

London Borough of Camden Fostering Service - Children and Families

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

Unique reference number	SC041843
Inspection date	22/01/2013
Inspector	Sandra Jacobs-Walls / Seka Graovac
Type of inspection	Full

Setting address	Camden Council, Crowndale Centre, 218 Eversholt Street, London, NW1 1BP
Telephone number	020 7974 6641
Email	anne.turner@camden.gov.uk
Registered person	London Borough of Camden
Registered manager	Nuala Harrington
Responsible individual	Anne Turner
Date of last inspection	30/09/2008

© Crown copyright 2013

Website: www.ofsted.gov.uk

This document may be reproduced in whole or in part for non-commercial educational purposes, provided that the information quoted is reproduced without adaptation and the source and date of publication are stated.

Service information

Brief description of the service

The London Borough of Camden provides comprehensive fostering support for looked after children. The fostering team is an integral part of the looked after children's services provided by the authority.

Foster carers are recruited, trained and supported by the fostering team. At 31st March 2012 the fostering service supported 75 fostering households. A further 2 foster carers were approved in January 2013.

The fostering service provides short-term, task centred and long-term foster placements. The authority's specialist foster carers provide placements to children and young people who present with complex emotional and behavioural needs. There is a small family based short-breaks service available for children with disabilities.

Until very recently, the assessment, training and support of family and friends foster carers have been the responsibility of the fostering team. This service is now managed by the authority's adoption and permanence team.

The authority is part of the North London Fostering Consortium. This forum aims to improve fostering services in the north London area and share resources such as recruitment activities, training and fostering placements.

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**.

This fostering service is judged to be good service with outstanding features. It provides excellent quality of care for children and young people and as a result, their outcomes are extremely positive. Children and young people receive individualised care and support that meets their physical, social and emotional needs effectively. In particular, the emotional and psychological support offered to children and young people is a clear strength of the service. Placement disruptions are low and the children and young people are in appropriate placements. Participation levels in

education and training are good and the vast majority of children and young people are making significant progress.

Children and young people are kept safe while living full and active lives. They are positive about their placements, very much feel part of their fostering families and know foster carers care about them. They are well consulted about the plans for their future and their views are sought about the development of the fostering service.

Foster carers are very satisfied with the service and receive excellent support, supervision and training. They feel valued and appreciate the investment the authority has made in ensuring they offer quality care.

Staff are appropriately qualified and experienced. The fostering team is well established and team members work effectively in collaboration with each other and with external partners. This close, effective joint working ensures that placements are well matched, sustained and that children and young people thrive. The fostering panel is robust in conducting its duties.

The leadership and management of the fostering service are strong. The management team is focused on improving and developing the fostering provision. Managers understand the strengths and weaknesses of the service and have a clear vision and plans in place to further improve the service. The service benefits from having an extremely motivated staff team and pool of dedicated foster carers. The fostering service more than meets the national minimum standards and regulations, and exceeds these in a number of cases.

A number of recommendations are made as a result of this inspection. These are in relation to increasing the number of foster carers, expansion of the service's central list and the improved efficiency of existing monitoring systems. Not all foster carers receive unannounced visits at least annually and not all vetting information for students is well evidenced. Recommendations made on this occasion do not directly impact on the outcomes and safety of children and young people.

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 fostering service implements an effective strategy to ensure there are sufficient foster carers to be responsive to current and predicted future demands on the service (NMS 13.1)
- ensure that the service has a record of the recruitment and suitability checks which have been carried out for those working, including volunteers for the fostering service (NMS 19.3)

- ensure all fostering households have at least one unannounced home visit a year (NMS 21.8)
- consider the expansion of fostering panel membership to include representatives from child health and education (The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 4: Fostering Services 5.8)
- ensure there are clear and effective procedures for monitoring and controlling the activities of the service. In particular implement a formal recording tool for matching decisions, consistently monitor staff case recordings and collate key service information. (NMS 25.1)

Outcomes for children and young people

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

Children and young people make excellent progress within their placements and outcomes are extremely positive. They feel part of their foster family and have a strong sense of belonging. This helps to enhance their self-esteem and emotional resilience which prepares them well for the future. Children and young people receive personalised care provided by the service which is in accordance with their care plans. They enjoy sound and loving relationships with their foster carers, who clearly enjoy caring for them. Children and young people's issues relating to their identity are well addressed by the service. This is crucial in ensuring the holistic needs of children and young people are met and that they have a clear understanding of their background.

Children and young people are in safe and appropriate placements; the number of placement disruptions are extremely low. They feel well protected by their families and are comfortable in their surroundings. Children and young people's wishes and feelings are taken seriously by the fostering service and their views greatly influence their care and the fostering service provision. This authority has an active and influential Children in Care Forum. These young people are very confident about talking with senior managers and feel that their views are listened to and that changes are made as a result of what they say. Recent successes as a result of their contributions, include the local authority purchasing laptops for all young people looked after attending higher education and the development and implementation of the authority's Pledge to its looked after children.

More generally, all children and young people have other excellent opportunities to express their views. These range from regular individual conversations with their social workers and supervising social workers to statutory reviews and formal consultation exercises. This helps to ensure that their individual needs are being met. Children and young people receive excellent information and advice about independent advocacy. This is important to ensure their wishes, views and best interests are represented by independent parties if they so wish. Children and young people are actively engaged in every aspect of their care and contribute, as appropriate, to the decision-making process.

Children and young people make exceptional progress to develop a positive self-view. They benefit immensely from the input of the multi-agency liaison team (MALT). Children and young people have the opportunity to explore issues such as attachment, loss, trauma and challenging behaviour. This acts to enhance children and young people's understanding of their experiences and provides insight and support in addressing and for some resolving life challenges. In many instances, historical risk taking behaviour such as running away and aggressive behaviour has been reduced or been eliminated. For most, placement stability is achieved and children and young people thrive and make excellent progress within their substitute families. Children and young people are extremely positive about the relationships they build and sustain with their foster families. One young person commented, 'I've been everywhere, I usually tear the homes up or they throw me out. But my (current) foster carers are the best. Right now, it's the best I've ever felt in a family, they understand me completely.'

Children and young people are healthy and live healthy lifestyles. They benefit from the fostering service's service strong partnership working with health professionals, in particular the looked after children's nurse, the designated physician and the aforementioned MALT. As a result children and young people's physical, emotional and psychological well-being are very well addressed and promoted. Children and young people have excellent access to information and advice with regards to specialist health care issues such as sexual health and substance misuse. Children living with disabilities receive specialist and personalised care that ensures their medical and health care needs are well met.

Children and young people make good progress in their learning. They benefit from the support of the authority's looked after children's virtual academy that assists them to meet their educational potential. Children and young people receive excellent pastoral care and this support has led to continual improvements in school attendance and examination results. Children and young people receive training and education tailored to meet their specific learning needs and they enjoy celebrating a wide scope of academic and other achievements in awards ceremonies hosted by the authority's looked after children's service.

With regards to leisure activities, children and young people participate in a wide range of recreational activities and hobbies of their choice. Children, young people and carers regularly receive information about local events, some of which are hosted by the fostering service. Children and young people enjoy free access to some of the borough's recreational facilities such as its cinema and play and leisure centres.

Children and young people have an understanding of their backgrounds and this is enhanced by their meaningful contact with their birth families and friends. They enjoy flexible contact arrangements with their families of origin if it is safe to do so. Children and young people actively contribute to the nature and frequency of this contact; their safety and best interests are paramount in decision-making around contact. Children, young people and their parents have access to the authority's purpose built contact centre which offers a safe and nurturing environment where

contact can be supervised if required.

Young people leaving local authority care are well prepared for independent life. They receive good support from the fostering service and the authority's 16 plus team to make this transition. Older young people work with their foster carers and other professionals to develop independence and practical skills. These include issues such as tenancy and money management. Young people have the opportunity to remain living with their former foster carers if they so wish beyond the age of 18. Those who choose to do so are appreciative of this on-going practical and emotional support as they move into adult life. One recent care leaver commented, 'I'm in college now, but my foster carers were so important when I decided to get my own place. I see them all the time, I'm around there every Sunday for dinner. I know I'm part of the family.'

Quality of service

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

The fostering service's quality of care is excellent. The fostering service robustly and effectively recruits, assesses and supports foster carers. Managers are aware of the need to increase the numbers of foster carers and have strategies in place to address this. The fostering team's current recruitment strategies are creative and innovative. These include for example, the use of social media, the authority's celebratory events and the involvement of national celebrities.

Prospective foster carers are treated fairly and all enquiries are dealt with promptly and efficiently. The service has clear and robust systems in place that manage and co-ordinate well all initial enquiries from the public interested in becoming foster carers. The fostering service provides potential foster care applicants with clear and comprehensive information. This is promptly followed up with an initial home visit that further outlines the fostering purpose and task. The service provides comprehensive preliminary training in the skills to foster programme. This supports applicants' understanding of the role and responsibilities of the fostering task. These pre-assessment measures are effective in outlining the competencies and strengths applicants will need to demonstrate in order to become approved foster carers and provide quality care to children and young people. Staff ensure that all necessary checks, including Criminal Record Bureau checks, are consistently completed to confirm potential foster carers are suitable to work with children.

Foster carer assessment reports are comprehensive, relevant and all key issues are thoroughly explored during this process. This ensures that applicants possess the necessary skills and knowledge to care safely for children and young people. The service has effective monitoring systems in place to ensure the quality of assessment reports remains high. These include managers' quality assurance reviews of draft assessment reports.

Alongside the mainstream foster carers the authority has developed a highly successful specialist foster care programme available for a cohort of children and

young people who present with significant behaviour and emotional challenges. This aspect of the fostering service is delivering some excellent outcomes for identified children and young people.

The service's fostering panel is effective, efficient and well managed with a strong leadership via the chairperson. There are clear written procedures in place that support practice. The fostering panel is orderly, democratically conducted and clear in its deliberation with regards to recommendations. All panel meetings are quorate and members of the central list have extensive experience in their respective fields of expertise. Currently, however, the fostering panel does not include representatives from child health or education as recommended by legislative guidance. The fostering panel has a clear and effective quality assurance role and has influence in a wider context within the fostering service, such as policy development. Panel meeting minutes are comprehensive and accurate, decision making about approval or re-approval of foster carers is timely and appropriate. Panel members have access to relevant training opportunities.

The reviews of foster carers' approvals are managed by an independent social worker. This ensures the reviewing process is sufficiently independent of the fostering service. The reviewing process is effective and comprehensive, facilitating informed decision making about the continued suitability of carers to foster. Areas of concern are appropriately explored, both during the reviewing process and as they arise. Foster carers approved by the fostering service are highly skilled and knowledgeable and are able to offer quality well sustained placements. As a result, children and young people thrive and make excellent progress.

The fostering service ensures that clear, comprehensive information about placement needs are carefully considered as a feature of the matching process. The process is mindful of variables such as geographical location, specific placement needs the linguistic and cultural needs of the child or young person and their educational and religious needs. The service's matching process is robust. Managers accept however, that formalising the recording of matching decisions will further enhance this process by consistent recording. There are few exemptions to the approval status of foster carers, where these are necessary, they are managed appropriately. Foster carers and all professionals involved ensure that foster care placements provide a high quality of care and that this care is in adherence with individual placement plans and objectives.

Foster carers receive excellent training and support from the fostering service. They are appreciative and motivated by the fostering service's clear investment in their learning, training and development. Foster carers receive extensive and superior training and development opportunities they need to carry out their role safely and effectively. For example the 12 week fostering changes programme and training provided by MALT offer foster carers training and support to help them care for looked after children who present with extremely challenging behaviour.

All new foster carers receive an induction and all foster carers are supported to achieve the Children's Workforce Council Training Standards. To date, all approved

foster carers have completed this training. Children and young people benefit from high quality training available to foster carers that ensures their knowledge and skills remain current and ensures safe practices are promoted. Other members of the fostering household and support carers also have access to training available to the approved foster carer. Identified looked after young people also contribute to the learning and development of foster carers. For example young people facilitate 'total respect' training which provides insight into their experiences of being in care.

Staff regularly review the individual development needs of foster carers and these feature consistently in each foster carer's supervision and in their annual reviews. The organisation's training programme is reviewed annually, is extensive in subject matter and relevant to the fostering task. The service makes good use of the expertise of both internal and external trainers, which further equips foster carers to offer strong and appropriate placements that meet the often challenging needs of children and young people.

The fostering service's support and supervision of foster carers is excellent and is a clear strength of the service. Foster carers' communication with staff of the service is consistent and meaningful; staff make themselves available to support foster carers and their families both practically and emotionally. Foster carers have very good access to managers of the service, who are committed to Camden's Foster Carer Charter. The organisation has an effective out-of-hours service, staffed by the authority's emergency social work duty team. Foster carers regularly attend both in house and externally facilitated support groups and have access to independent advocacy and support services such as Camden Association of Foster carers for additional support if required.

Foster carers are highly satisfied with the nature and level of support they receive. Staff maintain consistent records of formal supervisory visits that focus on placement progress and issues. This ensures that the needs of children remain paramount throughout the duration of the placement.

Safeguarding children and young people

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

Children and young people are safe while in placement and feel very safe. Their relationships within fostering households are very positive. Foster carers are able to set appropriate and fair boundaries. Children and young people do not identify bullying as a concern. They confirm they know how to make complaints and are given support to do so. The fostering service views effective safeguarding a priority for all placements and has this ethos at the centre of its function and operation. Complaints against the service are rare; when these occur they are managed sensitively and effectively. The service acknowledges and accepts the particular vulnerability faced by children looked after and staff and foster carers are committed to keeping children safe.

Children and young people benefit from the fostering service's clear and

comprehensive child protection and safeguarding policies and procedures. Foster carers receive good written guidance and training to assist them to keep children safe from harm and abuse. Foster carers receive excellent safeguarding training and this ensures that all fostering households have safe caring policies in place.

Foster carers are successful in breaking established patterns of anti-social and destructive behaviours. For example, it is now extremely rare for a young person to go missing from their placement. When this has occurred the majority of these involved only short periods of time. The fostering service staff and foster carers are familiar with and act in accordance with policies and procedures that address those who are absent or missing from placement. This practice contributes to the safety of children and young people. Foster carers work alongside staff and young people to help them develop effective strategies and practices to keep themselves safe, for example to protect them against bullying.

The fostering service is working effectively with the Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO), police and within the multi-agency partnership working agreements. Allegations against foster carers are rare. When these occur they are handled appropriately and in adherence with the established child protection procedures. The agency's monitoring of such incidents is thorough and effective.

Foster carers provide nurturing, stable and safe environments. Each foster carer's home is subject to an annual household review to ensure it meets accepted standards. Supervising social workers meet with their carers in their homes on a monthly basis or more frequently if required. Such visits provide an opportunity for carers to discuss the progress each child and young person is making and to raise any safeguarding issues or concerns. In the vast majority of cases, at least one annual unannounced visit is also undertaken. This however was not the case for all foster carers; managers acknowledge that in a very small minority of cases, such visits are not conducted annually as required. Such visits are important to promote the safety and well-being of children and young people living there.

The views of children and young people are regularly sought by their social workers about all aspects of their lives within their placements. There are good lines of communication between supervising and children's social workers and any concerns raised are normally dealt with promptly.

Children benefit from the fostering service's robust recruitment and vetting practices for staff and foster carers. These ensure individuals working with the service are deemed suitable to work with children. The service has clear and comprehensive policies and procedures in place that ensure the careful selection and vetting of staff, foster carers and those identified on the agency's central list. The fostering service's personnel files for these individuals evidence full vetting checks as required by the regulations. However, the service does not evidence well all required vetting checks for students in placement within the team.

Leadership and management

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

The leadership and management of this fostering service are sound. The managers are committed to providing quality foster care placements for looked after children and young people and this is achieved well. The two recommendations made at the last inspection have been fully addressed and there have been improvements in this service since that time. This has resulted in the very positive outcomes for children and young people. Managers acknowledge the need to increase the number of foster care placements in order to meet the specific current demands of the borough's looked after children.

The percentage of children looked after who are placed in foster care is slightly higher than comparator authorities. The authority also has a number of family and friend carers who, until recently have been supported by the fostering service. The support to friends and family carers is good as is their training; this results in safe, appropriate and secure placements being made. This service is now managed via the authority's adoption and permanence team.

The fostering service is managed by individuals who are well experienced and qualified to do so. Both the responsible individual and manager are experienced, qualified social workers with a strong background in child care, child protection and the fostering task. These managers are supported by the skills and expertise of other senior managers within the authority's looked after children's service. Managers encourage and establish effective relationships with partners which act to enhance the overall effectiveness of the fostering service.

All stakeholders and interested parties have access to clear and comprehensive information that outlines well the aims and objectives of the fostering service. The agency's Statement of Purpose is informative and explicit about what services and facilities the fostering service provides. The fostering service produces two children's guides; one for primary school aged children and another for older young people. These guides each contain a useful summary of the agency's aims, objectives and services and they are child friendly. In addition all children and young people receive a creative welcome/resource pack which includes a range of relevant information about being looked after by the authority.

The fostering service is well resourced. There are clear financial systems in place, foster carers receive competitive allowances and are paid in a timely way. Staff are appropriately qualified and the experience and stability of the fostering team is a strength of the service. The service benefits from having a highly motivated staff team who are clearly focused on improving outcomes for children and young people in foster care. There is a culture of training and professional development within the team and staff keep abreast of developments within the child care field by regularly accessing training opportunities and consulting current research. Staff have innovative opportunities to develop professionally. Training provision includes regular opportunities for reflective practice and clinical supervision from external mental health specialists. Staff confirm that managers are accessible and they receive good quality and regular supervision. Newly appointed staff are also well supported by

management and colleagues. Staff appraisals are taking place regularly. This helps support positive and safe care for children and young people.

The fostering service's team plan clearly outlines developmental initiatives in place to further improve quality of care and service delivery. For example, the development of foster carers written and pictorial profiles will increase young people's contribution to decision-making around placement choice. Managers of the service ensure statutory processes are consistently conducted so that placements objectives are appropriately reviewed.

The fostering service generally has effective quality assurance systems in place that ensure that the fostering service is appropriately monitored and controlled. There is careful monitoring and reporting of differing aspects of the functioning of the service. This includes review of policy development, complaints, allegations, missing persons, standard of care issues, foster care training and child protection enquiries. However, some aspects of this monitoring and the collation of information are not sufficiently robust or efficient. These include the monitoring of staff unannounced visits, the clear evidencing of recruitment information for students and some staff case recordings. Despite identified issues in the management of the fostering service, the service is very well run. The shortfalls in this area of the agency's operation do not negatively impact on the outcomes for young people which are outstanding.

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.