

London Borough of Ealing Fostering Service

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

Unique reference number	SC042826
Inspection date	17/10/2011
Inspector	Sandra Jacobs-Walls / Tola Akinde-Hummel
Type of inspection	Social Care Inspection

Setting address	London Borough of Ealing, Perceval House, 14-16 Uxbridge Road, London, W5 2HL
Telephone number	0208 825 6084
Email	sheikhg@ealing.gov.uk
Registered person	London Borough of Ealing
Registered manager	
Responsible individual	Carolyn Fair
Date of last inspection	03/03/2008

© Crown copyright 2011

Website: www.ofsted.gov.uk

This document may be reproduced in whole or in part for non-commercial educational purposes, provided that the information quoted is reproduced without adaptation and the source and date of publication are stated.

You can obtain copies of The Children Act 2004, Every Child Matters and The National Minimum Standards for Children's Services from: The Stationery Office (TSO) PO Box 29, St Crispins, Duke Street, Norwich, NR3 1GN. Tel: 0870 600 5522. Online ordering: www.tso.co.uk/bookshop

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 Ealing fostering service seeks to recruit, assess, support and provide children and young people with quality foster care placements. The service consists of the recruitment and assessment team, fostering support team and kinship fostering team. The types of placement provided include short to long term, mother and baby, and kinship placements. The foster placements of looked after children who are living with a disability are managed by another children's team within the department.

Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

The main aim of the inspection was to assess the quality of the service in line with the recently amended legislation underpinned by the Every Child Matters guidance. The main finding is that the fostering service offers an outstanding quality service to looked after children in foster care placements. The outcomes for children and young people are excellent.

Looked after children live very healthy lifestyles and are well protected from harm or abuse. The service excels in promoting the educational attainment of children and young people and they enjoy a creative, wide range of leisure activities. Children and young people are very keenly involved in decision making about their lives, and the service promotes very effective consultation with children, young people and foster carers. This is a clear strength of the fostering service.

The agency's recruitment, assessment and support of foster carers is exceptional. Staff are well supported and supervised and their partnership working with internal and external professionals is very effective. The fostering panel is highly organised and efficiently run. Staff and foster carers have access to extensive, quality training opportunities. The leadership of the service is strong. Areas identified for improvement include development of the service's children's guide and the quality of some staff's recording on file.

Improvements since the last inspection

The previous inspection resulted in one action. This related to the vetting checks for staff and foster carers. This issue has been resolved satisfactorily. The previous inspection also made a recommendation relating to staff's documentation. This inspection notes further improvements are needed in some staff's case file recording.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

Children and young people's physical, emotional and social development needs are highly promoted by the fostering service. Children and young people live very healthy lifestyles and have excellent access to primary and specialist health care services. Staff and foster carers maintain extensive records of all health care and medical issues, treatment options, appointments and of their outcomes. Children and young people are promptly registered with primary care services and have easy access to specialist services. These include sexual health advice, nutritional services, and alcohol and substance misuse services. Children and young people benefit from excellent access to the looked after children's (LAC) nurse, who is available to provide health care services such as statutory health assessments, immunisations, advice and support. Staff of the fostering team and the LAC nurse work in effective partnership to ensure the health care needs of children and young people are promptly and effectively met. The LAC nurse also regularly facilitates training for foster carers and staff.

Foster carers, children, young people and staff of the fostering team benefit immensely from the input of the team's LAC clinical psychologist. This service offers support and advice, and where necessary, direct work with foster carers, children and young people to address their emotional well-being and related placement issues. The clinical psychologist also provides a range of relevant training opportunities to foster carers and staff, such as life story work and attachment theory. Such opportunities act to enhance the skill and experiences of staff and foster carers to better meet the often complex needs of children and young people. The fostering service has well established links with external health care bodies such as child and adolescent mental health service to whom referrals are made. The borough's Horizons project also plays a significant role in preventative health care and education.

Foster carers and staff of the fostering service consistently review and address the health care needs of children and young people. This is particularly true of placement and supervisory visits. The health care needs of children and young people are also routinely explored during statutory looked after children reviews and foster carers' annual reviews. Foster carers have access to first aid, medication training and more general training that focuses on health care and medical matters, including issues of disability. The fostering service's foster carer handbook contains comprehensive policy and guidance relating to health promotion. Foster carers and staff of the service are committed to ensuring children and young people live healthy lifestyles and encourage them to have an interest and take responsibility for healthy living. The department's ongoing development of a 'Health Passport' for older young people is good illustration of this. Children and young people's wishes and feelings about health care are actively sought and are given significant priority when considering treatment options.

Children and young people participate in a range of innovative and stimulating

activities that contribute to their physical and emotional health. Children and young people enjoy recreational and leisure opportunities that are wide ranging and include trips to the theatre and opera, involvement in local and cultural events and participation in art, sport, music and dance. Foster carers regularly take children and young people in their care on family holidays. The organisation also periodically organises and hosts recreational and social events.

Children and young people live in suitable accommodation and they are happy with their surroundings. Foster carers' homes are comfortable, well furnished and decorated. The fostering service provides foster carers with training in health and safety matters and each foster home is inspected annually to monitor the suitability of the accommodation. The health and safety assessment tool is comprehensive and includes, where appropriate, a pet assessment. Staff's unannounced visits also include a review of foster carers homes. Each child and young person has their own room unless otherwise agreed with the authority.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

Children and young people are well protected from harm and abuse. The fostering service promotes their safety and welfare, and foster carers are proactive in safeguarding children and young people. The service regularly provides foster carers with comprehensive child protection training, which is mandatory. Staff of the fostering service and foster carers demonstrate an excellent understanding of how to keep children and young people safe. Their practice is supported by clear and extensive written guidance and child protection policies and procedures. All fostering households have a safe caring policy, that is often child specific. Staff and foster carers have access to quality child protection training that is facilitated by internal and external trainers, including the borough's Local Authority Designated Officer for child protection. Foster carers share very positive relationships with those in their care and this generates a culture of trust. Children and young people overwhelmingly indicate that they feel safe in their placements. One young person commented: 'I feel the safest I've ever felt anywhere.' Supervising social workers routinely meet with children and young people in their homes to ensure they are satisfied with care provided. Staff ensure that any identified issues are promptly and appropriately explored with appropriate personnel.

The fostering team shares a positive collaborative working relationship with key agencies such as the police, education, health and early years professionals. The safeguarding children's manager offers a consultation duty service to staff that offers information and advice with regard to child protection issues. This ensures that staff are well appraised of current safeguarding issues and have access to appropriate support in keeping children and young people safe. The fostering service has robust monitoring systems in place to review child protection referrals. Staff consistently and thoroughly explore all issues of a child protection nature and these are well documented on file.

Young people rarely go missing or are absent without permission from their placements. Foster carers demonstrate a keen awareness of procedures to be followed in either of these events. Staff ensure that any history of such behaviour is shared with foster carers at the point of placement negotiation. This is important to ensure that foster carers are alerted to the risk of young people going missing and to develop placement strategies to minimise such risk. The department has effective working relationships with the police and there are sound protocols in place to address missing persons. Where young people are absent without permission, foster carers take appropriate action, in accordance with written guidance and are welcoming upon the young person's return home.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Children and young people consistently indicate that they enjoy sound relationships with their foster carers. Likewise, foster carers enjoy caring for looked after children. Foster carers enthusiastically demonstrate a keen commitment to promoting positive outcomes children and young people in their care. One foster carer commented: 'I want to help children who are not with their parent or family, to give them love and to give them comfort. I try to give them a home, not a house.'

Placements are well sustained and this has a positive impact on the behaviour of children and young people. Foster carers have high expectations for children and young people and staff support them to expect more. Children and young people are encouraged to take responsibility for their behaviour. Foster carers receive excellent support in their management of challenging behaviour. The fostering service ensures that written guidance and training are made readily available to foster carers. Direct input from the LAC clinical psychologist is a key feature of services available to support foster carers sustain foster care placements. The borough's Horizons project uses restorative justice as a model for young people to explore conflict resolution.

With regards to leisure activities, children and young people participate in a wide range of recreational activities and hobbies of their choice. The fostering service supports this and has a clear expectation that foster carers are encouraging of this, which they clearly are. The fostering service regularly monitors children and young people's participation in activities, both within and outside the school environment. The borough's Horizons Centre is an invaluable resource geared towards meeting the varying needs of looked after children. The centre provides, amongst other key services, excellent opportunities for children and young people to participate in a host of leisure pursuits in addition to educational activities. Young people strongly indicate that they enjoy attending the centre. For some, it is a 'haven' where they do not feel they need to explain their personal circumstances and where solid, positive friendships are encouraged. Foster carers routinely take children and young people on family holidays and have a sensible approach to overnight stays by and with friends.

The fostering service's promotion of children and young people's educational

attainment is a clear strength of the service. This is an area of the fostering task in which the service excels. Staff ensure that children and young people have access to educational resources that meet their needs. The LAC education team is very much involved in the children and young people's learning, and their working relationship with the fostering team is very effective. Educational services and resources are expertly tailored to meet individual need and additional support such as one-to-one tuition is available as required. The borough's Horizons Centre is a popular educational resource, with creative and innovative learning opportunities. Children and young people clearly enjoy attending. One young person attending the centre commented: 'I come here on homework night, even when I don't have any homework. It's good here, they care about me.'

Foster carers are proactively involved in the development and education of children and young people and they routinely attend key school forums such as parents' evening and personal education planning meetings. The fostering service provides its foster carers with clear written guidance and training that highlight their role in the promotion of children and young people's education. Staff supervisory visits, LAC reviews and foster carers' annual reviews consistently review and monitor children and young people's educational progress and issues. The Horizons Centre is a place of purpose with a dedicated teaching team, where learning is both formal and informal. The centre is very popular with children and young people who attend; they feel their educational needs are well met by staff of the centre and the fostering team. The department has a good track record of achieving educational success with looked after children. The fostering team and LAC education team hold joint responsibility in ensuring educational targets are met. The fostering team openly celebrates achievement and children and young people are appreciative of this.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

The fostering service's efforts to engage and consult with children and young people in their care are excellent. Young people strongly report that they feel their wishes and feelings are taken into consideration by the fostering team. They feel empowered to participate in the decision-making process about their lives and in relation to the development of the fostering service.

The organisation facilitates numerous forums that provide opportunities for children and young people to share their views. These forums include statutory LAC reviews, frequent discussion with foster carers and staff, via staff of the Horizons project, and as a feature of foster carers' annual reviews. In addition, the service offers many other strands of consultation to achieve this aim. These include the Children in Care council, the formation of consultations groups, established meetings with councillors and periodic meetings with the borough's corporate parenting team. Children and young people also have very good access to senior managers of the fostering service to share their opinions about the service and discuss future developments they wish to see in place. Questionnaires about service development are also periodically distributed. Children and young people receive clear information about how to

contact independent advocacy groups and they also have a relationship with the department's complaints officer who will raise issues with advocacy groups on their behalf. Young people receive clear information about making a complaint.

Staff of the fostering service routinely meet with children and young people to ensure the quality of care they receive is of a high standard and that the placement continues to meet their needs. One foster carer comments, 'My supervising social worker will visit the child, enquiring how things are going and if there are any problems. If so, they will try to solve them with the help of other professionals, and you the foster carer.'

Children and young people receive very personalised care. There are clear placement objectives in place and staff and foster carers are highly focused on meeting children and young people's identified needs. Staff thoroughly and continually explore issues of issues of equality and diversity within placements and how any shortfalls are to be met. Foster carers receive excellent support to promote children and young people's social and emotional development and they are regularly assisted by other professionals such as the clinical psychologist. Children and young people enjoy a good choice of meals that meet religious and cultural requirements as well as known preferences. Children and young people experience no difficulty in purchasing clothes or personal requisites and their allowances are agreed at the placement start.

Children and young people enjoy contact with family and friends once it is established that it is safe for them to do so. The fostering service makes it clear to foster carers that it expects that contact arrangements are adhered to. These arrangements are often complex and intricate. Foster carers receive valuable training that prepares them for difficulties in managing contact. The fostering service ensures that where necessary, financial and practical support is also made available. Staff supervisory visits routinely explore issues around contact. Where contact with individuals is prohibited, this is clearly documented on file and highlighted with foster carers. Staff of the fostering service and foster carers regularly communicate with other departmental personnel with regards to the impact of contact on children and young people. This is to ensure in making arrangements for contact that the needs of children and young people remain paramount.

The fostering service prepares children, young people and foster carers well for new placements. The service has clear written procedures in place which are well understood by foster carers. Staff ensure that where placements are planned, that careful consideration is given to the introductory process, taking into account the needs of children and young people. Such planning and preparation acts to enhance the success of placement starts and encourages the sustainability of placements. Children and young people clearly benefit from this. Staff share key information available about children and young people with the identified foster carer and there is effective communication and coordination between the fostering service and other departmental teams to assist the process. Young people leaving care receive good support and many continue to receive practical and emotional support from their former carers. Where required, this is supported by the fostering team and there are formal systems in place to do so.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

Young people leaving local authority care are well prepared for independent life. They receive good support from the fostering service and the semi-independent outreach team to make this transition. Foster carers receive good guidance and training to work effectively with young people to develop independence and practical skills. Parent and baby placements provide young people with key skills to care for their children safely. The Horizons project also provides a wide range of support, particularly around skills development, tenancy management and exploring emotional support issues. The fostering service has good systems in place to help young people remain living with their foster carers once they have left local authority care if they so wish. One foster carer comments, 'I also support my foster daughter (no longer in care) with her two young children by allowing them to come 'home' almost every weekend.' Such decisions are well planned and coordinated, facilitating young people's continuity of quality care.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

Overall, the fostering service has outstanding arrangements in place for supporting children and young people, foster carers and staff. The service is effectively and efficiently managed. The Statement of Purpose clearly defines the services provided to all children and young people and it details the support available for the foster carers. The service has developed a guide for young people, but has failed to make available information about the service that is easily accessed by younger children.

The promotion of equality and diversity is excellent. Staff and foster carers attend equality and diversity training. One foster carer comments, 'Ealing fostering provides many courses about ethnicity and disability. We have a lot of carers that are from many different ethnic backgrounds, so it's nice to meet them and find out about their cultures.' The local authority's policies and procedures reflect an understanding of ethnicity, culture and issues of diversity, and procedures and practice are underpinned by this awareness. The fostering agency provides a personalised service to meet the specific individual needs of children and young people that considers all aspects of diversity. Staff are recruited from various ethnic groups and demonstrate a very good understanding of working within an anti-discriminatory framework.

The fostering service robustly and effectively recruits, assesses and supports foster carers who are then able to meet the needs of looked after children. The fostering service has an effective strategy to ensure the recruitment demands of the service are met. Currently the fostering service's recruitment strategy includes the targeting of carers for disabled children, mother and baby placements, teenage placements and potential foster carers from the gay and lesbian community. Prospective foster carers are treated fairly and all enquiries are dealt with promptly and efficiently. The

fostering service provides relevant, high quality preparation training and prospective foster carers are clear about the service's assessment process. Staff ensure that all necessary checks, including Criminal Record Bureau checks are consistently completed to confirm potential foster carers are suitable to work with children.

Foster carer assessment reports are comprehensive, relevant and all key issues are thoroughly explored during this process. The service has effective monitoring systems in place to ensure the quality of assessment reports remains high. These include, for example 'second opinion' home visits by managers to applicants following the completion of assessment reports. The review of foster carers' approval is managed by an external agency which ensures the reviewing process is sufficiently independent of the fostering service. The reviewing process is effective and comprehensive, facilitating informed decision making about the continued suitability of carers to foster. Areas of concern are appropriately explored, both during the reviewing process and as they arise. A child's social worker comments: 'I can confidently state that foster carers are providing excellent care and are able to focus on individual needs of children, are aware of child protection issues, procedures and their role.'

The service's fostering panel is effective, efficient and well managed with a strong leadership via the chairperson. There are clear written procedures in place that support practice. The fostering panel is orderly, democratically conducted and clear in its deliberation with regards to recommendations. Panel meetings are quorate and members of the central list have extensive experience in their respective field of expertise. The fostering panel has a clear and effective quality assurance role and has influence in a wider context within the fostering service, such as policy development. Panel meeting minutes are comprehensive and accurate, decision making about approval or re-approval of foster carers is timely and appropriate. Panel members have access to relevant training opportunities.

Children and young people benefit from the service's clear policies, procedures and practice that facilitate appropriate matching between foster carers and those seeking foster care placements. Staff have an excellent working relationship with commissioners and the access to resources team who manage placement referrals. There is effective communication between all parties, and placement objectives are promptly identified. This acts to enhance the success of the matching process and placement sustainability. Where there is not an exact match, the service explicitly highlights how placements are to be supported to ensure identified needs are met. For example, in the event of children and young people being placed in transracial placements, an assessment of need is completed. Staff and foster carers develop strategies to ensure placements can meet all identified needs. These strategies often include pairing an experienced foster carers with another to offer support and help bridge gaps.

Managers of the fostering service are appropriately experienced and qualified and their roles and responsibilities are well understood by all parties. The leadership of the service is very strong and this has a very positive impact on outcomes for looked after children. The fostering service is financially viable and current strategic plans

indicate the continuing growth of the service.

The organisation has a recruitment policy and procedures are in place. The human resources department of the local authority carries out relevant checks on fostering households, staff and persons on the central list. This is necessary to protect children and young people from potential abuse. Recent changes to the service's vetting systems have resulted in improved monitoring of required checks.

Foster carers receive extensive and superior training and development opportunities to assist them to offer quality care to children and young people. All new foster carers receive an induction and all foster carers are supported to achieve the Children's Workforce Development Council training. To date, all approved foster carers have completed this training, which is a significant achievement of the service. Children and young people benefit from high quality training available to foster carers that ensures their knowledge and skills base remains current and promotes safe practice. Staff regularly review the individual development needs of foster carers and these feature consistently in foster carers' annual reviews. The fostering service's newly developed training programme for foster carers is extensive in subject matter, dynamic and relevant to the fostering task. The service makes good use of the expertise of both internal and external trainers. Foster carers are appreciative and motivated by the fostering service's clear investment in their learning and development.

Foster carers are clear that they feel the support and supervision they receive from staff is outstanding. This is another clear area of strength of the service. One foster carer commented: 'You can't fault them!' The fostering service has an effective out-of-hours system; staff are accessible and approachable for support and advice during unsociable hours. The service facilitates peer support and membership of foster care associations to further support the efforts of its foster carers. Each foster care household is allocated a staff member to work with them, and staff conduct annual unannounced home visits. Foster carers have access to the service's foster care handbook, which contains key policies and procedures. Kinship carers have access to a handbook specifically designed to meet the needs of family and friends foster carers. Current and prospective foster carers receive clear information about the agency's complaints procedure, and there are robust mechanisms in place to monitor expressions of dissatisfaction.

The service has clear and effective policies in place that address the management of allegations. Staff and foster carers receive useful training in the management of allegations and child protection issues in general. The borough's Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) is very much involved in the safeguarding aspect of the fostering service and is available to offer advice and guidance to staff of the team. The LADO also periodically facilitates relevant training. The service has sound monitoring systems in place to review all known allegations. Staff manage allegations against foster carers appropriately and sensitively, ensuring the safety of children and young people is at the forefront of decision making. Foster carers receive clear written guidance about support available in the event of an allegation being made. Excellent information and advice are made available during any investigation.

The fostering service has an excellent, resourceful learning and development programme for staff that addresses their individual development needs. Staff are encouraged to pursue professional and personal learning opportunities. Supervision and support are readily available and highly valued. Induction training is available for all those on the service's central list. Social work staff are appropriately qualified and experienced in childcare, child protection and fostering. Unqualified social work staff are appropriately supervised by experienced social workers. Staff appraisals are conducted on an annual basis. All staff are highly committed and motivated to meet the needs of children and young people. One member of the fostering team commented, 'We don't just work well together, we care about each other. We're like a family.'

Managers of the organisation comprehensively monitor and control the functioning of the fostering service. There is a clear and effective management structure with excellent lines of communication. There are good financial procedures and keen attention has been paid to the impact of new fostering legislation. Managers complete periodic reviews and reports on many aspects of the service including complaints, allegations against foster carers and issues of safeguarding. The service ensures there is regular review of policies and procedures, and managers have a good overview of the challenges of the service and how these are to be addressed.

Staff generally maintain good records of placement activity on individual case files. However, some information was not consistent with records seen in differing volumes for the same individual. Some entries were not dated and some documents, such as the foster care agreement, are in need of revision. The fostering service ensures that written information is kept confidential and electronic recording systems are secure. There are robust administrative and information technology systems to support the fostering service achieve its stated aims. Relevant records are shared with involved professionals to ensure all parties are aware of placement progress and issues. Staff ensure that appropriate notifications of events are made to relevant bodies as required. The premises in use by the fostering service are suitable for meeting the aims of the service.

Payments to foster carers are fair and paid in a timely fashion. The rates of foster carers' allowances have recently increased, making allowances more competitive than in the past. Foster carers have access to financial advice, and the fostering service has clear effective financial procedures and systems. There are sensible financial arrangements to promote the accommodation and support of young people who are over the age of 18 years living with foster carers.

The service has a well-established, dedicated team that is responsible for the recruitment, assessment and support of kinship foster carers. The operation of the kinship team is guided by clear policies, and decision making is based on the needs of children and young people. Staff consistently complete comprehensive assessments and the assessment of temporarily approved kinship foster carers is conducted promptly. Team members and other departmental services share a strong and effective collaborative working relationship to ensure carers have the capacity to

provide a safe and high standard of care.

The fostering service has made significant investment in the support of its family and friends foster carers. This acts to offer sound support and encourage placement success and longevity. Kinship carers receive financial and practical support as required and useful information is made available to them. For example, the fostering service provides family and friends foster carers with a handbook specifically tailored to meet their needs. In addition to generic foster care training, kinship foster carers also have access to specific kinship training. They also benefit from a dedicated support group. The fostering service's kinship team excels in offering relevant, supportive services to family and friends foster carers. As a result, kinship placements are well sustained and regularly result in legally secure, permanent placements.

Children and young people are cared for in line with their care and placement plans. The fostering service's placement planning and reviewing systems are consistent, robust and well coordinated. Children and young people proactively participate in these processes and are supported to share their views and opinions. This acts to ensure that all parties are involved in the decision-making process and results in successful, sustained foster care placements, to the clear benefit of children and young people.

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):

- develop a children's guide that is readily accessible to young children. All children's guides to include the contact details of Ofsted (NMS 16.4)
- ensure that entries in records are clear, signed and dated. (NMS 26.5)