

Royal Borough of Greenwich Fostering

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

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Inspector	Linda Bond
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Service information

Brief description of the service

The Royal Borough of Greenwich's fostering service provides a range of placements for children looked after by the council. They assess and support a range of foster carers to provide short-term and long-term placements to children and young people with a wide range of needs, including support to friends and family carers. In addition, carers who can provide a short breaks service for children and young people with a disability are recruited.

At the time of the inspection, there were 140 children and young people placed with 101 Greenwich foster carers, including family and friends.

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**.

For children and young people who require foster care, the service uses a blend of in-house foster carers, independent fostering agencies and connected carers. A range of skilled, experienced, knowledgeable and loving carers provide children and young people with stable and safe placements.

The provision of regular supervision, training, safe recruitment and support ensures children and young people are cared for by foster carers and staff that are committed to improving standards. There is a strong culture of inclusion, participation and consultation in this service. This helps children and young people make good progress and achieve good outcomes in health and education.

The management of this service is a key strength and provides staff with direction, structure and positive leadership. However, there were two recommendations made as a result of this inspection and these were in relation to the children's guide.

Managers of the service are aware of these shortfalls, which have not significantly impacted on outcomes for 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 children's guide includes a summary of what the fostering service sets out to do for children, how they can find out their rights, how a child can contact their Independent Reviewing Officer, the Children's Rights Director and Ofsted if they wish to raise a concern with inspectors, and how to secure access to an independent advocate (NMS 16.4)
- ensure where a child requires it, the guide is available through suitable alternative methods of communication, e.g Makaton, pictures, tape recording, translation into another language (NMS 16.6)

Outcomes for children and young people

Outcomes for young people are **good**.

Children and young people are at the centre of everything the service does and there are good arrangements in place to secure positive outcomes for them. They are supported to be healthy and lead a healthy lifestyle. Of particular note is the positive work that has been done in relation to health screening; for example, reduction in unplanned pregnancies and good attendance at annual health assessments, routine dental checks, and immunisations. This ensures that their general health needs are identified and met.

Children and young people are supported to access therapeutic resources, which are readily accessible, if required to help improve children and young people's emotional well-being.

Positive working relationships are established through cross authority and multi-professional working to ensure regular monitoring for those children and young people placed within Independent Fostering Agency Placements. These arrangements ensure that young people and foster carers have prompt access to highly effective advice and support to make sure that the physical and emotional health needs of young people are met.

Children and young people make good progress, from their starting points in education, with active encouragement from their foster carers. Children and young people attend educational establishments and attendance is high. A strong emphasis is placed on the benefits of regular attendance and foster carers make use of support systems in place. For example, a Welfare Call system that identifies when a child or young person is not in school. Children and young people are healthy and enjoy taking part in a wide range of activities that promote their social and emotional development. The local authority encourages healthy outcomes by providing foster carers with free leisure passes so that the children they foster can access a range of

facilities. Foster carers also seek out appropriate activities in the wider community which engage young people in pursuits that reflect their interests, talents and skills. Children and young people report that they take part in a wide variety of activities that they enjoy.

Children and young people are regularly consulted about the care they receive, individually through the reviewing process and collectively through a very active Children in Care Council. Young people who attend this group report they feel valued and as a result develop increased self-confidence and a positive self-image.

Young people contribute to the development of the service by participating on the panel for approval of foster carers and attendance at reviews and meetings. When not possible, views are sought creatively, for example producing individualised report formats. In doing so children and young people are involved in their day-to-day planning. Young people gain self confidence in an environment where there is a strong culture of consultation.

The fostering panel works extremely well. The service's central list includes members who provide expertise from within childcare and related fields, including education and health, individuals with a range of experience, and young people who have been previously looked after. Recommendations are made based on good quality, rigorous assessments. The panel chair is experienced and knowledgeable, affording an excellent overview and monitoring service.

Children and young people benefit from stable foster placements which meet their varied needs. There is a low rate of unplanned endings to placements. Where placements end in an unplanned way, disruption is minimised by applying best match principles to ensure children and young people continue to have access to friends, family and educational placements.

In the main, young people report that they feel they have opportunities to develop the knowledge and skills they will need for later life. Foster carers recognise that the support they give to young people to help them to prepare for independence has to be appropriate to the age and stage of development of the individual young person. They provide this support within the context of a normal family life. Young people know they can access the Staying Put Policy beyond their 18th birthday, if they feel they are not ready to live independently.

Quality of service

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

The local authority is continually recruiting new carers. In recent times they have experienced difficulty in keeping up with the demand for placements and this is evidenced in their use of independent fostering agencies. Senior management recognise the competition in recruitment from neighbouring boroughs and accept that they would greatly benefit from having a larger pool of in house foster carers. The service strives to recruit foster carers from all sections of the community and is

currently engaged in a recruitment drive to identify potential foster carers from within minority communities and specialised foster carers for children and young people with complex needs and disabilities.

Potential placements are, when appropriate, sought within children and young people's existing communities and established social networks. The service is successful in identifying placements amongst connected carers (family and friends). Such carers are assessed sensitively and receive suitable induction, support and training. Every effort is made to minimise disruption in the lives of children and young people and they are supported in maintaining their existing educational placements and social networks.

The preparation and assessment of foster carers is thorough and ensures that a range of safe and suitable foster carers are recruited. Foster carers are committed to developing and maintaining their knowledge and skills and they have a broad understanding of the fostering task. Almost all carers have completed the required Children's Workforce Development Council's training, support and development standards for fostering. Foster carers also have access to a wide range of training that is directly relevant to the needs of the children and young people they care for. Foster carers report that this training is good. Foster carers who look after children and young people with disabilities and complex needs are given additional training in specific areas of care. This includes disability awareness and keeping disabled children safe, the management of epilepsy, and moving and handling.

There is a wide range of carers support meetings in place, together with regular supervision visits of a high standard. Foster carers report that they are very satisfied with the level of support and guidance that they receive from the fostering service, stating they feel 'valued and respected'.

Foster carers felt that an improvement in the way young people's needs are assessed and better communication between staff and carers has contributed significantly to more effective matching. Detailed and personalised matching forms and profiles, including racial and cultural needs now provide foster carers with detailed information on the specific care needs of each child and young person and make clear how they should be met. These forms, coupled with individual placement contracts, provide an effective mechanism for sharing information and clarifying expectations. Similarly, children and young people are able to access profiles about foster carers that provide information so that they can make informed decisions relating to placements.

Safeguarding children and young people

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

There are effective arrangements in place which ensure that children and young people are safeguarded and their welfare is promoted. Safeguarding underpins all policies, procedures and working practices. Risk assessments are extensively used to identify areas of potential concern. Recruitment processes for both staff and foster

carers and members of the panel are rigorous and include employment and Criminal Record Bureau checks. Foster carers spoke positively about the safeguarding training they received and felt it provided a good insight into the impact abuse can have on the development of children and young people. All said they were made aware of the need to ensure all family members develop good safe caring practices. The arrangements for supervising and supporting foster and connected carers are good.

Children and young people are safe and say they feel safe. They know how to complain and who to talk to, in order to raise any concerns regarding their care. There are several systems in place to check the care of children and young people; unannounced visits to foster carers' homes take place at least twice a year and children and young people are seen alone by placing social workers.

Comprehensive care, health and placement plans ensure that foster carers have the information they need to safeguard and promote the welfare of the children in their care. Extremely thorough risk assessments are undertaken as part of the matching process to ensure that all possible areas of concern for children and carers are considered. Foster carers prepare a safe care policy that addresses all aspects of household routines and safety.

Any complaints made are investigated and responded to promptly, within clear timescales. This ensures that concerns are taken seriously and responded to without delay. The service takes swift action to safeguard young people from bullying should these situations occur. Children and young people are also supplied with information to advise them where they can go to get help in this matter. Foster carers report that there are extremely good lines of communication between supervising and children's social workers and any concerns raised are normally dealt with immediately.

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

Leadership and management

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

Since the last inspection, the service has undergone a re-configuration of the management team. Though there have been some initial changes and minor disruptions, the management team have been able to provide consistency, structure, motivation and commitment to improving the standards for children and young people looked after. The quality of monitoring the service is rigorous and there is a proactive commitment to improving standards. Close scrutiny regarding the delivery and performance is welcomed and responded to by a stable and cohesive management team. The service is regularly audited and monitored both internally and externally from numerous sources.

The development of the management team has enabled the service to recruit and approve additional foster carers and demonstrate a clear commitment to the development of the service. Currently a blend of in house foster carers, independent fostering agencies and connected carers make up the carers network. The co-location of social work teams and the fostering service supports good information sharing and ensures that foster placements are very well supported.

Foster carers confirmed they are regularly consulted and feel their views contribute to planning for individual young people and service development. They are encouraged to raise concerns and are responded to appropriately. Outcomes from investigated complaints contribute to the service's robust approach to improvement. For example regular clear and positive communication has produced a positive outcome for a child and family member's future contact and on-going relationship. It is evident that greater monitoring and wider consultation with interested parties has led to an increase in both the quantity and quality of information available for managers. The availability of such evidence is contributing to more informed decision making.

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 confirmed managers are always accessible and they receive good quality and regular supervision. All felt the team managers had made significant contributions to recent improvements and look forward to the future of the service.

Staff report that they were satisfied that placement decisions are based on the needs of children and young people, rather than finance. The authority's commissioning service was fully appreciated by staff who felt that it was an efficient way of both accessing and utilising resources. Staff felt the service's commitment to seeking out multi-agency responses to meeting the needs of children and young people was having a positive impact on outcomes for children and young people.

The Statement of Purpose is written clearly, frequently reviewed and clearly details the aims and objectives of the service. A children and young person's guide about the fostering service is available for children and young people. However, this requires updating and making available in formats for differing abilities.

The Registered Manager is aware of the areas of development recommended at this inspection, and is highly committed to improving the quality of the service as well as the outcomes for looked after children and young people. High on their agenda is the further and greater inclusion of children and young people in the development of the service and the wider recruitment of in-house foster carers. Recommendations made at the last inspection have all been addressed; this has resulted in a positive improvement in the service for young people.

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.