

# London Borough of Tower Hamlets Fostering Team

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

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## Service information

### Brief description of the service

The London Borough of Tower Hamlet's Fostering service is a part of the children's resource service within the directorate of children, schools and families. Under the fostering umbrella there are three teams the fostering development, fostering recruitment and assessment and the children placement teams. The service manager also manages the permanency and adoption support team.

The structure of the fostering development, recruitment and assessment and resources teams comprises of one group manager, three team managers, three practice managers, three administrative officers, 23 social workers, one finance and information manager, and five finance and information officers.

The fostering service at the time of this inspection had 133 approved fostering households, supporting 150 children who were either in short or long-term care. Also 15 children placed with family and friends foster carers.

### The inspection judgements and what they mean

**Outstanding:** a service of exceptional quality that significantly exceeds minimum requirements

**Good:** a service of high quality that exceeds minimum requirements

**Adequate:** a service that only meets minimum requirements

**Inadequate:** a service that does not meet minimum requirements

## Overall effectiveness

The overall effectiveness is judged to be **good**.

The fostering service is effective. The service demonstrates a strong commitment to enhancing children's lives. There are an excellent range of wraparound services which positively impact on the personal development of each child. Children are making outstanding progress particularly in relation to their educational attainment, emotional well-being, social and independent living skills. All children are happy and extremely satisfied with the fostering service. The culture of empowerment helps children to maximise and achieve their full potential.

The large majority of children who are looked after by this Borough live with foster carers and benefit from stable placements. Statistically the Borough is on par with the national average for looked after children.

The fostering service has passionate and committed foster carers, strong leadership,

and an enthusiastic and experienced staff team ensuring excellent outcomes. Corporate parenting focuses on their holistic needs. All elements of the organisation, including children's social workers, fostering staff and foster carers are child centred. Foster carers receive extensive support which enables them to meet the demands of their role. The foster carers said training is, 'excellent, especially the fostering changes.' The service's involvement in a range of research studies demonstrates their wish to further improve outcomes for children. Children are able to influence decision making and there is significant promotion of equality and diversity.

The leadership and management teams are aware of the shortfalls. These include fully maintaining records and policies in relation to: foster carer's annual health and safety checks; staff appraisals; the panel and those for parents and children.

## Areas for improvement

### Recommendations

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

- ensure that foster carers actively safeguard and promote the welfare of foster children especially in relation to fire and e-safety (NMS 4.2)
- ensure that there are clear guidance in place for the arrangements made by the local authority for a parent and child as set out in The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 4: Fostering Services is followed (Volume 4, statutory guidance, paragraph 2.)
- ensure no business may be conducted by a fostering panel unless at least the following meet as the panel, either the person appointed to chair the panel or one of the vice chairs, one member who is a social worker who has at least three years' relevant post-qualifying experience, and three, or in the case of a fostering panel established under regulation 23(5) four, other members, and where the chair is not present and the vice chair who is present is not independent of the fostering service provider, at least one of the other panel members must be independent of the fostering service provider (Regulation 24.1)
- ensure the fostering service implements clear written policies and procedures in the recruitment to, and maintenance of, the central list of persons considered by them as to be suitable members of a fostering panel and on the constitution of fostering panels. This is with specific reference to ensuring the policies and procedures are in line with Regulation 24 (NMS 14.1)
- ensure all staff have their performance individually and formally appraised at least annually and, where they are working with children, this appraisal takes into account any views of children the service is providing for. (NMS 24.6)

### Outcomes for children and young people

Outcomes for children and young people are **outstanding**.

The outcomes for children are outstanding. Children thrive within nurturing environments which centre on their individuality. There are excellent mutually respectful relationships between children, foster carers and staff. Children reported exceptionally high levels of satisfaction with the fostering service. For example a child said, 'my foster carer treats me like a family member and they love me like a son.' Another said, 'they help me to make plans for the future and help me to shine.' Others rated their foster carers '10 out of 10'. Children enjoy being a part of the family and placements are relatively stable and disruption rates are low.

Children are supported to maximise their full potential. They are supported by a substantial range of services and interventions that focus on their individual needs. The organisation empowers children to develop exceptional life and social skills, which significantly increases their self-esteem and confidence. Children learn to make sense of their past and develop strong emotional resilience. This is linked to excellent life-story work which is undertaken by foster carers. Children said that their foster carers, 'helped me to change my life around', and, 'Foster carers listened and were interested in what and how I felt.'

Children's identities and culture are celebrated. Children said, 'I feel the borough really cares, the borough is for us', and, 'the borough is very good on diversity and promotes it well.' Young people gain an excellent understanding and appreciation of other backgrounds. Children readily engage in every aspect of their care. Their views are greatly valued; they proactively influence and shape the service. For example, they sit on interview panels, contribute to foster carers' training and challenge policy as part of the corporate parent steering group.

Children benefit from an excellent virtual school, which is meticulously focused on educational attainment.. Children achieve the best outcomes whether they live in or out of the borough. As a result children have gained the second highest results in GCSE 5A\*-C and the highest results in literacy at key stage 2 in Greater London.

Children commented on their aspirations being raised and that they were 'motivated to achieve'. They all had career plans these included for some going to Oxford University and gaining professional qualifications. They benefit from internships, information on external apprenticeships and general career advice.

Children are able to pursue their hobbies, interests and talents. They enjoy participating in community and leisure activities. They are offered a considerable range of opportunities and experiences. These include residential courses and international volunteering expeditions, which focus on their self-development. Children positively contribute to their local community and national affairs. They are part of the Youth Parliament and undertake projects with other Children in Care Councils. Children appreciate that their achievements are celebrated and find the award events 'very rewarding'.

Children receive excellent support for their health needs. Children are actively engaged in every aspect of their healthcare. They know why decisions are made and

understand how they have contributed to that decision. There are excellent links with therapeutic services; these include a physiotherapist and occupational therapist, psychologists, and speech and language therapists. Children are satisfied with the help and advice that foster carers give them.

Children lead healthy lifestyles. These include healthy option choices and advice from foster carers and other professionals, if needed. Children are encouraged to and do participate in exercise as part of their daily lifestyle. Children's health needs are identified through the looked after children's (LAC) health assessments. These focus on the needs of the child and any risks identified are quickly addressed with other professionals linked to the service.

Children are able to maintain valued contact with their families, friends and other significant people. The fostering service actively facilitates contact with families. Children benefit from being escorted to contact and having relatives visit the foster carer's home. Children receive support to communicate by email and the telephone. Children enjoy family life and sharing special events with their birth families. A good example is attending christenings and other meaningful events with their foster carers.

Children have access to independent support and advice. They know who to talk to if they have a problem or wish to complain. All complaints are generally dealt with before reaching the formal stage. Further support and advice can be accessed through the children in care council's or via the local authority's website.

Young people state they have a 'very good' leaving care service.. Young people receive a generous grant when moving into independent accommodation. They are able to stay with their foster carers past the age of 18. They receive the necessary support to achieve a successful tenancy, when they are suitably ready. Independent living skills are part of their daily routine. All of this support contributes towards a smooth transition into adult life.

## **Quality of service**

The quality of the service is **good**.

All those involved with the fostering service are generally very satisfied with the service they receive. For example, they agreed that the management team is strong and that communication between the fostering service and professionals has improved. This has strengthened the service's ability to meet the wide range of children and young people's needs.

Approved foster carers are integral members of the professional working team. The majority of foster carers have been caring for a number of years. They are an essential part of the recruitment of new foster carers through the mentoring scheme. Their opinions and views are taken into account and acted upon. Foster carers said that their support had improved, the change being spearheaded by the 'fostering change programme' which they all said was excellent. They also would like to see

this training as part of the recruitment programme for new carers. They felt they now understood their roles better and that the fostering service recognises the whole family; they value this.

The preparation and assessment of foster carers focuses on the needs of children. The recruitment strategy is aimed at attracting a wide range of carers from differing ethnic origins, to reflect the needs of children referred. Foster carers looking after children with disabilities say that they are well supported. Prospective carers develop an in-depth understanding of how important the balance is between fostered children and the needs of their fostering family. Fostering fortnight and open days detail the needs of the children; as a result, prospective carers are clear from the start what the role entails. A foster carer said, 'the service recognises fostering as the family unit.' The whole family is encouraged to take part in training and to attend support groups. One carer gave an example of how their family was trained to provide specialist care for a child. Therefore, they were able to support the child appropriately.

The fostering panel promotes safe, secure and stable placements. It acts as an additional safeguard for children because an experienced chair leads it and members have a mix of relevant expertise. The panel gives consideration to relevant issues, so as to enable good quality decisions regarding the approval of carers and in safeguarding children. It actively engages with the fostering service by carrying out a quality assurance function which has led to improvements in the assessments. Appraisals for members are completed yearly and training days are well attended. The assessment reports are robust, as are the minutes made of each meeting. The decision maker is fairly new to the role, but has a clear overview of the service. Foster carers and prospective carers are given the opportunity to attend and be heard at all panel meetings and most do. However, the panel policy and procedures have not been updated to reflect the current regulations.

The service's placement stability rate is on par with the national average. Stable placements are promoted by foster carers working effectively with the service. Therefore, the numbers of unplanned placement endings have decreased. The assessment of each child is comprehensively undertaken; therefore ensuring the correct match is made in line with needs. A dedicated on-call carers' team manage the emergencies. They are aware of the challenges and are therefore able to work with professionals to create a stable base. Foster carers spoken to were happy with this process.

Structured preparatory training effectively prepares fostering staff for their role. Vocational training is in progress and there is extensive provision to support foster carers to obtain their qualification. This includes mentoring and support with literacy and language. The provision of additional courses, workshops and e-learning opportunities further enhances their competency. Support is given to those carers whose first language is not English, and for those who are unable to attend training during the week.

Foster carers actively seek on-going development opportunities in order to meet any

gaps in their skills, knowledge and understanding. In relation to caring for individual children, carers can request specialist training and one-to-one tuition if needed. They are encouraged to achieve consistently in line with their potential; carers convey commitment and enthusiasm in this area of their work. All foster carers said that training was exceptional and that it has greatly improved over the years. The training program is produced yearly, therefore, carers can forward plan.

### **Safeguarding children and young people**

The service is **good** at keeping children and young people safe and feeling safe.

The service has good arrangements for safeguarding children. There are strong links with the Local Safeguarding Children Board. Foster carers' training covers all areas of child protection. They fully understand the potential impact of abuse on children, and how they are to protect them. Allegations against foster carers are low and investigations are thorough in line with the local safeguarding procedures. There have been no disciplinary action taken or referrals made to the Independent Safeguarding Authority since the last inspection. The impact of this has been that children's safety and welfare has been promoted; children say they feel and are safe. Foster carers who have been subject to an allegation or where there have been serious causes for concern are reviewed by the fostering panel as part of the overall safeguarding process.

The holistic approach to safeguarding ensures foster carers' initial and annual reviews focuses on how well they achieve this. Training and written guidance is provided for carers and updated information on safeguarding is provided for fostering staff. There has been one referral made to the Independent Review Mechanism (IRM). Relevant procedures are also available to address areas of concern and poor practice. The annual safeguarding review takes into account trends and patterns regarding all allegations. This then informs the training for carers. For example, records show that during the period of 2011 to 2012 the majority of serious concerns related to physical abuse.

The organisation endeavours to ensure unsuitable people do not work with children. Robust recruitment of staff, panel members and carers, protects children. For example, records showed that all of the necessary references and checks are completed, therefore ensuring that only suitable people are employed.

Children are protected by robust safeguarding practices and incidents of bullying are minimal. The service recognises that bullying is a universal problem and occurs across all races and cultures. Carers understand how to protect and keep children safe in all aspects of their life.

Robust practice minimises the number of times children go missing. Between 2011 to 2012 five children went missing a total of seven times is a reduction from the previous year. There is a clear overview about why incidents occur and each child has an appropriate risk management plan to ensure that they remain safe. Foster carers respond appropriately to a child on their return. They liaise with the police, to



ensure the ongoing safety of the child.

Unannounced visit and reviews are conducted once a year. Both visits take into account the child in placement, the fostering household, and any concern relating to health and safety. Foster carers produce their own fire and safe caring procedures. These include familiarising children with the emergency procedures. However, the fire and e-safety updates are not consistently reviewed, to ensure all areas of risk are suitably assessed and are known to all members of the household.

## **Leadership and management**

The leadership and management of the local authority fostering agency are **good**.

The service is effectively managed and staffed by people who have relevant qualifications, experience and knowledge. There is efficient administration. The management team monitor the delivery of the service and review the fostering service annually. The results of this review are used to drive improvements in the service.

Children appreciate the fostering service and state that, 'without my foster family I would not be the person I am'. There is a strong commitment from the council to ensure foster children are able to have a voice. Staff work in unison to ensure the best interests of children are widely promoted. The Statement of Purpose and children's guide efficiently outline what the service provides and what children can expect from it. The organisation's website also provides clear and comprehensive information about the service's aims and objectives.

The percentage of children looked after who are placed in foster care is on par with the national average, which is 74%. The majority of the preferred providers such as independent fostering agencies, overall effectiveness rating is good. There are good quality reviewing and monitoring systems for the preferred providers; this includes assessing reports from Ofsted and Pan London.

Children benefit from a service which is continually adapted to meet their needs. The Foster Carer Charter is being effectively implemented. The management monitors all areas of the service and are aware of the strengths and the areas requiring further development. Foster carers generally feel valued and part of the professional team working with the children. The majority said that they play a significant role, with staff, in planning for individual children and in the service development. They are rewarded for their support, work and care and this in turn makes them feel appreciated.

The management team consistently communicate high expectations to staff. Foster carers describe supervising social work staff as, 'fantastic'. Staff receive regular supervision and ongoing training that contributes to their professional competence. Performance appraisals inform the continuous development of foster carers, panel members and staff. In relation to the latter, annual staff appraisals have not been consistently undertaken.

There was only one recommendation from the last inspection, this related to expanding the diversity of the panel. The service continues to attract panel members from a range of backgrounds with a broad range of personal and professional experiences. The fostering service demonstrates a good capacity to further improve. There is a dynamic focus on achieving positive outcomes for children; foster carers and all staff work relentlessly to accomplish this shared goal.

At the time of inspection the procedures and arrangements for a parent and child to live together with foster carers were not available and some agency staff members were not aware of the document. However, the agency does have a comprehensive procedure that is now available to all staff.

## 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 to assess the effectiveness of the service and to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards.

The report details the main strengths, any areas for improvement, including any breaches of regulation, and any failure to meet national minimum standards. The judgements included in the report are made against the inspection framework and the evaluation schedule for local authority fostering agencies.