

Lewisham LA Fostering

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

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Inspector	Elisabeth Brunton
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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 Lewisham's fostering service provides placements for children looked after by the council and short breaks for children with disabilities. The fostering service consists of two teams, one responsible for the recruitment and assessment of foster carers and the other for the supervision, review, training and support of foster carers. Each team is staffed by a manager and a number of senior social workers, social workers and administrators. Overall management of the general fostering service is provided by the service manager for fostering and adoption who is currently working alongside an acting service manager.

At the time of the inspection, there were 129 children and young people placed with 121 Lewisham foster carers, including friends and family carers.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

The inspection was announced and all the key standards were covered. Young people are well matched with foster carers and are receiving good care in safe, comfortable foster homes. Their needs are very well met and foster carers' promotion of young people's contact with birth families is excellent. Staff recruitment is generally thorough but some additional checks are recommended for administrative staff and panel members. The service's fostering panel is functioning very well. The service is very well managed, staffing levels are adequate and staff are qualified and able. Foster carers are well supported and supervised and the service has been improved by more robust performance monitoring. Records are mostly well maintained, though two additions are recommended.

Improvements since the last inspection

Seven recommendations were made as a result of the previous inspection of Lewisham's fostering service in September 2006 and these have all been met. The information available for matching placements with young people is much improved and equality and diversity has been promoted in a number of ways, with good outcomes. There is greater clarity regarding which members of foster carers' households and networks should have Criminal Records Bureau checks and staff files are now well organised. Management information has been much improved. Young people know how to complain and there is a complaints procedure in place for foster carers.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Young people in foster care are benefiting from a high standard of health care. They are registered with general practitioners and attend the necessary dental, optical and other healthcare appointments. Young people are also encouraged to have healthy lifestyles. Foster carers are providing nutritious food and ample opportunity for physical activity. Information about young people's health care needs is shared with foster carers but signed consents for emergency medical treatment are not always promptly provided.

Lewisham council and health authority provide a good range of services which promote the health of looked after young people and support foster carers in providing the necessary care. A well resourced looked after children's health team provides support and advice to young people and foster carers in all aspects of health care, including sexual health and substance misuse. This service has done well at encouraging young people to participate in annual health assessments. Staff from a team within the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) known as the 'Symbol Project' work with a large number of young people in foster care and provide support to foster carers. The project is able to respond promptly to requests for help and is well regarded.

Training is provided for foster carers on a range of health related topics. Written information about different aspects of healthcare is given to looked after young people and foster carers in the form of leaflets, articles in their magazines and the foster carers' handbook.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The service is well managed by able and experienced staff who have been properly recruited. The necessary checks are regularly updated.

Young people benefit from good care in foster homes. Foster carers are committed, caring and demonstrate good understanding of young people's needs. Young people say they feel well cared for and that they like living where they do. Foster carers' accommodation is comfortable, well maintained and sufficiently spacious. Young people are pleased with their well decorated and personalised bedrooms, which are not shared inappropriately. The safety of foster homes is monitored through regular inspections, including the safety of foster carers' pets and transport. Any health and safety issues are addressed. Foster carers are provided with written information and training in health and safety.

Young people are safeguarded by all the necessary references and checks being taken up as part of foster carers' assessments and before they are approved. Foster carers' Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks and those of family members and

back-up carers are subsequently updated at regular intervals. Foster carers' medical checks are also regularly updated and further health checks made when necessary. An efficient system is in place to ensure that all checks are updated promptly.

Young people are matched with foster carers who are well able to meet their needs. There is an effective process for identifying the best placements for young people, based on comprehensive information and risk assessment and this is being further developed. Matches of young people with complex needs are carefully considered, involving senior managers, where necessary. The matching process takes account of young people's racial and cultural backgrounds and any shortfalls in matches made are identified, along with any additional support needed. The service does well at placing siblings together and in avoiding changes of school for young people. Foster carers are normally provided with adequate information about young people and are not pressurised into accepting placements. Care is taken by the fostering panel in considering the terms of foster carers' approval and any subsequent requests for changes to this. The procedure for approving placements outside of foster carers' terms of approval has not always been sufficiently robust. However, this shortfall has recently been identified by the service and a more independent system introduced which is having positive results. The service does well at ensuring that placement agreement meetings are held at the outset of placements. These meetings are used to agree the purpose of placements, roles, expectations and day-to-day issues.

Young people appear to be safe in placement and foster carers demonstrate good awareness of child protection issues and the importance of safe caring. Initial assessments and annual reviews focus on this aspect of care and foster carers have safe care policies which are reviewed annually. Training and written guidance is provided for foster carers and updated information on safeguarding is provided for fostering staff. There have been a small number of child protection allegations against foster carers during the past year. These have been robustly dealt with in line with the council's procedure. Thorough investigations have been conducted with foster carers and independent oversight provided by a safeguarding manager. Any other serious causes for concern arising from foster carers' care of young people are also addressed. The continuing approval of foster carers against whom allegations are made or where there are serious causes for concern is considered by the fostering panel.

Foster carers demonstrate skill in responding to young people's behaviour. Placing social workers praise foster carers for their maintenance of clear boundaries, the timing of their interventions, their use of effective strategies and limited use of sanctions. Foster carers are well supported in this aspect of their work with young people by CAMHS and the dedicated training provided. The fostering service recently responded promptly to an identified need for a clear policy statement and training for foster carers in the use of restraint and safe holding and both have now been provided. Young people do not report being bullied in foster homes. However, foster carers are dealing sensitively and effectively where bullying does occur.

Staff employed to work in the fostering service are qualified, knowledgeable and able, including those staff undertaking assessments of prospective foster carers. A

thorough recruitment process is followed for permanent and sessional social work staff, which includes all the necessary references and checks. Their CRB checks are also regularly updated. The recruitment of administrative staff to work in the fostering service is also thorough but CRB checks are not currently carried out. There is a recruitment process in place for members of the fostering panel. All panel members have up-to-date CRB checks but these have not all been carried out by Lewisham Council. Also, only one reference is in place for some independent panel members.

The council's fostering panel is very effective. The chair is professional, knowledgeable and independent and exercises her responsibilities robustly. The panel is properly constituted and its diverse membership provides the panel with a wide range of experience and skills. The recruitment of a member who has been looked after and of a social worker with fostering experience is in-hand but panel does not have a member with expertise in child health. Panel meetings are quorate and well attended. Cases are dealt with very thoroughly and discussion is child-focused and with an emphasis on safeguarding and equality and diversity. Sound decisions are made and decisions deferred appropriately, pending further work. A senior manager acts effectively as the council's decision maker and applicants are informed in writing of decisions made. Panel meetings and decisions are well minuted. Thorough and immediate feedback is given by the panel chair to the fostering service on the cases presented and any identified need for further work. Panel members are provided with training and opportunities for development as a group.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Young people's equality and diversity needs are well met by this fostering service. The management and staffing is diverse and the service has recruited foster carers from different racial and cultural backgrounds, to reflect the range of young people needing placement. Priority is given to placing young people with foster carers who share their heritage, in line with council policy and young people are pleased to be placed with foster carers who share and understand their racial and cultural backgrounds. There are a small number of trans-racial and trans-cultural placements and foster carers are doing well at supporting young people of different heritage, with the support of family, friends, the fostering service and dedicated training. The assessment of prospective foster carers ensures that foster carers are inclusive and anti-discriminatory in their approach. Foster carers' ability to meet young people's diversity needs is monitored through supervision and annual review and this work is being further developed by managers. Foster carers who care for young people with disabilities have the necessary skills, experience and positive attitude to disability. These foster carers are provided with the necessary information, support, training and equipment. Young people in foster care are encouraged to develop their individual interests and talents and are helped to grow in confidence.

Young people are doing well in their education as demonstrated by improved school

attendance, attainment at key stages and a record number of looked after young people attending university. Foster carers are giving good support and encouragement to young people in their education and are proud of their achievements. Young people say their foster carers 'want us to do well'. Foster carers maintain close contact with schools, attend personal education plan and other meetings, advocate on young people's behalf and help young people in choosing schools. Young people receive support with homework and are provided with the facilities and equipment to undertake this, including the use of computers. The service does well at maintaining young people at the same schools when a change of placement is necessary. Foster carers help to make this possible by escorting young people to and from school and by liaising with a number of different schools. Younger children are provided with the stimulation, activities and play materials necessary to promote development. Young people also benefit from the services of a dedicated education support team for looked after young people. These include the provision of tutors, personal education allowances and an annual awards ceremony. Foster carers are supported by input from social workers, training and written guidance.

Children and their families benefit from respite care provided by Lewisham's in-house foster carers. These foster carers are carefully assessed and work in close partnership with parents. Children are carefully matched with foster carers and parents compile detailed profiles of their children and their needs. Foster carers are sensitive to parents' feelings and seek guidance from parents over aspects of their children's care. Parents retain the main responsibility for meeting their children's health care and education needs.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

Young people benefit from excellent support from foster carers in maintaining contact with their birth families. Foster carers appreciate the importance of family contact to young people and successfully establish positive relationships with birth families, even in difficult circumstances. A young person comments that the best thing about his fostering placement is that, 'I can see my family a lot'. Foster carers are praised by placing social workers and independent reviewing officers (IROs) for their support to young people in maintaining contact. One IRO writes that a foster carer "has already engaged (the young person's) mother" shortly after the placement was made. Foster carers are supervising contact in their own and young people's family homes and organising joint outings together with birth families. Foster carers are supported by other foster carers, training in working in partnership and written guidance. The assessment, supervision and review of foster carers ensure that they continue to promote young people's family contact.

There is good communication between young people and foster carers. Foster carers listen to young people and take notice of their opinions. Young people write about their foster carers, 'They always listen to me' and 'I can talk to her, she understands'. Foster carers encourage young people to express their views. Consultation with

looked after young people in Lewisham is very well promoted by the Young Mayor and his panel and through the Corporate Parenting Panel. Young people's involvement in these panels has led to new developments, such as young people being given written information about foster carers and retaining their current social workers beyond the age of 16, where appropriate. Young people have easy access to advocacy provided by an independent project which supports them in making their views known and seeking change in their plans. A robust and experienced group of IROs ensure that young people express their views at reviews and that these are central to decision-making. Written feedback from young people on their placements contribute to foster carers' reviews. Young people know who to talk to if they have a problem or wish to complain and complaints are generally dealt with before reaching the formal stage, often with the support of advocacy.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

Young people are encouraged by foster carers to develop confidence and independence. Older young people are well supported by their foster carers in acquiring the skills necessary for independence and in getting ready to move into their own accommodation. Lewisham council has a well-resourced Leaving Care Team which offers a range of services to young people aged 16+. All young people have Pathway Plans and foster carers are doing well at working with young people in line with these and in partnership with the Leaving Care Team. Foster carers are supported in this by training and comprehensive written guidance. Some young people remain living in foster homes beyond the age of 18 but the full fostering allowance can unfortunately no longer be paid beyond this point due to the limitations on council funding. Young people benefit enormously from retaining contact with foster carers after they have moved into independence and from their continued support, often well into young people's adult lives.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The service has a comprehensive statement of purpose which is reviewed and updated annually. Young people in foster care are provided with written information about being looked after, together with a copy of 'My Guide to Fostering'. This well presented guide informs young people about fostering and what services they can expect and tells them how to complain.

Roles and responsibilities of managers and staff in the fostering service are clear and understood by staff within the service, elsewhere and by foster carers. Senior social workers have recently taken on responsibility for the development of discrete parts of the service such as foster carer training and friends and family fostering. Lines of communication and accountability between managers, staff and foster carers are clear. There has been a significant improvement in performance monitoring within the service during the past six months and the importance of this is emphasised by

the current management team. New systems have been introduced and the promptness of events, such as foster carer reviews, supervisory visits and unannounced visits, is now monitored and any delays promptly addressed. More effective quality assurance of foster carer assessments has also recently been introduced, together with an increase in the frequency and independence of file monitoring.

The service is very well managed by qualified and able managers. There is an effective balance within the management team between experience, stability and innovation, as evidenced by a number of recent improvements mentioned in this report. Staff and foster carers appreciate the openness and accessibility of managers and praise managers' decisiveness and ability to deliver improvements fast, such as policy and training for foster carers in restraint and safe holding. The service's two Fostering Support and Development Teams have recently amalgamated under one manager as a pilot arrangement and this arrangement appears to be delivering a more consistent service.

There are sufficient social work and administrative staff for the size of the fostering service. Staff are qualified and able and there is a low turnover of staff. Any performance issues are promptly dealt with. The service continues to recruit new foster carers; a recruitment plan is in place and there has been a range of recruitment activity during the past year. Foster home placements are also made in the independent sector and few children are waiting for placements.

Assessments of prospective foster carers are carried out by permanent and sessional staff and are generally satisfactory and reasonably thorough. They include the applicant's ability to safeguard young people and their attitude to equality and diversity. A recognised assessment format is used and the fostering competencies are addressed. Assessments contain varying levels of analysis of information in relation to the fostering task. The fostering panel requests further work on some assessments, as previously mentioned and the need for more robust quality assurance of assessment reports has already been recognised and put in place. Staff in the Recruitment Team have been praised by court and legal staff for the thoroughness of their assessments of the viability of different people as carers for a particular young person.

Staff's duties are clearly defined and a comprehensive policy and procedure is in place. Staff are well supported in their work and receive regular, focused management supervision and annual appraisals of their work.

Young people benefit from placement with foster carers who are well supported and supervised. All foster carers have allocated supervising social workers and praise their accessibility and support. One foster carer reports that her supervising social worker 'gave support in a difficult placement, so that the young person had a successful move'; another commented that she has a 'fantastic supervising social worker who is honest and caring and gives invaluable support'. Supervising social workers visit foster carers regularly and visits are periodically unannounced. Supervisory visits are constructive, focus on significant issues and are recorded in a

detailed format. Additional support is given in order to maintain placements, including the use of placement support meetings. Foster carers are also well supported when allegations are made against them and an out-of-hours support service is provided by fostering staff. Some foster carers receive additional support through mentoring, attendance at support groups and from a group of foster carers who provide practical help, such as childminding and escorts to school. Fostering managers are working well in partnership with a thriving local foster care organisation which meets regularly with senior managers. Foster carers are also provided with membership of the Fostering Network and copies of an informative handbook, along with other written information.

Foster carers' approval is reviewed annually and reviews are carried out by supervising social workers, using a comprehensive report format. The service has done very well at obtaining feedback to reviews from young people, their social workers and foster carers and also from IROs. Reviews are thorough and are signed off by managers. Independent scrutiny is provided by alternate reviews being considered by the fostering panel, together with reviews following allegations or any other concerns. Foster carers are informed in writing of the outcome of their reviews. Supervisory visits have not always been made to all foster homes at monthly intervals during the past year, in line with the service's Foster Care Agreement. Also, there have been some delays in carrying out annual unannounced foster home visits and reviews. However, this shortfall has already been identified by the managers of the service and is being addressed through additional performance monitoring and the introduction of systems to trigger these events. These improvements are having a positive outcome. Supervisory visits to foster homes and annual reviews include a focus on safeguarding and, to some extent, on foster carers' work with equality and diversity. Managers are working with staff to build on this.

Foster carers are provided with a very good range of training. They are expected to attend pre-approval training and a number of core training courses during their first year of fostering. Most foster carers attend regular training, including courses specific to their work and recommended by their supervising social workers. Training courses are well publicised and are said to be interesting and informative. The training attended by foster carers is monitored through supervisory visits, annual reviews and by the fostering panel. A significant proportion of Lewisham's foster carers have obtained or are studying for relevant qualifications. Good progress is also being made by the service in providing support and training to enable foster carers to demonstrate that they meet the recently introduced new training, support and development standards. Twice yearly development days are provided for foster carers and staff which are popular and informative.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. As previously mentioned, there is a diverse staff group and range of carers which reflects the range of young people needing placement. Priority is given to placing young people with foster carers who share their heritage, in line with council policy. Foster carers are doing well at meeting the diverse and individual needs of young people and receive the support and training needed to do so. The assessment, supervision and review of foster carers focus on equality and diversity issues and a robust management team and

fostering panel ensure that this focus is maintained and developed. Training is provided for staff and foster carers. The needs of young people with disabilities are met through an effective respite service and the provision of all necessary support, information and equipment.

Young people's case records are held in the children's teams and are accessible to the fostering service. Foster carers are provided with written information about young people in placement. Foster carers are doing well at maintaining records about young people's welfare and progress, together with photographs. Training and written guidance support foster carers in this. Foster carers are aware of the importance of confidentiality and their records are safely stored.

There are comprehensive file records for foster carers and staff which are safely stored and the confidentiality of information is safeguarded. Those records relating to foster carers which are required by regulation are maintained and the only exception to this is that the reasons for placements ending are not currently included in the placement logs maintained for each foster carer. However, this information is normally included in the detailed chronologies now recorded on file. Foster carers' records are generally well organised but all of the information relating to allegations and complaints, their investigation and outcome, is not always gathered together in one place on file and therefore not always immediately accessible. There is no evidence, however, that the correct action is not taken in response to allegations and complaints, as mentioned under a previous standard.

Young people benefit from being placed with family and friends foster carers who have generally been thoroughly assessed and with sensitivity to pre-existing family relationships. The fostering panel requests further work on some friend and family assessments, as previously mentioned and the need for more robust quality assurance of assessment reports has already been recognised and put in place. There is careful planning for children being placed with friends and family foster carers, with attention paid to safeguarding and family dynamics. Family and friends foster carers are providing very good care and there are good outcomes for young people placed with them. These carers are well supported and supervised and have access to mainstream foster carers' training, support groups and other forms of support.

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 foster carers are provided with signed consents to emergency medical treatment for young people (Regulation 34(3))
- ensure that all the required checks are carried out on anyone seeking to work for

the purposes of the fostering service, including administrative staff and fostering panel members (Regulation 20 and Schedule 1)

- consider appointing to the fostering panel a member with expertise in child health (NMS 30).
- amend the record of placements made with each foster carer to include the circumstances in which placements end (Regulation 30(3))
- arrange for all records relating to allegations and complaints against foster carers to be retained in one section of their case files, so that this information is easily accessible (NMS 25)