

London Borough of Hounslow Fostering Service

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

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Inspector	Karen Malcolm / Sandra Jacobs-Walls
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Service information

Brief description of the service

The London Borough of Hounslow Fostering Service is located at the civic centre. Foster placements are provided via in-house resources, and through private and voluntary providers. The service works in partnership with the Intake Teams, Children in Care Teams, Children in Care Permanence Team, Pathways Team, Social Work Team for Children with a Disability, the West Middlesex University Hospital Social Work Team, and Adoption & Permanence Team to ensure all children and young people looked after are safely and appropriately placed

The Fostering Service aims to work with birth families, and other professionals within and outside the Borough, to achieve the best possible outcomes for looked after children and young people in Hounslow. The service works in a child centred, multi-disciplinary and anti-discriminatory manner.

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. Outcomes for children and young people and quality of care are good, however, the leadership and management of the service is judge as adequate. This is primarily because the overall monitoring of the service has not been consistently completed. Children and young people are placed without avoidable delay with foster carers who can meet their needs, and with their siblings if appropriate. Quality support is provided to sustain placements. Children and young people make good progress in relation to their starting points across all aspects of their welfare and behavioural development and there are effective arrangements in place to support this. Children and young people have positive views about the quality of their care and their relationships with foster carers.

The fostering service is committed to valuing every child and improving their outcomes. Foster carers are passionate about providing the best possible care and they advocate for children and young people. The emphasis is placed upon keeping young people safe alongside providing them with opportunities for personal growth

and development. Consultation forums for young people and foster carers are improving and these ensure their voices are heard.

Foster carers receive effective supervision and support, and they demonstrate a good understanding of children and young people's needs. Children and young people are actively engaged in planning and they understand what is happening to them. They influence many areas of the fostering service's work.

Leaders and managers are committed to fostering; they have a clear understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the service, and are taking some steps to improve it. Areas of shortfall identified during the inspection relates to the overall monitoring undertaken by the manager, the use of shared rooms, medication training and foster carers training.

Areas for improvement

Recommendations

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

- implement the safe caring policy of the fostering service; in particular ensure that following any safeguarding concern strategies are put into place to minimise its recurrence (Regulation 12(1))
- train foster carers in the management and administration of medication (NMS 6.10)
- ensure that each child over the age of three has their own bedroom. If this is not possible, the sharing of a bedroom is agreed by each child's responsible authority and each child has their own area within the bedroom. Before seeking agreement for the sharing of a bedroom, the fostering service provider takes into account any potential for bullying, any history of abuse or abusive behaviour, the wishes of the children concerned and all other pertinent facts. The decision making process and outcome of the assessment are recorded in writing where bedroom sharing is agreed (NMS 10.6)
- implement an effective strategy to ensure sufficient foster carers to be responsive to current and predicted future demands on the service including planning for the need of children and young people with challenging behaviour and for mother and baby placements (NMS 13.1)
- ensure the guidance under national minimum standard 25.7 is followed using Regulation 35 as a guide to what should be monitored within this process (NMS 25.7)
- ensure all foster carers are clear about their roles and responsibilities in relation to undertaking consistent training as part of their overall development need. (NMS 25.5)

Outcomes for children and young people

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

Children and young people feel part of their foster family and have a strong sense of belonging. Their relationships with their foster carers are extremely positive. This helps to enhance their self-esteem and emotional resilience and prepares them well for the future. Children and young people receive personalised care provided by the fostering service which is in accordance with well documented care plans. Children and young people's issues of identity are well addressed by the service. This ensures the holistic needs of children and young people are met and they gain a clear understanding of their background.

Children and young people are aware who to approach if they are unhappy with the service. They have keen access to independent advocacy and receive clear information that outlines the fostering service's complaints procedure. Looked after children consistently receive the service's children's guide, which contains clear and useful information about the fostering service. This information is available in age-appropriate language.

Children and young people are keenly encouraged by the agency to share their views of the fostering service and to actively participate in its service development. Young people participate in a range of groups, forums and councils in place to elicit views and help shape the operation of the fostering service. There is a dedicated website for all looked after children, and questionnaires are periodically distributed by the fostering service and results are used to help shape the fostering service's development.

Children and young people are sensitively introduced to their foster families as the fostering services placement planning process is sound and carefully considered. They are made to feel welcome, secure and initial introductions are conducted at their pace, ensuring they are involved with the process. Children and young people are appreciative of the time taken surrounding this process and this contributes to the success and sustainability of placements.

Children live in healthy environments that very effectively address their medical and health care issues. This is an area of strength of the fostering service. Children and young people have excellent access to primary care services and a range of specialist health care services to address identified health care needs. Children and young people routinely participate in annual health care assessments that monitor their health care development. Children and young people benefit from very easy access to the organisations looked after children's nurse, for support, advice and information relating to their all aspects of their physical and emotional well-being. They highly value the organisations well-co-ordinated health care provision, which is primarily located on a dedicated site near to the offices of the fostering service. At this provision, 'Da Spot', children and young people can access an impressive range of services that effectively and sensitively address health care issues.

In addition, at this site, children and young people have access to individual or group based sessions facilitated by mental health professionals that address issues of emotional support. Looked after children benefit immensely from the opportunity to meet with LAC clinical psychologists on a one-to-one basis or as part of a group to explore issues, for example, self-harm, female empowerment, attachment and separation. Children and young people also benefit from access to other external mental health support services such as the local Children and Adolescence Mental Health Service, other national mental health support organisations and drug and alcohol preventative services. This is important to help children and young people explore their emotional well-being and support needs. The fostering service is able to offer fostering households family therapy to address wider family placement issues.

Children and young people make fair progress educationally. They benefit from foster carers' clear understanding and commitment to promoting their educational attainment. This is supported by training and written guidance. Children, young people, their foster carers and staff of the fostering team share effective relationships with the council's Looked After Children's Education team which supports and promotes educational success. Children benefit from direct work with members of the educational team which acts to enhance their academic achievement. This includes access to additional support, for example, individual tuition, assistance with homework and supplementary materials to aid their learning. Children and young people attend school very regularly and this promotes their learning. Current school attendance figures for looked after children of Hounslow are well over 90% for both primary and secondary school aged children. Children and young people's experience of school exclusions is minimal. Young people's GCSE results are encouraging and some young people progress to university.

Children and young people enjoy good access to their parents, family and friends in accordance with local authority or court ordered directions. The fostering service ensures that contact arrangements are adhered to by foster carers who in turn receive practical support, for example taxi's to help facilitate contact arrangements. Children who have supervised contact use designated facilities which ensure their safety.

Children and young people participate in a wide range of leisure activities which support their development and social skills and promote their individual wishes and interests. They also have opportunities to broaden their outlook and enjoy events such as holidays, outings and overnight stays with friends. They expressed satisfaction with the activities available to them, some of which are organised and facilitated by the fostering service.

Young people gain practical and life skills and are also prepared emotionally for adult life. Young people work in effective collaboration with their foster carers, staff of the fostering team and the Pathway team to ensure they are aware and develop skills necessary for them to function safely as independent young adults. They also benefit from the specialist input of external organisations such as Connexions that assist them to pursue training and/or obtain employment. This co-ordinated effort is successful in ensuring that young people are well prepared for the transition to

leaving care. Where appropriate, young people have the opportunity to remain in foster care after 18 years of age, supported by the local authority, and many young people continue to visit and receive support from their foster carers after leaving.

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 other professionals has improved and strengthened the service.

The service has a small number of sibling groups or other children and young people sharing bedrooms. However, where a child is over the age of three, there is no risk assessment agreement on how this will be effectively managed and reviewed.

The number of in-house foster placements has increased since the last inspection. 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 had improved; they are supported from all the teams directly involved in the care and well-being of looked after children. They also made comments that the fostering service recognises and supports their whole family which they value. Constant attention to meeting the identified needs of children and young people has resulted in preferred providers of care services being identified and monitored closely through quality assurance and case management processes; this ensures that good outcomes are achieved in all aspect of looked after children's services. Only providers whose overall ratings have been judged as good to outstanding have been used. Placement stability is maintained assisted by, for example, close monitoring of children and young people with complex behavioural needs. All placements take into consideration each child and young person's need such as their gender, ethnicity and culture, and good matching is achieved. This supports foster carers having all the necessary information about children and young people prior to placement so that they can meet children's needs effectively. Stable placements are also promoted by foster carers' working effectively with parents. For example they seek guidance from parents over aspects of their children's care wherever possible.

Foster carers are part of the team working with children and young people and share responsibility with other key professionals in the child's life. There is a robust and experienced group of independent reviewing officers who ensure that through reviews that children and young people are able to express their views, and these are central to decision-making of their lives. These processes contribute to the confidence of children and young people in their case review processes as a means of ensuring that good outcomes are being achieved. Children and young people said that they are always consulted with regards to their reviews.

The fostering panel promotes safe, secure and stable placements for children and young people. For example, it quality assures how well assessments are undertaken

and indicates how improvements can be made. The panel is properly constituted and its diverse membership means people with a wide range of experience and skills make recommendations. Cases are dealt with thoroughly and discussion is child-focused with an emphasis on safeguarding and equality and diversity. Sound decisions are made and decisions may be appropriately deferred, pending further information.

Safeguarding children and young people

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

Foster placements provide a safe secure environment for children and young people. Robust practice minimises the number of times children go missing. Since 2011/12, nineteen children and young people have gone missing approximately 20 times. This means that fewer than 10% of children have been affected by this. 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 and foster carers respond appropriately to children and young person's behaviour when they go missing or are absent without permission. However, the absence of monitoring reports (under NMS 25.7) detracts from the strategic picture of what has improved with regarding to children going missing and what more could be done.

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. Foster carers initial assessments and annual reviews focus on how well foster carers achieve this. Training and written guidance is provided for foster carers and updated information on safeguarding is provided for fostering staff. Foster carers who have been subject to allegations or where there are serious causes for concern have their reviews considered by the fostering panel. Allegations and disclosures are handled in a manner that is in the best interests of the child in the foster home and in the interests of the foster carers' own children. However, there is no clear process to monitor or review this which may inhibit identification of any patterns or trends that occur. Children are protected by robust safeguarding practices and incidents of bullying are minimised. There have been no incidents requiring referral to the Independent Review Mechanism since the last inspection.

Children and young people are protected from potentially unsafe adults. Approval checks conducted on prospective carers and members of their households are robust and thorough. The same stringent checking systems are also conducted on staff members, who cannot commence their employment until such checks are satisfactorily completed. Foster carers say they are suitably equipped with the training and guidance they need to keep children and young people safe from harm. Guidance and training is provided in dealing with difficult and challenging behaviours but the service is aware more specific training is needed for carers supporting children with complex challenging needs.

Children and young people know who to talk to if they have a problem or wish to

complain. Complaints are generally dealt with before reaching the formal stage, often with the support of an advocate.

Leadership and management

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

The management team understand many of the strengths and weaknesses of the fostering service. It has implemented a comprehensive statement of purpose which is reviewed annually along with a children's guide. This guide informs children and young people about fostering, what services they can expect and how they can complain.

The fostering management team is aware of the current local need for Looked After Children. The current need is for foster carers who are able to accommodate teenagers, sibling groups, young mothers with babies and children and young people with complex behavioural needs. The recruitment strategy 2012/13 is comprehensive and robust; and it does reflect how the fostering service plans to obtain suitable and sufficient foster carers who can respond to the current and predicted future demands of the service. In the year 2011/12 the numbers of approved carers was eleven, but in the same year eleven carers left the service. The fostering service's advertising campaigns attract many potential prospective carers, but the number approved are low following on from the number of initial enquiries received.

The fostering management team does have an overview of the strengths and weakness of the service. However, this is not formulated through quarterly reports as required under national minimum standard 25 and this detracts from the strategic oversight. Similarly eleven complaints / allegations and standards of care issues made against carers 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.

A large majority of foster carers have completed the Children Workforce Development Council training. The total to date is 84 per cent and the remaining carers are in the process of completing this. Foster carers are expected to attend pre-approval training and a number of core training courses during their first year of fostering. However, the number of foster carers attending refresher and mandatory training is low, especially courses specific to the particular needs of children and young people they are caring for. Training courses are well publicised. Training is monitored through supervisory visits, annual reviews and fostering panel and is also high on the agenda for the service. The service does make an enormous effort to ensure all carers attend training events when they come up. Foster carers commented that the training provided is good and there is a variety of training to choose from. Those who attended the 'fostering change 12 week programme' recommended it highly, but a second cohort of carers did not all complete the programme. It was also evident that the management and administration of medication is also not part of the training schedule.

Corporate parenting is taken seriously and ensures that children looked after have good outcomes. This is led by the corporate parenting panel whose membership includes looked after children and young people, councillors and members from the senior management teams. One of the key strategies is the 'Total Respect' training package, run and taught by looked after children. This training is rolled out for all staff who work or care for children in care. The training is a good initiative which has been well received.

There is clear evidence where children and young people have influence and contribute to the development of the fostering service, mainly through the 'children in care council' and the 'corporate parenting panel'. Written feedback from children and young people on their placements contributes to foster carers' reviews. Children and young people's achievements are also recognised by the council and once a year this is celebrated in an awards ceremony.

The recommendations from the last inspection have been complied with. These were: to clarify the reasons for resignation of a foster carer; and to ensure that kinship children and foster carers' receive the same benefits as mainstream carers.

Foster carers, children and young people are supported by a sufficient number of competent social work and administrative staff. The management of the service is stable. The service is well managed and there are clear lines of communication and accountability between the managers and staff. Foster carers can attend many of the support groups the service has to offer. Once a year, the life of a foster carer is celebrated by the service. Foster carers feel the service is supportive and there is always some-one at the end of the phone to support them in times of difficulties or for reassurance. Staff are appropriately experienced and qualified and professional development is promoted by the service. Staff are supported appropriately by regular team meetings, individual supervision and appraisals. All staff said that working in the same building as other professionals such as the children social workers team has helped enhance their support to carers and children better.

The friends and family team and the short break services are now under different remits within the looked after services in local authority.

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.