

London Borough of Brent Childrens Services Placement Fostering Service

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

The London Borough of Brent fostering service works within a child centred, multi-disciplinary and anti-discriminatory framework. There are three fostering teams that focus on recruitment and assessment, fostering support and kinship care. The service has one permanent independent reviewing officer and all other reviews are carried out through a contract with Aidhour. The Commissioning Service provide a range of placements using Brent resources and private and voluntary providers. At the time of the inspection the service was operating with 152 registered foster carers. Placements were being provided for 210 young people, 90 with independent fostering agencies and 120 within in-house provision and 35 within connected 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**.

The borough of Brent is one of the most culturally diverse and economically disadvantaged areas of the country. The foster service frequently has to respond to demands brought about by factors far beyond its control. For example, many children and young people enter the service from communities that have been displaced from their own countries because of strife and civil unrest. In recent times the service has had to find placements for a significant number of young people from Afghanistan and Somalia. The service is extremely good at responding to changing demands and is successful in both recruiting and training carers from minority communities. In-house provision has increased and this has allowed more children and young people to reside within the borough and maintain contact with their existing social networks.

The service has made significant progress in many areas since the last inspection. A rationalisation of the management structure has resulted in a more streamlined service. Three teams, with clearly defined roles and responsibilities, now deliver the service. The senior management team provide outstanding leadership to the experienced and motivated staff team. The introduction of a new quality assurance

system has created greater efficiency in all aspects of the service and created a regular source of reliable data to inform decision making.

Outcomes for individual young people are outstanding and children and young people respond positively to the quality individualised care they receive. Placement stability is good and the majority of young people now reside in their placements until 18 years. Young people are placed without avoidable delays and make good progress from their starting points. The educational attainment of children and young people continues to improve and an increasing number now progress on to college and university. The health and well-being of individual's is appropriately monitored and specialist help obtained to address specific health issue. Young people live full and active lives and expand their horizons by participating in a wide range of social and recreational activities. Young people are integral to decision making and their views contribute significantly to the development of the service. Diversity and equality are promoted effectively in all aspects of the service.

The service operates with a group of experienced and well-motivated carers. Carers feel valued and well supported and have a good understanding of the often complex needs of the young people in their care. New carers are carefully selected and are well prepared and trained. The service is extremely 'child focused' and carers and staff strive to ensure that the children and young people in their care are kept safe and are able to grow and develop within caring families.

Areas for improvement

Recommendations

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

- develop carers profiles that can be provided for young people in advance of any placement (NMS 11)
- involve children and young people in the recruitment, preparation, training and review of foster carers and staff (NMS 1.7)
- Develop a curriculum for the acquisition of key life skills. (NMS 12.1)

Outcomes for children and young people

Outcomes for young people are **outstanding**.

The service recognises each child and young person as a unique individual with their own specific physical, social and cultural needs. As part of the matching process every effort is made to place young people within their own community with families who share their ethnic, religious and linguistic background. However, this is not

always possible. Those placed with families from different cultural backgrounds felt their beliefs were respected and that appropriate arrangements had been made to ensure their religious and cultural needs could be met. While the service has been extremely successful in increasing its in-house provision there are still a significant number of placements sourced from outside the borough. Arrangements for monitoring the progress of young people in such placements are good. By accessing specialist interpreters staff aim to ensure that the views of young people who experience communication difficulties are obtained and shared with foster carers.

Although a number of foster families have produced excellent profiles that can be shown to children and young people before visiting, they are currently not yet widely available. Placement stability is good and indicates children and young people are appropriately placed with foster carers who can meet their assessed needs. By maintaining existing educational placements the service helps to provide a degree of continuity in children and young people's lives and minimise the inevitable disruption they experience when entering care. Once settled children and young people normally reside in their placements until 18 years.

The service is aspirational and there is an expectation that young people will grow and develop during their placements. Each child and young person is assigned to an independent reviewing officer who monitors their progress and ensures recommendations arising from their six monthly reviews are appropriately addressed. Additional independent support is also provided for children and young people who wish to access the service's complaints process. Young people spoken with felt they are appropriately placed with foster families whose members have a genuine interest in their well-being. The support they are receiving is clearly contributing to an increase in self-confidence and enabling them to make positive plans for their futures. One young person said that his foster placement, 'Was the best,' and that his life was now, 'Safe and enjoyable.' Young people reported they were happy with their accommodation and spoke positively about the food they were receiving. Children and young people are encouraged to recognise their potential in many different areas and are helped to live full and active lives by participating in a wide range of social and recreational activities within their community. While foster families provide opportunities for young people to acquire independent living skills, the current system is somewhat ad hoc and does not ensure all young people acquire the same key skills.

Education is given a high priority within the service and is viewed as a key element in increasing life opportunities. Effective support systems help children and young people who have disruptive educational histories to catch up and in many instances surpass their peers. Staff from the virtual school are extremely good at monitoring the progress of each child and young person and ensure that those preparing for national tests and exams have access to additional support if required. School attendance is good and exam results indicate children and young people are making significant progress. Virtual school staff are aware of all exclusions and intervene to help prevent reoccurrences. Foster carers and staff indicate that the support and extra-curricular enrichment activities provided by the virtual school is helping raise the educational aspirations of young people and an increasing number are now

progressing on to higher education.

The health needs of children and young people are appropriately met. All children and young people entering the service receive a comprehensive paediatric assessment that identifies any specific health needs. Thereafter looked after children nurses carry out regular reviews. Effective systems have been established to ensure that children and young people who have arrived from overseas receive recommended immunisations. Foster carers are provided with training on health related matters and closely monitor the health and well-being of young people in their care on an on-going basis. Young people spoken with were clearly aware of the contribution eating wisely and taking regular exercise contributes to health. Young people in their teens are helped to assume responsibility for monitoring their own health and are provided with advice and guidance on issues such as the use of alcohol, drugs and sexual health. Many young people arrive in the service following periods of stress and uncertainties in their lives. By providing life story work young people are helped to understand their past and contextualise events. Child and family health services (CAMHS) staff assist children and young people to develop emotional resilience.

Although children and young people contribute to the development of the service they are not currently involved in the recruitment, preparation and training of new foster carers. The service has created an open culture in which the views of children and young people are regularly gathered and participation officers have been extremely innovative in creating new ways of obtaining their views. For example, disposable cameras have been issued so that individuals can record the things that are important to them in their placements. The photographs are then presented and discussed at different forums. Another project 'We Care' has provided children and young people the opportunity to create a DVD on what it is like to enter foster care. The DVD is to be used as a 'child friendly' introduction to the service. Fortnightly 'Care in Action' council meetings provide opportunities for children and young people to discuss any concerns and proposed developments. Suggestions from young people are always considered and responded to. For example, as a result of children and young people complaining about the difficulty they experienced in accessing their social workers, staff have been issued with Apple phones. As the ability to text is now available lines of communication have greatly improved. Children and young people feel that consultation processes are good and that their views are valued.

Quality of service

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

The service strives to recruit foster families that will offer safe and nurturing environments in which children and young people can grow and develop. There is an expectation that children and young people will be integrated into their foster families and participate in all aspects of family life including family holidays. The children of foster carers are acknowledged as playing a key role and are involved in

both the assessment and training programme. The service's robust recruitment system ensures that unsuitable individuals do not gain access to vulnerable children and young people. All prospective foster carers have to be appropriately vetted and successfully complete an initial training programme before being presented to panel for approval.

The service's culture of training and development expects carers to continually update their knowledge and skills. Training is delivered by supervising social workers, experienced foster carers and a range of allied professionals from health and education. All new carers complete a training programme that familiarises them with key aspects of fostering such as attachment, contact, education, health and development, safeguarding and managing challenging behaviour. Carer training also raises awareness of equality issues and specific courses focus on culture, religion and disability. Specialist training is also arranged to address the specific needs of individual young people, such as those that experience medical or behavioural difficulties. The training needs of carers are reviewed on an on-going basis. There is an effective system to monitor foster carers attendance at training. The success and achievements of foster carers is recognised and celebrated at regular social events.

The service benefits from having a team of experienced and well-motivated staff who have established sound working relationships with their foster carers. Supervising social workers ensure foster carers effectively meet the care needs of the children and young people in their care. Communication between supervising social workers and fosters carers is good and support and guidance can extend to evenings and weekends. Effective communication and co-ordinated action between foster carers and service staff clearly helps achieve consistency in the delivery of care. All young people are provided with placement plans that are subject to regular review and are updated in response to changing circumstances.

Foster carers confirmed that staff are always quick to intervene and provide additional support if they are experiencing difficulties. As one carer remarked, 'My supervising social worker is always there when I need her.' Service staff are extremely good at liaising with other agencies such as housing and health and education to ensure foster families and the young people in their care have access to appropriate services and resources.

Foster carers feel the key role they occupy within the service is recognised and their views and opinions about the progress of the children and young people in their care is valued by service staff and allied professionals. Foster carers are aware of the need to continually update their knowledge and skills and appreciate the opportunity regular supervision gives them to reflect on their practice. As one carer remarked, 'Even though I have been fostering for many years I am always learning something new.'

The service benefits from the expert scrutiny of an appropriately constituted fostering panel. Decisions are made on good quality and rigorous assessments. The panel list includes members with expertise in childcare, education, health and a number with personal experience of foster care. The list provides sufficient members

that ensure it can meet regularly and remain quorate. The approval and reviewing functions of the panel provides an effective quality assurance function that ensures that young people are only cared for by appropriately trained and vetted foster carers. Matters arising through panel are discussed and contribute to further service development. Panel members provide advice to supervising social workers on the quality of their assessments and review reports. This feedback helps drive up the quality of both assessments and the on-going support of foster carers. Effective mechanisms exist for the panel and decision maker to discuss issues and differences.

Safeguarding children and young people

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

Safeguarding underpins all policies, procedures and working practices within the service. Supervising and children's social workers liaise effectively to ensure that carers are provided with key information about a young person before a placement is made. Risk assessments are extensively used to identify areas of potential concern. The needs of household members is always considered prior to the placement of a new child or young person. Service staff work alongside foster carers and develop behaviour management plans that address inappropriate and challenging behaviours. Foster carers receive safeguarding training that enables them to develop safe caring practices applicable to their particular social circumstances. All family members are made aware of their individual responsibilities in regard to the reporting of any safeguarding worries or concerns. This means that child protection issues are safely handled.

The service has established robust systems to monitor all placements and implements immediate action over any reported safeguarding concerns. The views of children and young people about their placements are always sought prior to their foster carers annual reviews. Supervising social workers meet with their carers in their homes on a monthly basis and undertake up to three unannounced visits annually. Each carer's home is subject to an annual household review to ensure it meets accepted standards. The service continually refines its approach in the light of best practice guidance arising from research and serious case reviews.

Although the service operates within a 'safe caring' framework, it is not risk averse and there is an expectation that children and young people will live full and active lives by participating in a range of social and recreational activities both within the home and in the local community. Carers work alongside young people and help them develop effective strategies and practices to keep themselves safe. Carers are successful in breaking established patterns of anti-social and destructive behaviours. Children and young people reported that they feel safe in their placements. None reported being bullied and all indicated they had an adult to whom they could report any worries or concerns. Children and young people indicated they were aware of how to raise a concern or make a complaint.

Leadership and management

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

There have been significant improvements in the way the service is managed since the last inspection. A new quality assurance system has been developed and its influence permeates all aspects of the service. The effective harnessing of technology now ensures that the operation of all aspects of the service can be monitored and information shared between all relevant parties. Managers can, at the touch of a button, gain up to date information about how the service is supporting children, young people and their foster carers. The new monitoring systems have helped drive improvements and promote positive outcomes for young people. For example, if a young person is excluded from school all key personnel are informed and strategies developed to prevent a further occurrence. The system also helps staff ensure that all statutory obligations, such as annual reviews, take place within expected timescales.

Although the new systems require staff to continually update information on the computer system they feel it has led to greater efficiency in the way they work and allows them to adopt a more pro-active approach. Staff reported they are now able to use information to identify potential difficulties within placements and intervene early and provide additional support. The working environment was observed to be organised and exuded an air of calm and efficiency. There was no indication that staff were having to react to crisis situations.

Since the last inspection a new three team structure has been introduced. Recruitment and assessment, fostering support and kinship each have their own team of dedicated staff. Each team operates with its own experienced manager. The registered manager and team managers operate as an effective management team. The senior management team are clearly aware of the need for the service to remain responsive to changing needs. Staff confirmed that managers are always accessible and they receive good quality and regular supervision. There is a general consensus amongst carers and staff that the service is well managed and maintains a clear focus on providing high quality foster care.

The service benefits from having a highly motivated and experienced staff team who are clearly focused on improving outcomes for children and young people in foster care. Staff feel their views are regularly sought, valued and contribute to the development of the service. Staff are expected to assume responsibility for their professional development by accessing the many training opportunities on offer and consulting current research. The service operates with a full complement of staff who operate with appropriate caseloads. Developments and new initiatives are encouraged and best practice is shared between foster carers and staff.

Complaints and concerns are acknowledged, investigated and responded to within appropriate timescales. Outcomes from investigated complaints contribute to the service's robust approach to improvement. There is an effective independent

reviewing process that ensures that the experiences of young people are aired and addressed at reviews. The service strives to improve and seeks out developments and best practice from a range of sources. New initiatives are informed by research and the experiences of others.

Recommendations arising from the last inspection have been appropriately addressed. Allegations against foster carers are appropriately recorded, investigated and resolved within established timescales. The new management structure ensures each area of the service, including arrangements for short term placements are appropriately managed. The new quality assurance system ensures that all foster carer reviews are scheduled and take place annually. Foster carer's agreements now specify the conditions of approvals.

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.