

Greater London Fostering

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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| Responsible individual | Diane Searle |
| Date of last inspection | 20/03/2009 |

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Greater London Fostering is a private independent fostering agency. There are currently 130 children and 120 foster carers. It provides a wide range of fostering opportunities for young people from birth to 18 years.

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**.

Young people have their needs met and make outstanding progress in all areas of their lives. They make secure attachments and develop a strong sense of self. Young people are also well supported to both attend and achieve at school. A strength of the agency is the high value placed on education which permeates throughout the whole agency and which has been led from clear consultation with young people, carers and staff to ensure exceptional involvement and progress. In some cases, significant and impressive goals have been reached. There is a careful recruitment and assessment process with a focus on safeguarding. This ensures that young people receive safe and effective care.

This agency is highly effective at making and sustaining placements for young people. There is a strong focus on achieving permanence and this helps young people to feel secure. The matching process is well organised, managed and implemented, providing young people and carers with the greatest opportunities to succeed. This is also evident from the low number of foster placement breakdowns or disruptions compared to similar agencies. This helps children and young people to experience consistency and continuity in their placements. The agency ensures that siblings are placed together, whenever possible, helping to promote individual and family identity.

Young people have consistently positive views about the agency and their carers. Carers feel valued and well supported by the agency. As a result they are strong advocates for young people. Staff are motivated, professional and child focused. They are well supported by management and as a result provide support which

ensures that carers meet young people's needs. There are good measures for keeping young people safe and these result in young people feeling safe and being safe. Young people are generally well safeguarded through checks on the suitability of carers and staff. Some staff members have not been vetted in line with one area of the regulations. The service has, however, demonstrated an immediate capacity to review and improve in this area to enhance the recruitment practices which do meet the regulations. Also, there are minor shortfalls in relation to paperwork such as the foster care agreement, panel meetings minutes and reference checks records. The promotion of young people's welfare is less robust in these areas. However, the impact of these shortfalls on young people is minimal.

There is a clear focus on development and improvement from management. There is a new energetic management team well empowered by the responsible individual. Through a whole range of initiatives, councils and groups the monitoring and reflection of practice is rigorous and challenging. The new manager is ambitious in striving for excellence and continual learning and development for the agency.

Areas for improvement

Statutory Requirements

This section sets out the actions which must be taken so that the registered person/s meets the Care Standards Act 2000, Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the National Minimum Standards. The registered person(s) must comply with the given timescales.

| Reg. | Requirement | Due date |
|--------------|--|------------|
| 20 (2011) | ensure that full and satisfactory information is available, in relation to each person employed to work for the purpose of the fostering service, in respect of each of the matters specified in Schedule 1, in particular, where a person has previously worked with children or vulnerable adults, so far as reasonably practicable, the reason why the position ended (Regulation 20) | 06/05/2013 |
| 27 (2011) | ensure that the foster carers written agreement covers the matters specified in Schedule 5 (Regulation 27 (5) (b)) | 08/07/2013 |

Recommendations

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

- ensure that panel minutes clearly cover the key issues and records the reasons for the panel's recommendation (NMS 14.7)
- ensure that telephone enquiries are made to each referee to verify the written references (NMS 19.1)
- record on the recruitment file the date on which each suitability check was

completed and who carried out the check. (NMS 19.4)

Outcomes for children and young people

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

Young people are safe and comfortable and are treated as part of the fostering family. Children and young people feel listened to and supported to have more say on what is happening in their lives. Through organised forums and various special events, they participate in the development of the agency. Young people say they participate in planning for their care and are involved in their reviews. There are regular monitoring and supervisory visits during which young people are consulted privately about the standards of care they receive. Carers are active in supporting young people to share their wishes, views and feelings. As a result, young people feel valued and cared for.

Children and young people experience continuity through established and stable placements. A particular strength of the agency is the permanent nature of many placements including progressing to adoption. All young people have made progress in their respective placements. Examples include young people that have previously experienced multiple moves and have now settled with carers from this agency. In other examples, young people that have made exceptional progress from their starting points. One young person states 'I think being in care has changed my life completely.'

Carers are knowledgeable about young people's needs and how to meet these. As a result young people make good progress in developing a positive self-view. Young people are assisted to live healthy lifestyles and understand how to take care of themselves. They say carers make sure they have access to health care professionals. Progress is carefully monitored. Each child and young person retains their own health passport which logs their own medical background in an accessible way. This enables them to improve their awareness of their personal history and encourages them to take responsibility for their own health over time.

Outcomes for young people regarding education are strong and demonstrate sustained improvement. For example, educational attendance for all young people is now 95 per cent. A young person stated, 'from where I began I feel that I am doing really well. I have caught up a lot nowadays.' Young people report proudly that they have gained better educational achievements and that they understand the importance of having good education for their future. For example, young people who refused school or failed to achieve now attend school regularly and make exceptional progress. Furthermore, there are comprehensive systems in place to monitor and collate progress and this promotes the attainment and achievement of all young people across the agency. It also ensures prompt and effective action is taken to address any emerging dips or levelling of progress. Children and young people grow and develop through engagement in an extensive range of activities in the wider community. These help to identify and develop individual interests and skills. Children and young people enjoy diverse holiday experiences with their foster

families. This helps to strengthen their personal identity and sense of self, in addition to enabling them to benefit from the opportunity of international travel.

Young people who are approaching independence are encouraged to prepare and develop current skills and learn new skills to assist them in adult life. Foster carers and placing authorities embrace the concept of delegated authority. This enables children and young people to enjoy visits to and from their friends and wider family of the carers, further promoting an experience of normal family life. Young people say that they are encouraged to develop life skills that will help them when they become independent. However, many maintain positive links with their foster families beyond the formal ending of their foster placements. Some young people who left care several years ago still have strong ties with their foster family and visit them regularly.

Quality of service

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

The fostering service recruits a range of carers who are able to meet the needs of young people. One Social worker stated 'this foster carer went well beyond any duty as a carer to that of a parents, brilliant care!' Current carers are mainly from black and minority ethnic backgrounds. Matching is well managed and effective. The matching process establishes the essential information about the young person that should be considered for the match. Consideration is then given to the availability and the skills of the right carer. Any deficit or shortfall in the skills and experience of the carer is carefully assessed to ensure the best match; this ensures that young people are given the best opportunities. Health and education are clear priorities in the matching process and significant factors in deciding whether or not a placement is made. Foster carers confirm that they are provided with all information known to the agency prior to any placement. This enables them to make the final decision when agreeing a placement. The agency have also introduced foster care profiles for young people with essential information; these are tailored to be child friendly.

The preparation and assessment processes are child focused. They involve a three-day skills to foster course and regular home visits. This ensures that foster carers have an in depth understanding of the needs of young people being fostered. The constitution and membership of the fostering panel helps to ensure that timely, appropriate and quality decisions are made in the best interests of young people. Panel members have the skills, knowledge and experience which ensure that they make knowledgeable recommendations to the agency decision maker.

Foster carers highlight the support they receive from the agency as a key strength. Several commented that this is a 'welcoming family agency.' They are reassured to know that a member of staff is always available to them in an emergency, or simply to offer advice. Additional support is provided to carers when needed and this is particularly helpful in supporting positive care for young people with complex needs. As a result, the stability of placements is enhanced. Two young people commented that although their own social workers have changed, their original supervising social

worker at the agency still supports them. Carers say that their supervision considers both support for the individual carers and also to the whole fostering family. This allows the carer and the agency to understand the impact of the placement upon the family and the young person. This results in increased understanding and carers feeling supported as a family rather than just an individual.

Good arrangements exist for training carers which means that young people are cared for by confident and effective carers. Creative support such as home visits and online resources promote carers' attendance at training. A rotation framework for the training and development of foster carers is in place. Foster carers highlight the quality of new education training alongside the Fostering Changes training within the agency as an important factor in their personal development.

Safeguarding children and young people

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

Safeguarding young people is at the centre of all that the agency does. Young people are confident about the support they receive and do not report bullying as a problem. Young people know how to make a complaint. Young people benefit from, and keep safe by, understanding their rights to be cared for and supported. Young people are confident and know when and how to complain or make representations to their carers or the agency.

Young people rarely go missing or run away. They say this is because they can always talk over their problems and worries with their carers. The agency ensures, through well managed support and guidance, that all carers are able to recognise signs and symptoms of any potential placement disruptions. Carers will provide immediate support to address such matters and the agency has out-of-hours support which reduces any disruption and minimises episodes of absence. A social worker stated 'the carer has done an amazing job, the young person has finally engaged and therefore there is a clear reduction in the frequencies and length of the young person going missing.' Furthermore comprehensive safe caring plans are kept highly individualised and relevant. They are rigorously updated after any change, or agreed trigger. Therefore young people are supported to take sensible risks.

There are unannounced visits to foster carers' homes on a regular basis which help to keep young people safe. The frequency of visits is increased when required. For example, when concerns are highlighted, regular monitoring visits are undertaken to foster carers and clear targets for improvement are set. If these are not satisfactorily met action is taken to de-register foster carers. This robust response ensures that high standards and expectations are maintained ensuring that children and young people are safeguarded.

There is a focus on safeguarding in the recruitment and training of carers. As a result, young people benefit from effective safeguards to ensure that unsuitable people do not have unsupervised contact with them. However, there is a less attention to detail in relation to the recruitment of staff and panel members. All

necessary reference checks and statutory checks are undertaken and any gaps in employment are explained and verified where appropriate. Complete employment histories are recorded, however, there is not always verification of the reasons why positions have ended or written records of the checks on references. The agency has clear plans to address these shortfalls and the impact on young people is minimal.

Child protection is treated seriously and allegations and disclosures are well handled. Any allegations against foster carers are handled effectively, promptly and fairly ensuring that all external agencies are informed. When necessary immediate action is taken to ensure that the well-being of children and young people is safeguarded at all times.

Leadership and management

The leadership and management of the independent fostering agency are **good**.

There is a manager in post who has applied to become the Registered Manager with Ofsted. Leadership and management of the agency are strong, ambitious and forward looking. There are good arrangements for monitoring the delivery of the service and this drives continuous improvement in the outcomes for young people. There is a proactive focus on service improvement supported by a clear business plan. The agency makes good use of blended technology to enable all staff to self-assess, review and prioritise tasks. This also includes computerised audits and lists. There have been a number of creative initiatives to improve the service and better support and evidence improved outcomes for children and young people. Those initiatives include health passports, a Champion of Learning scheme within and throughout the agency, learning groups including an equality and diversity group, education consultations linked to training and children's council meetings to enhance opportunities for children to progress.

One of the examples of the progress that has been achieved relates to the number of foster carers who have completed the mandatory training standards. The agency organised regular and frequent workshops to help foster carers achieve the desired progress. All foster carers subsequently have completed this or are on course to do so within the required timescales. Another example is the involvement of young people in reviewing, from an equality point of view, the agency's website information, brochures, application forms, material available to foster carers and the posters around the office. The agency works in partnership with young people and supports them to have a strong influence on and contribute to the development of the service. Young people play an active role in developing documents such as newsletters. This helps to ensure that the service is well focused in delivering the best outcomes.

The staff team are motivated and professional. They are extremely well supported by the management team and they are guided to fulfil their roles and provide a high quality service to young people. All staff who supervise foster carers are qualified and registered social workers. Staff receive regular supervision of a high quality. Through effective annual appraisals; personal development is encouraged and

supported through the provision of time and finances.

There is a positive response to complaints. They are welcomed as an opportunity to learn and further develop the agency. This promotes an open culture within the agency and contributes to stakeholders feeling confident that they will be listened to. The agency has developed positive relationships with other agencies. A commissioner said, 'The agency is clear about being there for young people, their needs are obviously paramount.' This contributes to improving the care of young people who are fostered.

A positive approach has been taken in response to shortfalls made at the last inspection. Following the last inspection prompt and appropriate action was taken to address the requirements and recommendations made. Positive impacts from these continue to benefit children and young people and have become embedded into practice. At this inspection some shortfalls exist regarding record keeping. The foster care agreement does not include some information on changes foster carers should tell the agency about. Also, minutes from some panel meetings do not provide evidence of clear or critical analysis and decision-making practices. These shortfalls do not impact significantly in the way that young people are cared for.

The agency places young people at the centre of all it does and this supports its capacity for continuous improvement. The service demonstrates a good drive for maintaining good standards of care and for continuous improvement. The evidence of the positive impact of the service on the outcomes for children and young people is clearly evidenced. Everybody who contributed to this inspection, including children, young people, foster carers and professionals external to the service described it as overall a good fostering service.

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 independent fostering agencies.