

London Borough of Waltham Forest Fostering Service

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

This local authority fostering service has 106 approved foster carers in 76 households offering 80 placements to children and young people. A range of placements are provided including emergency, short term, long term and parent and child 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 **adequate**.

Waltham Forest have a high use of independent fostering agency placements compared to the overall proportion in all local authorities. This equated to approximately 36% in-house and 64% external. This is a substantially higher proportion of commissioned Independent Fostering Agencies (IFA) placements compared to 28% external in all Local Authorities. Strategies are in place to increase the number of in-house placements within the borough. However, factors such as limited housing stock are key factors in recruitment of foster carers.

The fostering service is adequate. Most of the children and young people are benefiting from individual holistic care packages which are derived from a multidisciplinary approach which promotes improved outcomes for children and young people. As a result unplanned endings have reduced and children and young people enjoy relatively stable placements. Many are very happy with their foster carers; feeling valued and cared for are key factors which enable them to have a positive outlook on their future.

All children and young people have comprehensive assessments of their needs including risk assessments. These help to keep young people safe. Children and young people are consulted. Children and young people have opportunities to contribute to their care plans and feel that their views are often taken into consideration. Opportunities to contribute to the development of the service are limited, but this is being addressed by the service as they are beginning to expand the forums whereby children and young people can make their views known.

Strategic monitoring and planning recognises the strengths and weaknesses of the service. Necessary changes are being implemented in a timely manner. A number of changes remain in their infancy, with the full impact yet to be fully realised. Areas including training, consultation processes, foster carer recruitment and monitoring mechanisms are recognised by the service as needing to improve further in order to fully meet all of the national minimum standards. The entire service is working tirelessly to support the progress made, with the well-being of Waltham Forest children as its driving force.

Areas for improvement identified as a result of this inspection include consultation with children and young people, delegated authority, recruitment, updating Ofsted's information in the children's guide, monitoring of records and reporting to the executive side of the local authority.

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 wishes, feelings and views of children and those significant to them are taken into account in monitoring foster carers and developing the fostering service (NMS1.7)
- ensure that foster carers are supported to make reasonable and appropriate decisions within the authority delegated to them, without having to seek consent unnecessarily (NMS7.4)
- ensure that allowances and any fees paid are reviewed annually and the fostering service consults with foster carers in advance of any change to the allowance and fee (NMS 28.3)
- ensure that the fostering service has a record of the recruitment and suitability checks which have been carried out for foster carers and those working (including as volunteers) for the fostering service (NMS19.3)
- ensure that the fostering service produce a written guide to fostering which includes the address, including email address, and telephone number of HMCI (breach of Regulation 3.3)
- ensure that all people working in or for the fostering service, and the central of persons considered suitable to be members of a fostering panel, are interviewed as part of the selection process and have references checked to assess suitability before taking on responsibilities, and that telephone enquiries are made to each referee to verify the written references (NMS 19.1)
- ensure that children's safety and welfare is promoted in all fostering placement and that children are protected from abuse and other forms of significant harm (NMS4.1)

- ensure that the manager regularly monitors all records kept by the service to ensure compliance with the service's policy to identify any concerns about specific incidents and to identify patterns and trends. Immediate action is taken to address any issues raised by this monitoring (NMS25.2)
- ensure that the executive side of the local authority (a) receive written reports on the management, outcomes and financial state of the fostering service every 3 months and (b) monitor the management and outcomes of the services in order to satisfy themselves that the service is effective and is achieving good outcomes for children. (NMS25.7 (a) (b))

Outcomes for children and young people

Outcomes for young people are **adequate**.

The service has a good matching process that ensures the needs of young people are a priority. As a result, children and young people are generally placed with foster carers who can best meet their needs. This takes into consideration their race, culture, language and any other identified needs. Individual needs in all areas of their lives are well met and this is driven by the Every Child Matters outcomes. Young people are able to contribute to decisions that affect their lives. They say that their foster carers encourage them to participate in discussions about their future. Young people form strong attachment to their foster families and have a good understanding of their histories. They feel safe in their placements, and as a result, they thrive and make good progress.

Children and young people are treated as part of the family and generally feel comfortable in their foster placements. For all planned placements children have the opportunity to receive information about their prospective carers and in some cases visit the home before moving into their placement. As a result children and young people enjoy positive relationships with their foster carers and speak of feeling as part of the family. Young people say they feel valued and cared for. Comments include; 'I am treated like a member of the family' and, 'It feels like my home.' Younger children are very happy with their lifestyles and talk of fun activities, hobbies and seeing their friends.

Children and young people are proud of who they are and they develop emotional resilience. They feel that they receive good care and support from their foster carers. Placement stability is achieved because of the enthusiasm, commitment, and loyalty of foster carers who have kept the focus of the welfare of the children in their care as their priority. Children and young people have a positive self-view and have developed sound relationships with their carers, family and friends. Children and young people are placed with their siblings where possible. Children continue to thrive and foster carers have managed to keep some very difficult placements going. Foster carers felt that the use of the respite care and also the support from back up carers helped them to see some difficult behaviour through. As a result the number of unplanned endings has reduced.

Children and young people benefit from healthy lifestyles and understand the importance of good health. This is achieved through the proactive measures taken by the agency regarding health promotion. For example, the service works closely with other health professionals and is successful in accessing specialist services for young people. Young people engage in a wide range of activities that broaden their outlook on life. They know and understand the risks relating to smoking, alcohol and taking drugs as well as sexual health and the benefits of healthy eating and regular exercise. They are encouraged to pursue their interests and hobbies. Young people say they enjoy activities such as swimming, horse riding, dance and drama.

The educational attainment of young people is improving. They benefit from attending educational establishments that meet their needs. They make good progress from their starting points in placement. For example, there is an expectation that all young people will be in educational placements. A high percentage of children and young people say they enjoy learning because they get the help they need with homework from their foster carers. This is backed up by the increased number of log-ins to the virtual school. Individual needs are very clearly captured within personal education plans. Attendance and achievement figures are rising every year for the authority's fostered children and exclusions are decreasing. Young people are making positive decisions about their education and see this as a way of improving their life chances.

Where possible children and young people are able to participate in normal family life and go on holidays and participate in family events. A young person said, 'I feel like part of the family I have met all the family and their friends.' The issue of delegated authority, however, has not yet been sorted out by the Local Authority. Foster carers highlight issues where children are unable to get their hair cut, due to the lack of delegated authority. Children and young people express that they would like to have a greater influence within the fostering service. They highlight areas they would like to change these include having more information regarding placements and their complaints being taken seriously. Social workers are positive about the future and state that there is a 'drive to raise standards for children' and incorporate the 'voice of the child'.

Quality of service

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

The recruitment of foster carers is seen as a priority for this service. All staff involved in the fostering service recognises the need for good quality care for the children in their care and those who may come into their care in the future. The service knows where the gaps are and a targeted approach based upon its own data will focus on recruitment from all sections of the local community. White foster carers are under-represented in this borough as well as carers from other minority groups. Every effort is being made to increase the number of in-house placements within the

borough so the service will have sufficient numbers of suitable carers to fulfil the fostering needs of the community it serves.

Carers say they that they feel the fostering assessment process gave them a realistic view of fostering. They feel that the fostering process is thorough and is carried out sensitively. Foster carers say that the information sessions and the skills to foster training gave them an understanding of the legislation as well as their role as foster carers. They feel they were well prepared and appropriately supported to appear at the fostering panel.

Matching processes are scrutinised through the fostering panels. Any identified gaps in terms of prospective foster carers' skills, training or experience are explored and planned for. This means that the chances of the success of a placement are maximised, although there is still a number of unplanned endings. The service recognises the value of pathway planning to give young people the clarity about remaining in homes they are settled in.

Carers are allocated a support worker shortly after approval and receive support before their first placement. They say they are never pressurised to take a placement if they do not feel it to be appropriate. As a result, carers develop a good understanding of the needs of young people and understand how these should be met. Carers say the out-of-hours service is good. They speak positively of the support they receive and say that additional support is always available when needed. Family and friends who are assessed as carers also receive support, supervision and training in line with all foster carers.

There is a well-established culture of training and development within the service and expectation that carers will, during their fostering careers gain a good understanding of, amongst other things, health and development, safeguarding and managing challenging behaviour. Training also raises awareness of equality issues relating to culture, religion and disability. Foster carers confirmed that the service provides good quality training. All felt their training had provided a good insight into the difficulties many young people in care experience in regard to both forming and sustaining relationships. The majority 82% have achieved the Childcare Workforce Development Council (CWDC) training standards in foster care. This is an increase from 33% in 2011.

Foster carers are generally satisfied with the support they receive from the Fostering Service. Senior managers are aware of areas of dissatisfaction expressed by some foster carers and a planned and systematic drive towards continued improvement remains on-going. Children and young people are well served by foster carers who are committed and have the necessary skills, experience and knowledge. Placing social workers value foster carers as professional colleagues. This is echoed by foster carers. One foster carer said, 'I feel part of the team looking after the children and young people.'

Safeguarding children and young people

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

The authority received an adequate rating for safeguarding from its Safeguarding and Looked After Children inspection in January 2013. This has resulted in a targeted approach which is driving and achieving improved safeguarding practices throughout the authority including the fostering service.

Written guidance on bullying and behaviour management strategies is clearly communicated to foster carers. Children and young people do not feel they are being bullied in their homes, the community or at school. Comments from young people include, 'I would tell someone if it happened.' Young people feel safe and know that they can rely on their foster carers to keep them safe.

Safeguarding is a focus of every supervision for foster carers. This helps to ensure that foster carers are clear about their responsibilities for protecting young people from harm. Young people know who to turn to if they have a concern or complaint. Systems ensure that concerns raised by children are actively listened to and responded to. Concerns are investigated, risk assessed and managed in the best interest of the child. However these are not routinely audited for patterns or trends.

The service is proactive in protecting young people who go missing. Good links are established with the Local Safeguarding Children Board and interagency working is becoming embedded in practice. Good examples include partnership working with the police, as well as discussions with schools. This help to keep the safety and protection of looked after children high on everyone's agenda.

Supervising Social Workers put aside time to ensure that time is spent alone with the children and young people when they visit. Foster carers who are subject to an allegation receive support from the service and independent sources. The majority of carers say such processes are positive.

There is a strong focus on safeguarding in the recruitment and preparation of foster carers, including those involved in kinship care. Thorough checks are carried out on all carers and adult household members. There is also training in safeguarding, covering areas such as child protection, health and safety, bullying and young people who go missing. As a result, foster carers understand and recognise the impact of abuse and safe care. Unannounced visits to carers' homes occur annually and these promote the safety of young people. Checks are also conducted on new staff members who cannot commence their employment until such checks are satisfactorily completed. There were however gaps in checks for panel members where there were missing and non-verification of references.

Leadership and management

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

Many aspects of leadership and management are sound. The recent appointment of

an interim Head of Service has already resulted in a detailed review and analysis of the service. A permanent appointment is to be made and two new managers for the Fostering Service have been appointed; one will supervise the Recruitment and Assessment team and the other will supervise the Support and Supervising team. Necessary changes are underway. These are clear, focused and driven by the service's desired outcomes for its children and young people.

The number of children in foster care is in line with the national average. However there is an over-reliance on Independent Fostering Agencies to provide this service. The service is striving to increase its own number of approved fostering households and the percentage of children who are placed with Independent Fostering Agencies remains higher than the national average.

Staff have the required qualifications, training and experience needed to supervise and support foster carers. Most staff receive monthly supervisions but the recording of supervision lacks reflective practice as well as evaluation. Staff appraisals are carried out annually.

The majority of carers and staff feel well supported by the service. Foster carers are generally satisfied with the content and frequency of their supervision visits. Carers value support groups and a wider range of training provision than they had historically. Topics including payments and respite provision receive variable satisfaction levels; these are being explored through supervision and focus groups.

The recently appointed interim management team are already achieving a positive impact. There is a clear sense of purpose and direction dedicated to improving outcomes for children and young people. This is demonstrated by staff across all disciplines. Children and young people value the service they receive and have a very high regard for their foster carers. Comments include, 'I feel like part of the family.' 'Where I am now is good where I was before was very bad.'

An informative website, Statement of Purpose and young people's guides provide clear information about the services young people can expect to receive. However these need to be updated with the up-to date information relating to Ofsted. The establishment of consultation forums, including those for foster carers' own children and a 'men who foster' support group, although in its infancy, are also proving effective.

The service is acutely aware of the challenges faced by more children entering the care system each year. To this end, emphasis is also being placed on the recruitment and retention of foster carers so as to increase the number of approved fostering households across the borough. Robust monitoring ensures that the vast majority of children placed outside of the service's own provision are in services judged by Ofsted to be good or outstanding.

Staff say that with the recent appointments and the development of the new managerial structure the level of support and supervision they are receiving has improved and caseloads have become more manageable.

Further strategic plans are still to be implemented. Staff and carers are kept abreast of all such proposals. Improved IT systems are now in place. This makes it possible for all staff to access information about each child. Senior managers are driving improvements with regards to learning from reliable sources of information such as the Monroe Report. The service is focused upon making improvements. A clear action plan is entering its secondary phase because initial work has been completed.

The ten recommendations regarding safeguarding, foster carers reviews, fostering panel recording, Statement of Purpose, the Children's Guide, monitoring, record keeping in relation to foster carers and foster carers training made from the last fostering inspection of June 2010 have been implemented.

There has been an honest extensive evaluation of the service and there are clear aspirations and a commitment to improve practice and develop a stronger vision for the service to raise standards and focus on impact and outcomes for children. Foster carers and staff say that they have seen change for the better, now that they have councillors involvement, 'corporate backing'. The service demonstrates a sincere commitment to sustained improvement. Leaders and managers recognise that the executive side of the organisation need to be kept informed to ensure that there is continued oversight of the service.

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.