

London Borough of Lewisham Fostering

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

Unique reference number	SC043496
Inspection date	22/01/2013
Inspector	Paul Clark
Type of inspection	Full

Setting address	1st Floor, Laurence House, 1 Catford Road, Catford, LONDON, SE6 4RU
Telephone number	0208 3148730
Email	brendah.malahleka@lewisham.gov.uk
Registered person	London Borough Of Lewisham
Registered manager	
Responsible individual	Brendah Malahleka
Date of last inspection	24/11/2008

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Service information

Brief description of the service

The London Borough of Lewisham's fostering service provides placements for children looked after by the Council. The fostering service employs an external agency for the recruitment and assessment of foster carers and has a team of social workers for the supervision, review, training and support of foster carers. The 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.

At the time of the inspection, there were 143 children and young people placed with 104 of the total of 114 approved fostering households in Lewisham, including friends and family carers. There are 228 children and young people being looked after with foster carers in independent fostering agencies.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding: a service of exceptional quality that significantly exceeds minimum requirements

Good: a service of high quality that exceeds minimum requirements

Adequate: a service that only meets minimum requirements

Inadequate: a service that does not meet minimum requirements

Overall effectiveness

The overall effectiveness is judged to be **good**.

The fostering service in Lewisham continues to provide a good level of care for looked after children.

Placements are stable and good attention is paid to children's health and educational needs. The service engages with children and young people, birth parents and carers to promote an inclusive model of service development and it is constant in its review and development of its service provision. Recent research findings in supporting more challenging young people have been drawn upon to provide an additional service programme for such young people. Staff and carers are supported by high levels of training and supervision and an outstanding management team.

In order to improve upon this already good service the service must implement an effective strategy to reduce the number of sibling groups being cared for in different fostering households and ensure that assessments of back up carers are sufficiently robust.

Areas for improvement

Recommendations

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

- ensure that the service implements an effective strategy to ensure sufficient foster carers to be responsive to current and predicted future demands on the service. Specifically, one that ensures that sibling groups will not be separated unnecessarily (NMS 13.1)
- ensure that children's safety and welfare is promoted in all fostering placements. Specifically, that assessments of 'back up' carers are sufficiently thorough to allow the fostering service to properly satisfy itself about their suitability to undertake the fostering role. (NMS 4.1)

Outcomes for children and young people

Outcomes for children and young people are **good**.

The majority of children and young people who are looked after in Lewisham live with foster carers and these placements are generally stable. There are various arrangements in place to consult children about their care and to listen to their wishes and feelings. Young people are generally invited to attend the review meetings of their care unless their behaviour deems this as inappropriate, and they are otherwise consulted and advised about their care planning by the independent reviewing officer. Young people say they have support from their carers or social workers, or there is a participation worker with whom they can share their views. The authority has a service level agreement with an advocacy service to which children can go to for advice and support. There is also an information website that they can access. All of these built in resources mean that children have good avenues of support while they are being looked after.

Young people that were spoken to say they are comfortable in their foster homes and are treated as part of their fostering family. Children say they have the information they need about their foster carers. Carers construct written personal profiles about themselves and their households which help children in making decisions about their choice of placement.

The authority has a residential facility which provides a short-breaks scheme for children who have disabilities and this is the service of choice for the majority of parents. There are also a small number of mainstream fostering households who are skilled in caring for children with disabilities, thus ensuring that disabled children who receive respite care will have a good level of care.

Children and young people are supported by carers who have a good knowledge of

their background. Placing social workers state that appropriately matched placements are made by a placement and procurement officer in liaison with the manager of the fostering team. There is also a family finder within the fostering team who finds carers for children requiring long-term placements. The fostering service have a number of carers who have specialist skills in conducting life story work with young people and these workers assist with the training of other carers in this regard. This work helps young people to have a good knowledge of their history and to develop a sense of their identity.

Young people say that they are supported in maintaining contact with their birth relatives and carers assist with transporting them to contact meetings. The authority has a number of contact centres that can be used for supervised contact when necessary. Some young people felt that one of the centres was poorly lit and overcrowded. There is a balance in the numbers of fostered young people and fostering households from black and minority ethnic groups. This helps to ensure that children are matched with carers who can meet their racial and cultural needs. Foster carers show consideration and awareness of the religious and cultural beliefs of the young people in their care. This helps children to feel that cultural differences are respected.

Children say that they experience a wide range of activities and holidays in their foster placements. Several young people spoken to were members of social or sporting clubs. This helps children to integrate into their local community and improves their self-confidence. There is a Child in Care Council for both younger and older children. Members of these councils say that they are consulted by social workers regularly. This gives children a forum for raising any concerns about things that are worrying them. Young people are able to make contributions to the running of the fostering service through their membership of these councils. They also have access to a dedicated website where they can put forward their views. Older young people are also supported by the service in undertaking voluntary work overseas. This provides them with valuable life experiences. A number of them were looking forward to visiting India later this year to undertake charitable work.

Most children and young people are generally healthy. In order to meet children's health needs carers are able to access relevant services provided by a paediatrician responsible for looked after children (LAC) and the LAC nurse. The paediatrician carries out a medical checks on all children under five and a general practitioners check older children when they become looked after. The LAC nurse conducts medicals for placement reviews. There are effective policies in place on smoking cessation, drug and alcohol use, sexual health and healthy lifestyle programmes. These help to promote children's physical and psychological health. The fostering service has an exceptionally close working relationship with the local Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) which helps to ensure that fostered children have good access to therapeutic support.

Children are well supported in making educational progress by the provision of a virtual team for LAC with a lead teacher. The large majority of fostered children attend school or college. Personal education plans are in place for each looked after

child and these plans are appropriately reviewed. Older children and young people say that they are well prepared for independence through a skills programme based on everyday living. The authority employs personal advisors who support LAC in preparing for independent living and who ensure that pathway plans are in place where appropriate and that these are appropriately reviewed.

Quality of service

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

The service employs an external agency for the recruitment and assessment of foster carers to meet the needs of the range of looked after children. The supervising social workers within the fostering team support the carers in providing the care for looked after children including the on-going supervision and training needs of carers. However, in the past 12 months there were seven siblings groups for whom the plan was for them to be fostered together. This did not happen because there were no fostering households that were approved to take larger sibling groups and there appears to be no indication in the authority's contract with their recruitment agency that sibling groups are a high priority at this point in time. Separating sibling groups does not help children to have effective family links or add to their sense of identity.

The levels of supervision that carers report indicates that it is of a high standard and is regular and appropriate, as is the core and on-going training that they receive. Carers receive a financial bonus for successfully completing this training. Placing social workers receive, from foster carers, the copies of the monthly log which carers are asked to maintain. Carers are provided with free membership of an organisation that gives them personal advice and guidance about fostering which enhances their fostering task and there is an active Foster Care Association within Lewisham which further promotes carers' information base and their involvement in service development. Foster carers report that there are good arrangements in place to ensure that they have a voice in all aspects of the fostering service and in service development. One commented, 'We have excellent support from our supervising social workers and in particular from our service manager who is always there for us and is familiar with all aspects of our needs.'

There is a good balance of foster carers from a variety of cultural and racial backgrounds which reflects the composition of the council's looked after child population and this ensures that children are mainly placed in homes which reflect their birth culture.

As stated, the assessment and preparation process for carers is undertaken by an external agency who have recently been contracted to undertake this task. This work had been undertaken by a previous contracted agency but this had changed as there have been concerns about the numbers of approvals and the quality and timeliness of assessments. The assessment process is now generally completed within recommended timescales. However, although assessments seen were of a reasonable quality there were some which were returned by panel for greater analytic depth. The fostering panel have an independent chair and are guided by clear policies and procedures and there is a central list of members in place in

accordance with regulations. Minutes of panel meetings record clearly the detail the discussions of issues raised by panel members and this gives evidence of due rigour of their approval methodology.

Foster carers have access to a range of health and education services coordinated by a virtual school for LAC. This helps to meet looked after children's and young people's educational needs. Family and friends carers are assessed appropriately and receive support from social workers within the service. Foster carers have to undertake the Children's Workforce Development Council's training standards in foster care immediately after approval and the significant majority of them have achieved this award. Carers feel they are well supported by supervising social workers and in particular by the service manager and team manager who provide an out of hours support service. They feel that this provides them with an excellent level of support.

Safeguarding children and young people

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

Looked after children and young people said that they feel safe and that they know how to complain and how to talk to people to express any concerns regarding their care. They know that the service has a policy on bullying and they know where they can go to get help in this regard; they are confident that any bullying incidents reported would be dealt with effectively. Young people can also access an independent advocacy service and they are given the contact details of this service. The service has a participation officer to whom looked after children may raise concerns or complaints. Older young people are linked with a personal advisor to help them with their preparation for independent living and they can also use this person as a source of help and support.

Complaints are investigated and responded to generally within timescales. Foster carers' training as part of their recruitment includes a focus on safeguarding, safe caring and current child protection practice; this is refreshed over time and takes place before and after approval. Foster carers also receive training on the effects of attachment and loss and birth trauma has on children. This ensures that carers have a clear understanding of safeguarding and that they demonstrate an awareness of current practice and the impact of abuse on a child's development. The number of allegations of abuse and neglect raised by young people against foster carers is low and these are dealt with effectively and children and carers are well supported by the process of enquiry. A clear process for dealing with allegations ensures that they are handled in a manner which is in the best interests of looked after children and foster carers.

In order to check that the care of young people is safe, unannounced visits to foster carers' homes take place more than once a year and there is a system in place to record this. Children are always seen alone by placing social workers and asked if they feel safe in placement. Concerns about foster carers' care practice which is identified by supervising social workers are shared with management and this can

result in the reconsideration of carers' approval. The recruitment and vetting of staff, carers and panel members is generally thorough and organised to ensure that staff appointed and carers approved are vetted correctly and are aware of their responsibilities to keep looked after children safe. However, while all back up carers are Criminal Records Bureau checked, assessments are not sufficiently thorough to allow the fostering service to properly satisfy itself about their suitability to undertake the fostering role. This has been a key weakness in assessment reports audited for this inspection.

Foster carers are aware of their responsibilities to report children missing from their care and there are procedures in place to be followed should this occur. The manager of the service states there is a collaborative relationship with the police and that they take seriously the safety of looked after children who go missing. As stated, carers benefit from the support of the out-of-hours service staffed by fostering service and team managers.

Leadership and management

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

The percentage of looked after children who are fostered in Lewisham is substantially above the national average. The delivery of the fostering service in Lewisham is monitored by the senior management group and reported upon every three months to the Director of Children's Services and to the Corporate Parent Group of the Council; the latter have a substantial commitment to meeting the needs of looked after children. This ensures that the level of care that fostered children receive is constantly being monitored. There is on-going action planning to identify areas for development and improvement and there have been effective improvements made since the time of the previous inspection. Fostered children and young people, carers and birth parents are involved in this process which ensures that their voices are heard in developing the service and this promotes an open, transparent and inclusive culture. The service is currently developing a Multi-Dimensional Treatment Foster Care programme aimed at providing positive foster care for those children and young people who are most difficult to place and who might otherwise be looked after in secure or residential care. This programme is based upon recent research findings developed in the USA.

All of these measures are indicative of outstanding leadership and management.

Social work staff in the fostering service who are appointed have relevant child protection knowledge, experience, qualifications and are registered social workers. There is an induction process for new staff and appraisals take place at least annually to identify their training and development needs. Fortnightly staff supervision takes place and there are fortnightly team meetings. Social workers in the fostering service have access to a good level of on-going training provided by an in-house training section of the council. They are all professionally qualified and are all members of the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC). The service manager of the fostering service is a professionally qualified social worker who is also

registered with the HCPC and who has many years' experience in child care management and has an appropriate management qualification. The work of this manager is highly regarded by both staff and carers. On-going staff training and supervision and efficient management ensures that children receive good quality care from carers whose work is supervised by skilled professionals.

Foster carers say that they feel part of a professional team working with and helping children and young people. Frequent and regular support group meetings and information events are available for foster carers and attendance at these is high. Carers are well prepared, trained and supported. This further ensures that children are cared for by an informed and professional service. Managers of the service have developed a working relationship with other agencies including the police, education and health to ensure that there is a joint approach when assessing and meeting looked after children's needs.

The Statement of Purpose and children's guides are clearly written, frequently reviewed and describe the service's aims and objectives. These are also contained on the fostering webpage on the council's website. The children's guide is available in the different formats that make it more accessible and inclusive for children below reading age, or who have a reading difficulty for whatever reason. The guides were produced in collaboration with young people and they are of an extremely high quality and provide an excellent information resource for young people. Young people also have their own online information site about the service.

There were six recommendations made at the last inspections which have all been addressed. This has resulted in a positive improvement in the service for young people who are fostered. As part of this inspection and in order to further improve the service for children and young people, there are two further recommendations identified.

About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to assure children and young people, parents, the public, local authorities and government of the quality and standard of the service provided. The inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000 to assess the effectiveness of the service and to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards.

The report details the main strengths, any areas for improvement, including any breaches of regulation, and any failure to meet national minimum standards. The judgements included in the report are made against the inspection framework and the evaluation schedule for local authority fostering agencies.