

inspection report

FOSTERING SERVICE

West Berks District Council Fostering Services

Avonbank House West Street Newbury RG14 1BZ

Lead Inspector
Lucy Martin

Announced Inspection 15th – 18th January 2007 10:00 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 West Berks District Council Fostering Services

Address Avonbank House

West Street Newbury RG14 1BZ

Telephone number 01635 516820

Fax number

Email address

Provider Web address

Name of registered provider(s)/company (if applicable)

West Berkshire Council

Name of registered manager (if applicable)

Type of registration Local Authority Fostering Service

SERVICE INFORMATION

Conditions of registration:

Date of last inspection 6th March 2006

Brief Description of the Service:

West Berkshire Family Placement Team is part of the Children and Families Services provided by West Berkshire Council. The team also undertakes an adoption service, private fostering services, supported accommodation (lodgings) and the identification and oversight of placements with Independent Fostering Providers. Only the fostering service was the scope of this inspection.

The Fostering Service exists to provide high quality locally based substitute family care, on either a short or long-term basis; to meet the needs of looked after children and young people who are unable to live with their birth parents. The Fostering Service currently offers:

Planned and emergency foster care for individual children and sibling groups of all ages, including specialist care for disabled children, across the full range of short and long term placements, and relief care when necessary for established placements.

Family based day and overnight short break care to support children and young people and their families including specialist care to meet the needs of disabled children.

Supported accommodation for young people aged 16+ who are looked after.

Mother and baby placements.

At the time of this inspection (figures from 15 January 2007), there were:

64 approved fostering households plus 8 households offering day care only.

65 looked after children and young people placed full time with West Berkshire approved foster carers, (includes 2 from other local authorities), plus 3 young people aged 18+.

13 looked after children and young people are placed with family and friends, carers who have been approved as foster carers.

As this Fostering Service is a Local Authority there are no fees charged for placements.	

SUMMARY

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

Before the inspection questionnaires were sent to all children over 7 years of age in foster care, to parents, foster carers and the placing social workers. 10 completed questionnaires were received from young people, 15 from foster carers, 28 from social workers and 2 from parents. The Manager supplied pre-inspection information and sent the inspector key documentation.

The inspection took place over four days and the inspector met with:

- The Team Manager, the two Assistant Team Managers and the Service Manager for the Family Placement team.
- Three supervising social workers and a Family Support Worker individually.
- Four foster households and the foster children in their homes.

Samples of case records, the minutes of the Fostering Panel and policies and procedures were looked at. Feedback was given to the Team Manager, Assistant Team Managers and Head of Children's Services at the end of the inspection.

What the service does well:

West Berkshire has a strong fostering service that carries out its duties well. There is strong, effective leadership of the team and the staff team feel valued and supported in their work. There is an enthusiasm about the work and a commitment to improving and developing practice.

There are strong links with other teams and good multi-agency work in the Life Chances Team. This 'wrap-around' service helps to ensure that there is effective promotion of education for fostered young people and that their health needs are met.

There is good consultation with the young people and 100% of those who completed the questionnaire said that they always felt well cared for where they are living now. They felt listened to by their foster carers and effective systems are in place to gain their views about placements. There are few placements made more than 20 miles from their home and there is excellent placement stability.

Foster carers feel well supported and there are good back-up systems in place for carers and a child-sitting service. Senior managers have regular meetings with the Foster Carers' Association. The fostering service has continued to recruit a number of new foster carers which increases placement choice.

What has improved since the last inspection?

A strong feature of this service continues to be its willingness to develop and improve its knowledge and practice. There have been a number of improvements made since the last inspection including the further development of the multi-agency Life Chances Team which now includes workers from early years, education, education welfare, educational psychology, youth work, early intervention (YOT), child and adolescent mental health and health. This has enabled a significant number of more challenging young people to remain in in-house placements.

There is better evidence of the matching process when finding a new placement and there was seen to be greater consistency in practice regarding the completion of safer care guidelines.

There has been continued development of the health and safety checklists and the Family Support Workers who usually complete the checklist have attended training in health and safety and risk management.

The quality and consistency of information in the foster carers' files has improved and it is positive that more regular file audits are being carried out.

A substantial number of policies and procedures, both internally and in the Foster Carers' Handbook, have been reviewed since the last inspection and is an ongoing process

What they could do better:

The document used by West Berkshire as the Foster Placement Agreement, the Placement Information and Agreement Record, should be reviewed. Those agreements seen did not include information as to who attended the meeting or the signatures of the foster carers. Two of the four agreements seen did not include information regarding medical consent.

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

Quality in this outcome area is good.

The foster carers actively promote the health and development of children with good support from the fostering service.

This judgement has been made using available evidence including a visit to this service.

EVIDENCE:

There were good examples seen on this inspection where foster carers were actively promoting the health and development of the young people placed with them. There is good involvement of the Looked After Children's nurse who liaises with foster carers and has seen young people at school and in foster carers' homes. There was evidence that where a child has specific health needs, the matching process ensures that these can be met and the Looked After Children's nurse ensures that foster carers are provided with written health records and information in relation to each placement. 60% of the young people who completed the questionnaire prior to this inspection felt that they always get support and advice about being healthy.

Two of the young people seen on this inspection had health concerns and there was substantial evidence that the foster carers were accessing appropriate medical expertise and were receiving good support from the fostering service.

All new foster carers are required to undertake first aid training in the first year after approval and there are a number of training courses on health related subjects such as attachment, separation and loss, the health of Looked After Children, an introduction to mental health and drug withdrawal in babies.

All foster carers, their families and the fostered young people have free access to West Berkshire leisure centres for 'pay and play' activities and swimming, to help promote healthy related interests. There are plans to develop the use of fitness assessments at leisure centres for older Looked After Children who refuse to attend their annual medical appointment and this is creative thinking.

The development last year of the Life Chances team which is multi-agency and includes health has progressed and ensures that each Looked After Child is monitored in terms of health and that there are close relationships with health care professionals.

Two of the Placement Information and Agreement Records had the section regarding medical consent not completed or signed. It is acknowledged that there are some difficulties regarding obtaining signatures on a computer generated form, but it is essential that this information is fully completed on the form which West Berkshire uses as the Foster Placement Agreement. See the 'Staying Safe' part of the report for more details.

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, 9, 15, 30

Quality in this outcome area is good.

The fostering service has effective systems in place to ensure that children and young people placed are kept safe.

This judgement has been made using available evidence including a visit to this service.

EVIDENCE:

The Manager of the Family Placement Team confirmed that CRB (Criminal Records Bureau) checks are renewed every three years for members of staff, including the Manager's CRB check. The Manager is an authorised counter signatory for the CRB checks and this ensures close monitoring of checks and their renewal.

West Berkshire Council has written recruitment and selection procedures which are followed for appointing staff. All staff working in the Fostering Service have been interviewed as part of the selection process. All social work staff involved in the assessment and approval of carers are appropriately qualified. Where unqualified workers are carrying out social work functions they do so under the close supervision of an experienced and appropriately qualified member of staff who is accountable for their work.

At the last inspection in March 2006, six personnel files were seen, including the Team Manager's. All the required information was on file. No personnel files were seen on this inspection.

The inspector visited the homes of four foster carers. All were seen to be warm, comfortable, well maintained and suitable for the children who were living there. All foster homes have an annual health and safety check to ensure that a good standard of cleanliness, hygiene and safety is maintained. This is usually undertaken by a Family Support Worker and includes a check on the sleeping arrangements. The health and safety checklist used is comprehensive and includes sections on general safety, specific areas of accommodation, pets, vehicles and insurance. Any recommendations are followed up by supervising social workers as part of the carers' routine supervision sessions. A database is maintained to track and monitor that health and safety checks are completed annually, and that any recommendations are followed up.

The areas covered in the annual health and safety checks have increased substantially and at the last inspection advice was given that the Family Support Workers undertaking the health and safety checks attend training in this area. This has been done and training has been attended on health and safety and risk management. It was positive that the form has been updated to include compliance with new legislation on car seat belts and restraints for children and that further advice and training is being sought from the local Fire Safety Officer. Overall, there was much evidence to indicate good practice and that this standard is exceeded.

The fostering service uses a Placement Information and Agreement Record to record all the details required in a Foster Placement Agreement. At the last inspection it was a requirement that there was more reference to specific elements of matching and that the Foster Placement Agreements contained reference to where this information was located. The requirement concerning matching has been met and the matching grid seen on foster carers' files provided good evidence of the matching process. Advice was given to always include the reasons why one foster carer was more appropriate than another when a choice had been made between carers.

The document used as the Foster Placement Agreement did not include the signatures of the foster carers or who attended the meeting. In addition, in two of the files seen, the medical consent sections of the form had not been completed. It is a recommendation of this report that this form is reviewed to ensure that all information is recorded, including signatures and that it meets the needs of the fostering service.

All foster carers are required to attend pre-approval training that includes caring for children who may have been abused, safer caring, behaviour

management and recognising possible signs of abuse. More in-depth training on all these subjects is available post-approval to all foster carers. Fostering service policies and procedures are in place regarding child protection, safer caring, behaviour management and the use of physical punishment, bullying and unauthorised absences from the foster home and are included in the Foster Carers' Handbook. There have been no Section 47 child protection investigations regarding a child in a foster placement since the last inspection.

A safer caring agreement is developed with all new fostering households at the time of their approval and when a new placement is made. On this inspection, there were found to be improvements in the use of the safer care agreements and a template for a placement specific combined risk assessment and safer care agreement has been developed. The revised forms include evidence that the guidelines are cleared with the child's social worker and are explained clearly and appropriately to the child. The reviewing of these agreements will become part of the regular Looked After Children reviewing processes.

The Fostering Panel continues to meet monthly and is a busy panel. The Fostering Panel handbook details panel policies and procedures and this has been incorporated into the Fostering Policies and Procedures manual. The Fostering Panel was observed as part of the last inspection in March 2006 and was not attended this year. The Panel minutes were seen and showed that there is consistent membership, which includes expertise in educational psychology, child health and disabled children, and there are two foster carer members from other agencies. The Panel minutes showed that sound recommendations are made. The practice whereby the Panel Chair and Adviser meet with the Agency Decision Maker immediately after the Panel to confirm the recommendations made continues, and works well.

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, 13, 31

Quality in this outcome area is good.

The fostering service ensures that diversity is valued and that educational achievement is actively promoted. There continue to be low numbers of disabled children in foster placements.

This judgement has been made using available evidence including a visit to this service.

EVIDENCE:

All fostering service and social work staff attend training on valuing diversity and the training is highly recommended for all foster carers. One of the young people case-tracked as part of this inspection is placed cross-culturally with foster carers and there was evidence that much work has been undertaken in ensuring that his cultural and identity needs are met. It was evident when talking to foster carers that issues in relation to the young people's self-confidence, self-esteem and dealing with discrimination are regularly discussed with them as part of their supervision process. The Foster Carers' Handbook contains information on equal opportunities and cultural diversity.

The importance of educational achievement is given a very high priority and is closely monitored for all the young people in foster placements. This is overseen by three Looked After Children teachers who help to arrange and chair all Personal Education Plan meetings and liaise with school staff and carers to achieve the best possible educational outcomes for the young people

in foster placements. Personal computers are provided for all fostering households where the young person is aged 8 or over and who do not otherwise have access to a computer in the home. The development of the multi-disciplinary Life Chances Team and their database for all Looked After Children has enabled prompt action to be taken if a child is not attending school for any reason. One of the young people case tracked as part of this inspection was not attending school and there was much evidence of the actions taken in response and the involvement of the foster carer.

A number of young people in foster placements have individual tuition with specialist tutors and it was positive to hear that since April 2006, only 4 newly accommodated children have been placed more than 20 miles from their home which is helping to enable children to remain in their established schools. 54% of foster carers who returned the questionnaire asking for their views about the fostering service described as 'excellent' how well the fostering service supports them in helping the children they care for in achieving educationally. Overall, there was much evidence to indicate good practice and that this standard is exceeded.

The fostering service has a short break scheme specifically for disabled children.

The policies and procedures specific to short-term breaks meet the needs of the children as they recognise the importance in these situations of birth parents, who remain the main carers and are central to the promotion of these children's health and educational needs. There are plans to develop and pilot a shortened version of the Placement Information and Agreement form for short breaks care placements.

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, 11

Quality in this outcome area is excellent.

Foster carers and young people felt that the arrangements for contact work well and there is consultation with the young people in foster care on a regular and ongoing basis.

This judgement has been made using available evidence including a visit to this service.

EVIDENCE:

Maintaining and developing good quality contact between children and their original family networks is central to the strategy of West Berkshire Children's Services. The Foster Carers' Handbook contains guidance for carers and the importance of maintaining contact is emphasised to carers during assessment and supervision. The issue of contact is considered when a placement is being identified and the Placement Information and Agreement form details the arrangements and any support/supervision that may be necessary.

The foster carers and young people spoken with on this inspection said that the contact details were well known and that the arrangements were working well. In some cases the same person took the young person to contact and supervised the meeting, a consistency appreciated by the foster carers and the young people.

Consultation with the young people in foster care takes place on a regular and ongoing basis. The consultation forms which have been developed to encourage children and young people to express their views prior to their

foster carer's annual review are appealing with colour pictures. A Family Support Worker is available to support younger children and those with learning difficulties, and independent assistance in completing the form is available if required. There is information readily available to the young people on how to raise concerns and complaints and there is access to an independent visitor scheme and an advocacy service. Any child who makes a complaint is offered an advocate within 24 hours.

Since the last inspection a group of young people have met with Members and senior officers at a Corporate Parenting meeting to describe the good points and the challenges they encountered whilst being looked after.

In the questionnaires returned by the young people prior to this inspection, 90% said that their carers always listen to them and take notice of their opinions. One young person said 'they always listen to what I have to say and always help with my problems.' Another said 'I am asked about my opinions on most things that affect me.' 90% of the young people said that they knew how to make a complaint. This standard is exceeded.

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)

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

These standards were not assessed at this inspection.

EVIDENCE:

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, 24 and 32 the key standards to be inspected at least once during a 12 month period.

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

1, 16, 17, 21, 24, 25, 32

Quality in this outcome area is excellent.

The fostering team is well managed and staff members remain enthusiastic and are keen to develop practice. Foster carers receive high levels of support.

This judgement has been made using available evidence including a visit to this service.

EVIDENCE:

There is a clear Statement of Purpose providing a comprehensive overview of the aims and objectives of the service and the facilities and services provided. It is revised on an annual basis and was last done in November 2006. The Children's Guide is sent to all young people in placement aged 5 and over and a member of the Family Placement Team is currently developing a simple illustrated storybook version.

The fostering service is well managed with an experienced Team Manager and an accessible senior management team. There is a good mix of age, gender and experience within the staff team and all the team members spoken with were positive about the support they receive both from their peers and from management. They are a busy team but feel valued and are enthusiastic about the work and developing good practice. There is a clear management structure with clear lines of accountability, levels of delegation and responsibility. Staff are managed and monitored through regular supervision. There is an open workload management system for the allocation and prioritisation of work, which all staff can access.

There are good links with the Children's social work teams (the under 12's, the adolescent team and the disabled children's team). There are regular meetings with the Managers of the teams and there was clear evidence that the staff are organised and managed in a way that delivers a very efficient and effective foster care service and this standard is exceeded.

The Family Placement Team has increased in staffing numbers in the past year and the full staffing establishment consists of a Team Manager, 2 Assistant Team Managers, 7.5 social workers, 2.6 Family Support Workers, 1 Publicity and Recruitment Worker and 3.3 Support Services Staff. The full staffing complement should be adequate to meet operational need but this is a constant challenge. It is positive that in future, all new assessments will be undertaken by a team member.

The fostering service has continued to recruit a number of new carers in the last year and this has enabled more choice when making placements. No new placements have been made with Independent Fostering Agencies in the past year, apart from one that was short-term. These are good developments and the stability of placements is excellent. 89% of Looked After Children aged under 16 who have been in care for 2.5 years or more have been in their current placement for 2 or more years.

The fostering service offers high levels of support to foster carers. There is a clear strategy for working with carers including a comprehensive training programme, support for the Foster Carers' Association, supervision

arrangements, out of hours support and arrangements for the annual reviews of foster carers. There are formal arrangements in place for 'back-up' carers and foster carers are paid a child-sitting allowance to enable them to have an evening out. Foster carers feel valued and there was a Christmas Ball held where foster carers were presented with various awards.

All the foster carers spoken with felt well supported by the fostering service and they have regular supervision sessions with their supervising social workers that are clearly documented.

The fostering service continues to actively support, fund and promote the West Berkshire Foster Carers Association (WBFCA.) There continue to be regular meetings with the Association and senior managers and some changes to practice have been made as a result.

Samples of case records for children and foster carers were seen. The foster carers' files were clearly presented and the information about a specific child in placement is stored in a separate section and is removed when the placement ends. There were improvements seen in the consistency of information in files and it was apparent that more file audits have been undertaken in the last year. There was better recording of the training attended by foster carers so that an overview of all the training undertaken since approval could be seen.

The training opportunities offered to foster carers are excellent and include NVQ and Akamas training.

Foster carers keep a fostering logbook and the recordings are seen regularly by their supervising social workers and copies passed to the child's social worker. Carers are provided with secure storage facilities and are encouraged to keep photographs and personal items for the children in their care.

Appropriate administrative records are maintained including records of allegations and complaints. A comprehensive procedure for the management of allegations, complaints and issues of concern has been produced in consultation with carers.

The fostering service has reviewed and updated a significant number of policies and procedures since the last inspection.

There are a number of placements where the foster carers are family or friends of the young people in their care. Where young people are placed with family members or friends, their particular pre-existing relationships are recognised together with their individual needs. Assessments and approval processes of family and friends as foster carers are sensitive to these special circumstances and are intended to encourage their consideration as foster carers. The allowances paid to family and friends carers are at least equivalent to the Fostering Network recommended allowances, and in certain circumstances

they are at the same rates as those paid to unrelated foster carers. The other support, supervision and training needs of family and friends carers are assessed and met in the same way as all other carers. A support and training group specifically for family and friends carers, both within and outside the Looked After Children system has been formed and meets at regular intervals.

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		
Standard No	Score	
12	3	

STAYING SAFE		
Standard No	Score	
3	3	
6	4	
8	2	
9	3	
15	3	
30	3	

ENJOYING AND ACHIEVING		
Standard No Score		
7	3	
13	4	
31	3	

MAKING A POSITIVE CONTRIBUTION		
Standard No	Score	
10	3	
11	4	

ACHIEVING ECONOMIC		
WELLBEING		
Standard No	Score	
14	X	
29	X	

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

Are there any outstanding requirements from the last inspection?

No

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	FS8	The form used as the Foster Placement Agreement is reviewed to ensure that all signatures are included and that it meets the needs of the fostering service.

Commission for Social Care Inspection

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