

London Borough of Southwark Council Fostering Service

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

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Date of last inspection

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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

Southwark fostering service is part of the local authority services for looked after children and provides a service for a diverse range of children, within an inner London borough. The fostering service provides short and long-term placements, placements with family and friends and parent and child placements. The service additionally provides short breaks for disabled children living with their families. At the time of the inspection 411 children were placed within fostering households.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

The fostering service demonstrates a great passion for children. The service seeks to empower children giving them a voice and creatively responding to their diverse needs. Children benefit from a good service with outstanding features. The organisation exceeds in the outcomes of health, consulting with foster children, promoting children's achievements and assisting to prepare them for adulthood. There is a robust understanding of the issues children face and the service takes an innovative approach to facing these challenges. The implementation of equality and diversity is excellent.

The organisation has a good awareness of the new standards and regulations. The impressive action plan robustly addresses all areas for development. The service has a good capacity for improvement. Shortfalls do not directly impact on children. These relate to updating the children's guide, providing clear financial information and ensuring foster carers undertake the required vocational training.

Improvements since the last inspection

At the last inspection the service was asked to address six actions and eight recommendations. The service has successfully addressed all areas, which demonstrates their strong commitment to children. The majority of these actions and recommendations are no longer applicable under the new regulations and standards. Children's welfare is better promoted and safeguarded through the improvements in record keeping, health and safety, foster carer approvals, exemptions and panel procedures.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

Children benefit from the organisation's excellent health care arrangements. An extensive range of initiatives innovatively cater for children's physical, emotional and psychological needs. The holistic range of interventions are effective and ensure children thrive. Children have comprehensive health plans, which clearly detail their specific needs. Plans fully highlight the respective responsibilities of foster carers and professionals. The service demonstrates substantial awareness of the issues facing children. This enables them to be purposefully responsive by strategically tailoring interventions. This contributes to placement stability.

The service actively works to secure the best health outcomes for children. It has successfully built partnerships with key agencies and professionals. There is an outstanding commitment to joint working. The organisation has a building devoted to children's health, which has a range of resources. The advantage is that children can access a range of health services from one site. This includes both occupational and speech and language therapy. Resources include an adventure play ground, a sensory room, soft play and a ball pond. This enables children to enjoy a fun and suitably stimulating environment.

A significant strength is the specialist, multi-disciplinary team dedicated to children's emotional and mental health. This is part of Child and Adolescent mental health service (CAMHS). Children receive tailored support, which can consist of a wide range of individual therapy. This includes psychotherapy, drama and play therapy. The specialist mental health team has a worker specifically employed to assist foster carers. Staff work with foster carers to develop behavioural strategies and coping mechanisms. The team excellently liaises with other CAMHS in a variety of boroughs. There is a diligent focus on providing the best service for children. If necessary the team will support children living outside of the borough.

The organisation has exceptional foresight and identifies particular health needs which may impact on future outcomes for the child. This results in creative service development. Examples are the recruitment of a worker to address teen pregnancies and an early screening tool focused on emotional health. The service undertakes innovative work with leaders in mental health service. This has contributed to national guidance.

They creatively engage children to take responsibility for their health and make positive choices. This includes targeted services which address sexual health and drug and alcohol misuse.

Foster carers receive outstanding support dedicated to promoting healthy outcomes. The wide range of services, training and practical guidance are dynamically responsive to presenting needs. Comprehensive induction and ongoing training, enables foster carers to actively address children's health needs. Individual bespoke training effectively equips them with the skills to manage a range of medical conditions. Children reside in safe, nurturing, healthy home environment. Foster

homes are maintained to a good standard. Children enjoy a balanced, culturally reflective diet and regular exercise. Children receive a leisure card, which enables them to access free swimming, gym sessions and classes to promote physical health.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The service actively promotes the safety and welfare of children. Efficient procedures ensure that foster carers and staff are aware of their role in safeguarding children. The service follows Government guidance and keeps foster carers informed of the changes in legislation. Effective safe caring principles and strategies protect children from abuse and other forms of significant harm. Risk management is proportionate, respectfully balancing the needs of the child and taking reasonable precautions. There is a good awareness of internet dangers. Foster carers receive relevant training and computers have the necessary safeguards. This helps to protect young people from cyber bullying and other forms of abuse.

Children learn the importance of personal safety, making choices and learning from experience. There is a strong awareness of peer pressure and challenges facing young people. This includes positively addressing gang activity, sexualised behaviour and substance misuse. The organisation endeavours to avoid criminalising young people, wherever possible. Strong links with the youth offending and other teams provides a good foundation for preventative work. Children benefit from their positive relationships with foster carers which generates a culture of openness and trust. Children state that they are 'listened to' and do not highlight any concerns regarding bullying or their safety. Children comment that they feel 'safe' and 'well cared for'.

There is a clear procedure for responding to, documenting and monitoring safeguarding concerns. A designated senior manager is responsible for managing allegations. The strong relationship between the quality assurance and unit and the fostering services ensures the prompt investigation of complaints and allegations. Systems monitor any recurring themes or patterns. This includes concerns that do not meet the local authority threshold criteria. Where allegations are made with regards to foster carers they are automatically taken to panel. Plans are in progress to further improve the quality of care. This includes relocating a child protection coordinator into the fostering service for one day a week.

The service ensures fostering households are safe. This includes annual unannounced visits, health and safety checks and robust recruitment and ongoing Criminal Record Bureau checks. Children receive the necessary protection from the organisation's missing from care policy. This complies with national and the Local Safeguarding Children Board guidance. The well-established protocols promote good practice. This is supported by strong internal communication mechanisms. Foster carers can access 24-hour support to manage unauthorised absences. Where there are ongoing issues, these are competently addressed. There is a good relationship

with the police. A specialist team also effectively explores any sexual exploitation concerns.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Children receive an excellent range of support to maximise their potential. Children provide extensive examples of how being in their fostering households has positively changed their lives. This includes attention to their personal hygiene, pursuing activities, enjoying school and having ambitions for their future. They enjoy the fact that they have friends and increased confidence and self belief. Children comment that they 'have a great life'. They state their lives has changed from 'bad to good'. Children are making significant progress, in relation to their starting points. Foster carer's focus on assisting children in accordance with the Every child Matters outcome areas. Children's social workers remark on the 'excellent progress'. They comment that children are 'supported well'.

The organisational ethos celebrates the diversity of their children, ensuring they feel valued. Children have a sense of belonging and acceptance. They learn to develop pride in themselves, their heritage and respective cultures. Examples are specific events to celebrate Black History Month, fashion shows and gender related activities. Children enjoy a wide range of new opportunities and experiences. This is regardless of their background or disability. Disabled children have a flourishing short break service. This enables them to have wider access to their local community, have fun and develop new relationships. Children enjoy a wide range of programmes, which greatly enhances their lives. An excellent innovative activity programme is available for teenagers. This focuses on enhancing their lives through empowerment and increasing their self-worth.

Children receive excellent educational support which is creatively responsive to a child's individual needs. There is a substantial commitment to extended school activities and the pupil premium scheme. Children comment that they are 'always being encouraged'. External verification highlights the dynamic attainment Southwark are achieving on a national scale. Children are exceeding expectations and have exceptional educational outcomes. The service has a systematic approach to the ongoing assessment of children's educational needs and responding to these proactively. Foster carers and staff maintain and sustain good links with the child's school. Children comment on the support they receive, with reading, homework, finding courses and reaching their goal.

The virtual school system demonstrates a dedication to corporate parenting. The service is continually evolving to secure the most effective intervention for children. Excellent liaison helps children to secure places in their preferred school. The team also provide valuable assistance to avert the need for suspensions or expulsions. Children benefit from innovative reading programmes, computers, individual tuition, mentoring and focused tracking of their progress and attendance. The service can also support children with getting to school through arranging transport. Foster carers

benefit from extensive support which helps them support young people with learning. This includes inspiring training and financial assistance with internet connections. Children receive scholarships for higher education. Children use this to their advantage and are attending colleges and university.

Children receive substantial encouragement to achieve, in all aspects of their lives. This includes nurturing their talents, interests and learning how to behave in a socially acceptable manner. This significantly raises their self esteem and resilience. The social and emotional skills they learn dynamically addresses their personal development. Children state, 'I am happy in care. I enjoy it here. If I never came into care I would not of gone to all these fun places'. Children list the range of activities they participate in, these include swimming, horse riding, ice-skating parties, going to church, social clubs and theme parks. The service also organises events which includes pantomime trips, picnics and achievement celebrations.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

Children have a highly influential role within the organisation and the fostering service. They significantly impact upon service development. There is an excellent children in care council, called Speakerbox. They are known to 'get things done' and are actively supported by the children's rights officer. The strong mutually respectful relationship with senior management empowers children. This enables them to have considerable impact on policy, practice, evaluation and change. They meet formally with senior management and the corporate parenting committee. This has recently been extended to include attending team meetings. This assists with maintaining an open dialogue with social workers.

Speakerbox make an outstanding contribution to other children, the organisation and wider afield. They regularly produce an impressive magazine which assists with raising children's awareness of their rights. This include undertaking research which helps to shape the service. An example being exit interviews for care leavers. They proactively influence decision making, a recent example being the semi-independence allowance.

Speakerbox are involved in staff interviews, speaking at conferences, events and training foster carers. Their accomplishments also include meeting with the Prime Minister. They receive training and support to undertake these responsibilities and find the experience greatly rewarding.

Children's participation in discussions and decision-making about their own futures is fully integrated into service policy and planning. This includes creative methods to enable participation of disabled and younger children. There are wide-ranging opportunities for children to meet up together. These enable children to have fun with their peers, share experiences and see their siblings. Children contribute to their own and foster carer reviews. They can also nominate their foster care for an 'Extra Mile' award. A child wrote the following to describe the winner of the recent award 'she is the type of mum I have been praying for all my life'.

Children are always asked for their views and these views make a difference. Children comment 'when I talk to them they listen'. 'When I have problems there are always people in the house to talk to'. Foster carers are positively involved in helping children make sense of their family relationships. Life story work additionally contributes to children developing a positive view. Children know how to complain and if they wish they can be supported by their peers. The service has established an effective complaints system. Children experience the system as quick and easy for them to use. The children's rights officer and children in care council can also take on an advocacy role.

The service works in partnership with parents especially in relation to short breaks. The service meets the needs of children as well as parents. Placements proceed at the families pace, ensuring the child is happy and having their needs met. Children benefit from highly personalised, flexible, contact arrangements. This enables them to maintain appropriate relationships with their family members and other important people in their lives. The new contact model positively responds to the increased demands and is centred around the child's needs. A pool of trained staff are matched directly to families. The new building has a purpose-built contact suite. The aim being to significantly improve the quality of contact for birth families.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is outstanding.

Children receive excellent, wide-ranging tailored support to ease their transition into adulthood. This enables them to reach their potential and successfully meet their practical, financial, social and emotional needs.

Children under 18 do not have to leave care until they feel personally ready. 'Staying Put' arrangements enable them to remain living with their foster parents after the age of 18. This offers young people a high level of stability and valued support. Allowances, training and continued support provides foster carers with the confidence they need to prepare young people for independent living.

The organisation believes in their young people and invests heavily into their personal development. Children benefit from an outstanding adolescence and after care service where children can learn a vast range of life skills. There is an inspiring range of support which uniquely empowers young people. They have their own personal advisor and build on their self confidence through life coaching. Young people benefit from comprehensive group work and drop-in sessions.

The organisation innovatively promotes young people's economic well-being. Young people benefit from a dynamic employment, education and training strategy. This includes providing job opportunities through apprenticeships, careers advice, assistance with university and further education and helping them secure employment. The service thoughtfully considers all the practical hurdles facing young people. Young people receive financial assistance to purchase interview clothes and

travel to work. They also practice their interview skills. Young people feel that they are strongly encouraged and supported to achieve their dreams and ambitions.

Young people are well prepared for independence. In their foster homes they engage in age appropriate activities which promotes their independence. They learn a range of household skills, which include doing their own laundry, keeping their rooms clean, cooking and budgeting. The vast majority of care leavers are still in touch with the service. The organisation excels in their meticulous desire to consistently improve. There is a tracking system monitoring care leavers, they continue to be consulted and a young person was commissioned to evaluate a specific aspect of the service.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

Children are at the heart of the service. There is an innovative approach to corporate parenting. The organisation demonstrates a strong grasp of the issues facing their children. They creatively work in a child centred manner to promote and enhance life chances. Approachable, senior management empower and value children, foster carers and staff. The organisation reflect and evaluates their practice. They constantly strive to improve and research contributes to effective service development. Foster carers highlight that the service is 'passionate about the kids'. Children highlight they would like to 'thank Southwark Fostering for giving me great care'. Stakeholders comment on the 'good communication' and describe the service as 'imaginative and action orientated.'

The clear Statement of Purpose highlights the overall mission, aims, objectives, philosophy of care, and the range of services available to meet the needs of children. The service is competently conducted in a manner consistent with the Statement of Purpose. Children benefit from their own guide. This is available in age appropriate formats. This document is currently being updated to include the contact details for Ofsted and the Children's Rights Director. Foster carers have concise guidance within their specialist handbook. Foster carers report that 'the help and support I get is 100%', they describe Southwark as 'the best'. All highlight the exceptional support they receive from their supervising social worker. Additional support includes varied support groups, respite care, mentoring, social outings and celebratory events.

There is strong, consistent, well-qualified and experienced management. One of the key strengths of the organisation is their good leadership and their ability to retain high quality staff and foster carers. The service successfully demonstrates efficient financial management. Effective commissioning and strategic restructuring enables the fostering team to deliver their service in a more creative manner. This includes introducing a duty information officer post and outsourcing their fostering assessments.

The service resiliently builds on their strengths and undertake joint initiatives where tangible. Robust quality monitoring and performance management systems identify

areas for improvement. There is a culture of reflection and evaluation, which is driven by improving outcomes for children. A good benchmark is the audit of the service's compliance with the new national minimum standards. The annual safeguarding plan is a further example of effective quality assurance.

Robust human resources support all aspects of staffing, including recruitment and selection. There is a positive commitment to continuous development, which includes staff, foster carers and panel members. Foster carers and staff benefit from regular structured supervision for staff and foster carers. Staff and foster carers receive appropriate resources, training and support. Foster carers and staff keep up to date with key policy and practice developments. This assists them with fulfilling their respective roles in providing a high quality service to children. Children's Workforce Development Council training is in progress. The service acknowledge they require greater success in this area. The service is introducing mentors and other options to ensure all foster carers achieve their vocational qualification.

Children benefit from a dynamically sharp, extremely effective fostering panel. The panel efficiently discharges its functions and demonstrates robust quality assurance. There is a strong emphasis on safeguarding and achieving permanence for children. Panel membership is diversely representative of the local community. The agency decision maker considers all recommendations in a timely manner. Children enjoy significant levels of stability within successfully matched and well-supported placements. Staff and foster carers demonstrate great enthusiasm and commitment to their roles. Staff and foster carers confirm job satisfaction and confidence in management. Children benefit from good family and friend fostering arrangements. Family and friends receive valued support, which enables them to effectively meet the needs of children. An example is priority housing if they remain within the borough.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. There is a holistic approach to meeting needs. Working practices throughout the service, policies and procedures proactively promotes the diversity of children. This is consistent with the organisation's equality policies. Themed audits feed into the comprehensive equality impact assessment. This ensures children receive an equitable service and there is focused analysis of outcomes. The service takes steps to ensure there is a diverse range of staff and carers who can meet the diverse needs of the children. Care planning actively considers children's gender, religion, ethnic origin, language, culture, disability and sexuality. The service inventively addresses challenges. Examples are working in partnership with specific communities to raise awareness of safeguarding.

The service is actively aware of their strengths and areas for development. Shortfalls identified do not impact on the quality of care or outcomes for children and young people. There is a good computerised system, which ensures the prompt payment of foster carers. The guidance on discretionary allowances and expenses payable, however, are not widely available. This means that some placements may not have access to all the resources available to them. The move to the new purpose-designed single site in January 2012, provides a single base for practitioners. The aim being to

further improve integrated working. The current premises and administrative arrangements meet the service's needs. There is a good integrated information technology system. Children's records provide a meaningful summary of their lives. They concisely contain all relevant information required by regulations.

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 foster carers attain the necessary Children's Workforce Development Council Training (NMS 20.2)
- provide foster carers with clear information about the allowances and expenses payable, and how to access them (NMS 28.6)
- update the Children's Guide to include the contact details for the Children's Rights Director and Ofsted. (NMS 16.4)