

London Borough of Lambeth Fostering

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

This is a local authority fostering service located in an inner city area, with a highly diverse and mobile population. The fostering service is part of the social care division of Lambeth children and young people's services. It is led by a head of service and includes: a recruitment team; a fostering assessment team; a fostering support team. The majority of looked after children are placed with foster carers provided by the independent sector, in neighbouring authorities. The provision of in-house carers has been growing.

The authority states its commitment to finding and supporting stable and secure foster care placements for children where the identified plan is fostering. The service aims to treat all parties with fairness and respect and to ensure that the services provided meet their diversified needs in relation to race, culture, ethnicity, language, disability, religion and sexuality.

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 **outstanding**.

This local authority provides an excellent service to children and young people, family and foster carers. Children and young people are kept safe by processes, systems and procedures that are routinely and vigorously reviewed by an experienced and dedicated staff and management team.

The outcomes for children and young people in foster care are excellent. Placement stability is very good with very few unplanned endings. Children and young people are healthy and enjoy taking part in a wide range of activities that promote their social and emotional development. They enjoy very good relationships with their carers and report that they are looked after very well. Children and young people make very good progress in education from their starting point on coming into care. Attendance levels are extremely high, which maximises their opportunity to achieve. Young people are very well supported in transition to adulthood.

Safeguarding procedures and service development plans are in place and are regularly updated. The leadership and management team is a key strength of the service with a positive and proactive approach towards consultation with young people. The fostering service welcomes and learns from regular external and internal evaluations of the service. A stable staff and management team are very committed and strongly motivated to improving the lives of looked after children.

The service has good relationships with other agencies to provide a joined-up approach to meeting children's safety, healthcare and educational needs. The strategic management structure and the co-location of inter-professional teams help to ensure effective professional links throughout children's services in Lambeth.

The service has strong, creative and inspirational leadership. There is robust monitoring in place across all aspects of the service. A development plan is implemented consistently to ensure continued improvements in service quality.

A number of recommendations are made as a result of this inspection. Recommendations made on this occasion do not directly impact on the outcomes and safety of children and young people. These are in relation to the timeliness of assessments and approval of foster carers, the recruitment of foster carers to meet the demands of the service, the proportionate approach to risk assessments, and the routine training in management and administration of medicines.

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 the service implements a proportionate approach to any risk assessment (NMS 4.5)
- ensure foster carers are trained in the management and administration of medication (NMS 6.10)
- ensure the local fostering service implements an effective strategy to ensure sufficient foster carers to be responsive to current and predicted future demands on the service. Planning for future demands covers the need for short breaks for disabled children (NMS 13.1)
- ensure the fostering panel makes its recommendations on the suitability of a prospective foster carer within eight months of receipt of the prospective foster carer's application to be assessed (NMS 14.4).

Outcomes for children and young people

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

The majority of children and young people who are looked after by the local authority, live with foster carers. Children and young people benefit from being placed with highly skilled and motivated carers who are carefully matched to meet their needs. When the local authority cannot identify in-house placements. Independent fostering agencies will be approached to provide placements for children and young people.

All children and young people attend educational establishments and attendance is high. Young people make good progress, from their starting points, in education, with active encouragement from their foster carers. Young people are achieving adequate results at GCSE level. There is very close liaison with schools across the authority, and the progress of young people is very closely monitored to ensure that they have the support they require to maximise their achievements. Managers and staff, both in the education and fostering services, have a very good knowledge of the young people who are looked after and there is a prompt response if young people experience difficulties. There are almost no exclusions, which means that young people are able to maximise their opportunity to achieve. Children and young people generally make excellent progress in education from their individual starting points.

The participation of children and young people in the decisions that are made about their own care and in the development of the service is exceptional. The authority has a Children in Care Council group for young people and are looking to develop a similar group for children. The current group is highly effective in giving young people a voice and ensuring children and young people are central to the decision making processes.

Children and young people benefit from valuable relationships with birth families and friends. Strong and healthy relationships between foster carers and children and young people ensures very few unplanned endings to placements. The excellent support that is provided to foster carers and young people themselves has also helped to sustain placements. This continuity of care supports young people's emotional development and in turn helps them to a positive self image and strong sense of identity.

Children and young people are fully supported to be healthy and develop a healthy lifestyle. Of particular note is the excellent work that has been done in relation to routine health screening. For example, almost all children and young people have had an annual health assessment, routine dental checks. However, it is to be noted that some children and young people are not receiving routine immunisations.

Children and young people understand about healthy lifestyles. They report that foster carers talk to them about how to stay healthy and make sure that they eat healthily and exercise. The local authority has provided foster carers with free leisure passes so that they, their families and the children they foster can access a range of facilities. Foster carers also seek out appropriate activities in the wider community which engage young people in pursuits that reflect their interests, talents and skills. Children and young people report that they take part in a wide variety of activities

that they enjoy, such as dance, art, football, swimming and skiing. Involvement in such activities helps young people to develop and sustain friendships, supports their emotional well-being and their general development and learning.

The health and well-being of children and young people is further promoted by excellent partnership working between the fostering service and a variety of agencies, such as the looked after children's nurse, substance misuse service and the children looked after adolescent mental health service (CLAMHS). These arrangements ensure that young people and foster carers have prompt access to highly effective advice and support to make sure that the physical and emotional health needs of young people are met. They provide a planned programme of intervention and support that is tailored to meet those identified needs. This service has been widely acclaimed as a success in the authority and is highly valued by foster carers, social workers, and managers.

Children and young people report that they feel very safe in their foster homes. There is little evidence that children and young people who are fostered engage in risk-taking behaviours. The service has developed a 'staying put' policy. This has meant that several young people over 18 remain with their foster carers and benefit from emotional stability, together with opportunities to acquire independent living skills. This helps them move to independence at their own pace, whilst they are supported to make the transition to adulthood in a more gradual way.

Quality of service

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

There are good recruitment and service development plans in place to ensure that children's and young people's needs can be met. Foster carers reflect the wide diversity of the local community. Managers and staff are aware of the difficulties in recruiting a range of carers, and have made a clear commitment to improving and developing the demands of the service. Notwithstanding the difficulty in recruitment, the service has been successful in recruiting a number of new carer households. This increase in the number of available carers has greatly improved the ability of the service to match children and young people to the most appropriate carer. This in turn has contributed to the stability of placements, thereby benefiting children and young people.

Foster carers are well prepared and trained to meet children and young people's diverse needs. The majority of carers have either completed the Children's Workforce Development Council's training standards programme or are completing it. When foster carers require specific skills to care for a particular young person, this training is provided. Nevertheless, whilst it was clear that all foster carers receive training in first aid, it was noted that foster carers were not routinely receiving training in the management and administration of medication.

The assessment of carers is rigorous and focuses on how carers are able to meet the needs of children. The majority of carers are being assessed and approved in a

timely manner. However, in some instances there was 'considerable drift' noted by panel in this process.

The fostering panel works extremely well. The authority's central list includes professionals and individuals with a range of experience, such as a social worker, a councillor, a representative from the CLAMHS team, a foster carer and a care leaver. This ensures that there is broad range of expertise and knowledge available. Panel members undertake a rigorous analysis of assessments and review reports and make very clear recommendations to the service about the suitability of carers. The panel also makes an excellent contribution to the improvement and development of the service through its quality assurance function. Fostering panel minutes provide a very clear and detailed overview of the discussions. Assessment reports and fostering panel minutes are closely scrutinised by the agency decision maker, which ensures that decisions are rigorous and safeguard children and young people.

There is a wide range of carers support meetings in place, together with regular supervision visits of a high standard. Carers are provided with free membership of The Fostering Network, an organisation which provides personal advice and guidance about fostering. Foster carers report that they are very satisfied with the level of support and guidance that they receive from the fostering service. This includes a robust out of hours service.

Matching for placements, particularly long-term placements, is very thorough. This is one of the service's strengths. Foster carers receive information on children prior to placement and introductions are able to take place. In the case of unplanned placements, information on children and placement planning take place soon after placement. Foster carers say they are given all the information held by the service on the needs of children, and any risk factors. Foster carers generally enjoy good relationships with the fostering service and report they are improving.

Safeguarding children and young people

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

There are highly effective arrangements in place which ensure that children and young people are safeguarded, their welfare is promoted and is central to the service. These include rigorous systems for checking the suitability of foster carers and staff, and effective training for carers and staff. The arrangements for supervising and supporting carers are excellent. Supervisory visits take place at least monthly and unannounced visits to foster carers take place more than the national minimum standards.

Children and young people are confident that they can report matters which worry them to either their carers or to the active advocacy service. Any complaints made are investigated and responded to promptly, within clear timescales. This ensures that concerns are taken seriously and responded to without delay. The service takes swift action to safeguard young people from bullying should these situations occur.

Children and young people are also supplied with an excellent level of information to advise them where they can go to get help in this matter.

Comprehensive care and placement plans ensure that foster carers have the information they need to safeguard and promote the welfare of the children in their care. A range of risk assessments are undertaken as part of the matching process to ensure that all possible areas of concern for children and carers are considered. However, some risk assessments were found not to be in place and some documents did not provide a depth of analysis. As a result some carers may not be equipped with all necessary information to understand the complexities and risk taking behaviour of some children and young people.

Staff recruitment and vetting is well organised and staff are aware of their responsibilities to prioritise the safety of looked after children in foster placements. The local authority fostering service has established policies and procedures, to employ staff, which adheres to practice guidelines regarding safer recruitment.

A detailed programme of preparation and post approval training for foster carers is in place with a strong focus on safe caring and safeguarding. This training makes sure that carers gain a good understanding of current safeguarding practice and the impact of neglect and abuse on a child and young person's behaviour and development. The local authority has a robust system for managing and reviewing allegations that is overseen by the head of safeguarding, who is also the agency decision maker. The fostering service manager is fully involved in the process. There are very few allegations against foster carers. Those that arise are responded to promptly and investigated thoroughly with a clear focus on the safety and well-being of children.

A safe care policy enables carers and social workers to plan for the individual needs of children and young people. All plans are reviewed regularly to keep them up to date and relevant to the needs of the individual child and the foster family. Managers and panel members further scrutinise all plans to ensure the safeguarding of children and young people is maximised.

Children and young people very rarely go missing from their foster placements. The very few who do are protected by highly effective partnership arrangements between the police, social work teams and other agencies.

Leadership and management

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

The service is exceptionally well managed, with a clear structure and lines of accountability. A permanent staff team are well supervised which ensures that their work is of a high quality. There are extremely robust and effective monitoring arrangements in place that enable excellent oversight of the work of the service.

Managers make very good use of current research and developments in fostering in order to inform future service developments. For example, the service manager is currently exploring issues around recruitment of male carers and carers for young people with diverse needs. All recommendations made at the last inspection have been fully addressed and there have been significant improvements in this service since that time. This has resulted in the outcomes for children and young people being greatly improved.

Ambitious action plans have resulted from a series of audits and evaluation exercises, which reveal areas where the fostering service needs to develop. The reports are always acted upon. At the same time, management is proactively responding to the recent changes and developments in foster care. Children and young people are also actively encouraged to get involved in the service development and have their views heard. For example young people leaving care are offered career and training opportunities within the council.

The Statement of Purpose is written clearly, frequently reviewed and clearly details the aims and objectives of the service. Some inaccuracies on the current statement of purpose were corrected at the point of inspection. A children's guide is accessible and inclusive for children of differing abilities.

The service manager provides regular reports on the performance of the service to the authority's corporate parenting group. The service works closely with other parts of the local authority and there are strong links with partner agencies. The views of children and young people are routinely sought and are central to the development of the service. There is a strong supportive culture that permeates the whole organisation. This inclusive approach gives staff, foster carers, children and young people ownership of improvements made by the service.

There is currently a full and permanent staff and management team. This enables the service to focus on delivering a quality service, recruiting and approving additional foster carers and demonstrating a clear commitment to the development of the service. The co-location of social work teams, specialist support services and the fostering service supports good information sharing and ensures that foster placements are very well supported.

Social work and administrative staff are well supported, regularly supervised and trained. There is an extensive induction process for new staff. This helps them to possess necessary skills in order to support and assess foster families, and to make sure that the needs of looked after children and young people are effectively considered. Appraisals of social workers take place annually. Actively involved managers of the service are professionally qualified and registered social work practitioners with several years' experience in fostering who hold the appropriate qualifications in management.

Foster carers are valued and feel valued as part of the team working with individual children and young people. They are fully involved in the care planning and reviewing process for the children in their care. They are also involved in service

development through a variety of means, such as the Foster Care Association and a range of support groups. The local authority has adopted the principles of the Foster Carer Charter and developed its own charter. This was done in close consultation with carers, children and young people and staff. The authority recognises and promotes the importance of the role of family and friends as carers and ensures that such placements are actively considered before a foster placement is sought.

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.