events and projects are an annual achievement event and peer mentoring.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

Children report that they are 'listened to'. They have a significant voice in the development of the fostering service; they play a significant role in influencing change. The service effectively facilitates an immense network of consultation groups. Children benefit from the service having an advocacy and consultation officer. The participation strategy fully and actively involves children at every level. This includes creative methods to enable the participation of younger children. Children meet regularly with senior leaders and have their own Looked after Children (LAC) council. This council was instrumental in the development of the local LAC pledge which outlines the organisation's promises to them.

Groups of children provide consultation and advice to the fostering service. This has a direct impact on policy and practice and on evaluation and change. Examples of developments are the practice of providing foster carer profiles to children, the children's guide to fostering, the publishing of financial allowances, and implementation of the leisure card scheme. Children are consistently asked for their views and these views make a difference. For example, they are involved in training foster carers and participate in staff recruitment panels; they receive training and support to undertake this responsibility.

Children know how to complain and if they wish they can be supported by the advocacy officer. The service has established an effective complaints system. Children's participation in discussions and decision making about their own futures is fully integrated into service policy and planning. The service has imaginative methods of enabling this. Children have their own website, which is an innovative source of information. An interactive electronic consultation system is a valuable tool in the quality assurance process. The service fully consults with foster carers. Foster carers take a key role in meetings, offering their expertise. Their views additionally inform practice and the service provision.

Children are able to maintain appropriate contact with their family members and significant others. Contact arrangements are very clear, constructive and safeguard children. Foster carers benefit from excellent training and support to facilitate this process. There is a respectful working relationship with birth families which acknowledges the sensitive nature of the care plan. Children receive support to understand their current circumstances. Highly valued life history work empowers children giving them a good sense of their identity. The children's guide also provides a comprehensive summary of foster care. This guide innovatively includes very famous people who were fostered; this information is inspiring and helps children develop a positive self-view.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is outstanding.

Children receive substantial assistance which promotes their independence and eases their transition to adulthood. The service ensures children are fully supported, practically, financially and emotionally. An exemplary scheme enables young people to remain living with their foster parents after the age of 18. This offers young people a high level of stability. Foster carers are fully enabled, through allowances and training, to continue to offer a high degree of support to young people. A further example of this is continued outreach support to young people who are living independently.

Children benefit from age appropriate opportunities to learn independence skills. The service has produced a unique DVD which features a foster carer and child; this is an excellent resource, which details how carers can help with life skills. Children benefit from focused support from the independence preparation groups and from the specialist independent support teams. Children learn financial responsibility through a saving scheme and within their fostering households they learn how to budget and save. Children learn a range of household skills, which include doing their own laundry, keeping their rooms clean and cooking.

The service strongly encourages and supports children to achieve their dreams and ambitions. Foster children state they 'always get the right help' and 'are helped and encouraged to think about the future.' A significant number of children are attending university. Post 16 educational tuition inspires confidence in young people promoting a yes you can attitude. Older children are able to visit a variety of universities for the day or for longer residential trips. They also have an opportunity to obtain valued work experience through the organisation's teenagers to work scheme.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

Children receive a high quality service which innovatively responds to their needs. There is an exceptional dedication to the corporate parenting role. The service is open, willing to learn and in constant pursuit of excellence. Children, foster carers and staff benefit from the culture of respect and empowerment. The service is courageously addressing financial constraints and forthcoming changes. They are positively working beyond their local authority boundaries to embrace the new tri-borough arrangements. Regular updates and proactive planning assists in ensuring a smooth transition for children, foster carers and staff.

The Statement of Purpose explicitly details the service's vision and values. This is evident throughout the service delivery and in the day to day practice. Staff and foster carers demonstrate a genuine commitment to promoting positive outcomes for children. Children have their own vibrant, age appropriate guide which outlines what

they can expect from the service. Children thrive within stable, well supported placements which are built on successful matching. Other professionals highlight the marked improvement and describe how children 'blossom' and 'flourish'.

The fostering service is run in an ethical and effective manner. The service is financially sound and they pride themselves on their efficiency. Staff are warm, people orientated and have an unquestionable heart for children. There is excellent staff retention and exceptionally high staff morale. Children benefit from a reflective and highly supportive service with dynamic leadership. Managers are well qualified, extremely experienced and passionate. They ensure that working practices, processes and systems are comprehensive and encourage good practice. The service appropriately notifies relevant parties of significant events.

The service has a wide range of foster carers to meet children's needs. Foster carers work in partnership with the service. Carers from the service have received external recognition from the Mayor of London. The vigorous assessment and annual review process ensures the optimum suitability of foster carers. Foster carers feel valued and describe their support as outstanding. Support includes thorough supervisory meetings, local support groups, peer mentoring, respite care, trips, celebratory events and extensive professional support.

Staff and foster carers' recruitment procedures are in line with best practice in the field. The service recruits a range of diverse staff and foster carers to reflect the needs of children. The service has high expectations of foster carers, which includes a set number of training days. Foster carers receive excellent training which thoroughly equips them for their role; this includes the Children's Workforce Development Council training. There is a strong management commitment to continuous development, which includes staff, foster carers and panel members. The comprehensive performance appraisal system ensures their ongoing development needs are met. Foster carers and staff demonstrate significant skill, knowledge, expertise, self-awareness and commitment to their respective roles.

The fostering panel is extremely effective and discharges its functions efficiently. The panel demonstrates robust quality assurance. There is a strong emphasis on safeguarding and ensuring excellent outcomes for children. Panel membership is very diverse and representative of the local community. The panel receives and acts upon high quality information. The agency decision maker meticulously considers all recommendations in a timely manner. They effectively challenge decisions which are not in the best interests of children. The constitution and practice of the panel takes account of the new regulations. The service is currently updating the written panel procedures.

The premises and administrative arrangements meet the service's needs. There is innovative use of information technology and virtual systems of communication. The service has excellent quality assurance and recording practice and an effective foster carers' payment system. Allowances and expenses paid support carers in achieving very good outcomes for children. This enables greater stability and assists in the recruitment and retention of foster carers. Children's records are accurate, up to

date, concise and clear and contain all significant information required by regulations.

The service takes tremendous pride in their successful family and friend fostering arrangements. Children benefit from the high incidences of permanence. Family and friends receive substantial support, which enables them to effectively meet the needs of children. There are well developed and robustly implemented policies and strategies which recognise the unique aspects of these carers. Carers have their own designated worker and are able to access specialist and general training as offered to other foster carers. An exceptional bonus is the plan to offer these carers an equitable financial allowance; this is in accordance with the new national minimum standards.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. There is a comprehensive understanding of and a varied and holistic approach to meeting needs. Working practices throughout the service, policies and procedures explicitly promote diversity and equality. The service sensitively and proactively responds to issues of gender, religion, ethnic origin, language, culture, disability and sexuality. The service challenges prejudices, an example being homophobia. All decision making promotes the needs of children. Children benefit from excellent support regarding their heritage; for example through visiting the country of origin of their family.

The service continually strives for further improvement through evaluative and reflective practice. There is consistent use of self-evaluation. Improvements identified are managed in a timely and very effective way. Everyone in the team is involved in service improvement that links individual targets with business priorities and in particular the LAC service improvement plan. There is a golden thread which is reflected in the team plan and individual targets. The service proactively works in partnership with key people to ensure 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):

- update the written policy and procedure regarding the recruitment and constitution of the fostering panel. (NMS 14.1)