

# London Borough of Merton Fostering Services

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

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<b>Date of last inspection</b>	08/09/2008

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## Service information

### Brief description of the service

Merton Fostering Service is a local authority service that provides short and long-term foster placements for children and young people aged from birth to 18 years old. The day-to-day management of the service is the responsibility of the fostering team manager. The access to resources team (ART) undertaken the recruitment and assessment of prospective carers'.

Both teams involved in the fostering service work together. At present there are 44 approved foster carers and 84 children and young people placed with them.

### 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. Children and young people are able to make good progress in relation to their starting points across all aspects of their care and effective arrangements are in place to support this. Children and young people have positive views about their care and their relationships with foster carers.

Foster carers receive supervision and support and they were able to demonstrate a good understanding of children and young people's needs. Children and young people are actively engaged in plans that are made for them. They have been able to influence the service through the children in care council and other groups.

The fostering team is stable. They are all appropriately experienced and qualified. Foster carers maintain good working relationships with the service and support is provided to the whole fostering family.

The leaders and managers are committed to fostering. They have an insightful understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the service and have put in measures to improve it. Shortfalls identified during this inspection relate to monitoring undertaken by the fostering manager, training for foster carers and recruitment checks for panel members.

## 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 all foster carers receive training in positive care and control of children, including training in physical intervention for all ages. The behaviour policy should clearly set out how physical intervention should or not be used by a carer (NMS3.8)
- ensure that a record is kept of the recruitment and suitability checks which have been carried out for foster carers and those working (including as volunteers), for the fostering service. This relates specifically to the recruitment of panel members (NMS 19.3)
- ensure that support and training is made available to foster carers, including hard-to-reach carers, to assist them in meeting the specific needs of the children they are caring for or are expected to care for. This is in relation to refresher training courses and when concerns are raised with regards to standards of care (NMS20.8)
- ensure that the manager regularly monitors all records kept by the service to ensure compliance with the service's policies, to identify any concerns about specific incidents and to identify patterns and trends. Ensure that immediate action is taken to address any issues raised by this monitoring, this is in relation to case files (NMS 25.2)
- ensure that the management committee members receive written reports on the management, outcomes and financial state of the fostering service every 3 months;(a) monitor the management and outcomes of the services in order to satisfy themselves that the service is effective and is achieving good outcomes for children;(b) satisfy themselves that the provider is complying with the conditions of registration. (NMS 25.7).

### Outcomes for children and young people

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

Children and young people are supported to take risks that are proportionate to their age and understanding. They are able to make and sustain relationships with their friends and participate in sports and outdoor activities without excessive constraints, in accordance with appropriate risk assessments.

Children and young people enjoy contact with family and friends, when it is safe to do so. Contact arrangements for children and young people enable them to reinforce, sustain and create links with their birth families. Contact takes place in a safe environment and may be supervised so that it is constructive and safeguards

children and young people's welfare.

Children and young people's health needs are well met. A number of services are in place which promote their physical and emotional well-being. Foster carers have prompt and direct contact with health professionals, including a registered general nurse and a psychologist. The input of the psychologist has promoted placement stability as well as providing foster carers with insight on how to manage challenging behaviours effectively. Children and young people with specific health needs and/or disabilities enjoy specialist, individualised care which meets their overall health needs. Children and young people have access to additional health care checks to monitor whether they are meeting their developmental milestones, so that they can reach their full potential.

Children and young people have a good understanding of how to live healthy lifestyles. They are involved in leisure activities within their local community, which promotes their self-esteem as well as providing them with an enjoyable way of keeping good physical health.

Children and young people are supported to achieve to the best of their ability in respect of their education. Pre-school children have access to support that stimulates their learning through play. This ensures that they are not at a disadvantage when it is time for them to go to school. Children and young people's enjoy consistent school placements, as changes in school are minimised as far as reasonably practical. Young people are supported to attend education through to university. They are provided with support to fulfil their maximum educational potential and overcome any challenges that they may face. This includes their attendance at 'taster days' at further educational establishments and additional support in the classroom. Young people's school attendance, punctuality and exam results have steadily improved over the years. These matters are overseen by the virtual headteacher and remedial steps taken to address any barriers that are affecting children and young people's ability to achieve the highest educational standards that they possibly can.

Children and young people are actively involved in the running of the foster service and decision making process. They take part in the recruitment of potential foster carers because they have a good understanding of the needs of children in foster care. Young people express their views about the care that they receive through their involvement in the children in care council. Here, they can also contribute their views at strategic level and have been involved in reviewing literature that is being promoted within the fostering service.

Young people learn a wide range of life skills that will enable them to live successfully in the community. Formal planning from a young age provides them with more opportunity to develop essential life skills. Young people need to demonstrate that they have sufficient understanding of the practical, social and emotional impact of living alone. They are supported in this by their foster carers and by training sessions that are facilitated by the 14 Plus team. This input has led to positive outcomes in young people maintaining individual tenancies. Young people also have the option of remaining in their former fostering home under 'staying put'

arrangements. This offers a transition to independence similar to that which is experienced by most other young people.

## Quality of service

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

The recruitment and retention of foster carers is sufficient for the fostering service. The arrangements for the recruitment of foster carers are robust. Foster carers say that the assessment process is positive and they receive good induction, support and training. Experienced carers are involved in the initial training to enable applicants to have a good insight about foster care and other training provided. There is a clear and robust recruit strategy aimed at obtaining skilled foster carers who can provide specialised care to children with complex challenging needs, sibling groups and specific cultural needs. The introduction of the access to resources team has enabled the process of recruitment and assessment of foster carers to be completed within the service's timescale. Foster carers talk positively about the responsive, reliable support from the service. Experienced foster carers act as 'buddies' for new carers to offer additional support.

The matching process ensures that children and young people are placed with foster carers who have the skills and backgrounds to provide care that is unique to children's needs. Where this support is not fully met, additional support is provided by other professionals. This is regularly reviewed.

Information given to the foster carer about the child has improved. Some foster carers did say that they did not feel that all the necessary information about the child is always available at the beginning of a placement. However, within five days this is in place. The team manager and social workers all said this has improved. Foster carers understand that some placements, for example, emergency placements may result in limited information being available, but support is in place for the child.

Foster carers are positive about the quality of support they receive from supervising social workers. Most rate this as excellent too good. This is through regular supervision, which is always available. They are given the opportunity to undertake further on-going training, if they so wish. Foster carers all say they are supported by dedicated social workers and other professionals who put children and young people at the centre of what they do. One foster carer said 'I like working for Merton; the support is brilliant and I have made new friends. This statement was reiterated by other carers.

Approved foster carers are integral members of the professional working team. Their opinions and views are taken into account and acted upon. Foster carers said that their support has improved, the change being spearheaded by the team manager, who supports and enables them to understand their roles. They also made comments that the fostering service recognises and supports their whole family. There is also a fostering forum where carers can raise issues to be taken forward. Foster carers also receive newsletters to enable information to be shared effectively.

The training programme for foster carers covers most of the core training. Training can be tailored to the needs of the individual children and young people to support the carer. For example, training has been provided to carers who care for children with complex health needs or behavioural issues. However, positive care and control of children which includes physical intervention is not part of the training programme provided to all carers. Carers are also supported to access external training courses.

All fosters carers have or are working towards the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) training standards in foster care. New carers are expected to undertake the CWDC standards. . Training is discussed at the annual review, but refresher courses and follow-up training is not consistently managed.

The organisation has recently reviewed the fostering panel along with the adoption panel. This was completed through consultation and working alongside British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering. The panel was reformed as a joint pilot panel that is to be reviewed in January 2013. All panel members on the central list have a good range of experience and expertise to help them consider carers' approvals and relevant annual reviews. Cases are dealt with thoroughly and discussion is child-focused, with an emphasis on safeguarding and equality and diversity. The panel provides feedback to the agency decision maker, for example, if there are any quality assurance issues. Part of an applicant's assessment to become carers is that they are invited to attend the panel and are given the opportunity to present their views on the process. This is followed up in their annual reviews. However, personnel information pertaining to individuals' panel members' identification, qualifications and references was missing from some files.

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

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

Children and young people are protected by robust safeguarding practices and incidents of bullying are minimal. Foster carers understand the potential impact of abuse on children and young people. They are fully aware of the procedures to protect them and this is enhanced by the training they attend. The numbers of allegations against foster carers are low and investigations are thorough. Approvals are reviewed at panel. There have been six allegations made against foster carers since the beginning of 2012. The theme of the majority of allegations or complaints against foster carers relates to actions of physical intervention. Links with the Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) facilitate informal dialogue about any concerns the service may have, ensuring that children's interests are safeguarded. Training and written guidance is provided for foster carers and updated information on safeguarding is provided. However, following an allegation or complaint and where standards of care may have been a matter of concern, actions are then set. However, this practice is not consistently followed up with the carer. Therefore, it is unclear whether lessons have been learnt.

Complaints are generally dealt with before reaching the formal stage. The children's

guide includes contact numbers of other organisations, such as Ofsted. All children spoken said that if they have a complaint or a concern they would go to their foster carer or social worker first.

Robust practice minimises the number of times that children and young people go missing. Over a course of a year eight children and young people had gone missing a total of 15 occasions. The fostering service has a clear overview on why incidents occur and each child and young person has an appropriate risk management plan to ensure that they remain safe. Foster carers gave examples of how they respond to children and young person when they go missing or are absent without permission. Where the need is great, a charity working to support children and young people through trauma, loss and bereavement is used to support those children and young people who persistently go missing.

Recruitment and vetting of staff and foster carers is undertaken robustly. Records are held electronically or on paper files. The fostering panel follows up with social workers any outstanding concerns about foster carer suitability checks, to ensure that children are safeguarded. Unannounced visits to foster carers take place at least annually and also, whenever there are concerns about safety or safe care practice. These visits are recorded on foster carers' annual reviews, which enables the panel to monitor that they take place and are effective. As a result, children and young people are protected.

## **Leadership and management**

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

The fostering management team has an overview of the strengths and weakness of the service. However, this is not formulated through quarterly reports as required. This detracts from strategic oversight of the service. Similarly, this year, five complaints, allegations and standards of care issues were made against carers and were investigated by the service. Although, each concern was addressed and followed safeguarding guidance, there is little recorded evidence of what strategies had been put in place as a consequence.

The management team has developed various monitoring strategies and there is an emphasis on continuous development and learning. One of the areas identified for improvement related to case files. An audit was undertaken and an action plan address where improvement could be made. However, the monitoring of this has not been consistent, for example some case files did not have a robust chronological report of events such as exemptions, or if variation changes took place. The Statement of Purpose is comprehensive and provides well written information about the fostering service and the services it provides. The children's guide is produced in two formats and is very informative and age appropriate.

Reviews are timely and children and young people are seen regularly. Children's rights are actively promoted and children and young people are well supported by



various activities. There is clear evidence where children and young people have influenced and contributed to the development of the fostering service, mainly through the children in care council and various other groups. The corporate parenting committee is also committed to listening to the views of looked-after children and care leavers. They have produced an annual report which shows what has been achieved and where further improvements can be made.

The recommendations from the last inspection have been complied with. These were: to ensure that all carers have information on how to support all the children in their care and the payment structure for all carers is to be fair and comparable across the service.

The friends and family service is a small part of the service and carers are integrated into the fostering service.

The service has established the dedicated functions of recruitment and assessment in the access to resources team. The majority of looked-after children are placed within fostering. The access to resources team has improved the quality assurance of external commissioning, through the extensive investment in this service. The service has focused on continually improving on stability in placements both internal and externally.

Both teams involved in the fostering service work together to ensure a seamless transfer of cases and to ensure that good placement decisions are made. There is a clear strategy plan on recruitment. The current demand is for placements for teenagers with complex behavioural needs and sibling groups. The fostering service has maintained positive relationships within the teams and with external partners. There are positive links with other professionals and all staff spoken to said that having the teams located within the same building has improved communication.

Foster carers, children and young people are supported by a sufficient number of competent social work and administrative staff. Staff are appropriately experienced and qualified and any professional development is promoted by the service. Staff are supported appropriately by regular team meetings, individual supervision and appraisals. Staff spoken to were very clear on what has improved for children and young people and where improvements can be made to enhance the service.

## 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.