

London Borough of Westminster Fostering Service

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

Unique reference number	SC048572
Inspection date	12/02/2013
Inspector	Sharon Lewis / Karen Malcolm
Type of inspection	Full

Setting address	Town Hall, King Street, LONDON, W6 9JU
------------------------	--

Telephone number	020 8748 3020
Email	Sally.Pillay@lbhf.gov.uk
Registered person	London Borough of Westminster City Council
Registered manager	Suresh Kumar
Responsible individual	Sally Pillay
Date of last inspection	25/09/2008

© 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

Tri-borough Fostering and Adoption Services, in relation to the London Boroughs of Westminster, Hammersmith and Fulham and Kensington and Chelsea, were merged and formed in 2012. The arrangements consist of four teams: duty, support and supervision, recruitment and assessment, connected people and adoption and permanence including post-order support. The services recruit and supervise foster carers, place looked after children (LAC) with in-house foster carers, identify permanent placements for children who are already LAC, and offer a full range of adoption services; this inspection focused only on the fostering services provided.

Referrals are made to the fostering team, who match children to carers across the three boroughs. The service aims to improve placement choice and matches for children, increase numbers of permanency orders, improve quality and timeliness of assessments, and place more children in-house with a consequent reduction in independent foster agency (IFA) placements. There are 223 tri-borough fostering households.

Westminster has 70 children in foster care. There are 223 tri-borough fostering households.

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**.

Children benefit from an innovative tri-borough fostering service which has radically strengthened arrangements and improved their outcomes. Children now receive a prompt choice of placement, within their locality, which assists with providing placement stability. Senior managers are trail blazers in the field and offer excellent proactive leadership and dynamic vision. There is an inspiring commitment to vastly improving children's outcomes, positively adapting the service, utilising strengths and moving the service forward.

It is recognised this is a service in transition, however, the results within a short period of time are outstanding.

The fostering service is highly effective, successfully making and sustaining placements for children. Children consistently have very positive views about the quality of their care and their relationships with foster carers. Children respond well to the supportive, nurturing environment and continue to make great progress. Education, health, partnership working and specific funding arrangements enable children to maximise their potential. Children's needs and views are highly influential and central to how the fostering service operates and develops practice.

Children receive support from staff and foster carers who have access to an extensive range of training that helps them to provide a high quality service. Staff are well qualified, highly skilled, experienced and passionately committed to their role. Leaders and managers have an exceptional desire to learn. They make purposeful use of a range of rigorous monitoring activities relating to the quality of care to improve the service. There is a culture of promoting excellence and for continuous improvement. The fostering service is meticulously tackling areas of improvement and development. There are no recommendations and no breaches of regulations are identified.

Outcomes for children and young people

Outcomes for young people are **outstanding**.

The new tri-borough arrangements proactively promote children's needs. Social workers highlight that one of the key strengths is the fact that children now have placement choice. Children make exceptional progress to develop, a positive self-view, maintain successful relationships with their carers and relatives which is supported by effective contact arrangements. Children are happy, greatly appreciate that they are in stable long-term placements. Children said, 'they care for you and you feel a part of the fostering family.' They described their foster carers as 'very supportive' and 'encourage you to do better.' Children state that 'the whole team supports you' and 'they always look out for me.' Children rarely experience unplanned endings to their placements. The service learns from disruptions and a staff member is currently undertaking research into placement breakdowns.

Children positively influence service development through a variety of avenues. All the boroughs have Children in Care Councils, although they have different names. The views of children are integral to monitoring outcomes and shaping service provision. Children highlight that they assist with making magazines, videos and other projects. Children participate in the corporate parenting panel and speak at a range of conferences within the department. There are mechanisms to build their views into service planning that ensure their views are heard and recorded at their statutory reviews. Children enjoy excellent individualised support. This takes into account their disability, race, culture, religion, communication and behavioural needs. Personal skills and specific training enable foster carers to effectively support transracial and transcultural placements. Children state their foster carer 'is very good even though I have a different religion from her, she is really caring and supports me.'

Children benefit from highly individualised health care arrangements, delivered by a multi-disciplinary team. There is a named nurse for each child and a designated doctor for looked after children. One hundred per cent of health assessments are completed. Children confirm that they are very well informed about leading healthy lives, for example eating a balanced diet and taking exercise; this includes going to the gym, dancing and playing sports. Children have leisure passports which enable them to use Westminster's sports centres. The health team provides a range of comprehensive and bespoke training, enabling foster carers to effectively respond to health needs. Specialist projects are also available; an example is the work tackling childhood obesity. At the last Safeguarding and Looked After Children (SLAC) inspection the contribution of health agencies was rated as being outstanding, as was work in relation to early intervention.

The fostering service celebrates the achievement of children and there is a strong commitment to helping them maximise their potential. Westminster children benefit from an excellent virtual school with the bonus of educational psychology support. It meticulously tracks and monitors across a range of variables including actual and predicted attainment, attendance and exclusion and statemented pupils. The team champions the needs of looked after children both in and outside of the local authority, this includes tailored case work. Individual tuition is available to support achievement. There is exceptional collaboration in the creative arts; this includes links to prestigious theatres and fashion colleges. Children highlight the positive impact of having a learning mentor, additional tuition, £500 life chances money and being able to learn English as an additional language. Children are ambitious and for some their future career plans include engineering and law. Foster carers also highlight the positive impact of the virtual school.

There are innovative tri-borough initiatives which enable foster carers to support children. An example is the very successful 'Text Now', reading project. There are plans to extend this and form a new literacy relationship with the British Library. Foster carers also highlight the tri-borough educational conferences and specific educational training which they described as 'amazing.' Foster carers learn new ways to support achievement and receive up-to-date information about the education system. This helps to raise aspirations and educational attainment. Children have the opportunity to engage in individual activities. The service works innovatively in partnership with cultural organisations to provide programmes for children. Examples are Tate Britain and the British Museum. Children have the opportunity of pursuing their hobbies and interests. They participate in an extensive range of community and leisure activities that are designed to support them in all aspects of their development and learning.

A comprehensive range of support is available for young people leaving care. This includes continued support from the virtual school. Personal advisors successfully work with young people, ensuring almost all are engaged in employment, education or training. Twenty three young people are currently at university; there is a generous one off payment to support them of up to £5000. A specific course is being run for hard to reach young people which includes supporting them to obtain a

certificate in personal effectiveness. This is complemented by individual life coaching to improve their resilience, emotional competence and self-control and to build their skills in communication, team work and leadership. The course also encourages enterprise and employability as students work alongside business volunteers. Young people proudly list their independence skills, highlighting how their carer helps with their cooking skills. Westminster has extensive guidance to help young people with the transition to adulthood. This handbook covers health, emotional development, identity, relationships, independent living skills, accommodation and financial arrangements.

Quality of service

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

Children benefit from an excellent tri-borough fostering service which provides an inspiring model of care. There is an extensive pool of foster carers with substantial experience. Children's social workers highlight the successes as being more prompt placements, promoting more stability, choice and the ability for children to stay in their schools and maintain links with their family. An additional bonus is having carers who know the locality and have links with community resources. Foster carers have been recognised under the honours system. The fostering service is prioritising recruiting carers to meet specific needs. Examples, of this are recruiting for: White British children, parent and child placements and teenagers with high level needs. There is a considerable recruitment budget dedicated to achieving this and a comprehensive recruitment strategy and sufficiency plan.

There is an increased demand for family and friends (connected persons) assessments. The fostering service is currently participating in a care proceedings pilot. This involves new ways of working which proactively includes the use of eligibility criteria and a standardised referral system. Most assessments are completed within 10 weeks resulting in exceptionally improved outcomes for children. External professionals describe this work as 'exemplary' and are extremely complimentary about the quality of the special guardianship work. Children also benefit from Westminster's housing scheme which prioritises their accommodation needs if they are in a connected persons' placement.

Children receive care from foster carers who are trained in the practical and interpersonal skills needed for the role. There is a very comprehensive induction process which enables new foster carers to be mentored by dedicated and experienced peers. This enables good practice to continue. All carers have completed their national vocational training. There is a purposeful understanding of issues relating to gender and there are specific courses to address these. Examples are a women's empowerment course and a course for men who foster. The service consistently evaluates training demonstrating the impact each foster carer's on-going professional development has on their care of children. Evaluation also enables training to be strategic to meet specific needs. The service provides e-learning courses and training during the weekends and evenings. There are further plans to promote flexible learning opportunities to further enhance foster carers' skills.

Foster carers are able to attend a range of support groups and they appreciate the new joint groups. Foster carers describe the training and their support from supervising social workers as 'excellent'. There is additional coaching, regular supervision, annual appraisals and self and visual learning. Their family members also have access to training and foster carers highlight the children and adolescent mental health support as being 'very good'. Foster carers also receive a new tri-borough magazine and have an amalgamated foster carers' association. The association passionately advocates for children and foster carers. An example of their involvement has been the standardisation of the fostering allowance. The service ensures foster carers continue to possess the skills and qualities needed to effectively care for children. Very comprehensive annual reviews efficiently detail each foster carer's continued suitability to foster.

Foster carers maintain very effective solution-focused working relationships with the service. The fostering service has an earnest understanding of delegated authority. Foster carers confirm there is a substantial recognition of their professionalism, reporting 'they have more of a voice and input', which is 'good as never had it before.' There is continual engagement with foster carers through a highly valued foster carers' association; its members confirm that 'senior management listen.' Foster carers also lead on educational projects, speak at health conferences and are represented on parliamentary groups. They were also recently asked to join the virtual school's management committee.

Children benefit from a highly effective, meticulous and insightful tri-borough panel. The panel chair has significant experience in fostering and adoption and provides strong leadership. The central list of panel members is very extensive and reflects a considerable range of expertise. This provides the flexible option of matching professionals to the cases. The agency decision maker provides accurate challenge, where needed and undertakes their work within the recommended timescales. The fostering panel exercises rigorous oversight of the approval and review of foster carers. A valued dimension is their quality assurance function. Senior management are extremely keen to learn and further improve. They describe the panel 'as a reflective window of our services.' The membership of the quarterly meetings with the panel chair has been extended to also include team managers, which demonstrates the unquestionable commitment to continuous improvement.

Safeguarding children and young people

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

The fostering service has strong arrangements which focus on safeguarding and promoting the best interests of children. Supervising social workers undertake at least one annual unannounced visit to fostering households. Children confirm that they feel safe, stating this is 'the safest I have felt.' Children do not identify bullying as an issue. Children and foster carers know how to make a complaint. They do not actively use this mechanism to express their concerns. The service appropriately manages issues in a prompt and efficient manner. Foster carers take the time to

compliment the service. Since the tri-borough merger there have been 12 compliments which include many foster carers expressing their gratitude regarding the support and guidance received from their supervising social worker. The organisation received a 'good' judgement for overall effectiveness at their SLAC inspection. A 'good' judgement was also received in the outcome area which ensures that children are safe and feel safe. Westminster has positively responded to their SLAC inspection and has developed new systems to address identified shortfalls.

The fostering service being part of a local authority has a strong relationship with LSCB and the Local Authority Designated Officer. They regularly receive pertinent information enabling them to keep up-to-date with best practice and key safeguarding issues. Children receive protection from the organisation's recruitment practices which are fully compliant with regulations, standards and guidance. The organisation competently undertakes the necessary safeguarding checks, and this includes regular Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks at specific intervals. This effectively ensures that staff and involved parties are carefully vetted. The service successfully retains an experienced staff team; social workers are appropriately registered with the new professional body.

Foster carers and staff receive regular safeguarding training. They also have a wide range of other complementary training. Examples of this training are understanding gang culture and sexual exploitation. Foster carers receive extensive guidance on keeping themselves and children safe. This includes internal and external environment risks, general safety and internet safety. Foster carers learn the diverse nature of abuse and neglect. The recruitment, assessment, preparation and supervision of foster carers, including connected persons' carers, have an active focus on safeguarding and child protection. Foster carers recognise the impact any abuse or neglect has on children and take appropriate action to support them. Children do not routinely engage in risk taking or offending behaviours. Risk assessments detail individual safeguarding concerns. The service regularly updates risk assessments and undertakes the necessary action to minimise risks.

Staff understand the demands of being a foster carer and offer respite and increased support during difficult periods. Foster carers and social workers highlight the valued support from the children and adolescent mental health service as a particular strength. Foster carers effectively promote positive behaviour. They do not have to restrain children. They do, however, undertake training in keeping safe, breakaway skills, techniques and de-escalation. The fostering service also effectively monitors accidents and incidents. Foster carers know what action to take if the whereabouts of children are not known. The fostering service does not have an issue with children going missing, although there may be occasions where children have unauthorised absences. A combined tri-borough multi-agency safeguarding information hub is currently being set up.

Leadership and management

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

Children benefit from an innovative, tri-borough service which has exceptionally strong and dynamic leadership. The percentage of children looked after who are placed in foster care is above the national average. There is a dedicated commitment to excellence and to proactively addressing issues. Foster carers and all professionals feel the tri-borough arrangement is working well. It is acknowledged that there are teething issues and this is a service in transition. Within a relatively short period of time, however, the fostering service has an inspiring template which centres on promoting the best interests of children. The pooled resources, shared expertise and best practice from all the local authorities results in an outstanding transparent service. Senior management express pride in their vision stating 'We value where we came from and where we are going.' They conclude that 'it is amazing what you can do when there are no boundaries.'

The fostering service is a trail blazer, as others parts of Children's Services are due to become tri-borough and are learning from their experience. This includes the imminent setting up of a multi-systemic tri-borough service and a consultation regarding developing a tri-borough leaving care service. Children's needs and well-being are at the heart of the fostering service's structure. The clear Statement of Purpose highlights the overall mission, aims, objectives, philosophy of care, and the range of facilities and services available for children. This document is subject to regular review and provides an excellent portrayal of how the new tri-borough arrangements enhance children's lives. The Statement of Purpose is available on the website and children also benefit from their own guide. Children's guides are borough specific and age appropriate. They provide a comprehensive summary of professionals' roles, the rules and expectations, meetings, the complaints procedure and the names of other agencies that can help them.

Staffing arrangements meet the holistic needs of children. Leadership is strengthened by highly competent and efficient team management and principal social worker arrangements. They consistently communicate high expectations to staff about sustaining improvement. This involves motivating staff, giving them lead responsibilities and utilising their skills. Individuals are able to build up their expertise in specific areas.

Children's social workers comment on the positive changes since the tri-borough service was introduced. Examples of these are an increase in joint working and supervising social workers attending the child's statutory review. Children and foster carers receive assistance from a highly qualified, very competent, well trained, stable and committed staff team. The team members have an extensive range of qualifications and prior experience between them. Staff believe in empowering families and are dedicated to their work. A comprehensive network of meetings enables staff to regularly increase their knowledge and keep-up-to-date on issues pertaining to children.

The organisation provides a wide range of training and support which effectively helps staff to fulfil their role. Staff reflect on their practice and they benefit from

regular individual supervision, appraisals and team meetings. Staff appropriately maintain confidentiality and securely store personal information. There is a shared tri-borough database of carers; access to each borough's integrated children's systems; harmonised carers' fees, allowances and payment processes; and use of tri-borough duty emails to request placements and to recruit and support carers. The fostering service demonstrates a substantial commitment to staff development. The structured staff training and developing programme focuses on practically equipping staff for their work. An extensive range of specialist training and resources provides an outstanding learning environment for staff. This increases the knowledge and skills of staff and ultimately benefits children.

Children thrive because the service is a leader within the sector and has a high level of expertise. The fostering service shares their knowledge through involvement in pilots. There is excellent involvement in research especially regarding permanency. Research and developments in the sector are used to inform aspects of the service and training. Leaders and managers routinely and rigorously monitor and evaluate the quality of foster placements and services provided. This leads to significant improvements across the whole of the fostering service. Tri-borough arrangements have resulted in a sharp decrease in the use of independent fostering agencies (IFAs). An example being in the last month, no placements were made in IFAs. Historically there were a high number of placements made within IFAs; these are long-term matches that remain in the best interests of the children involved.

The well-developed quality monitoring system is centred on the experience of children. The senior leadership team are very proactive and take a highly personalised approach to service improvement. Examples of this are them being involved in case audits, meetings with individual workers and developing action plans. There is an excellent awareness of areas for further development and plans are in place to further perpetuate best practice. There is an influential cycle of improvement and learning from events. There is a sincere desire to continually improve and promote excellence. The service has a forward thinking aim to utilise the small number of out of borough carers by offering their services to other local authorities. Each team has a comprehensive development plan. The service is being continually adapted to address the current climate. Plans are founded on robust evidence and tackle key areas requiring further development; they also build on areas of strength. Staff are integral to planning for individual children and are consistently consulted in service development.

Children play a significant part in the development of the fostering service. They routinely complete questionnaires and the service is currently working on safe ways to receive consultation information from them, via the internet and mobile phones. The service has effectively addressed the six previous recommendations from the last inspection. A comprehensive action plan was devised to meet each recommendation. Children benefit from a robust recruitment policy, an extended short-break service and better supported connected persons' placements. Consultation has also improved; disabled children have a specific form which contributes to their carer's annual review and foster carers are able to influence children's futures. All carers have also received the out-of-hours contact information.

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 the inspection of local authority fostering agencies.