

London Borough of Bromley Fostering Service

Inspection report for local authority 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 outcomes for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and the relevant National Minimum Standards for the service.

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

The London Borough of Bromley fostering service is a local authority fostering service that provides short-term and long-term foster carers for children and young people. The service also provides a short-break scheme and kinship care. The service has approximately 134 in-house foster carers and the majority of Bromley's looked after children are placed with Bromley's own carers. The service is based in Joseph Lancaster House at the Civic Centre, Bromley.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

The fostering service provides good, personalised care for children and young people, taking into account their individual needs. Children and young people's views have been sought about the quality of care they receive and feedback has led to improvements to their care. The fostering service is good at engaging with foster carers, meeting young people's educational needs, ensuring that they lead healthy lifestyles and supporting young people in making decisions about their everyday lives. Areas for improvement relate to monitoring and administration systems, such as ensuring that staff have yearly appraisals, that recording processes are reflective of the work that is undertaken and that the foster carers' handbook is updated. However, these shortfalls do not have an immediate and direct impact on the service's support of young people and foster carers. The fostering service is already aware of these shortfalls and has been diligently working to address them.

Improvements since the last inspection

At the last inspection two statutory requirements were made. Notifications are now being sent to Ofsted as required. The service is in the process of transferring foster carers' files onto an information technology system. In the interim, there has been some improvement in the organisation of the files of some foster carers.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Children and young people live in healthy and caring environments where their physical, emotional and psychological needs are promoted and where they are able to access other services to meet these needs. There is clear statistical evidence that the healthcare needs of looked after children and young people have improved and the majority of looked after children medicals have been completed. There are very good links with the child and adolescent mental health service and other professional

bodies. Foster carers spoken to said that the health resource is very good especially when they need this support. The looked after children nurse offers excellent support for young people and foster carers, is flexible in her approach and can be contacted directly. The looked after children nurse has successfully engaged young people who have been reluctant to undertake medicals, provide support with young people's sexual health and has offered practical support and supervision for foster carers who are inexperienced in the administration of feeding tubes.

Children and young people are also encouraged to take charge of their health and well-being. Over the past three years there has been an increase in the number of placements for newborns and babies. Foster carers confirmed that they are appropriately supported and if they need additional help, this is assessed by their supervising social worker who ensures that the child's overall welfare and care are managed safely. Foster carers are given training in safe caring and the management and administration of medication. Any physical adaptation or equipment needed for the appropriate care of the child or young person are provided to the foster carer.

Prior to a foster carer being approved a health and safe checklist is completed and this is reviewed yearly as part of the carers' annual review. All foster carers are trained in health and safety. The home of each foster carer visited was found to be homely, warm and comfortable. This was reiterated by the children and young people. Each child and young person is provided with separate bedrooms and communal spaces shared as a family were found to be spacious and comfortable.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

Children and young people spoken to said that they feel safe and are safe in their home environment. Foster carers actively safeguard and promote the welfare of their foster child and they understand clearly who they call if they have any concerns or issues. Relationships between foster carers and children are based on mutual respect, understanding and clear professional and personal boundaries which are effective. Children and young people understand how to protect themselves and are also protected from significant harm including neglect, abuse, and accident. There is clear guidance in place in relation to sanctions and punishments. Foster carers respond positively to acceptable behaviour, and where the behaviour is regarded as unacceptable, this is responded to constructively. All foster carers said that they feel supported by the fostering service and can use other supportive groups for further advice. All foster carers once approved undertake training in child protection, safeguarding and safe caring. There is a robust and comprehensive safeguarding policy and procedure which has been updated in line with the London-wide safeguarding board procedures.

Bromley's Children Missing from Home/Care policy has been reviewed and now follows the guidance of the national Runaways and Missing from Home and Care protocol in order that resources are focused on the most vulnerable young people who have gone missing rather than young people who are unauthorised absent.

Any allegation or suspicion of abuse is investigated thoroughly, speedily and sensitively. Once investigated, there is a clear procedure requiring the fostering panel to undertake further quality assurance action prior to the foster carer being re-approved. Timeout may be considered by the fostering panel as an appropriate and supportive medium for the foster carer; with the support and guidance provided by the supervising social worker to review their practices and skills.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The educational achievement of all children and young people is actively promoted and valued as part of the care undertaken by foster carers and the fostering service. Foster carers drive children and young people to school if required, attend personal education plan meetings and provide support with homework. The fostering service has good links with Bromley's children in care education service which is a virtual school. The school receives information about children and young people when accommodated including details of placements to ensure there is a timely involvement from the service. Any issues of non-attendance and transport are addressed quickly by the fostering service. Therefore, foster carers feel confident that any child or young person placed with them will be appropriately supported. The fostering service is good at ensuring that young people are placed in education. Children and young people have access to a range of educational resources to support their learning and development needs; this includes pre-school and older children. The educational achievement of children and young people in care is good, school attendance is high, as is the number of looked after children who have gone on to further education and university.

Children and young people are able to pursue individual interests and hobbies. There are a number of groups and activities they can attend which are provided through the fostering service and links to other services within the borough. Foster carers arrange various activities according to the child or young person's developmental needs and linked to their placement plan.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Young people are able to enjoy their interests and develop confidence in their skills by engaging in leisure activities that develop their emotional, intellectual, social, creative and physical skills. Young people have access to leisure passes within the London Borough of Bromley that maximise opportunities for them to make use of local facilities. The fostering service financially supports foster carers for young people to engage in leisure activities of their choice, although some carers are unclear as to whose responsibility it is to source the activities for young people in the first instance. This does not impact on young people's ability to be involved in their chosen activity, as the foster carers ensure that this is not the case.

The fostering service is very good at ensuring that the wishes and feelings of young people can be heard. Foster carers spoken with were able to evidence that they spend a lot of time talking and getting to know young people in order that their individual needs can be met. This includes areas such as helping them to understand decisions about their future. The fostering service has recently undertaken a number of surveys in relation to the quality of service that is offered to children and young people. This includes gaining the views of children and young people's relating to looked after children reviews, child protection conferences and the planned transformation of short break services. This has led to improvements, such as independent reviewing officers having contact cards so that children and young people can have direct access to them. A Living in Care Council has recently been formed and is due to be launched in July 2011. Their task is to ensure that the wishes and feelings of all looked after children, including those leaving care are heard and services provided for them. This involves ensuring that as many children and young people as possible can access this service. As a result, 'The HUB' is being launched; this is a service which can be accessed via the internet. Appropriate safeguards are in place, so that it can only be accessed by children and young people who are looked after by the London Borough of Bromley, so they can be made aware of services that are on offer and be informed on matters such as bullying in a discreet and private manner. A young children's panel interviewed candidates for the Assistant Director's post and are involved in the recruitment and interview of social work posts in the looked after and leaving care teams, as well as the induction programme for staff and foster carers. This ensures that questions are asked about matters that are important to them and that they have a say in choosing staff that they think have a genuine interest and can relate to them.

Contact arrangements are good. These are undertaken in accordance with the children and young people's care plans to ensure that they only have contact with people who it is safe to do so. Existing contact arrangements can be changed if it is believed that it is not in the best interest of children and young people. Foster carers monitor their responses and will inform their supervising social worker if they have concerns about young people's physical, sexual and emotional welfare following contact visits. Foster carers are supportive of the arrangements set and will accommodate within contact the specific to the needs of children and young people. This includes facilitating telephone contact or travelling to a place of contact with the child or young person. They receive remuneration from the fostering service where appropriate.

Children and young people are welcomed and leave foster homes in a planned and sensitive manner which makes them feel valued. There are clear procedures in place which enable the child or young person to have a smooth transition into their new home. This includes providing as much information as possible with regards to their prospective placements and to have overnight stays so that they can have an idea and understanding about their new family. Children and young people can bring their personal effects into their new home which gives them a sense of familiarity and self worth. They have free access to their new home and everyday household rules are clearly set out to them at the start and reinforced at appropriate intervals. Foster

carers view children and young people as family members and maintain contact with them after they have left. Foster carers speak with pride about young people who return to inform them of their progress, long after they have left the placement. This is conducted in accordance with care plans for children or young people who have been adopted.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

Children and young people are prepared for and supported into adulthood so that they can reach their full potential and achieve economic well-being. Foster carers are aware that part of their responsibility is to prepare children and young people to live independently from a relatively young age. As such, younger children are given responsibilities in caring for themselves. This includes their personal care and undertaking household chores in accordance with their age and capabilities. Older young people are supported with tasks such as budgeting and shopping. Children and young people have bank accounts and are encouraged to save regularly in order they can financially prepare for their future. Foster carers work collaboratively with social workers to support children and young people in implementing their pathway plans. Children and young people have the option of being able to remain in foster care beyond the age of 18 with continued funding to the carers. There are also robust arrangements for children and young people with learning difficulties or disabilities to ensure a smooth transition to adult services, education, training or employment. A 'floating support worker' is in place to assist young people in their transition to permanent accommodation in addition to their allocated advisor. The Floating Support Service helps young people who require assistance with the development of key life skills needed to sustain a tenancy. This includes assisting them to obtain and manage welfare benefits or to seek work or further education. The local authority has a package of care to support care leavers, up to the age of 24, who wish to enter higher educational programmes. Within the past three years, 10 young people have been successful in their studies and have achieved degrees in subjects ranging from business management to psychology.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

Supervising social workers have the appropriate qualifications and experience to competently support foster carers. Supervising social workers have actively been recruited in order to ensure greater stability for young people. Safeguards to ensure that staff are fit to work with children and young people are very good and ensure that full and satisfactory information is available about staff. These safeguards are also in place for fostering households and the central list of members on the fostering panel. This includes records of identity checks, two references and Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks. CRB checks are undertaken on a three yearly basis, with the date of when each check was completed. These procedures prevent unsuitable people having the opportunity to harm children and young people.

The Statement of Purpose clearly sets out the aims and objectives of the fostering service. It gives those interested in the service a clear understanding of how it intends to recruit and support foster carers and staff in promoting the welfare of children and young people.

The fostering panel is undertaken by a core group of members who are quorate and make decisions about the approval and reviewing of foster carers. The fostering panel also undertakes a quality assurance role which ensures that assessments are of good quality and undertaken within a timely fashion. Reports are presented to panel members at least 10 days prior to panel date, so that there is time for additional information to be requested to prevent any delay to recommendations being made in relation to foster carers' approval or reviews. Any queries or concerns are highlighted by the fostering chair and effectively acted upon by the fostering team. The chair of the panel states that she has seen developments in a number of areas that have led to improved performance in the last two years. This has included closer supervision of sessional staff to ensure consistency of reports presented to panel. Annual appraisal of panel members is undertaken by the panel chair to review panel members' performance against agreed objectives, such as training needs and their levels of commitment. The fostering process is transparent for potential foster carers and it is only in rare and exceptional circumstances where they may not be invited to contribute and have their views heard during this process.

Reviews and visits of foster carers are undertaken within timescales. There is a quality assurance administration system in place which alerts supervising social worker to when looked after children reviews are due. This is also a system in place to ensure the renewal of foster carers' CRB checks are conducted at appropriate intervals.

The premises are suitable to meet the objectives set out in the Statement of Purpose. For instance meeting rooms can be booked for meetings and interviewing of potential foster carers to ensure that sensitive information can be discussed in private. In addition, designated members of staff are in place to answer initial queries and to ensure that literature is sent out to potential foster carers in a timely manner.

Matching of children and young people with foster carers is good and maximises the likelihood of a stable placement. Foster carers are provided with information about the young person prior to them being placed in order that they can undertake their role effectively. Transracial placements are kept under review and the child or young person may be moved to a more appropriate placement as soon as possible. All carers are required to attend training on equality, diversity and discrimination.

There is a development plan in place, which sets out how the fostering service plans to improve the service that they provide. Gate keeping processes are in place to ensure that requests made for placements fit the criteria of the fostering service and for placement with independent fostering agency. These are reviewed regularly to ensure that they are providing 'best value' for their services. The fostering service is

also exploring commissioning initiatives with neighbouring boroughs to further enhance their service provision in a cost-effective way.

Training and support are available for all foster carers that assist them in meeting the specific needs of children and young people. This includes training in safeguarding and child development. Foster carers maintain a portfolio of the courses that they have undertaken so that they can meet the skills required of them by the fostering service. Foster carers' appraisal of their performance is discussed during their annual reviews and against clear and consistent standards. Children and young people's and other family members' views are taken into account during this process to ensure the foster carers continuing suitability to work with children and young people.

Each foster carer is supervised by a named, appropriately qualified social worker, who they meet regularly with. Good cover arrangements are in place, should the supervising social worker be away for any length of time. This includes use of the duty system and out-of-hours service. Foster carers are provided with a handbook which covers policies, procedures and other information that relates to their care task. The handbook is in the process of being updated to include the new national minimum standards for fostering services and information relating to making a complaint.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Recommendations

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

- ensure that records are clear and up to date and contribute to an understanding of a young person's life (NMS 26)
- ensure that there is a clear and transparent policy written on payments to foster carers (NMS 28)
- ensure that staff have their performance individually and formally appraised at least annually. (NMS 24)