

# London Borough of Bexley Fostering

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 fostering service is provided by the integrated children's placement service (CPS), which also provides the council's adoption service. The service is responsible for the recruitment, assessment, support, supervision and review of foster carers for children looked after by Bexley Council. There is a duty team which is responsible for accepting referrals and initiating the process to arrange placements with in-house and independent fostering agency carers. Placements are provided across the range, which includes emergencies, short term, long term, permanency, parent and child and short break stays for children with disabilities.

### **Summary**

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

Children and young people thrive within fostering households which place them at the very centre of the provision. Excellent consultation mechanisms ensure they are heard and effectively responded to. Staff members across all disciplines respect each others' roles and work collaboratively to offer the very best service possible; senior managers constantly look for ways to improve and this tells children that they are highly valued. Foster carers receive the training, support and guidance they need in order to provide safe, nurturing placements, which frequently result in long-term stability. Shortfalls are aired and worked through in an attempt to continue to improve services for the children and their carers.

Three recommendations have been made as a result of this visit. These are largely concerned with documentation and had already been highlighted by the service as requiring improvement.

### **Improvements since the last inspection**

Eight recommendations were made from the previous inspection of 4 February 2008. These were concerned with health and safety checks to fostering households, transport arrangements, safe care guidance, recruitment checks and various anomalies with regards to record keeping.

the service is able to demonstrate clear progress in all of these areas. Health and safety checks and processes have been updated and transport arrangements are clear. Safe care policies are in place within all fostering households, recruitment checks are robust and records hold greater clarity.

Services for children and young people have improved as a direct result of a service which responds positively and appropriately to the inspection process.

## Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

Children and young people are thriving within nurturing environments, which effectively promote their physical and emotional well-being. Comprehensive assessments identify presenting health needs and these are carefully considered during initial matching processes. Children and young people are placed within households which can effectively meet their needs as a direct result.

A comprehensive training programme equips foster carers with the information and guidance they need to meet the health needs of those they look after. Foster carers are very positive about the individual and specific guidance they receive. Comments include, 'I get exactly what I need in terms of training' and 'I'm confident in meeting the health needs of the child placed with me because of the quality and frequency of the training.'

Foster carers give very high praise to the additional health services provided by the borough. The children's and adolescent mental health services team is particularly commended, with comments including, 'we can self-refer' and 'the response is immediate.' Additional services, including the looked after children's nurse, receive equally positive feedback. Children and young people are up to date with their health checks and a sexual health nurse works proactively and ensures she is easily and readily accessible to provide young people with the support and advice they need.

The complex needs manager works closely with the duty and fostering teams to identify children who may require additional support, including the need for short term breaks, currently and in the future. Excellent planning ensures that such children and young people are avoiding the use of residential provision in favour of being placed with carefully matched foster carers who can meet their needs.

Children and young people say they receive the guidance and support they need from their foster carers to stay healthy. Direct quotes include, 'my foster mum makes sure we eat good food', 'I can talk to them about anything that's worrying me' and 'I always get good advice about being healthy.' Foster carers demonstrate a keen commitment to promote good health and well-being. Training attendance on such courses is high and children confirm they are actively encouraged and supported to undertake regular physical activities. Foster carers maintain detailed records pertaining to the health needs of those in their care and these are routinely monitored by supervising social workers to ensure high quality care continues to be provided.

The service conducts thorough assessments and ongoing checks to ensure that fostering households are well maintained and free from potential health and safety hazards. Children and young people enjoy the privacy of their own bedrooms and only share in accordance with strict, appropriate criteria. Any shortfalls with regards to the expected standards of fostering households are swiftly identified and promptly dealt with, in the best interests of the children and young people.

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

The provision is outstanding.

Children and young people say they feel safe and protected. The service provides clear and explicit guidance and training for foster carers. This is stringently implemented in practice. Effective safeguarding is assured. Foster carers implement their own individual safe care policies; these are updated at annual reviews and whenever a new placement is made. Concerns and incidents are swiftly reported and foster carers understand the processes in place for dealing with allegations. In addition to effective systems, children and young people receive excellent levels of support from their foster carers in terms of keeping themselves safe. Comments include, 'I used to take really silly risks but I don't any more' and 'my foster carers have taught me that I'm worth more than the things I used to do.'

Foster carers strike an excellent balance in terms of allowing children and young people to learn through making mistakes and by taking appropriate risks. The service provides very clear guidance with regards to approved methods of behaviour management and foster carers take their safeguarding responsibilities very seriously. Children and young people develop a sense of making appropriate choices as a direct result. When mistakes are made, they are assured that their foster carers will implement firm and consistent boundaries in their best interests.

Foster carers complete clear written records and monthly reports with regards to incidents, allegations and concerns. The service scrutinises such information and this is further reviewed through forums including the local safeguarding children's board (LSCB) and senior management meetings. The service is proactive in terms of safeguarding.

Strong links are established between the fostering service and the police. Quarterly meetings feed into the LSCB in order to stringently monitor instances of allegations and young people being missing. Potential patterns and trends are identified and this stringent approach enables the service to be proactive; thus the number of occurrences is reducing year upon year. Foster carers provide excellent support in the event of a young person returning home following a period of absence. An educative approach, complemented by appropriate consequences encourages young people to deal with their difficulties in a safer way.

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

The provision is outstanding.

Children and young people enjoy trusting, nurturing relationships with their foster families. They are treated as valued family members. Direct quotes from children and young people include, 'I wouldn't be anywhere else', 'this is my family' and 'I'm staying here even after I leave school.'

Foster carers implement clear and specific behaviour management guidance, which is

disseminated through training and written procedures. The majority of foster carers say they receive excellent support from the service in terms of dealing with difficult and challenging behaviours. Children and young people receive safe, consistent practice as a result. Emphasis is placed upon rewarding and encouraging positive conduct; however appropriate guidance and support from supervising social workers is in place in the event of it being needed. Such instances are very rare and closely monitored. Foster carers ordinarily state, 'I couldn't do without my supervising social worker', 'the on call service is excellent' and 'I have always received the help I need.' A small number of foster carers report less favourably with regards to the current duty system and the service is currently reviewing this aspect of provision.

Children and young people report very positively about their leisure activities and hobbies. The service pays close attention to the lifestyles and interests of its approved fostering households during initial matching stages. Hence, children and young people are routinely placed with families who have similar interests to their own. Foster carers remain keenly aware that many young people need encouragement and support to try new activities. Children frequently say, 'I'm enjoying trying new things' and 'we get to do loads of different stuff.'

The service provides financial assistance, where necessary, in order to ensure that children and young people benefit from easy access to activities and leisure pursuits within the borough. Many local initiatives offer a wide range of sporting and other pursuits and the young peoples' forum is routinely consulted for fresh ideas.

Children and young people receive an exceptionally high quality service in terms of promoting their educational achievement. The energy and enthusiasm demonstrated by those responsible for this aspect of service provision is commended. Foster carers provide stimulating environments, within which children and young people develop enquiring minds and an interest in learning. The service provides innovative and creative ways in which to support foster carers to actively encourage attendance and attainment. Reading schemes, online learning support, homework youth clubs and annual achievement awards are all positively endorsed by foster carers and young people.

Robust systems ensure that school attendance is keenly monitored and foster carers are furnished with the information they need to provide the individual support required by those in their care. They appreciate the support they receive in attending education review meetings and personal educational plans are in place for all children and young people. Foster carers actively encourage and appropriately stretch youngsters to fulfil their potential; however rewards are not solely dependent upon academic success. Young people more suited to vocational learning are equally praised and supported, as are children with additional learning needs.

Innovative initiatives provide young people with the encouragement and opportunities they need to successfully move into the adult arena of further education and employment. The looked after children's 16+ manager enjoys very positive relationships with foster carers and young people. This factor assists him to effectively track and monitor progress at college and apprenticeship placements. A

newly appointed careers and education advisor for the leaving care team is also exploring apprenticeships and work placements, as well as focusing upon the needs of young people who are not currently engaging with education services.

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

The provision is outstanding.

Children and young people enjoy the benefits of excellent consultation mechanisms. Within their foster homes, children and young people say, 'my carers always ask for my opinions' and 'I'm always listened to.' Foster carers are strong advocates for children and young people. They demonstrate sensitivity and empathy particularly when a placement starts, in an attempt to help the child settle.

Clear written literature effectively tells children and young people what they can expect from being looked after by the fostering service. This includes guidance on how to make a complaint. A variety of formats use appropriate language, avoiding jargon and are further verbally explained by foster carers. Children and young people say they know what to expect and feel very well supported in verbalising their own views and opinions about their care. Younger children and those with communication difficulties also receive the support they need from their foster carers and social work staff to help them express their needs and views.

The children in care council is highly respected and valued. Chaired by a care leaver, this forum canvasses the views and opinions of Bexley's looked after children and feeds directly into the corporate parenting group. It is influential in terms of the growth and continued development of the fostering service and young people are assured they have a strong voice.

Independent reviewing officers hold additional roles and responsibilities and these impact very positively upon the service provision. This team is actively involved within the fostering service, in terms of safeguarding, consultation and monitoring. Children and young people are assured that the quality of their care is being scrutinised by a variety of professionals and departments.

Children and young people are encouraged to explore and make sense of their past histories. Foster carers instil a sense of pride and value which enables young people to flourish in terms of confidence and self-worth. Training provision with regards to equality and diversity is strong. Comments from young people include, 'I love the fact that we're all different in our house but there are no favourites' and 'I'm just accepted for being me.'

Additional services complement the work of foster carers whereby some children need specialist support to deal with difficulties arising from their past. Access to counselling and therapeutic services is swift and highly valued. Foster carers say, 'as much as the child receives a confidential service, we also receive the guidance and direction we need to continue to support the child at home.'



Care plans are in place for all children and young people. Foster carers fully understand and embrace their own roles and responsibilities. They talk passionately about giving children the opportunities to grow in confidence and develop emotional maturity. Comments include, 'I love seeing them grow up and start making their own choices' and 'they rarely all want the same thing to eat, so I just cook loads of different things!'

In many cases, complex contact arrangements are in place. Foster carers are commended for their efforts to ensure these go smoothly for the young people and family members involved. Children and young people report very positively on this topic and say, 'I love seeing my brothers and sisters, it's really important to me' and 'my carers always make sure I get there on time.' Foster carers demonstrate a professional approach in this regard. They are aware of how emotive this aspect can be and demonstrate empathy for all involved parties.

The majority of children and young people benefit by joining and leaving the service in a planned and sensitive manner. This is borne out by robust monitoring systems which show that a significant number of initial placements become long term. Children and young people enjoy the stability of forming lasting and meaningful attachments with their foster carers and this starts with thorough matching processes. In the event of emergency placements, great effort is made to welcome individuals and carefully explain the purpose of their placement in an attempt to minimise potential stress and anxiety.

### **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is good.

Foster carers receive good quality training and written guidance to assist young people to be effectively supported into adulthood. The LAC 16+ manager is developing systems further to improve liaison between the social work teams in an attempt to engage in preparation and transitional planning earlier on in young people's lives. Foster carers express mixed views regarding this. They endorse earlier planning but they hold the view that young people often move onto independent living arrangements before they are ready. Excellent examples are noted whereby young people have remained with their foster carers beyond leaving care age due to their individual and specific needs.

Young people benefit by acquiring the practical life skills they need for independent living. Placement plans contain clear details and foster carers ensure they provide the necessary opportunities for young people to learn how to budget and develop personal care skills. Additional support services provide good quality guidance and advice with regards to relationships and sexual health. Confidentiality is assured and this aspect is highly valued by young people.

## Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

The service has embraced the recent changes with regards to the national minimum standards for fostering services. A new panel chair has been appointed and the central list continues to grow to reflect a group of individuals who are suitably qualified and experienced. Assessments of prospective foster carers are rigorous and thorough. Panel members work to clear guidance and criteria which promotes the safety and welfare of children and young people. Members are observed to be questioning and appropriately challenging; review processes are thorough and issues and concerns from meetings are carried forward for continued scrutiny until the panel is satisfied with the outcome.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. The children and young people currently in placement are predominantly of White/ British heritage; however the service is aware of how quickly such factors can change and continues to recruit foster carers and staff from a diverse range of cultures and ethnic backgrounds. Children and young people with complex care needs, additional learning needs and behavioural difficulties are placed with foster carers who possess the skills and experience needed to provide stable, nurturing placements. Children and young people are thriving.

Since the last inspection, a new manager, who possesses a wealth of experience within the fostering and adoption arena has been appointed. In addition, a carefully planned recruitment drive means the service is now fully staffed in terms of qualified supervising social workers. Foster carers say there have been periods of difficulty and feedback with regards to the quality and frequency of support during this time is variable. All fostering households now have an allocated supervising social worker and emphasis is being placed upon providing regular, consistent support, in line with the services clear protocols and procedures.

Although the current team remains in its infancy, a number of senior practitioners and heads of departments have been in post for some considerable time. Such factors bring stability, as well as fresh ideas from newer team members. Social workers are benefitting from thorough induction processes and regular, professional supervision. All team members are involved with the skills to foster training and this helps new foster carers to get to know all of the team.

The vast majority of foster carers are very positive about working for the service. They say, 'it feels more professional' and 'it's good to have a full staff team.' All foster carers have access to the fostering network and they value the independence of this provision. Mixed views are expressed with regards to support groups. Recent changes have handed the responsibility for running these groups directly over to the foster carers. Some say this is an improvement and gives them greater autonomy but others say they miss the structure of them being run by social work team members. Mixed responses are also received with regards to the introduction of fostering for new foster carers. Comments differ between, 'I felt extremely well

prepared' and 'I would have benefitted from more support with my first placement.' The service manager is aware of such anomalies and is continuing to further develop a buddy system of matching experienced foster carers with new ones.

Following the recent successful staff recruitment campaign, all caseloads are being thoroughly reviewed. The manager is keen to allocate fostering households based upon relevant and appropriate criteria, in the best interests of each fostering household. Complex arrangements are being temporarily managed by senior staff members and although such arrangements can be unsettling, the service is keen to work towards longer term stability for all concerned. Emphasis is also being strongly placed upon monitoring the quality and content of written records pertaining to foster carers' supervision meetings. These have been variable historically and are being specifically targeted for improvement.

Foster carers say their allowances and expenses are usually received on time and without error. Comments include, 'I had nothing in place to take a baby in an emergency, I was immediately provided with everything I needed' and 'we've recently had new guidance on the use of pocket money which makes things clearer.' This piece of work remains ongoing, in consultation with the young person's council and a number of foster carers are also asking for more guidance on the use of disability living allowance.

A comprehensive training programme ensures that social workers and foster carers continue to develop their skills and expertise. Children and young people receive safe, competent care as a direct result. The fostering service has recently moved away from the corporate training department, although direct links and access are still maintained. This enables the service to provide exactly the training as dictated by the needs of foster carers and social workers. Comments include, 'the training provision is second to none' and 'my child's needs are very specific and courses are provided even if there is only a very small number of us interested in a particular topic.'

The provision for kinship care arrangements and short term breaks is a particular strength of the service. The needs, wishes and safety of children and young people are integral to the assessment of prospective carers. Complicated situations are robustly explored and such carers say the service fully explains its role. Excellent examples include young people being placed with relatives living abroad and using creative ways to continue to monitor and safeguard such individuals. Kinship carers receive the same entitlements with regards to training and support provision as other foster carers. Comments include, 'I don't need a lot of support but I know it's there' and 'great support and good training.'

Robust recruitment practices ensure the service is run by safe individuals. The same strict criteria is applied to social work staff, panel members and foster carers. Children and young people benefit from the competence and safety of the whole team.

Placement plans are clear and the majority of foster carers know exactly what is

expected of them. They are keen advocates for children and young people and assist them to contribute to their own statutory reviews. However, for the very small number who do not have a current plan, foster carers are potentially hindered to effectively contribute to initial and ongoing care planning processes. The quality of the contents of care files is usually very good but there are a few examples of incomplete or unclear information. This factor may present difficulties for young people in making sense of their time spent in care should they choose to access their files in the future.

Excellent quality monitoring and assurance systems reliably inform the service of its successes, as well as issues and themes requiring improvement. Senior managers are proactive and creative and work hard to bring about continued improvements for children and young people. Throughout this inspection, staff and foster carers demonstrate an open and transparent approach; they celebrate the positive aspects without losing sight of the areas for development.

## **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 information about the child is recorded clearly and in a way which will be helpful to the child when they access their files now or in the future (NMS 26.6)
- ensure that foster carers play an active role in agreeing the contents of the placement plan, in conjunction with the responsible authority and that each foster carer is given a copy of the placement plan (NMS 31.1 and 31.2)
- ensure that each approved foster carer is supervised by a named social worker who has meetings with the foster carer and that foster carers' files include records of supervisory meetings. (NMS 21.8)