

# Greater London Fostering

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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## 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.

This report details the main strengths and any areas for improvement identified during the inspection. The judgements included in the report are made in relation to the outcome for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and relevant National Minimum Standards for the establishment.

## The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding:	this aspect of the provision is of exceptionally high quality
Good:	this aspect of the provision is strong
Satisfactory:	this aspect of the provision is sound
Inadequate:	this aspect of the provision is not good enough

## Service information

### Brief description of the service

Greater London Fostering is an independent fostering agency and is run and managed by its three directors. The stated aim of the service is to 'recruit, train and support foster carers .....to provide the best possible care to children who for many different reasons cannot live with their own families'. The office premises of Greater London Fostering Service is located in Crouch End, within of the London Borough of Haringey. The staff group consists of two team managers, one senior practitioner, supervising social workers and other supervising 'link' workers. The service had recently recruited a placements officer and a new chair of the fostering panel had been appointed. The fostering service has a long standing history of providing social work placements for social work students. The service regularly organises outings and social activities for children and young people in placement, foster carers and their families and also staff.

### Summary

The purpose of the announced inspection of Greater London Fostering is to assess the service against key National Minimum Standards and gauge improvement made to the service since the last inspection that was conducted 12 months ago. The inspection process was conducted over eight days; its scope was wide ranging. Overall Greater London Fostering is judged to be a satisfactory service. The service has developed and implemented sound policies and written guidance that is well known to foster carers and staff. The recruitment, assessment and support of foster carers is largely very good and consultation with young people and the facilitation of contact between young people and their significant others is excellent. Staff are committed to providing well matched placements for 'Looked After' children and young people and the service's fostering panel functions efficiently. Good attention is paid to issues of diversity and equality within the service. However a number of concerns are noted in relation to two outcome areas; Staying Safe and Organisation. Personnel files of staff employed by the fostering service and recruited foster care panel members do not evidence full information as required to ensure the safe vetting of personnel. Individual safe caring policies are not evident on each file and decisions regarding placement exemptions are not always made in accordance with practice protocols. The service's 'Children's Guide' and Foster Care Agreement document does not fully meet the requirements of the regulations. Some files do not evidence satisfactory case recording and all foster carers must complete fully an induction process prior to placements being negotiated.

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

This is an overview of what the inspector found during the inspection.

### Improvements since the last inspection

The last inspection of Greater London Fostering resulted in no requirements and no recommendations. Since the last inspection, the service has recreated a new placements officer post and has further developed its administrative data base and IT systems.

### Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

The fostering service promotes well the health and development of young people in their care. Young people's individual case files contain good information relating to their medical and health care needs, acquired both from information held by the placing authority and via foster

carers' direct involvement in pursuing health care services on behalf of children and young people. Medical and health care issues as they pertain to young people are consistently explored via foster carers' supervision sessions and in other formal settings such as Looked After Children (LAC) statutory reviews. Foster carers understand well their role in promoting the good health and young people's development and confirm that core mandatory training offered by the fostering service focussed on health care issues. Good written guidance is available to foster carers via the agency's Foster Carers' Handbook and a series of training opportunities focussed on health care issues are also available to foster carers. Foster carers' individual files and returned questionnaire responses indicate that training has been received that focused on first aid training, sex education for foster children, healthy nutrition and good health care promotion. Relevant policies and procedures are in place to support the practice of carers and staff in addressing the health care needs of young people in placement. Young people interviewed in placement confirm that they are encouraged to live healthy lifestyles and that efforts were supported by their carers. Where necessary, the services of specialist health care professionals are sought. For example, there is evidence on individual young people's files of referrals being made to community adolescence mental health services and other external counselling resources. The fostering service facilitates young people's access to play therapy services which are conducted at the office premises and there is excellent access to health care and medical advice via the service's medical advisor who is a member of the fostering panel. The service maintains centralised records of accidents and undesired 'incidents'. Both foster carers and staff are encouraged to contribute relevant documentation. In cross referencing documented accidents and incidents recorded on individual files it became apparent that the centralised mechanism did not evidence all accidents as reported by foster carers and staff and so was not consistently utilized.

### **Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe**

The provision is satisfactory.

Both the responsible person and registered manager are qualified social workers with extensive experience in the fields of child protection, fostering and family support. The directors of Greater London Fostering are very suitable to manage the fostering service. Team managers of the fostering service are qualified and experienced; practitioners are either qualified social workers or are staff who have good relevant experience of the fostering task. Foster carers have 24 hours access to staff as there is an out of hours provision available to foster carers should support or advice be required outside of the service's core working hours. The fostering agency provides foster carers with information and training that address child protection issues; this also explored as part of foster carers' supervisory visits. Foster carers indicate that they have a good understanding of child protection policies and procedures which is supported by guidance available in the Foster Carers' Handbook. Foster carers comment that training opportunities that address issues of child protection is good. The fostering service appropriately manages allegations made against foster carers. Foster carers' homes provide a safe, healthy and nurturing environment; file documentation confirm that health and safety checks are completed at least annually, although one exception to this was noted on file. The fostering service has in place policies and procedures that address bullying and young people who abscond from placement without authority. Formal written agency policies that address safe care are in place and foster carers are expected to develop their own safe caring practice policies in relation to each child or young person placed with them. Individual safe caring policies were evident on files reviewed with the exception of one. It was also noted in another case file that the documented safe caring policy did not adequately address issues of safety pertinent to the

young person in placement and in fact the policy was in contradiction to guidelines as recommended by the placing authority. During the inspection staff personnel files were reviewed. It was noted that not all required information as specified in Schedule 1 of the Fostering Services Regulations had been obtained. All staff files evidence Criminal Record Bureau (CRB) checks, however, no positive proof of identity was available for three of the five staff files reviewed, few staff photographs were evident as required and two staff files evidenced only one written reference as opposed to the two which are required. Managers explained that one staff member for whom there was only one written reference had been employed by the service for several years and prior to fostering regulations being issued. However, for another staff member more recently employed, it was clear that the second written reference was received only after the staff member had started to work for the fostering service. This is not consistent with safe staff recruitment practices. The fostering service provides suitable foster carers. The recruitment of carers and the fostering service's vetting of prospective carers is good. Individual foster carers' files evidence completion of required checks, good exploration during the assessment process of issues of concern and areas needing further clarification. Files evidence the appropriate vetting of foster carers' identified support network. With regard to the matching process, staff of the fostering service give careful consideration to the specific needs of young people and how best these are to be met by available foster carers. Children and young people are generally matched with foster carers in line with the conditions of foster carers' approval. However, it was noted that one young person was placed with foster carers whose age at the time of the placement was outside the approval status of the foster carer. There was no evidence on file to suggest an exemption had been granted and managers confirm that no discussion had taken place with any member of the service's fostering panel as per practice protocol. Directors of the fostering service are responsible for agreeing referrals, this task is due shortly to be allocated to the newly developed placements officer post. The cultural, religious and linguistic skills and experiences of foster carers are well documented, these help guide staff of the fostering agency to facilitate placement match. Where placements are arranged and there are noted gaps in the match, these are documented on the initial placement agreement. The majority of placements arranged as are done so on an emergency basis; where this is not the case, files indicate that planned introduction between foster carers and young people are facilitated by the service. The service's fostering panel operates efficiently and effectively; there are written procedures in place and meetings are quorate when convened. The fostering panel has appropriate membership, including a newly appointed chairperson. The panel lacks a representative whose expertise is education. The fostering panel performs a quality assurance function and meetings highlight strengths and weakness of work presented to panel meetings. There is good administrative support. No foster care panel meeting was observed as part of this inspection, however, two panel meeting minutes were reviewed and were considered satisfactory. In reviewing the personnel files for four members of the service's the fostering panel, it was noted that all files evidence CRB checks. However, three files failed to evident positive proof of identification, two files contain only one of the two required written references, while one file evidenced no written reference at all. Managers of the service comment that they were unaware of the need to maintain this information for members of the fostering panel.

### **Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do**

The provision is good.

The fostering service values diversity and works effectively with young people from varying backgrounds; foster carers' ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds reflect those of the wider community. The fostering agency recognises that some groups are under represented in the

pool of current approved foster carers. In response to this strategies are being developed by the management team to target recruitment to address this imbalance. Issues of diversity and equality are explored with prospective carers throughout the assessment process and thereafter following foster carers' approval at panel. Issues of young people's identity and self esteem are consistently explored during supervisory visits. Good consideration is given to the experiences and skills of carers as part of the matching process and the fostering service has in place policies that address issues of diversity and equality. These are well known to staff and foster carers and feature in the Foster Carers' Handbook. Core and specialist training is offered to foster carers that concentrate of issues of diversity and equality. One foster carer interviewed shared her experience of co-facilitating training for foster carers that focussed on working with young people of the Muslim faith. Staff and carers consistently demonstrate commitment to anti-discriminatory practice. The fostering service promotes the high educational achievement of young people in placement and foster carers are clear about the expectation that they fully support the educational attainment of young people in their care. Written guidance is available via the Foster Carers' Handbook and carers confirm their attendance at relevant training sessions. Young people comment that their carers have been instrumental in their continuing learning and great efforts are made by the placing authority and the fostering service to ensure, where possible the continuity of school/college attendance. Files evidence and foster carers verbally confirm that they are actively involved in supporting the continued education of young people in a number of ways. These include monitoring homework performance, attending Personal Educational Planning meetings and parent consultation school meetings, monitoring truanting behaviour and providing learning resources, such as, access to the internet for homework research purposes. Carers are involved in planning for the educational needs of young people who have learning difficulties. The educational needs of young people in placement is explored consistently via the supervision process and staff are aware of presented issues. Young people comment that they feel their educational needs are being met by the placement. Greater London Fostering does not offer a short breaks provision. The service, however, does facilitate respite services for its own carers making use of an existing pool of carers approved for the purpose of respite only or via foster carers own support systems. Foster carers are appreciative of this provision, although some carers commented on their frustration with regard to the financial arrangements in place.

### **Helping children make a positive contribution**

The provision is outstanding.

A clear strength of the fostering service is staff and foster carers' efforts to ensure, where appropriate, that young people maintain contact with friends, family and significant others. The importance of young people experiencing positive contact with family and friends is highly promoted and is keenly acknowledged by staff and foster carers. The office premises of Greater London Fostering has specific space designated for the purpose of supervised contact that can be used by young people in placement and can also be utilised by the local authorities for the purposes of supervised contact. The contact centre is a very useful resource that allows for contact to be facilitated in a safe and sometimes familiar environment for children and young people in placement with Greater London Fostering. In addition where appropriate, the venue for contact can also be extended to the homes of foster carers other than the primarily identified carer; contact can also be supervised by the 'host' foster carer. Individual files reviewed indicate complex and intricate contact arrangements in place and evidence the sometimes extraordinary efforts of staff and foster carers to ensure these arrangements are complied with. Staff and foster carers talk of and demonstrate personal commitment to young people developing and

maintaining relationships while in placement. Staff work well with foster carers to consider the impact of these contact arrangements and foster carers are encouraged to record outcomes and evidence the impact to young people. Staff work diligently with the placing authority to ensure that plans and adequate provision is in place to facilitate positive outcomes. Contact issues and contact arrangements feature strongly on the agenda for supervision between staff and foster carers. Young people are regularly encouraged to share their opinion about arrangements in place to facilitate continuing relationships with family members and friends. The fostering service regularly invites the birth parents and siblings of young people in placement to participate in social events and outings organised by Greater London Fostering in an attempt to keep family members connected, involved and appraised of their children's development while in placement. The fostering service promotes good consultation with young people on a number of levels. Staff and foster carers are committed to this ethos and understand the intrinsic value in exploring the views and opinions of children and young people. The review of case files and discussions with foster carers and young people confirm that consultation with young people is viewed as being an integral feature of the fostering task and that the efforts of staff and foster carers are supported by training, written and practice guidance. Case files contain good evidence of supervising staff spending extended periods of time with young people talking with them, sharing ideas and exploring a range of pertinent issues. In some instances, staff are working directly and extensively to support and enhance the consultation process. Additionally, young people have the opportunity to formally share their opinions, particularly about the placement and their carers via the LAC process and as part of the foster carer annual review process. The fostering service has a robust complaints procedure in place that is well known to staff and foster carers. Information about making complaints is available to young people via the 'Children's Guide'. Making complaints or raising concerns is regularly discussed with young people. The fostering service maintains records of all complaints or issues of concern made. Documented evidence highlights that these are dealt with promptly and in accordance with the service's complaints procedure.

### **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is good.

Staff of the fostering service and foster carers understand their role in supporting young people leave local authority care to live independently in the community; relevant training opportunities are offered by the service. One young person and his foster carer commented that, in preparation of the young person leaving the placement and moving on to semi-independent living, the carer ensures that there is a focus on daily living skills. The young person is supported to shop and cook independently, complete laundry tasks and is encouraged to save funds to put towards living independently in the wider community. A foster carer interviewed said of the young person currently in placement '(X) has savings - every week he's given money in anticipation of his leaving.' The foster carers are holding regular discussions with the young person about 'moving on' and helping them develop life skills. The fostering service has in place written guidance and policies that relate to allowances and agreed expenses. Foster carers confirm that they consistently receive prompt payment at the agreed rate. One foster carer commented, 'The payment of finances is prompt and always as expected'. The service has recently introduced financial and recording systems to help foster carers and the service better monitor placement expenditure. While most foster carers indicated they understood why these measures were necessary, some foster carers felt this posed some issues. One carer commented, 'Its hard to stick to the expenditure rules, you're constantly juggling figures and it contradicts feelings of normality.' Similarly some foster carers indicate that the payment of carers who offered respite

services to young people's primary foster carers needed review. Managers of the fostering service are aware of these views and continue to manage and address these issues with foster carers.

## Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

The fostering service has a clear statement of its aims and objectives and outlines the facilities and services provided. The Statement of Purpose document of Greater London Fostering complies fully with information required. The service's Children's Guide is an easy read document intended to be used by young people with their foster carers or staff to learn more about the service and more about the young person. The Children's Guide is a useful working document but is not a summary of the more detailed Statement of Purpose as required by the regulations. So, for example, the guide does not highlight information about the organisational structure, that is, the varying roles and posts held within the service or details of staff experience and qualifications. The fostering service has an appropriate number of experienced and qualified staff. Two of the directors are very experienced, qualified social workers and have qualifications in management. The two team managers are also experienced, qualified social workers as are the three senior practitioners. Supervising link workers are either qualified social workers or staff who have good experience of the foster care task. The service also utilises the services of independent qualified social workers to complete Form F assessments and regularly offers social work placements to social work students. The service has recently appointed a placements officer. The fostering service has a clear management structure and there are clear lines of accountability. Staff are organised well and are encouraged to assist in the fostering service's development. One staff member said, 'It's a way of life - more than a job'. Staff indicate that both formal and informal supervision is available to them and that they enjoy the opportunity of working collaboratively with colleagues and managers. Staff are primarily home based workers and this way of working is attractive to most of the current staff group. There are good IT systems in place to support staff work from home. The fostering service has monitoring systems in place and continues to develop systems that encourage greater use of IT and electronic recording systems as opposed to those which are almost exclusively manually generated. Staff explain that the system is sophisticated and facilitates managers review of all electronic file recording, which is then signed off. Despite this, however, concern is expressed for some entries seen on file that were considered inappropriate and others which brought into question the practice of some individual staff. Organisational issues are also highlighted; the foster carer agreement is not fully compliant with Schedule 5 of the regulations and systems to ensure the thorough induction of new foster carers appear inconsistent. Documented evidence was seen on one file to suggest the induction of a foster care couple had not been completed thoroughly by the time the first placement was agreed. The foster carers expressed concerns about their induction and overall support received. Staff of the fostering service acknowledge and comment that it was likely that following their approval at panel the foster carers was not promptly allocated a named supervising worker. Views of other foster carers who were interviewed and received responses via returned questionnaires are very positive about the level of support received via Greater London Fostering. One foster carer said of support offered, 'We receive a lot of support, particularly with our first emergency placement. They picked her up from the hospital, we didn't have extensive information and were visited early on in the placement.' A foster carer's written response states, 'GLF have been a good service to work with. The social worker is always available when you need to talk to her within or outside of working hours.' Foster carers and staff confirm that support groups are available; foster carers attend to varying

degrees. The service is continuing to develop a support group run by and for men. The service annually organises a range of social events and outings for young people, foster carers and their families and staff and family. At the time of the inspection the service had purchased property in France, anticipated to be used by the service for primarily recreational purposes. With regard to training, foster carers and staff indicate that training opportunities are excellent and that carers are encouraged to facilitate both training sessions and support groups. Training available to foster carers is four tiered; preparatory training, induction, core and foundation training. Foster carers' files evidence individual training profiles and their training and developmental needs are consistently reviewed as part of the supervision process and more formally as a feature of annual reviews. Some foster carers indicate their attendance at training is not as consistent as they would wish due to varying commitments, particularly over the weekend when many of the training sessions are held. The service continues to explore flexible alternative training arrangements. One foster carer said of training provided by the service, 'I love training. I think its good to learn from other foster carers'. A foster carer's written response states, 'I think they should encourage carers to be more computer literate. Providing computers and training. This would improve communication, record keeping, ability to obtain information as well as providing equipment and understanding for children' Case files for children and young people contain relevant information obtained from various sources including statutory LAC information; Care plans and LAC reviews and information obtained from carers themselves. There was good documentation on file of staff requesting key and pertinent information about young people held by the placing authority be shared with the fostering service. Administrative records are generally maintained in accordance to the requirements of the regulations.

## What must be done to secure future improvement?

### Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions, which must be taken so that the registered person meets the Care Standards Act 2000, The Fostering Services Regulations 2005 and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider must comply with the given timescales.

Standard	Action	Due date
15	ensure that the personnel files of staff evidence full information as outlined in Schedule 1 of the Fostering Services Regulations (Regulation 20)	30 May 2008
15	ensure that the personnel files of fostering panel members evidence full information as outlined in Schedule 1 of the Fostering Services Regulations (Regulation 20)	30 May 2008
9	ensure that safe caring guidelines are in place for each foster home.(Regulation 12)	30 May 2008
9	ensure that safe caring guidelines are specific to individual children and young people so that their welfare is safeguarded and promoted at all times. (Regulation 11)	30 May 2008
8	ensure that the welfare of children and young people is safeguarded and promoted by placements being arranged in accordance to the conditions of foster carers' registration or via formally agreed exemptions. (Regulation 11)	30 May 2008

1	review the Children's Guide regularly.(Regulation 4)	30 May 2008
19	provide targeted training for staff focused on case recording.(Regulation 21)	30 May 2008
22	ensure that all foster care agreements are up to date and include all matters as set out in regulation 28(5)(b) schedule 5 (Regulation 28)	30 May 2008
22	provide foster carers with such training and advice, including an induction as appears necessary in the interests of children placed with them (Regulation 17)	30 May 2008

## Recommendations

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

- encourage staff to consistently record all accidents that occur to young people in placement in the centrally maintained accident/incidents book. (NMS 12)
- consider recruiting to the fostering panel an individual who has expertise in education. (NMS 30)

## Annex

## Annex A

### National Minimum Standards for independent fostering agency

#### Being healthy

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service promotes the health and development of children (NMS 12)

**Ofsted considers 12 the key standard to be inspected.**

#### Staying safe

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- any persons carrying on or managing the service are suitable (NMS 3)
- the fostering service provides suitable foster carers (NMS 6)
- the service matches children to carers appropriately (NMS 8)
- the fostering service protects each child or young person from abuse and neglect (NMS 9)
- the people who work in or for the fostering service are suitable to work with children and young people (NMS 15)
- fostering panels are organised efficiently and effectively (NMS 30)

**Ofsted considers 3, 6, 8, 9, 15 and 30 the key standards to be inspected.**

#### Enjoying and achieving

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service values diversity (NMS 7)
- the fostering service promotes educational achievement (NMS 13)
- when foster care is provided as a short-term break for a child, the arrangements recognise that the parents remain the main carers for the child (NMS 31)

**Ofsted considers 7, 13 and 31 the key standards to be inspected.**

#### Making a positive contribution

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service promotes contact arrangements for the child or young person (NMS 10)
- the fostering service promotes consultation (NMS 11)

**Ofsted considers 10 and 11 the key standards to be inspected.**

#### Achieving economic well-being

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service prepares young people for adulthood (NMS 14)
- the fostering service pays carers an allowance and agreed expenses as specified (NMS 29)

**Ofsted considers none of the above to be key standards to be inspected.**

#### Organisation

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- there is a clear statement of the aims and objectives of the fostering service and the fostering service ensures that they meet those aims and objectives (NMS 1)
- the fostering service is managed by those with the appropriate skills and experience (NMS 2)
- the fostering service is monitored and controlled as specified (NMS 4)

**Annex A**

- the fostering service is managed effectively and efficiently (NMS 5)
- staff are organised and managed effectively (NMS 16)
- the fostering service has an adequate number of sufficiently experienced and qualified staff (NMS 17)
- the fostering service is a fair and competent employer (NMS 18)
- there is a good quality training programme (NMS 19)
- all staff are properly accountable and supported (NMS 20)
- the fostering service has a clear strategy for working with and supporting carers (NMS 21)
- foster carers are provided with supervision and support (NMS 22)
- foster carers are appropriately trained (NMS 23)
- case records for children are comprehensive (NMS 24)
- the administrative records are maintained as required (NMS 25)
- The premises used as offices by the fostering service are suitable for the purpose (NMS 26)
- the fostering service is financially viable (NMS 27)
- the fostering service has robust financial processes (NMS 28)
- local authority fostering services recognise the contribution made by family and friends as carers (NMS 32)

**Ofsted considers 1, 16, 17, 21, 24, 25 and 32 the key standards to be inspected.**