

# Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council Fostering Service

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

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<b>Date of last inspection</b>	16/11/2007

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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

This local authority fostering service provides care for children and young people who are looked after by the local authority. The fostering service offers a number of different fostering arrangements which include emergency, short and long term, permanence, respite, and care with family and friends.

### Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This is a well managed service. Staff are suitably qualified and experienced. There is a clear recruitment strategy and robust arrangements for assessing, approving and training foster carers, including friends and family carers. These systems ensure that carers are suitable and that they have the knowledge and skills they need to care for young people. Managers and staff strive continuously to improve the service and effective monitoring systems ensure that issues are identified and acted upon.

Arrangements for the supervision and support of carers are robust and the majority of carers reported that they are supported very well by their supervising social worker and the service generally. One carer said about their experience of being a foster carer for this authority, 'It's been the best two-and-a-half years of my life'.

The service works effectively with other agencies to promote good outcomes for young people. Their health needs are met and they are supported to maintain healthy lifestyles. Education is actively supported and promoted. This has resulted in increased levels of attainment overall and an increase in the numbers of young people moving on to further and higher education. Young people have access to a range of leisure activities and they are encouraged to pursue their individual interests. There are effective arrangements in place to ensure that young people are safeguarded. They enjoy good relationships with carers and report that they feel safe and well cared.

Two recommendations have been made at this inspection. These relate to the foster panel minutes and the information that is provided to young people about foster carers.

### Improvements since the last inspection

A number of recommendations were made at the last inspection. These have all been fully addressed demonstrating the commitment of managers to the continuous improvement of the service.

The fostering panel is now appropriately constituted and works effectively to ensure that suitable carers are recommended for approval. The panel also now provides a robust quality assurance function within the service making recommendations to managers to improve practice. The views of foster carers are noted at their annual reviews and all first reviews of carers are now presented to the fostering panel. This means that there is an effective system for monitoring carers' ongoing suitability to foster.

Thorough checks are now undertaken on all prospective carers and staff. Information from the Criminal Records Bureau is maintained in a manner that complies with the requirements of that agency.

The young person's guide to the service has been produced in consultation with young people. It provides clear information about foster care generally as well as about this particular service. Young people understand the complaints' process and are confident about using it. They also understand that they can read the information that is kept about them. This means that they have access to a detailed record of their history and their time in care.

The authority has developed a robust system for approving friends and family carers that ensures that they are assessed as suitable and safe carers for young people. They are paid, trained and supervised in the same way as all other foster carers, ensuring equality of support.

The system for paying short breaks carers has been reviewed and these carers reported that they receive their payments in a timely way.

### **Helping children to be healthy**

The provision is good.

Young people's primary health care needs are well met and specialist services are available for them as and when required. Foster carers receive a broad range of training about health matters in order to support them in their care of young people. This includes additional training for carers who look after young people with more complex needs. Carers clearly understand their responsibility to help young people to develop and sustain a healthy lifestyle. They make sure that young people in their care are registered with primary health services and they act as role models for them on such issues as healthy eating and smoking. All of the young people who contributed to this inspection reported that their carers support them to be healthy. One young person said, 'We live healthily. My foster carer cooks everything from scratch!'

There are good health monitoring systems in the fostering service and the wider authority. For example, each young person has a detailed health action plan that is regularly reviewed and carers submit monthly surveys to the fostering team that identify health issues. These are closely monitored by the fostering service manager and action is taken on any issue that is identified. These arrangements enable

managers and staff to have a good oversight of the health of children and young people who are fostered and to ensure that they remain healthy. The systems in the service itself are underpinned by good partnership arrangements and effective working relationships with health agencies. For example, each young person has a named designated nurse who takes responsibility for such things as annual health assessments. Nurses are also able to support young people's prompt access to any additional health resource they need.

Foster carers are trained in health and safety matters. Supervising social workers undertake an initial health and safety check on all foster carer households, including a risk assessment on pets. Risk assessments are reviewed and on an annual basis. These checks ensure that appropriate standards are maintained and that children and young people benefit from living in a safe, comfortable and well maintained environment.

### **Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe**

The provision is good.

The fostering service ensures that young people are effectively safeguarded. All of the young people who contributed to the inspection said that they feel well cared for and safe. Many made positive comments about their carers. One young person said, 'I always feel safe because they look after me very well' and another young person commented, 'I can go to my carer about anything'. Young people also report that they know who they can approach if they want to make a complaint and would feel confident about doing so.

Foster carers are trained in safe care during their assessment and induction. This gives them a good understanding of issues that may affect the safety and well being of the young people they look after. All carers develop a safe care policy for their own home which is individualised to reflect the needs of the young people in their care. These plans are reviewed with supervising social workers and they contribute to ensuring that the safety and welfare of young people is promoted in their foster home. Carers have a good understanding of the local authority's safeguarding procedure and know how to report concerns in order to keep young people safe. Young people rarely go missing and if they do, there are robust systems in place to support their prompt and safe return. Recruitment and vetting procedures are thorough and ensure that all carers and staff are assessed as suitable. These arrangements contribute to maintaining the safety of young people.

### **Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do**

The provision is good.

Young people report that they enjoy good relationships with their carers. They say that they are happy in their placement and feel well cared for. This is evident from the positive comments they make, 'My carers don't treat us like foster children they treat us like their own', and, 'My foster parents help me. They always listen to me'.

Young people enjoy taking part in a range of activities and groups that enable them to develop their individual interests and their friendships in their local community. A number of young people spoke enthusiastically about a specific project run by the authority. This twelve week personal development programme enables them to take part in activities, have fun and also to learn new skills. One young person said, 'It's really the best - you get to do a load of things, learn a lot and make friends'. Young people also enjoy the annual presentation that the authority organises to recognise their achievements.

Education is promoted well by the fostering service and the wider local authority and young people benefit from the support they are given by carers. Rates of exclusion are low and levels of attainment for young people are good overall and continuing to improve. There is a dedicated education support team that provides training for carers generally and specific support for individual carers and young people. The authority has developed a number of initiatives to promote literacy and numeracy. Workers from the education support team report that these have been received very well by carers. One commented that carers are, 'dedicated and fully committed to supporting young people with their education and ensuring that they have aspirations for their future'. Young people of post-statutory school age are well supported to engage in work and further education. There has been a year-on-year rise in the numbers of young people leaving care who are attending university. This has been underpinned by the authority's commitment to enabling young people to remain with their foster carers after they reach 18.

### **Helping children make a positive contribution**

The provision is good.

The arrangements that the authority has put in place for consulting with young people enable them to make a real contribution to the development of the fostering service and other services in the authority. Young people feel that their views really matter and can identify a number of things that have changed as a result of consultation. For example, they report that they have been instrumental in ensuring that the scheme of delegation and decision making for carers has been reviewed and that all carers, staff and young people are being given this information. They have also contributed to the development of new consultation forms to ensure that these capture fully the views of young people who are looked after. At an individual level, young people confirm that they are fully involved in the decisions that are made about their own care and that they contribute to their carer's reviews.

Young people benefit from the individualised care they are given by their foster carers. Social workers make sure that carers have good information about the young people they look after. This enables carers to help young people to develop an understanding of their identity and history and the reasons why they are in foster care. Carers encourage young people to keep mementoes so they have memories to take with them when they move on. A number of carers reported that young people who have been in their care have kept in touch with them as adults.

Foster carers have a good understanding of the importance to young people of maintaining positive contact with family and friends. Social workers make sure that contact arrangements are clearly defined in the young person's placement plan. Carers provide practical and emotional support to young people to make sure that contact is maintained in line with these plans. These arrangements enable young people to keep in touch with individuals who are important to them and promote their sense of identity.

Wherever possible placements are planned and social workers provide young people with information about their prospective carers and placements. However, a number of young people said that they had not been any given information and that this would have been helpful to them. The service is currently working with carers to produce pen pictures of their families that can be made available to young people, but this is not yet available.

### **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is good.

Young people receive the support, advice and guidance they need to prepare for adulthood from foster carers who are appropriately trained to support them through transitions.

From the age of 14 years, young people are supported by a dedicated young person's team. They have up-to-date pathway plans that are kept under review and reflect their current needs. Young people are fully consulted about their pathway plans and carers contribute to them. Young people themselves say that carers talk to them about their future and encourage them to pursue their education so that they have improved choices in later life. They also say that carers help them to learn to be independent in the home. Young people are particularly enthusiastic about the support they receive from the employability workers at the job club. They say that staff help them to think about possible future careers and plan how to apply for work. The success of the way the authority supports young people into adulthood is reflected in the fact that almost all the young people over the age of 16 who are looked after, are actively engaged with work or further and higher education.

### **Organisation**

The organisation is good.

This is a well managed service. There is a clear management structure and good leadership across the service. In particular, the fostering manager is held in high regard by workers in the fostering team and by professionals in other parts of the authority. There are robust arrangements for monitoring that are effective in identifying trends and patterns in the service and there is a detailed development plan.

Well trained and qualified social work staff, who have a clear understanding of their



role, support and supervise carers well. Staff report that they are in turn supported very well by their managers and that their training opportunities are good. All of the members of the fostering team are enthusiastic about their work and staff morale is very good. The overwhelming majority of carers who contributed to this inspection spoke highly about the level of support they receive from the service. Comments included, 'My supervising social worker is brilliant', and, 'I am completely satisfied with the service over the past 10 years. Could not imagine wanting to change'.

The fostering service has a clear recruitment strategy that is underpinned by a good knowledge of the needs in the local area. The strategy is kept under close review to ensure that it remains appropriate. There has been a steady increase overall in the number of carers recruited to the service. The authority commissions foster placements from independent fostering agencies to meet specific needs. Currently only a small minority of young people are placed with foster carers from independent agencies.

The arrangements for the assessment and approval of all carers, including friends and family, are robust. This ensures that all carers who are approved are suitable. The foster panel is appropriately constituted and works effectively. There is a central list made up of individuals from diverse backgrounds and with a range of skills. The panel has good access to legal and medical expertise. The panel also provides a clear quality assurance function within the service. Panel members have regular training to enable them to keep their knowledge and skills up to date and there appropriate arrangements in place for appraising the performance of panel members and the panel chair. Panel minutes are produced in a timely way, but they are often very lengthy. This can make it difficult to follow the reasoning in the discussion that has taken place. The panel chair and fostering service manager have recognised this issue and are taking steps to address it. The agency decision maker is very thorough and ensures that prompt decisions are made on recommendations from panel and that these are conveyed in a timely way to carers.

Foster carers undertake a core programme of training during their induction in order to develop their knowledge and skills. They are also required to complete the Children's Workforce Development Council training for foster carers. The overwhelming majority of carers have completed this, including friends and family carers. Generally, carers feel that training opportunities are good and that training is relevant to their needs. Foster carers comment that the payment structure is clear and that payments are paid in a timely way. Friends and family carers are paid at the same rate as other carers and have access to the same training. In addition, their specific needs in relation to their role are recognised and additional training is made available to accommodate those needs. Friends and family carers who contributed to the inspection commented very positively on their experience of being approved and supported by the fostering service.

Information about the aims and objectives of the service is detailed in the Statement of Purpose. This document is kept under review to ensure that it accurately reflects current practice. The young person's guide to the service has been produced in consultation with young people themselves. It gives young people clear information

about fostering and about their rights in care. The service is currently developing the guide in different formats for young people with additional needs.

The service maintains detailed information about young people that contributes to the understanding of a young person's life. All records are stored securely to protect confidentiality. The offices used by the fostering service are also secure. They are suitably located and appropriate for the needs of the service.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Policies and procedures reflect the authority's commitment to anti-discriminatory practice and to ensuring equality of opportunity for young people, carers and staff. Staff, carers and panel members attend training in equality and diversity. Young people are valued and treated as individuals and social workers work closely with young people and carers to ensure that young people's specific needs are clearly identified and met.

## **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, unless an emergency placement makes it impossible, all children are given information about the foster carer before arrival, and any information (including where appropriate, photographic information) they need or reasonably request about the placement, in a format appropriate to their age and understanding (NMS 11.3)
- ensure that panel minutes are clear about matters discussed and the reasoning behind recommendations. (Volume 4, statutory guidance, paragraph 5.25)