



*Making Social Care
Better for People*

inspection report

FOSTERING SERVICE

Coventry Family Placement Service

**Stoke House
Lloyd Crescent
Coventry
West Midlands
CV2 5NY**

Lead Inspector
Warren Clarke

Announced Inspection
20th February 2006 09:00

The Commission for Social Care Inspection aims to:

- Put the people who use social care first
- Improve services and stamp out bad practice
- Be an expert voice on social care
- Practise what we preach in our own organisation

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This is a report of an inspection to assess whether services are meeting the needs of people who use them. The legal basis for conducting inspections is the Care Standards Act 2000 and the relevant National Minimum Standards for this establishment are those for *Fostering Services*. They can be found at www.dh.gov.uk or obtained from The Stationery Office (TSO) PO Box 29, St Crispins, Duke Street, Norwich, NR3 1GN. Tel: 0870 600 5522. Online ordering: www.tso.co.uk/bookshop

Every Child Matters, outlined the government's vision for children's services and formed the basis of the Children Act 2004. It provides a framework for inspection so that children's services should be judged on their contribution to the outcomes considered essential to wellbeing in childhood and later life. Those outcomes are:

- Being healthy
- Staying safe
- Enjoying and achieving
- Making a contribution; and
- Achieving economic wellbeing.

In response, the Commission for Social Care Inspection has re-ordered the national minimum standards for children's services under the five outcomes, for reporting purposes. A further section has been created under 'Management' to cover those issues that will potentially impact on all the outcomes above.

Copies of *Every Child Matters* and *The Children Act 2004* are available from The Stationery Office as above

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SERVICE INFORMATION

Name of service Coventry Family Placement Service

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Provider Web address

Name of registered provider(s)/company (if applicable) Coventry City Council

Name of registered manager (if applicable) Mrs Catherine Swanson

Type of registration Local Auth Fostering Service

Category(ies) of registration, with number of places

SERVICE INFORMATION

Conditions of registration:

None

Date of last inspection 24th January 2005

Brief Description of the Service:

The Coventry Fostering Service is part of Coventry Social Services' child care provision. It provides accommodation and care for children and young people who are being looked after, either temporarily or on a long-term basis, by the local authority. The service caters for children and young people aged 0 – 18 years of either gender. It makes available a wide range of foster carers in order to respond to the varying needs of those requiring a service.

The service is part of the Children and Families' Placement Service that is based on one site. There is a fostering service manager and a number of team managers who lead on various aspects of the service's functions, i.e., four teams including: a recruitment team that undertakes the recruitment, assessment/preparation of potential foster carers; two fostering teams that supervise and support all approved foster carers, including specific workers for family and friend carers; and a placements team that receives requests for placements, whether fostering or residential, and matches requests to placements. Social workers within all four teams undertake the assessment of potential carers and submission of the application to Panel for approval. In addition, there are two adoption teams.

Coventry has established separate adoption and fostering panels. The Fostering Panel is chaired by someone with the necessary professional background and experience and is independent of the Local Authority. The agency decision-maker is the Head of Children's Services. Applicants are invited to attend Panel.

The service provides long-term and permanent foster placements, including with family and friends. It also provides emergency and time-limited placements, the latter when workers have identified a particular task, such as preparation for longer-term fostering or adoption, or a twin-track arrangement when the plan is either a return home or adoption. The service offers, on a limited basis, respite placements for children placed with other foster carers or living at home where workers identify that a break from caring will support the placement. Day care is also available in similar circumstances, and to allow foster carers to attend training or other foster care activities. There is a specialist scheme for children whose difficulties present a particular challenge. The Council has a contract with a national voluntary organisation to provide short breaks or longer-term care for children and young people with disabilities.

Foster carers' progress through a fee-paid scheme based on their level of experience and skills. The specialist scheme operates separately with carers receiving a flat-rate fee that is higher than the highest rate of the general fee-paid scheme. They also have 28 days' paid leave and retain up to a specified number of days when no child is placed with them.

SUMMARY

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

The inspection was announced and was conducted by two inspectors over four days. In assessing the fostering service performance against the standards and regulations, account was taken of the requirements and recommendations made at the last inspection. Further, in assembling the evidence for the judgements made about the service's performance, the views of children, foster carers and children's social workers as ascertained from face to face interviews with some of them and from their wider responses to questionnaires were also taken into account. The inspectors visited a sample of six foster homes accommodating children of different ages and examined a wide range of records and other relevant documents concerned with the running of the service. An assessment was also made of the premises from where the service is operated and facilities made available to assist staff in carrying out their duties.

Throughout the report children and young people are used inter-changeably. The fostering service is also sometimes simply referred to as **the service** and foster carers, as **carers** and any reference to the standards and the regulations mean the Fostering Services National Minimum Standards and The Fostering Services Regulations 2002, respectively.

What the service does well:

The fostering service does particularly well in assessing supporting and developing carers. It is professional in its approach thus while there has in recent times been some staff changes, it has managed to retain a significant number of highly qualified and skilled staff and to recruit a similar cohort.

Children and young people were positive about their carers and the quality of their care; a number of them specified that they felt safe in the foster home and that they are consulted both by their carers and the fostering service. Foster carers value the around the clock support that they receive from the service and the benefits they derive from the support groups, including one recently established for foster carers children, that the fostering service facilitate.

There being sound child protection measures in place and the provisions made for children to voice their concerns means that any disturbing issues are picked up quickly and dealt with accordingly.

What has improved since the last inspection?

At the last inspection four requirements were made; that is, the service was deemed to have just fallen short of what is required in the following areas:

- ❑ Separation of the chairing of the fostering panel from direct operational management of the service
- ❑ The appointment of a dedicated fostering service manager
- ❑ Ensuring that foster carers are given all the relevant Look after Children (LAC) documentation either at the time when a child is placed or very soon thereafter.
- ❑ Clarification and promotion of the role of carers in preparing young people for independence or semi-independence.

All these matters have been addressed satisfactorily, but in their areas of LAC records there is scope for further improvement. There are fewer same day (emergency) placements thus improving the scope for better planning and more accurate matching and introduction of children to carers. Generally, the service's principal stakeholder's: children, foster carers and staff all report satisfaction with the quality of services being provided and recognise the improvements and developments which have been happening since the last inspection.

What they could do better:

Although there have been improvements in the matching of children to foster homes and in the documentation given to carers, certain aspects have been identified as presenting with scope for further improvements. Representing some of the children's comments, the service should note that a minority report that frequent changes of placement is a factor and a disruptive one and that greater care needs to be taken when they are being moved on. For example, some children wish it to be recognised that they form significant attachment to other children in their foster home and are upset when they are moved on without any farewell rituals. Some children also indicated that they would appreciate a more effective service from their own social workers in sorting things out and not changing too often.

Please contact the provider for advice of actions taken in response to this inspection.

The report of this inspection is available from enquiries@csci.gsi.gov.uk or by contacting your local CSCI office.

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Being Healthy

The intended outcome for this Standard is:

- The fostering service promotes the health and development of children.(NMS 12)

The Commission considers Standard 12 the key standard to be inspected at least once during a 12 month period.

JUDGEMENT – we looked at the outcome for Standard:

12

A range of measures in place to promote the health and development of children placed in the fostering service's care are proving effective from the point of view some of the children, their foster carers and what was actually observed during the inspection. Some fine-tuning is however indicated to ensure that foster carers are given the fullest information about the children's health histories and that the information presented is easily accessible and understood.

EVIDENCE:

In order to promote the children's health the fostering service ensures in its assessment and approval of foster carers that their own health and the living environment that they provide will not have any adverse effect on the children's health. Further, under the terms of the Foster Carers Agreement, carers undertake to treat the child as a child of the family thus maintaining the children's health as would be expected of any good parent. It was noted in the Foster Carers Handbook and other sources of information such as the Foster Carers Newsletter (Winter 2005), they are given information on a range of local health care services for Looked After children (children in care) and other useful sources in relation to children with particular diagnosed conditions. A specialist Medical Officer in child health is a member of the fostering panel and advises the panel in relation to the health of foster carers seeking approval and that related to children being placed in foster care.

The service is mindful of national policy intentions to enhance the life chances of children and young people who are being looked after and has a system in place for them to have an annual medical. It was also observed from interview of carers and examination of their records that they ensure children placed with them are registered with GPs and benefit from routine health screening including dental and optical checks. Where children in this fostering service's

care require specialist services for emotional and behavioural difficulties, they have each access to the Children and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) for looked after children, which is based on the same site. It was also noted from children's records that in some cases, they were either receiving speech and language therapy or were about to be referred to the service.

Health information given to foster carers, as gleaned from the Looked After Children documentation that they had, was judged variable in the amount of detail and, in a minority of instances, confusing. One carer reported not having had any health information about any of the children who were placed and was concerned when it was discovered later that one of the children had a specific allergy. In another case, a carer was given health information about two siblings who were placed at the same time, but some of this information was vague. When the inspectors asked most carers about medical consent documentation some were not immediately aware of what this is or where to find it. This suggests the need for carers to be given guidance on the crucial information and written authorisations that they need in relation to children's health. It may be that this could be done as part of the audit of carers' records, which was seen to be undertaken by the supervising social workers. Examination of children's records kept by the fostering service and foster carers showed that the health of each child features as a distinct item on the agenda of the statutory reviews of their case thus providing an ongoing system of monitoring.

In response to the item on the questionnaire asking the children how their foster carers help them to stay healthy, 90% cited being provided with healthy food. Other examples given were how aspects of personal care were arranged, encouragement to take exercise; getting enough sleep and check ups by health professionals. This tended to confirm that the children are being positively affected by the healthy lifestyles, which the fostering service seeks to promote and that they recognised the efforts being made by their foster carers to keep them healthy.

Staying Safe

The intended outcomes for these Standards are:

- Any persons carrying on or managing the service are suitable. (NMS 3)
- The fostering service provides suitable foster carers.(NMS 6)
- The service matches children to carers appropriately.(NMS 8)
- The fostering service protects each child or young person from abuse and neglect.(NMS 9)
- The people who work in or for the fostering service are suitable to work with children and young people.(NMS 15)
- Fostering panels are organised efficiently and effectively.(NMS 30)

The Commission considers Standards 3, 6, 8, 9, 15 and 30 the key standards to be inspected at least once during a 12 month period.

JUDGEMENT – we looked at outcomes for the following Standard(s):

3, 6, 8 and 9

Children and young people in the care of this fostering service are benefiting from an effectively managed service. Within this they are provided with a good material standard of living and are protected by sound policies, procedures and practices. Furthermore, requisite care is taken to ensure that those who care for them are fit persons in terms of their character, practices and competence.

EVIDENCE:

The fostering service is operated by the Local Authority and therefore accountable to both local and national governments in addition to being bound by the regulations and standards against which this inspection is being conducted. From information submitted to the Commission by the designated manager of the fostering service including employment history, criminal records check and references, this person was judged fit both in competence and character for the post. This confirms that the people involved in running the fostering service are suitable to do so and that they have the ability to run it such that it provides protection to children and promotes their proper development and wellbeing.

In assessing the fostering service's performance in promoting and safeguarding the health and wellbeing of children placed with foster carers, six foster homes were visited and the communal facilities (bathrooms, toilets, sitting room, etc) were inspected. Policy, procedure and guidance documents

such as *Health and Safety Checklist in Foster Homes, Dog Owner Questionnaire for Prospective Adopters and Foster Carers and Safe Caring Plans*, were also examined. All these sources indicate that the fostering service is taking due care to ensure that children are placed in homes which are safe and provide a comfortable and healthy lifestyle. That is, all the homes that were seen, in size and facilities were able to accommodate, in relative comfort, all who live in them. In all the homes visited, except one instance in which two same sex infant siblings shared a bedroom, children had their own bedroom and without exception their own bed. It was also established from discussions with staff that in matching children with foster carers, there is an understanding that if the child has experienced abuse or is at risk of abusing other children this is taken into consideration in the accommodation arrangements. Note, all the beds and bedding seen were clean and in sound condition.

All the foster homes that were seen had been subject to a health and safety check in the initial assessment and approval process for the foster carers and, as relevant, annually thereafter. There were, for example, instances where safety measures such as stair gates were installed to guard against the risk of young children falling from unguarded stairs.

The homes featured in the case tracking process (i.e., sample of homes closely examined for conformity to the standards) were welcoming and clean. There was however an instance of a home appearing somewhat cluttered and, because of the unusual arrangements made for the large but inoffensive pet dog, immediately off putting. It was also noted that in two instances toilets opened directly into the kitchen. It is recommended that in supervision visits or health and safety audits these observations are looked into and where necessary foster carers are given indicative assistance to address them.

Carers who use their own transport to convey children placed with them were seen, as confirmed by some of their records and what they told the inspectors, to have their vehicle records checked by the fostering service, i.e., driving licence, MOT and Road Fund Licence. They are also, in information given to them, advised to inform their motor insurers of the purpose for which the vehicle is to be used.

As alluded to earlier, one of the ways in which the fostering service seeks to promote the health, safety and wellbeing of children is by ensuring they are matched with foster carers whose abilities and the facilities of their households are able to meet the needs of the particular child. In this connection, evidence was provided of a database of foster carers' profile, which is used as a basis for comparison of what the children need and what particular carers are able to offer.

Information gleaned from the fostering service's staff when they were interviewed suggests that this system, which takes account of the agreed

planned outcomes for the child (the care plan) and involves information sharing with relevant professionals and the child, works well when circumstances allow sufficient planning time. However, most foster carers who were interviewed whilst largely satisfied with the process of how children are placed, tended not to perceive a deliberate matching process. They perceived that particular children are placed with them because they are in a position to accommodate them and that the children fall within the category for which they have been approved. The exception being for foster carers in the specialist scheme for which there are defined matching criteria. The inspectors were also shown a *Matching Report* – a kind of matrix, which compares the child's needs with the fostering household's profile and is intended to document all that was taken into account in the matching process. Such a report was not seen among either the children's or the foster carers records, which were examined during the case tracking process.

It was also noted that though the foster placement agreement setting out what carers are expected to do to meet the child's needs and contribute to the care plan were clear, they did not make any reference to the matching process. Further, in none of the records examined were any recognition of gaps in the foster carers' ability to meet the children's needs and compensatory support, which might be necessary, should this be the case. One instance reported by foster carers where transport other than that provided by them was needed to facilitate children's contact with relatives, this was either not taken into account in the matching process or failed to be honoured in the foster care agreement. Consequently they had to use their own transport. This is even though it was agreed that their address should not be revealed and it was recognised that their transport, which is also used in their employment, is so distinctive as to make it possible for it to be traced back to their address. It appeared that it is practical details such as this that carers found lacking in the matching and placement planning process, but otherwise thought the process by which children are placed is quite effective. In some instances however, they cited cases where children were placed on an unplanned basis for say, two weeks and stayed for two years and the matching tended to be by drift rather than planning. In these cases, it was felt that the information sharing which normally takes place with planned placements is not as good and getting all the relevant information subsequently is difficult.

Information gleaned from the children's responses to a questionnaire about their foster placement and its reflection on the matching process, suggest that they are content. Whilst most did not respond to the item about "What is going well for you in your fostering service", among the comments of those who responded was: "My foster carers are bringing up my confidence". Similarly, most did not make any comment in relation to what they thought might need changing, but a minority who commented said everything is fine. In others areas where the children were asked specifically about how they are being looked after in their foster homes, they were very positive about their

carers from which it has been inferred that they were generally satisfied with the match.

The inspectors were satisfied that the fostering service has taken all reasonable steps to protect children placed with foster carers from abuse in all forms. They were seen to do this by preparing, training and provision of written instructions and guidance to foster carers for the task of caring for children, some of whom may have experienced abuse. In their initial training prospective foster carers are made aware of the nature and effects of abuse, how to recognise when it might be happening and how to respond. They all take part in a programme of Safe Caring, i.e., how to organise their own households and conduct their caring to assure the safety of the children in their care. In the inspectors' interviews with carers, they were all aware of their responsibilities in the contribution to the protection of the children they are looking after. The fostering services that have ready access to the local Area Child Protection Procedures and carers are given a summary of those procedures.

The fostering service declared that all foster care households have a safe caring plan, which is taken into account when the individuals concerned are being considered for approval as carers. This was confirmed by foster carers as being the case, and records showed these plans are reviewed annually or in light of any significant change in the foster home.

The fostering service was seen to issue clear instructions, guidance and training in how foster carers are expected to approach the management of children's behaviour. In essence, the service's behaviour management policy is in line with recognised good practice in that it seeks to encourage and reinforce acceptable behaviour and sets out reasonable and age-appropriate sanctions, which might be used in response to unacceptable conduct. The behaviour management policy is clear about punishments, such as smacking or humiliating treatment, which are not permitted and makes clear the circumstances where physical intervention (e.g. restraint) might be used to control a child. That is, where the child is about to cause harm to herself/himself or others.

Of those foster cares who responded to the inspection questionnaire all indicated that it has been made clear what punishments are acceptable and in their comments about these, they considered them fair and effective. Similar responses were made by those children's social workers who completed the questionnaire. Asked about the type of punishments that their foster carers give them, the children in their response to the questionnaire listed the range of those which are set out in the fostering service's behaviour management policy as being acceptable. These include earlier than usual bedtime, being grounded (not allowed out unsupervised at certain times), temporary withdrawal of play station, TV, etc. Of those who were asked whether any of

the punishments given should not be allowed, 29% made no response, but all the other respondents indicated that they thought the punishments were fair.

The children's questionnaire also asked them whether they have had to be held to stop them hurting others or themselves or to stop them causing a lot of damage to property. They were also asked if they had been held were they hurt in the process. Only 14% of the sample responded that they were held and of these all indicated that it was done properly with only one respondent reporting being hurt. The inspectors' judgement is that the fostering service's approach to managing children's behaviour is based on sound principles and promotes good practice. However, more importantly the children, as shown above, perceive that the way in which they are punished, when necessary, are fair.

Evidence of the fostering service's *Anti-Bullying Policy* was presented at inspection and was seen to be included in the Foster Carers Handbook. Foster carers are mindful of the vulnerability of looked after children to bullying and one carer gave the inspectors an account of where effective intervention was made in the case of a young person who was being bullied at school. None of the children and young people who were seen during the inspection and those who responded to the questionnaire reported any current or recent instances of bullying. Indeed, where asked, "What's best thing about fostering..." were responses such as: "They ... don't make you feel intimidated"; "I know I'm safe and happy"; "Going to nice place – being safe and loved".

It was observed that children are also being protected by the fostering service's "Missing From Care Protocol", which sets out clear procedures to be followed when a child is absent without authority, is missing or has absconded. The procedures include assessing the vulnerability of those who go missing and the steps to be taken for their recovery. The fostering service reporting of children who go missing to the Commission through the notification system has provided evidence that in practice the procedures are effective.

Enjoying and Achieving

The intended outcomes for these Standards are:

- The fostering service values diversity.(NMS 7)
- The fostering service promotes educational achievement.(NMS 13)
- When foster care is provided as a short-term break for a child, the arrangements recognise that the parents remain the main carers for the child.(NMS 31)

The Commission considers Standards 7, 13, and 31 the key standards to be inspected at least once during a 12 month period.

JUDGEMENT – we looked at outcomes for the following standard(s):

7 and 13

The fostering service has made provisions, which are proving effective in recognising, valuing and responding to the needs of children arising from their gender, race, culture, religion and disabilities. Arrangements made for supporting the education of children in foster care are soundly based and ought to result in good outcomes.

EVIDENCE:

The fostering service has sought to (and has been reasonably successful) in recruiting a diverse group of foster carers including Black and Asian carers. It was noted that the matching process adopted by the service gives recognition to needs arising from children's gender, disabilities, race, religion and culture. That is, were possible, it is intended that children should be placed with carers who are equipped to respond appropriately to those needs. For example, children being placed with foster carers of the same race so that their identity, cultural, religious and, as relevant, their linguistic needs are attended. This seems to be working quite well in that the service has a group of Black and Asian carers for whom support groups have been established to consolidate and develop the service that they provide.

It was noted that a Development Group has been established within the fostering service to promote the diversity aspects of the service. This group of social workers facilitates carers in ensuring that they look after children such that their religious, cultural and linguistic heritage are respected and that they develop confidence in their identity and worth. To this end evidence in the form of the foster carers' training programme for 2005/2006 shows that carers

were provided with training in Caring for Black Children; Helping Children trans-racially Placed (with carers of a different race) Understand their Heritage; Equality and Diversity; and, Good Outcomes for Black Children.

The fostering service in partnership with a voluntary organisation provides a dedicated service, which is separately registered and inspected, for some of the children with disabilities including those provided with short break care. The most recent inspection of that service indicates that the needs of those children were being adequately met. Where the diverse needs of others are concerned it was noted that foster carers are, for example, provided with training in Helping Children to Communicate and in Caring for Children with Autistic Spectrum Disorders.

None of the children who were seen during the inspection or those who responded to the questionnaire, reported any concerns related to the fostering services performance in terms of diversity and equality. One carer did, however, believe that the children placed in her care would benefit from some specific input in relation to their identity. It was also noted that the evaluation of the workshop on securing Good Outcomes for Black Children recommended that the fostering panel should monitor and, as necessary, report on the performance of the fostering service in this regard. In the inspectors opinion this is a sound idea and we would recommend that it be adopted. We would also recommend that the Development Workers Group assist the fostering service to track children who have needs arising from their race, religion and culture so that where these needs are not being addressed effectively, the fostering service is able to respond accordingly. As for example in the case of the carer who believes the children in her care would benefit from support in relation to their identity.

The fostering service operates within the local authority children's services, which gives high priority to meeting the needs of looked after children. In this connection a dedicated service: Education Access is well established and works in partnership with the LEA, schools and carers to promote the education of looked after children.

Over the years there have been a number of initiatives to support looked after children to achieve their full potential and the fostering service has provided foster carers with guidance and training in this regard. Carers who were interviewed in the course of the inspection described how they supported the children's education in the ways that would be expected of any good parents. That is they ensure that the children are made ready on time and are properly equipped for school. They liaise with schools both in terms of the children's progress and to resolve any difficulties as they occur. They also reported that where homework is set, they ensure that the children have the space and resources necessary to complete it. Some carers also showed school reports and dates of school events that they had attended. Indeed one carer explained that she volunteers to assist with some of the activities at the school

by way of indicating interest in the children's education. The inspectors noted that in the foster homes which were visited, there were books, toys and games and in some cases computers. It was also noted from records and other sources that the children are involved in a wide range of sports and leisure activities, which are likely to contribute both to their formal education and social learning.

Although no records were examined in this connection, it was noted that all the young people who are being looked after and are placed with foster carers are intended to have a Personal Education Plan, which is reviewed twice per year and to which the young person and all those involved in his or her case are able to contribute. This together with the monitoring activity of the Life Chances Group and the work of the Education Access, as reported by the Fostering Service Manager suggests that there is rigorous monitoring of the general educational arrangements and progress of children and young people in foster care.

In the questionnaire children and young people were asked to say what help they get from their foster home with school and college work. Their responses tended to confirm the accounts given by foster carers as outlined above. That is 91% (all those who made a response) said that their foster carers helped them with their school and college work and that this help was in the form of encouragement to work hard, to do homework and with their reading, spelling and to understand things. The general tenor of the children's comments was both positive about school and the support that they receive. This and the evidence given above leads the inspectors to conclude that the service is securing for children and young people the outcomes that these standards intend.

Making a Positive Contribution

The intended outcomes for these Standards are:

- The fostering service promotes contact arrangements for the child or young person. (NMS 10)
- The fostering service promotes consultation.(NMS 11)

The Commission considers Standards 10 and 11 the key standards to be inspected at least once during a 12 month period.

JUDGEMENT – we looked at outcomes for the following standard(s):

10 and 11

Children and young people benefit from the arrangements, which are made for them to maintain and develop contact with their families and those significant to them, where this is featured in their foster placement agreement. The Fostering service has also demonstrated that it respects the opinions of children and others with an interest its services, and has introduced a range of means for receiving and responding to any compliments, concerns or complaints in this regard.

EVIDENCE:

There was evidence in the foster carers training and an implied condition in the Foster Carers Agreement recognising the importance of enabling children to maintain contact with their families and other people who are important to them. In those foster placement agreements examined, contact arrangements were clearly stated. Those in the sample of foster carers who were interviewed during the inspection all recognised that the children's contact with their families is important and explained the various ways in which they facilitated this. These include providing transport to the contact venue or agreeing to some contact visits at the foster home. This was in line with the responses that the wider group of foster carer made in the inspection survey in which they were asked to say what they do to help foster children to maintain contact. Note some carers in their response said that in addition to some of the examples already given, they make the telephone available to the children for contact; they help them to keep in touch by letters and arrange social gatherings so that siblings can meet in instances where they are separated.

On the evidence outlined above it was judged that the fostering service has fulfilled the requirements to enable children to have contact with their families

and important others unless there are official reasons for this not to happen. The fostering service should however note that among the issues that a minority of children suggested should be mentioned in the report is more regular contact with their families (i.e., those they are permitted to see) particularly where contact is prohibited with certain family members. A significant number of children also indicated that whilst their foster care experience is positive, they nevertheless miss their usual home and family and therefore regard being separated from these as the worst thing about fostering.

The fostering service has produced and issued an up-to-date and child friendly guide to the fostering service and being looked after in foster care. The guide makes children aware of what they can expect of the service and their foster carers. In addition to a separate leaflet on how to complain, the guide also advises children about the various agencies they might approach if they are unhappy or have any concerns. In addition to the Children's Services own Complaints Officer children in foster care are made aware that they can approach the Commission, the local Children's Rights Service and the Children's Rights Director.

The complaints system works well since children do complain or others do so on their behalf and when they do they are taken seriously and responded to accordingly. This is borne out by incidents reported to the Commission through the formal notification system and by the fostering service's own data, which shows that since the last inspection some 26 complaints were made all of which have been investigated and resolved. Balanced against this are compliments about the children's experience of the service. For example, asked whether there is anything they would like the inspectors to put in the report about the fostering service, one respondent suggested that his carer be sent a bouquet.

In examining the other ways in which the fostering service seeks the opinions of children, evidence was found to suggest that the children's views are sought in the annual review of the carers. Further, that carers are guided to listen to the children, to seek their views and to help them to contribute effectively to matters that affect them. Indeed, 91% of those responding to an item on the questionnaire about whether their carers ask for their opinion and ideas indicated that this is the case and cited a wide range of activities in daily living such as choice of food, leisure pursuits, where go on holiday, etc. It was also encouraging to note that among the examples given was one, which suggests that the foster carers ask the child if there are other ways of dealing with problems than what is being done by the carer. Only 43% of the children who responded to the questionnaire consider that they are consulted about the fostering service, but 75% said that they were asked their opinions about their carers. More importantly, 60% of those who made a response said something was changed on account of views that they had expressed. Among the examples cited in this regard were:

“We handle things better than before” – “Got new clothes, shoes and sports wear” – Orange with seeds; I don’t like them” – “...Carer was going have another [foster] child, but changed her mind because it would upset me” – “I was asked if I would share my bedroom with another child and I agreed”

On the basis of this evidence it was considered that the fostering service and, in particular, foster carers are doing a sterling job in involving children and young people, seeking their opinions and responding appropriately to them.

Achieving Economic Wellbeing

The intended outcomes for these Standards are:

- The fostering service prepares young people for adulthood.(NMS 14)
- The fostering service pays carers an allowance and agreed expenses as specified.(NMS 29)

The Commission considers Standards 29 the key standard to be inspected at least once during a 12 month period.

JUDGEMENT – we looked at outcomes for the following standard(s):

14 and 29

There are likely to be benefits from the clarity of the guidance, which has now been given to foster carers in respect of their role in preparing young people for independence and the provisions available in the after care service. This together with the satisfactory financial provisions that the fostering service makes for their care of children and young people acts to assure their economic wellbeing.

EVIDENCE:

At the last inspection a requirement was made for the fostering service to clarify and emphasise the role of foster carers and the provisions of the after care service in assisting young people in their preparation for independent or semi-independent living. It was observed that a positive response has been made to this requirement. That is to say, in addition to the basic duty of foster carers to bring the child up as a child of the family, which would mean promoting their normal development towards independence, their role in the deliberate action planning for young people who are nearing the time when they will leave the care system has been made explicit.

Information was given at inspection to suggest that young people in the fostering service's care also benefit from the Local Authority's leaving care policy, which includes Pathway and Transition (for those with severe disabilities) planning. It was also noted that a voluntary organisation has been commissioned to provide an aftercare service and that in a guide for young people (January 2006) they and their foster carers are advised of the various living and care options available to young people after they become 18. These include staying on in their foster homes on a supportive lodgings basis.

In one of the cases that was tracked (examined closely) it was observed that the young person was approaching adulthood and that proper arrangements were in place for this young person to leave the foster home to live independently. Both the young person and the foster carer were satisfied with those arrangements.

The fostering service provided evidence to confirm that it issues, annually, the allowances and expenses that it will pay to foster carers for the maintenance of children. These are in line with the rates recommended by the Fostering Network and all those in the group of foster carers who were interviewed confirmed that this actually happens, that they are paid promptly and that the allowances are adequate. In terms of the effects of these financial provisions on the economic wellbeing of the children and young people, the inspectors noted that they were being cared for in households that provide a materially comfortable standard of living. Furthermore, the children and young people in response to the questionnaire gave other positive clues in this regard. That is they cited examples of enjoying economic wellbeing in having their bedding changed regularly, going on holidays and to nice places; getting clothes and footwear, toys and games and other things which means that by being in foster care they are not set apart from their peers materially.

Management

The intended outcomes for these Standards are:

- There is a clear statement of the aims and objectives of the fostering service and the fostering service ensures that they meet those aims and objectives.(NMS 1)
- The fostering service is managed by those with the appropriate skills and experience. (NMS 2)
- The fostering service is monitored and controlled as specified. (NMS 4)
- The fostering service is managed effectively and efficiently.(NMS 5)
- Staff are organised and managed effectively.(NMS 16)
- The fostering service has an adequate number of sufficiently experienced and qualified staff.(NMS 17)
- The fostering service is a fair and competent employer.(NMS 18)
- There is a good quality training programme. (NMS 19)
- All staff are properly accountable and supported.(NMS 20)
- The fostering service has a clear strategy for working with and supporting carers.(NMS 21)
- Foster carers are provided with supervision and support.(NMS 22)
- Foster carers are appropriately trained.(NMS 23)
- Case records for children are comprehensive.(NMS 24)
- The administrative records are maintained as required.(NMS 25)
- The premises used as offices by the fostering service are suitable for the purpose.(NMS 26)
- The fostering service is financially viable. (NMS 27)
- The fostering service has robust financial processes. (NMS 28)
- Local Authority fostering services recognise the contribution made by family and friends as carers.(NMS 32)

The Commission considers Standards 17, 21, and 24 the key standards to be inspected at least once during a 12 month period.

JUDGEMENT – we looked at outcomes for the following standard(s):

17, 21, 24 and 32

The resources, human and otherwise, allocated to the fostering service enable it to operate effectively in the recruitment, assessment and support of foster carers from which the children and young people are benefiting. Further, the service maintains records of its activities sufficient to enable it to review, plan and manage the full range of its functions.

EVIDENCE:

Information declared in the fostering service's revised Statement of Purpose (January 2006) and confirmed by managers and staff in interviews during the inspection, suggest that there are in excess of 36 employed. Including the designated Fostering Service Manager and four Team Managers, there are 21 social workers all of whom are professionally qualified and, in a significant number of cases, have received post-qualifying training and hold advanced qualifications in child care. An administrative team comprising an Administration Manager, Database Manager and 5 clerical staff supports the professional work of the service. The average experience of social work staff (mostly in children and families work) is 14 years, and a significant number have been in the employ of the fostering service for more than 10 years. This demonstrates a professional and well-resourced service with experienced and competent managers and practitioners.

The service is structured to develop and deliver services in relation to recruitment and assessment of prospective foster carers, dealing with referrals for placements and supporting foster carers for which there are two teams. Within this structure are sub teams dealing with family and friends as carers and the development of remand fostering as an addition to the current portfolio of services.

The numbers and deployment of staff outlined above means that reasonable shortfalls as may occur from time to time are manageable; it allows for their regular supervision and training and seems to account for the service's success in their retention. This is also the experience of most foster carers who were fulsome in their praise of the support that they receive from the fostering service around the clock and in particular for the efficiency and professionalism of their particular supervising social workers. The inspectors from the declared frequency of home visits and those recorded in foster carers supervision records consider that they are receiving the requisite level of monitoring and support. At January 2006, the number of foster carers approved and available to the fostering service is reported to be 224.

It was observed from the Statement of Purpose and other documents that the fostering service has a clear recruitment policy, which identifies where there are shortfalls and plans strategies to respond to these. Currently the focus is on recruiting more carers for teenagers and the inspectors were advised of plans recently produced to employ a marketing specialist to enhance the effectiveness of the recruitment team.

Staff members in the fostering service are given clear written guidelines on the process for the assessment of foster carers and the qualities and competencies against which they are to be assessed. In essence, the fostering service has adopted the BAAF Form F (a nationally recognised assessment format) as its

approach to the assessment of prospective foster carers. Social workers who conduct assessments and were interviewed during the inspection, were satisfied with this process and the chairperson of the fostering panel rated this and the service generally as being efficient. The chairperson of the fostering panel also noted that there has been a marked increase in the number of carers approved for teenagers thus adding further corroboration of the success of the recruitment strategy in this connection.

So far as foster carers are concerned, those who were interviewed confirmed information given by staff that the assessment took an average of about 6 months from initial inquiry to the approval stage. The foster carers were of the opinion that the assessment process is rigorous and that they were left in no doubt about the nature and implications of the commitment they were making in becoming foster carers. They mostly did not consider that any changes were necessary in the fostering service's approach to recruitment and in some cases recognised improvements, which have been made. Views on the assessment process were similar in that foster carers reported improvements in this regard though a minority considered that it is all too long-winded. With this and the foregoing in mind, the inspectors concluded that the service has satisfied the requirement of standard 17, but might wish to look again at the assessment process to see whether there is any merit in the minority view that it is too long-winded.

As mentioned earlier, foster carers said they are satisfied with the support they receive from the service, but they also recognise the encouragement and facilitation of the foster carers' support groups from which they derive much benefit in carrying out their fostering task. Evidence was provided in the form of the annual training programme for foster carers and the learning and skills development programme, which confirms that the service provides carers with post-approval training and development. From these documents it is clear that carers are expected to undertake foundation training after their approval and are able to pursue a National Vocational Qualification Level 3 accreditation process with financial incentives for successful completion.

Carers reported both in interviews and in response to the questionnaire that this training and development programme is actually made available to them, but as observed at the last inspection there was no clear training strategy for individual carers. Accordingly, some carers' training records indicate that they have received repeats of training in particular areas, whilst others, including newly approved carers, were unsuccessful in gaining places for foundation training modules because of what seems to be a first come first served approach. It is therefore suggested that each carer has an annual training and development plan which relates to the service's current objectives and the carers' needs, as jointly agreed by them and their supervising social workers. This issue is recognised by the Fostering Service Manager as shown in the Manager's Self Assessment, and has been identified for attention.

Arrangements were seen to be in place for respite in relation to some placements where this was agreed as necessary in the foster care agreement

In the accounts given by supervising social workers and foster carers and on the basis of the evidence set out in this report, the inspectors concluded that the role of supervising social worker is clear. From the records examined it was also evident that there is an annual review of carers, which is available to the fostering panel and endorsed on behalf of the local authority – in effect confirming continued approval of the carer, where appropriate.

There appears to be good communication between fostering service social workers and children's social workers, but given that some foster carers are still reporting a lack of full information about the children placed with them, this communication needs to be used more effectively to resolve this issue. The inspectors noted that whilst all the LAC documentation had been completed in all of the cases they examined, the fullness of information was variable and in most cases was not sufficient to enable the carer to allow the children to have a sufficient understanding of their background circumstances and how this has influenced their current situation.

Examination of a sample of records kept by the fostering service was found to be full, and up-to-date. They were also deemed to reflect accurately the necessary details in relation to the foster carers and the children placed with them. Foster carers were also seen to be provided with necessary details about the children placed with them and to be given the means and the training to maintain records of each child's circumstances and progress. In all instances records were being securely stored and there is now a clear access to records procedure. Carers are mindful of helping children to understand their history and provided examples of different ways in which they assist to record significant life events. For example, there was evidence of life story work being done, photograph albums and memory boxes being kept.

Among the group of foster carers who were interviewed during the course of the inspection, were two who have been assessed and are looking after children under the family and friends as carers scheme. They reported that the Local Authority has proceeded sensitively in assessing them as carers giving due regard to their pre-existing relationships with the children. It was clear from what these carers had to say and from their records, that they are afforded the same monitoring, support and access to training as mainstream carers.

In assessing the fostering service's performance in relation to family and friends as carers account was taken of the recommendation advanced at the last inspection for the promotion of this aspect of the service's function. In this regard, the inspectors noted the acceptable attempts made to enhance the profile of this aspect of service both in regard to the Statement of Purpose and the dedicated resources made available to it.

SCORING OF OUTCOMES

This page summarises the assessment of the extent to which the National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services have been met and uses the following scale.

4 Standard Exceeded (Commendable) **3** Standard Met (No Shortfalls)
2 Standard Almost Met (Minor Shortfalls) **1** Standard Not Met (Major Shortfalls)

"X" in the standard met box denotes standard not assessed on this occasion
 "N/A" in the standard met box denotes standard not applicable

BEING HEALTHY	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
12	3

STAYING SAFE	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
3	3
6	4
8	3
9	3
15	X
30	X

ENJOYING AND ACHIEVING	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
7	3
13	3
31	X

MAKING A POSITIVE CONTRIBUTION	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
10	3
11	3

ACHIEVING ECONOMIC WELLBEING	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
14	3
29	3

MANAGEMENT	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
1	X
2	X
4	X
5	X
16	X
17	3
18	X
19	X
20	X
21	3
22	X
23	X
24	3
25	X
26	X
27	X
28	X
32	3

No

Are there any outstanding requirements from the last inspection?

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 Regulations 2002 and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider(s) must comply with the given timescales.

No.	Standard	Regulation	Requirement	Timescale for action

RECOMMENDATIONS

These recommendations relate to National Minimum Standards and are seen as good practice for the Registered Provider/s to consider carrying out.

No.	Refer to Standard	Good Practice Recommendations
1	FS12	Those in charge of the fostering service should assist carers to know what health information they can reasonably expect to be given (including necessary authorisation to arrange medical and dental treatment), how to seek this information when it is not made available at the time the child is placed and how to organise these records for easy access.
2	FS6	Where toilets open directly onto kitchens in foster homes, the fostering service should seek advice from the Environmental Services Department as to whether this is acceptable and, if indicated, assist the foster carers to remedy this.
3	FS8	The fostering service should ensure that factors that inform the match of a child to foster carers is reflected in the foster placement agreement and that practical arrangements such as transporting the child to access venues are clearly documented and understood.

4	FS17	The fostering service should – taking account of a minority view that the assessment process for prospective carers is too longwinded – consider whether there is any merit in this view and, if so, take such corrective actions as necessary.
5	FS24	The fostering service should ensure that foster carers are given the fullest information to enable them to look after the children placed with them effectively and, in so doing, assist them to understand and come to terms with their past circumstances.
6	FS24	In order to address recommendation 5 above, the Local Authority is recommended to permit the fostering service access to the children’s computerised records, ensure that each social worker employed in the service has ready access to a computer and receive any training necessary in this regard.

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