

# Greater London Fostering

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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**Date of last inspection** 08/02/2013

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## Service information

### Brief description of the service

Greater London Fostering is a private independent fostering agency. The agency currently has 106 fostering households and 119 children placed with them. It provides a wide range of fostering opportunities for young people from birth to 18 years. This includes emergency, short, medium and long term and parent and child placements.

### The inspection judgements and what they mean

**Outstanding:** An agency demonstrating and exceeding the characteristics of a good judgement where children and young people are making significantly better progress and achieving more than was expected in all areas of their lives.

**Good:** An agency where children and young people, including those with the most complex needs, have their individual needs met and their welfare safeguarded and promoted. They make good progress and receive effective services so they achieve as well as they can in all areas of their lives.

**Requires improvement:** An agency that may be compliant with regulations and observing the national minimum standards but is not yet demonstrating the characteristics of a good judgement. It therefore requires improvement to be good. There may be failures to meet all regulations or national minimum standards but these are not widespread or serious; all children's and young people's welfare is safeguarded and promoted.

**Inadequate:** An agency where there are widespread or serious failures which result in children and young people not having their welfare safeguarded and promoted.

## Overall effectiveness

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Children receive care from a well-run, highly effective agency. Foster carers, staff and management express pride in their sense of community. Children benefit from nurturing, life enriching placements, which build resilience, confidence and their self-esteem. They feel part of a family and there is a strong commitment to securing permanence. The agency prioritises children's needs and there is a drive to provide more targeted support.

Foster carers view a key strength as being the extensive support. They have excellent training opportunities and there is a high completion rate for their vocational training. The agency are influencing the sector through their acclaimed practice regarding annual reviews. This is mentioned in a best practice national document.

Children benefit from good safeguarding arrangements. Staff and foster carers benefit from a wide range of training, which helps them protect children. The

agency’s recruitment practices are meticulously thorough. There is appropriate management of complaints, allegations and concerns. The agency are not afraid to de-register foster carers and they learn from incidents.

Children benefit from strong, resilient leadership and management arrangements. The agency is financially viable, with sufficient staffing and new invigorating management. Staff demonstrate a cohesive enthusiasm to support the general function of the agency. There are highly effective relationships with local authorities, resulting in preferential commissioning contracts. Service development is strategic, aiming to creatively maximise the agency’s strengths.

Shortfalls do not have a detrimental impact on children. These shortfalls relate to improving the notification procedure, risk assessments and staff appraisals. The agency should also consider support for foster carer’s children and how to further prevent children from going missing.

## Areas of 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.

Requirement	Due date
Ensure if any events listed in Column 1 of Schedule 7 takes place, the registered person must without delay notify Ofsted. (Regulation 36 (1))	01/02/2016

### Recommendations

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

the provider should implement a proportionate response to any risk assessment (NMS 4.5)

the provider should consider with the responsible authority and foster carer what action should be taken to prevent a child going missing in the future (NMS 5.9)

the provider should consider any help or support needed by the sons and daughters of foster carers (NMS 21.6)

the provider should ensure staff appraisals consider the views of children they are working with. (NMS 24.6)



## Experiences and progress of, and outcomes for, children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Children highlight that it is 'brilliant here' and they are helped 'with everything.' They state that foster carers 'are always nice' and 'very caring.' A social worker comments a child has 'come on so well since being with this carer'. Children have the opportunity to thrive within enriching placements, which build resilience and confidence. Foster carers proudly express their input, commenting on children's 'excellent improvement'. They give examples of enhanced moods, social skills and aspirations. The agency are currently formulating quantitative data to measure starting points, enabling them to more clearly demonstrate exceptional progress.

Children have a sense of security and feel part of a family. Carer's profiles provide a welcome introduction to their new home. They benefit from inclusion in the immediate and extended family, which increases their friendship group. There is good continuity of care as family members provide backup support. Some children affectionately refer to their carers as 'Mum and Dad' or 'Uncle and Aunty.' This normalises the situation and a foster carer states, it makes a child feel that they are not 'in care.'

The agency has a significant number of children in long-term placements. There is a strong commitment to offering children permanence. This extends to moving children onto adoptive homes or foster carers deciding to adopt the children placed with them. The latter greatly appreciate the agency, one foster carer affirms that 'our house is full of extended happiness and we are very blessed to have our beautiful children.' Another foster carer states 'you helped us become parents and we can't thank you enough for that.'

Children are able to maintain their family bonds through contact with their relatives. Foster carers are instrumental in managing contact arrangements. They demonstrate an insightful recognition of the emotional impact on children. In some cases, they provide a bridge between children and their parents to help with restoring difficult relationships. The agency is able to supervise contact arrangements for an additional fee. Some children are in placements with their siblings or although separated, are with foster carers within the agency. Children benefit from spending days together, overnight visits and using mobile technology to preserve their family links.

The agency recognises the importance of a good education. The introduction of a more strategic educational consultant evidences their strong commitment. The aim is to proactively raise outcomes and standards through increased tracking of each child. The formulation of comprehensive actions plans positively targets issues. Foster carers promote a learning environment, through reading with children and assisting with and setting homework. Activities are intellectually stimulating, and include visiting the library and museums. They also actively liaise with school and colleges, to monitor attendance and attainment.

The agency is very proud that all children over the statutory school age are in some

form of further education. This cohort of children are enjoying their courses and meeting expectations. Where a foster carer has a trade, older children are able to shadow them. There is an example of an older child safely helping with their new bedroom, which was part of a loft conversion. The agency are also investigating apprenticeships, vocational courses and other training initiatives.

Children benefit from good health outcomes. The agency can provide therapy, counselling and a psychiatric assessment, for an additional cost. There are plans to develop therapeutic services, an example being play therapy. This will provide a complementary contribution to addressing a spectrum of children's emotional, behavioural and mental health needs. There is ongoing monitoring of each child's health and they benefit from appropriate medical intervention. The agency's social workers take pride in their individual work with children. This personalised support contributes to their overall wellbeing. Foster carers also proactively address spiritual needs, which includes attendance at places of worship.

Children live within homes which positively promotes their identity. A child highlights that their foster carer 'let's me be who I am.' They add she 'treats me like a son, she's motherly and caring.' Children have a sense of value and foster carers and the agency make a point of celebrating their birthdays. Children receive the support to be proud of who they are, which contributes to their increased self-esteem. There are examples of them having a greater understanding of their heritage through visiting their parent's country of origin. The agency supports foster carers to develop a good understanding of sexuality. This enables them to sensitively support children who identify as lesbian, gay and transgender.

Children engage in meaningful activities, which are interesting or nurture their natural talents. Examples are: ballet, guitar tuition, drama, martial arts and cheer leading. They can keep healthy through going to the gym, swimming, gymnastics, tennis and playing football. They enjoy socialising with their peers at youth, summer and after school clubs. The agency also organises opportunities for them to get together through trips to the seaside, pantomime and seasonal parties.

The children's council provides an empowering avenue for foster and birth children to make a positive contribution to the agency. They were instrumental in organising social events, sharing views on foster carer recruitment and providing quotes for the website and newsletters. The agency wishes to further extend their influence. Foster children contribute to their carer's reviews, however, they do not share their views on the agency's workers. The national minimum standards specify that staff appraisals should consider the views of the children they work with.

Children state they are 'helped to become more independent'. Where appropriate they assist with household tasks, cleaning their rooms and cooking. They also receive support with practical tasks, an example being travel training. Young people are able to stay in their placements under 'Staying Put' and other local authority lodgings schemes.

## Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

The agency excels in their comprehensive system for reviewing foster carers. Professional practice in this area exceeds requirements and is highlighted in national best practice guidance. They are leaders in their field and are positively influencing the sector. Enabling foster carers to self-reflect on each placement makes an exceptional difference to their personal and professional development. Their insight and purposeful learning from each placement ultimately sustains improvement and constructively enhances the lives of children.

Placing authorities provide unreservedly positive feedback on the agency. One highlights the 'excellent standard of care'. Another describes a 'fantastic foster carer that puts her heart and soul into what she does'. Another recalls 'an extremely committed and capable foster carer'. This social worker goes on to state 'I would not hesitate placing other children in her care.' Leaders and managers take pride in the holistic approach and having the 'child at the centre' of their work. A foster carer confirms that the agency 'prioritise the child'.

The agency has a wide range of carers and are aware of any gaps. They hope to address this through their recruitment strategy. This creatively uses social media and provides clear, relevant interesting content for prospective applicants. The agency is demystifying myths regarding fostering, actively encouraging applicants from all sectors of society, regardless of their sexuality. The agency is aware of the demand for remand, parent and child and unaccompanied minors placements. They have proven expertise in the latter areas.

Children benefit from a strong fostering panel, which comprises of individuals with a range of expertise. The panel chair is a highly experienced and well-qualified social work professional. The panel maintains a constructively independent relationship with the agency. They positively contribute towards decision making and their quality assurance functions influences assessments, foster carer support and service development. Panel members benefit from training and annual appraisals. The agency decision maker is also the owner of the agency. This individual has an exceptionally meticulous aptitude for their role. They describe it as being 'forensic', this enables them to look beyond the surface and appropriately challenge decisions. The overall system assists with promoting the best interests of children.

Children benefit from strong matching arrangements, which relates to carer's personal background and experience. Where gaps are identified, the agency suggests additional resources to meet specific needs. Foster carers effectively care for children with different ethnicities and religions from their own. Commissioners comment on the 'robustness in matching' and welcome the fact that the agency 'will only take if they can match.' This process contributes to the stability of placements and the retention of foster carers.

Foster carers benefit from a substantial level of support. Several describe their supervising social worker as 'amazing'. They particularly appreciate the 24 hour support. One states they 'will never change to another agency' and 'all my needs are met.' Another recommends the agency, commenting they 'know how to look after their carers'. Supervising social workers are strong advocates and undertake an extensive range of tasks. An example being accompanying foster carers to significant meetings. The agency has also used a trouble shooter to undertake specific work to guard against placement breakdown.

A foster carer comments that the agency get the 'whole family involved'. They appreciate the inclusion of their birth children, they like the fact that 'all children are seen'. They highlight the receipt of gifts at Christmas and birthdays and invitations to social events. The agency acknowledge the need to actively consider any help or support required by the birth children of foster carers. One of the agency's biggest additions is their house in France. Apart from a deposit, fostering households can use this free of charge. It gives children a break abroad and the opportunity to experience another culture.

Foster carers take a key role in developing meaningful support mechanisms. An example is the introduction of fostering ambassadors. Foster carers help to develop support locally and influence the service. They already have informal networks amongst their peers. The agency appropriately uses delegated authority. Foster carers feel valued and highlight that the agency treats them like a professional.

Foster carers benefit from excellent training opportunities. They can choose from an extensive range of group and on-line training. The agency has a very high completion rate for their Training, Support and Development Standards (TSDS) course. They plan to improve further, by introducing a TSDS co-ordinator. Experienced foster carers contribute towards the initial skills to foster training. New carers benefit from their real life practical scenarios, one describes this training as 'fantastic'. The training programme aptly addresses children's needs and builds the knowledge base and resilience of foster carers. Foster carers also benefit from individualised information technology training to further upskill them for their role.

## **Safeguarding children and young people**

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Children benefit from good safeguarding arrangements. The agency excels in their safer recruitment practices. Their procedure meticulously takes into account legislation, guidance and key learning from serious case reviews. This actively helps to prevent unsuitable people from working with children. An example is the verifying of reasons for leaving employment, where the applicant has worked with children. In some cases, this involves going back decades to confirm information.

Foster carers and staff benefit from extensive training which covers the wide-ranging

aspects of safeguarding and child protection. This incorporates pertinent issues including; child sexual exploitation, child trafficking, internet safety and gang awareness. There is a good understanding of cultural concerns for example, honour based violence and female genital mutilation. Training equips foster carers and staff to recognise the emotional and mental vulnerabilities children may encounter in regards to self-harm, depression and suicide. Training promotes constant vigilance and the need to relate their learning to practice.

Staff undertake unannounced visits more than once a year and they regularly meet with children. Each fostering household is subject to routine health and safety checks. The agency also formulate individual safe caring policies for each child. Through close partnership working with local authorities the agency is acutely aware of risks. There is information regarding specific vulnerabilities in children's files. This is not always detailed in the safe caring policies, which are frequently generic. The agency is aware of the need to strengthen this paperwork. This will further protect children and inform care planning.

Generally, children demonstrate improved behaviour. The level of children going missing is relatively low. The agency stresses the importance of meeting with placing social workers to discuss issues. Where needed, they attend strategy meetings to promote a cohesive approach to missing episodes. Records did not indicate what action was being taken to prevent the child going missing in the future. There are partnerships with other agencies to address these concerns, which include the police, youth offending teams and other community links.

The agency has an efficient system for managing complaints and allegations. This includes independent reviews and returning cases back to panel. Where necessary the agency de-register foster carers. There is a very open culture to complaints and a strong desire to improve practice. Foster carers provide a safe haven where children feel able to discuss their past. This occasionally involves disclosures of a child protection nature. Staff liaise closely with relevant personnel to ensure appropriate action is taken.

## Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Children benefit from strong, resilient leadership and management arrangements. The agency still maintains a family feel which is based on the owner's vision for the service. Leaders, managers, staff and foster carers share the collective ethos of being part of a fostering community. A foster carer liked 'the personal touch of the agency'. Another highlights the 'very open and friendly' atmosphere. A social work professional describes the agency as 'well run and very child focused.' Another states 'it would be great if all fostering services were as good as this one.'

The past year has been very turbulent due to changes in the senior leadership. This

has not had an impact on the consistently good quality of care. The new manager is currently going through registration with Ofsted. This highly experienced individual has over 20 years' experience in social care. Alongside the new Responsible Individual they bring an invigorating energy to the agency. Leaders and managers are insightful and reflective. There is a renewed impetus to take the agency forward.

The only shortfall relates to a minor issue and does not affect the outcomes for children. This relates to a notifiable event, which should have been sent to Ofsted. This is a regulatory matter and appropriate action was taken by agency. Prior to this incident, the agency has a good history of notifying Ofsted of significant events. The agency has effectively addressed the requirements and recommendations from the last inspection. This results in improved recruitment practices, panel minutes and a foster care agreement which complies with regulations.

The agency is financially viable, with sufficient staffing and approachable leadership and management. Supervising social workers have wide-ranging experiences, which they bring to their role. This includes; child protection, probation, youth justice, children's rights, and international social work. They appreciate the flexibility and autonomy of their work. They benefit from regular supervision, appraisals and purposeful training. The updated policies and procedures reflect current legislations and guidance, giving staff clear direction.

Staff demonstrate a cohesive enthusiasm to support the general function of the agency. They feel valued and take great pride in their respective roles. Long-standing staff and foster carers receive recognition for their work. The agency offers staff various perks and has a 'grow your own' policy, which nurtures talents and aspirations. This results in sponsoring social work courses or developing specific roles within the agency.

There are highly effective relationships with local authorities, resulting in preferential commissioning contracts. Two highlighted the agency is 'one of their first points of call'. They highlight that staff 'go out of their way to help' and 'support in an emergency, is fantastic.' The agency has a comprehensive website, which provides a wealth of information for prospective applicants and professionals. The website includes the statements of purpose, which meets legal requirements. Children also benefit from their own age appropriate guides.

Service development is more strategic, this includes analysing trends and patterns. There is a broad range of quality assurance systems, these include; foster carer consultations, exit interviews, an annual report of fostering, an external auditor and a Regulation 35 report. Leaders and managers are ambitious for the future and wish to creatively maximise on the agency's strengths.

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## About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to inform 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 and to support services to improve.

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 the inspection of independent fostering agencies.