

London Borough of Hillingdon Fostering Service

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

Unique reference number	SC042828
Inspection date	28/09/2012
Inspector	Paul Clark
Type of inspection	Full

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Date of last inspection	29/09/2008

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Service information

Brief description of the service

This is a Local Authority Fostering Service operated by the London Borough of Hillingdon. The service is based at the Civic Centre in Uxbridge. Foster carers live throughout the Greater London area and many provide care to asylum seeking children and young people. The service has an approved number of family and friends as foster carers. There is also a respite-fostering scheme for children with disabilities within the authority. Placements are made by a separate team that is under the same overall management.

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 large majority of children and young people who are looked after by this council live with foster carers and benefit from stable placements. The young people report that they generally feel safe and are looked after in accordance with their individual care plans. Foster carers receive regular and appropriate training and supervision. Staff recruitment and vetting systems are generally thorough and the performance and delivery of the service is well monitored. The service has maintained an effective recruitment programme designed in part to address service shortfalls and this has been achieved. Children's health is well supported and educational attainment is higher than the national average for looked after children. Carers assessments are timely and of a good quality. There is good quality monitoring of the fostering service and much evidence of on-going service development.

There are some shortfalls in connection with the need to appoint independent visitors to children who have had no family contact for over 12 months; the need to ensure that younger children are supported in attending their review meetings; information in the children's guides; and correctly recording the manager's qualification in management. The senior management of children's services are aware of these shortfalls and plans are in place to further develop the fostering service accordingly.

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 children communicate their views on all aspects of their care and support (NMS 1.3)
- ensure that children have access to independent advice and support from adults who they can contact directly and in private about problems or concerns (NMS 1.5)
- ensure that the Children's Guide shows how a child can contact the Children's Rights Director and Ofsted (NMS 16.4)
- ascertain that the manager has a qualification in management at least at level 5 Diploma in Leadership for Health and Social Care and Children and Young People's Services. (NMS 17.2)

Outcomes for children and young people

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

Children and young people who live with foster carers in Hillingdon benefit from stable placements where there are fewer moves between placements than comparable authorities. There are few unplanned endings. There are good arrangements in place to consult children about their care and to listen to their wishes and feelings. Although young people are generally invited to attend the review meetings of their care, younger looked after children do not always attend these reviews. Instead, they complete a consultation form together with their social worker and this is presented to the review meeting. Although young people do receive written notification informing them of their review dates, these notifications do not advise them that they may have an advocate with them at the review. Neither does it give them the contact details of the advocacy service.

The authority previously had a service level agreement with an advocacy service to which children could go to for advice and support. This service is now provided in-house. Young people say they have good support from their carers and social workers, or there is a participation worker with whom they can share their views. There is also a Children in Care Council to whom they may present concerns. All of these built-in resources mean that children have good avenues of support while they are being looked after. Heathrow Airport is within Hillingdon's boundary and as a result a high number of children who are unaccompanied asylum seekers are received. Several unaccompanied young people have not had family contact for over 12 months and no independent visitor arrangements put in place.

Most children and young people say they are comfortable in their foster homes and

are treated as part of their fostering family. Children say they have the information they need about their foster carers. Carers construct written personal profiles about themselves and their households which help children in making decisions about their choice of placement.

The authority has a short-breaks scheme for children who have disabilities which is independent of the fostering service. There are also a number of mainstream fostering households who are skilled and well trained in caring for children with disabilities, ensuring that disabled children who are fostered have a good level of care.

Children and young people are supported in having a knowledge and understanding of their background. Social workers in the team construct high quality placement books and memory boxes (life story work); a foster carer who has been trained in life story work cascades this skill to other carers. Case histories on young people are comprehensive and clearly written and these give carers the detail of children's backgrounds.

Young people's health is well promoted by the provision of a range of services. A looked after children's nurse carries out a health assessment of each child placed and provides this in written form to carers. This is updated annually and presented to the child's review meeting. The nurse ensures that carers register children with a general practitioner, dentist and optician and that routine checks and immunisations are carried out. Children benefit from the services of a clinical psychologist who is attached to the fostering team and who will undertake direct work with children and offer a consultancy service to carers. The clinical psychologist also leads clinical review meetings of the fostering team. Children are referred to the local Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) teams when necessary.

Children receive good support with their educational progress. This is provided by a Virtual School comprised of a headteacher and four educational officers (currently two vacancies). The school sets up an initial personal education plan within seven days for each child entering foster care and this plan is appropriately reviewed. All looked after children in foster care have educational arrangements in place. There are few school exclusions and little absenteeism. The authority has a system in place for measuring children's educational progress. Educational attainment in Hillingdon is better than the national average for looked after children. Several looked after children have achieved university places in the past year. Pathway plans are in place for those young people of the appropriate age.

Quality of service

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

The service generally recruits carers who will meet the needs of looked after children. However, between 2010/11 there were two siblings groups for whom the plan was for them to be fostered together who were not able to be fostered together. This was because of a lack of available carers who could take larger sibling

groups. Since this time the authority have put extensive recruitment drives in place to address this. Of the 12 fostering households approved between September 2011/2012, nine were approved which could take more than two children. This action will avoid the need to separate sibling groups and will help children to have effective family links and help to maintain their sense of identity. Identifying and positively responding to service shortfalls demonstrates a good commitment to service development in meeting the best needs of children.

The assessment and preparation process for carers is thorough and informative and several carers commented that this was of benefit later when they were approved to care for children. The assessment process is always completed within the recommended timescale. Foster carers' assessments are of a good quality. Minutes of panel meetings record clearly the detail of the discussions held and these show that consideration of approval is given due rigour. The fostering panel is properly constituted and there are clear policies and procedures and a central list of members in accordance with regulations. Panel members undertake an annual personal development profile which identifies their on-going training and development needs

The levels of supervision that carers report indicates that it is regular and appropriate, as is the training and support that they receive. Placing social workers are provided with supervising social worker's summaries of the daily and weekly logs received from carers. Carers are provided with free membership of an organisation that gives them personal advice and guidance about fostering which enhances their fostering task. Although some foster carers from a white UK background said that they were caring for young people from a black or mixed race parentage background and vice versa, the service now actively recruits carers from minority ethnic communities and these carers mainly reflect the composition of the council's looked after child population; this ensures that children are mainly placed in homes which reflect their birth culture.

All carers have to undertake the Children's Workforce Development Council's training within the first year of approval. They receive on-going training in all areas of core skills and state that they are able to access any further and specific training required which may be specific to the needs of an individual young person. Carers always attend children's reviews and contribute to children's on-going care plans.

Safeguarding children and young people

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

Looked after children and young people comment that they feel safe, know how to complain and how to talk to people to express any concerns regarding their care. Children felt confident that any concerns or bullying incidents reported would be dealt with effectively either by raising them with their carers, the participation officer or the advocacy service. Complaints are investigated and responded to within appropriate timescales. Foster carers' training as part of their assessment includes a focus on safeguarding, safe caring and current child protection practice; this is refreshed over time and takes place before and after approval. Foster carers also

receive training on the effects of attachment and loss and birth trauma on children. This ensures that carers have a clear understanding of safeguarding and that they demonstrate an awareness of current practice and the impact of abuse on a child's development and future behaviours. There is a clear process in place for dealing with any allegations that children may raise about their carers or placements. This ensures that any allegations will be handled in a manner which is in the best interests of looked after children and foster carers. No such allegations have been made within the past 12 months.

In order to check that the care of young people is safe, unannounced visits to foster carers' homes take place more than once a year and there is a system to record this. Children are always seen alone by placing social workers and asked if they feel safe in placement. Concerns about foster carers' practice which is identified by supervising social workers, is shared with management and this can result in the reconsideration of the carers' approval. The recruitment and vetting of staff and carers is generally thorough and organised to ensure that staff appointed and carers approved are vetted correctly and are aware of their responsibilities to keep looked after children safe.

Foster carers are aware of their responsibilities to report when children go missing. There is a clear policy in place to describe necessary actions. The authority has established a clear protocol with the local police to identify the necessary action to follow should a child go missing. There have been few instances of children going missing within the past 12 months and those who did effectively returned to their foster care placement.

Leadership and management

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

Following service developments there has been a change of manager of the service. Ofsted have been formally advised in writing of these changes. The performance and delivery of the fostering service are well monitored and reported upon every three months to the senior management group, thus ensuring that the level of care that fostered children receive is constantly being monitored. There are also action plans in place which identify areas for development. The corporate parent body of the council is actively involved in the development of the fostering service. There is some evidence that children and young people are involved in this process which ensures that their voices are heard in developing the service.

In order to help to make sure looked after children's needs are known and practice is professionally applied, social work staff in the fostering service are appointed with relevant child protection knowledge, experience, qualifications and registration. There is evidence of an induction process for new staff and regular appraisals take place at least annually. Staff supervision and team meetings take place fortnightly and there are clinical review meetings conducted by the clinical psychologist. Social workers in the fostering service have access to a good level of on-going training provided by an in-house training section of the council. They are all

professionally qualified and are members of the General Social Care Council. The manager of the service is a professionally qualified social worker who is registered with the General Social Care Council and who has many years' experience in child care management. The manager's file does not clearly identify the management qualification held or have a copy of the award certificate. On-going staff training and supervision ensures that children receive good quality care from carers whose work is supervised by skilled professionals.

Foster carers say that they feel part of a professional team in working with and helping children and young people. Support group meetings and on-going training and information events are available for foster carers and this further ensures that children are cared for by an informed and professional service. The service maintains an out-of-hour's telephone line staffed by social workers in the fostering team. This is highly regarded by carers. The Statement of Purpose is comprehensive and informative and there are children's guides in place in different age-related formats. However, these do not clearly identify Ofsted's role and the contact details are incorrect. Also, they do not explicitly give the contact details of the Children's Rights Director.

Managers of the service have developed a good working relationship with other agencies including the police, education and health services to ensure that there is a joint approach when assessing and meeting the needs of looked after children.

The three recommendations made at the previous inspection have all been implemented.

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.