



*Making Social Care
Better for People*

inspection report

FOSTERING SERVICE

Halton Borough Council Fostering Service

**Grosvenor House
Halton Lea
Runcorn
Cheshire
WA7 2ED**

Lead Inspector
Jeff Banham

Announced Inspection
13th February 2006 13:00

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

Reader Information	
Document Purpose	Inspection Report
Author	CSCI
Audience	General Public
Further copies from	0870 240 7535 (telephone order line)
Copyright	This report is copyright Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI) and may only be used in its entirety. Extracts may not be used or reproduced without the express permission of CSCI
Internet address	www.csci.org.uk

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

This report is a public document. Extracts may not be used or reproduced without the prior permission of the Commission for Social Care Inspection.

SERVICE INFORMATION

Name of service Halton Borough Council Fostering Service

Address Grosvenor House
Halton Lea
Runcorn
Cheshire
WA7 2ED

Telephone number 01928 704393

Fax number

Email address

Provider Web address

Name of registered provider(s)/company (if applicable) Halton Borough Council

Name of registered manager (if applicable)

Type of registration Local Auth Fostering Service

Category(ies) of registration, with number of places

SERVICE INFORMATION

Conditions of registration:

Date of last inspection 7th February 2005

Brief Description of the Service:

Halton Borough is situated between Liverpool and Manchester. It contains the towns of Widnes and Runcorn, plus the villages of Hale, Moore, Daresbury and Preston Brook.

Halton Borough Council Fostering Service forms part of the Children's Services Division located within the Children and Young People Directorate. The fostering and adoption team holds responsibility for the recruitment, assessment, training, support and management of all people providing a fostering placement for children and young people who have been placed through the "looked after" system.

The team is managed by a Principal Manager and a Practice Manager who acted as deputy. They have responsibility for the management of fostering social workers and administrative support. The fostering and adoption team is accountable to the Divisional Manager and is based in the main council offices in Runcorn.

On November 2005 the team had 75 foster carers looking after 166 children; their ages ranged from 0 to 18 years.

The team is also responsible for the provision of short and long term placement, short-term respite breaks and 22 kinship carers.

SUMMARY

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

The inspection took place over a week. Policies and procedures were examined. Managers and social work staff were interviewed and a meeting of the fostering panel was observed. The manager of the Education Support Team was interviewed.

Survey questionnaires were received from foster carers, children and placing social workers.

Eight foster carers were seen in their own homes, and their files, and the files of the children placed with them, were examined.

What the service does well:

The Fostering Team provides effective support for foster carers. When inevitably there are issues of shortages of social workers or changes in children's social workers, the supervising social workers become highly significant in providing consistency and support. All the foster carers who contributed to the inspection were positive about the support they received from the team.

The service ensures foster care is based on sound policies and practices that are regularly monitored and reviewed. Foster carers are provided with high quality and comprehensive information.

The Directorate's commitment to ensuring children receive appropriate health care and educational opportunities is supported by effective resources.

The existence of a reviewing officer, based in the Quality Assurance Unit, offers objective monitoring of practice, and enables a range of practice issues to be considered and developed.

Staff were skilled, enthusiastic and committed to providing good support for carers and successful placements for children.

What has improved since the last inspection?

The fostering team continues to promote good practice both within its own service and within the child care service as a whole. Its recent reorganisation has involved the team and is designed to be more flexible and effective in responding to the changing needs of children and carers.

The requirements and recommendations from the last inspection have been effectively addressed. In particular records and documentation have been reorganised, and the fostering team continues to improve the quantity, quality and timing of information available to carers.

The development of the specialist post for kinship care and private fostering will enable the team to provide a better service to these carers.

Only one practice requirement was identified at this inspection. There are a number of good practice recommendations, and the manager has indicated that they will be given through consideration as the team continues to monitor and improve its operation.

What they could do better:

The most significant issue was the reorganisation of the fostering team. Apart from the issues of premises, computers and telephones not being sufficient to allow the team to fulfil its remit effectively, senior managers need to continue to monitor the structure and responsibilities of the team, and ensure that social workers were given as much opportunity to be involved in the development of the service and were given support and recognition.

The structure and systems around kinship care could be further developed, and the fostering panel would benefit from further training to ensure it fulfilled its role effectively.

The development of the role of supervising social worker needs to continue to ensure that the change from foster carer "support" to foster carer supervision is properly carried through and implemented consistently by all the team.

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.

DETAILS OF INSPECTOR FINDINGS

CONTENTS

Being Healthy

Staying Safe

Enjoying and Achieving

Making a Positive Contribution

Achieving Economic Wellbeing

Management

Scoring of Outcomes

Statutory Requirements Identified During the Inspection

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

Foster carers were supported by a range of policies, procedures and practices, health care needs were identified, and appropriate care was provided to ensure children were as healthy as possible.

EVIDENCE:

The 2005/6 Statement of Purpose and Function described the key objectives of the fostering services. One was *"To recruit carers who will provide an environment for Looked After Children which will meet their health and education needs and give them the same life chances as other children."*

The manager said that promoting the health of Looked After Children had been given special scrutiny by Councillors and was the subject of ongoing development. The manager also said that a protocol for Joint Working between the Halton Children and Young Person's Directorate and the Halton Primary Care Trust was about to be launched. This was based on the DoH publication "Promoting the Health of Looked After Children."

The specialist post of nurse for Looked After Children had been created and was based in the Quality Assurance Unit. It was the responsibility of the nurse to promote the health of children in the "Looked After" system. Case records contained evidence of the involvement of the nurse in the health care of individual children.

The Foster Care agreement, signed by all carers, set out the their responsibilities in ensuring children were healthy.

Children had an individual Health Plan; information about health needs and treatments was contained in the assessment and care planning documentation. The statutory reviews of children discussed health care, set objectives and monitored progress of individual children.

Foster carers were advised through the Foster Carer Handbook that Looked After Children should have regular medical examinations, and that they must

ensure that children were registered with a G.P. and dentist, and have regular sight and hearing tests.

Children's files contained information about health issues, including contact with GPs and other specialist health care provision, and issues to do with diet, weight, and drug and alcohol use where these were recognised as an issue. Foster carers were able to describe the steps that they had taken to ensure children received the treatment and care they needed, and that they were supported by the fostering team in promoting children's health care needs. Carers received regular supervisory visits from social workers. Written records of these supervision sessions demonstrated that health issues were a regular topic of discussion.

Foster carers were advised that they were not authorised to sign consent for treatment, vaccinations and anaesthetics and that either parents or an identified manager within the Children's Directorate must sign consent.

The foster carers training programme was based on the "five outcomes" from the "Every Child Matters" framework and it included the promotion of health care issues. The information provided for the inspection said that training on drug awareness, sexual health and children's medicals had been delivered, and training on nutrition and healthy eating was planned for March.

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 and 30

The Fostering Service worked within the framework of rigorously applied practices to ensure children were safe in placements. A range of training and support opportunities ensured carers were clear about their responsibilities towards children.

The Fostering Panel had recently been reconstituted to undertake more extensive functions and would benefit from a review of its membership and the training it needed to enable it to fulfil its duties as effectively as possible.

EVIDENCE:

Both the Acting Principal Manager and the Practice Manager, who acted as her “deputy” where necessary, were experienced and qualified childcare workers and had been subject to the selection and recruitment procedures of Halton Borough Council. The Principal Manager, who said she would continue in the role until 31st March 2006, was accountable to the senior manager for Looked After Children, and said she was waiting to undertake management training.

All foster carers were formally assessed and approved. Health and safety checks were part of that assessment, and files contained records of the health and safety assessments that had been made. Foster carers were made aware, through a number of processes, of their responsibilities in keeping children safe, and the use of safe caring plans was becoming a feature of practice. Issues to do with pets were specifically raised and dealt with where required.

Carers received regular visits from supervising social workers as well as statutory visits from social workers responsible for children placed. Records of visits were made and signed by carers.

Each foster carer was reviewed each year and a written report placed on file. The review focussed on issues that had arisen during the past year and identified any areas where additional support, training or resources were required.

All of the foster carer homes that were visited during the inspection offered a safe, healthy and nurturing environment.

In order to meet the explicit objective of placing children with people who could best meet their needs foster carers were approved for specific categories of children, and their registration was formally and explicitly approved by the Fostering Panel. Numbers of children to be placed, their ages, sex and particular needs were part of the registration process. Children were matched with carers as a result of the assessment of their needs together with an assessment of the abilities and experience of carers. Formal matching meetings took place, and the Fostering Panel was asked to approve specific matches of long-term placements. The Principal Manager monitored the incidence of the placement of children where this resulted in carers going over-numbers. Placements out of the original registration category had to be approved by Panel.

Some foster carers said they had been asked to take children where not all the written information in existence was given to them. The Manager said this was a topic that was constantly addressed with social workers, and a statement about the expectation of there being sufficient information at the time of placement had been included in the Foster Care Agreement.

Some carers were unable to produce their copy of the LAC document that constituted the written foster placement agreement, and were unsure if one had been written.

See requirement 1

Foster carer files could contain copies of the foster placement agreements for each current placement. This would enable supervising social workers to monitor the extent to which they had been drawn up, and action taken accordingly.

See recommendation 1

Training for carers included courses on recognising and dealing with suspected abuse and child protection issues. The Principal manager said there was a continuing need to ensure carers undertook all the training that was available to them. The Foster Carer agreement said *"We expect carers to attend training courses arranged by us to develop their fostering skills when these are considered necessary and appropriate. Some training courses are deemed as*

mandatory and will be a condition of your continued approval, i.e. Safe Care and Child Protection."

The Directorate had compiled a record of training attended by foster carers between March and September 2005. In relation to child protection courses on Child Protection Process and Procedures, Sexual Abuse/Mental Health/Neglect – Safeguarding Children, Safeguarding Children in Need, and Professionals Who Abuse had been provided. The numbers who had attended were low in relation to the numbers of carers who could potentially attend.

The Principal Manager said that foster care training had been recognised as one of the areas to address and a Care Training Officer was to be recruited in the near future. She said that the service was continually thinking about how carers could be encouraged to attend more training in all relevant subjects. It was recognised that the role of the Supervising Social Worker was crucial in this area.

The roles and responsibilities of foster carers in relation to child protection were made clear in the carers handbook, through the recruitment and approval process, and through subsequent visits by both supervising and placing social workers.

Foster carers confirmed that training was available and that they were supported in providing safe care by clear guidelines and a thorough assessment process. Sanctions available to children were identified as part of overall management of a child's behaviour and carers were clear that corporal punishment was not an option available to them.

All staff employed by the fostering service were recruited and selected according to the policies and procedures of Halton Borough Council. Personnel files were held centrally in the Human Resources Department of the Borough Council. A selection of files was seen. These demonstrated that all necessary checks and references had been obtained, and that all staff were appropriately qualified.

The Fostering Panel met each month. Its membership and functions were based on clear procedures and guidelines. The Adoption and Fostering Panels had recently been re-organised; the Adoption Panel dealt solely with adoption matters, and so the remit of the Fostering Panel had extended to deal with matters related to Permanence for children.

The Panel that met during the inspection was fully attended with appropriate membership, was well chaired and efficiently administered and organised. The first two substantive matters on the agenda dealt with complex cases that involved significant childcare planning matters. In one, a child was accommodated under Section 20 of the Children Act 1989. According to the information provided for the Panel the parent of the child had been acting in a way that undermined the planning for meeting the needs of the child, and an application for a Care Order may have been more appropriate. The subsequent discussion did not address these issues. In a similar case considered by the

Panel in September 2005 the minutes said, *"The view of the Local Authority is that there is no need for legal proceedings. Panel members expressed concern about this and felt that the Local Authority needed greater control in order to plan effectively for X."*

There was therefore a clear expectation that the Panel should be independent and critical of childcare practice.

In another case presented to the Panel an assessment had been undertaken on relatives of a child who was subject to a Care Order, and for whom a placement was being sought. The written assessment, although positive about the potential of the carers, did not address a number of significant issues including why the relatives had not come forward before, the amount and nature of the contact that had taken place between child and potential carers, and how the carers could evidence that they had the skills and capacity to care for a child given that they had no children of their own, and had made a positive decision not to have children. The Panel discussion did not raise any of these issues, or seek further clarification.

These matters were discussed with the Chair. It was felt that this Panel was relatively new and was still in the process of learning and gaining confidence about the full remit of its activities. Some training had been provided, but it would be useful for the Panel to be given more training in order for it to understand its role in relation to complex child care cases, and for members to feel confident in providing the contribution they are no doubt able to make.

One set of applicants who were being considered for approval had written to the Panel expressing their concern that they had not been given an invitation to attend until the last minute, and as a result were unable to do so. One member of the Panel said that, although it had been unfortunate that they had not been able to attend, she felt the Panel would benefit from training in managing the attendance of applicants, given that it was an expressed intention of the Panel to meet directly with applicants and others.

See recommendation 2

Two social workers were part of the membership of the Panel. One was from the adoption team, and the other from one of the childcare teams. Given the nature of the discussions that may have to take place, and the role of the Panel in being the "critical friend" in relation to child care issues it may be more appropriate for the social work membership to be provided by social workers in a management role.

See recommendation 3

The Fostering Panel was in a significant strategic position to make comment on general childcare issues involved in the matters that came to it for consideration. The Directorate could ask the Panel to prepare a regular "quality assurance" report to raise matters concerning overall childcare practice as observed and considered of significance from the Panel agenda.

See recommendation 4

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 and 31.

The priority and resources given to ensuring children experienced the maximum opportunity for educational achievement were effective in meeting identified needs.

Cooperation and coordination between education and social services staff enabled children to be supported in and out of school at all times, and foster carers were clear about their responsibilities in assisting children in education.

EVIDENCE:

The foster care recruitment, approval and training process emphasised and reinforced the need to treat every child as an individual and to provide care and support to meet their identified needs. The Statement of Purpose said that *"We aim to provide children and young people who are looked after with the same quality of care that any good parent would want to provide for their own child. This includes...ensuring children have the same opportunities for life experiences that are available to any child."*

Assessments, care plans and reviews described the individual needs of children and the actions taken to ensure care was provided to promote all aspects of a child's development.

The Manager said that educational attainment was given in a high priority within the Borough. The Statement of Purpose and the Foster Care Handbook provided comprehensive information about the objectives of the Directorate, the resources available and the requirements of foster carers in promoting educational achievement. The Fostering Service had strong links with the Education Service for Looked After Children. The Education Service offered

training to foster carers and social workers to raise the profile of educational needs and to ensure they were prioritised in order to provide additional support where this was required.

The Education Support Team consisted of two newly recruited Education Support Officers and an Educational Psychologist who worked directly with young people and supported young people in class. At the time of the inspection, according to the Manager of the Educational Support Team, there were no permanent exclusions and only two fixed-term exclusions. Support workers assisted children who were excluded by providing structured programmes.

A homework club had been set up, although the Manager said there had been a "*disappointing response*", but most schools assisted children with homework. Clear guidance was given to foster carers about the role and responsibilities in relation to supporting educational achievement. This included working with social workers, and being given responsibility for direct contact with schools where appropriate. "Home/school agreements" were produced. Children had Statements of Special Educational Need as required; these were reviewed regularly. Children also had Personal Education Plans, and the statutory review process identified all areas of educational need and the actions required to meet them.

Every foster carer had been provided with computer to assist education development.

Every school had a Designated Teacher for Looked After Children.

Foster carers were clear about their duties in relation to schools and were able to confirm that children's educational needs and progress were reviewed, and that they were assisted by a range of staff to provide the best possible service for children.

The fostering service provided a range of short-term placements for children. These included respite placements for existing foster care placements, short term placements undertaking specific assessment work and "Home from Home" placements for children with physical and learning disabilities. This scheme offered flexible support for parents and included regular short breaks for children that included holidays, weekends, day care and baby-sitting. These placements were designed to support parents and primary carers, and explicitly recognised the limits of the responsibilities held by the substitute carers.

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

Foster carers were given advice and guidance in supporting children in a number of ways. Children were given help and encouragement in having their say and making their views known.

The significance of contact was recognised and individual contact arrangements agreed and implemented.

Recording of contact issues by foster carers could be improved.

EVIDENCE:

The Foster Carer Handbook had a section on “contact.” It spelled out the importance of contact between children and their parents and significant others in effective child care practice.

The Handbook said *“Contact is a fundamental part of fostering these days; cutting children off from their past is no longer seen as helpful. Whilst contact may be unsettling in the present in the longer term it is beneficial in helping young people understand their situation and be realistic about it, feel a sense of identity and resolve past issues.”*

Assessments and care plans identified those with whom children should and should not have contact. These contacts were reviewed through the statutory review process, through supervisory visits and foster carers annual reviews. Foster carers and children were able to describe the arrangements for contact, and the support available to review the extent to which contact met children’s needs.

The Fostering Service introduced “Children’s Documentation Files” in 2005 after concerns were raised about the quantity and quality of information given to carers when children were placed. Parts of the system were the “Specific Incident Record Book” and “Contact Book”. Carers were required to document issues arising from contact, but there was evidence that some carers were

unclear or unwilling to record information about contact arrangements. Supervising Social Workers should ensure the expectations of carers are clear in each individual case, and that recording is completed where required.

See recommendation 5

Children were given their own written guide to the fostering service. This described the importance given to listening to children and promoting their involvement in the decision making process concerning their care. Information was provided about the complaints procedure.

Consultation with children and the promotion of their involvement in the review process was part of standard practice, and records demonstrated that children's views were obtained and that they were involved in meetings about their care.

A children's advocacy service for all looked after children was provided by Barnardo's. The Children's Right's Service facilitated "Rant and Rave" groups which encouraged consultation and participation.

The Statement of Purpose said there were two age-related groups and a third group for over-17's was being developed.

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

The Directorate was creating an effective system for supporting children as they left care and foster carers were aware of their responsibilities in assisting young people into independence.

Foster carers received payments and allowances in accordance with agreed rates and criteria.

EVIDENCE:

The Directorate recognised the importance of preparing young people for life after leaving care. The Foster Care Handbook described the "Leaving Care Policy". It said that the intention of the policy was to ensure that children left the care system when they were ready, and that children in the care system were particularly vulnerable and in need of support.

Young people were involved in needs assessments that lead to a "Pathway Plan." This described the needs of young people in living independently, and the range of support they would need in areas such as education, training, employment, accommodation health, personal support, financial support and life skills.

Personal advisers would assist individual children until the age of at least 21; the Connexions service worked in collaboration with the Directorate to support young people after 16. A Connexions Personal Adviser was based in the Young People's Team one day each week. The Manager said that it was planned that a Connexions worker would be based in the Permanence Team in the near future.

The allowances paid to foster carers had been agreed for the period 1st April 2005 to 31st March 2006. The payment arrangements were described in detail in the Foster Carer's Handbook.

The criteria for additional allowances and discretionary payments were clear. Foster carers said they understood the payments system, knew how to claim, and that appropriate payments were made on time.

One foster carer said that her payments had sometimes been late, but she had taken the matter up with the supervising social worker and the matter had been resolved. Another said that she had taken children during the day and had not received payment. She recognised that this was because she had not claimed payment for the care she had provided.

Foster carers said they felt that the service was fair and efficient, given the restrictions on levels of payments, and that they were properly treated.

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):

1,2,4,5,16,17,18,19,20,21,22,23,24,25,26 and 32.

The Fostering Team had undergone some reorganisation since the last inspection. The changes had not been fully consolidated, and there was a need for the senior managers to ensure that the Fostering Team continued to be supported and fully involved in reviewing its operation in order to maximise the undoubted skills and commitment of the team.

EVIDENCE:

The Fostering Service had produced a Statement of Purpose that contained comprehensive information about all aspects of foster care and being a foster carer. In addition the Foster Carer Handbook was a well-produced and informative reference on a range of issues, policies and procedures relating to fostering.

There were a number of ways in which the activities of the team were monitored. Quarterly meetings took place between the team and the Permanence Team and quarterly meetings took place between the team and the Quality Assurance Team. An independent reviewing officer carried out foster carer reviews. Recruitment updates and budget monitoring reports were produced regularly.

Regular supervision took place between team managers and supervising social workers, although one member of staff reported that there had been a period when supervision had not been offered within the required frequency due to the workload of the team.

The Adoption and Fostering Team was managed by the Principal Manager and supported by the Practice Manager who acted as her "deputy" when required. The Team had recently been restructured. The restructuring was based on ideas that had come from the team itself. Staff were positive about the way that they had been involved in setting up the new arrangements but some felt that some momentum had been lost, that their original ideas had been changed and that although very positive about the support they received from the team managers felt that "senior managers" may not always give them appropriate support and recognition.

The examples given were the ways in which the assessment team (part of the Fostering Team) was being asked to do assessments of kinship carers and private fostering, despite there being specialist posts for these areas in the team, the ways in which other non-fostering team staff had been accommodated in close proximity to them and the way in which foster carer training sessions had been reorganised.

Staff did recognise however that some of the feelings might be reactions to changes that had not yet "bedded in" and the fact that there were new senior managers in post who had not yet had a full opportunity to become acquainted with the team and its work.

See recommendation 6

The Fostering Team was fully staffed and all staff were appropriately qualified and experienced.

The restructuring of the team had created an assessment sub-team, and a supervision team consisting of workers responsible for the supervision of social workers. The Manager recognised that the role of the supervising social worker was changing, and the emphasis was moving from "support" to "supervision" of carers. Visits to carers during the inspection indicated that the practice of

supervising social workers might need to be reemphasised to stress the monitoring aspect of the role. There were examples of records not being kept, of records not being stored or organised efficiently and securely, and of a child's bedroom being below an acceptable standard. The Directorate had produced a comprehensive statement describing the role of the supervising social worker. It may be timely to review this to ensure that all supervising social workers are clear about the full extent of their responsibilities. In addition the role of the supervising social workers in contributing to care planning issues could be revisited to ensure responsibilities are clear and explicit.

See recommendation 7

Foster carers were positive about the support they received from the team. Regular supervision was provided and felt to be supportive. Carers were subject to an annual review, and there were a variety of other events to support carers. These included the Foster Care Forum, involving carers and managers and staff of the Directorate, the creation of the "skilled carer scheme" that provided support to carers involved in allegations, the out of hours support rota and the regular Halton Foster Care Newsletter. Carers felt the team were responsive and sympathetic and were always there to help them.

There was evidence that supervisory visits sometimes did not take place in accordance with the agreed frequency, and that unannounced visits – at least one a year- were not taking place. The service could produce a supervision agreement to be entered into with each carer and which set out the frequency of supervision for that particular placement. Each carer should have at least one unannounced visit each year.

The Principal Manager could undertake a selection of unannounced visits as a way of monitoring the practice of carers, and of supervising social workers.

See recommendation 8

Training courses were offered to carers throughout the year and were described in the annual foster care training strategy that was sent out early each year. The Foster Carer handbook said *"Training is a very important aspect of your role as a foster carer and this will have been highlighted to you during your assessment and in your supervisory meetings."* Records of supervisory meetings and of the annual review demonstrated that the issue of training was constantly monitored. The issue of some carers not attending training was one with which the manager continued to grapple.

Each foster carer had a case file that contained all the written information in relation to their approval, placements, supervision and review. There was a section on each file that contained details of any complaint or allegation involving the carer. There were examples of information being missed, or details not being recorded correctly, but overall the management of files was thorough. Managers of other teams audited foster carer files, but it might be

more effective if the Principal Manager and the Practice Manager audited the files of their own team.

See recommendation 9

Children had their own separate case records that were the responsibility of the child care teams and kept in their locations. A selection of files was seen and found to contain the relevant records. Team managers audited the files. The inspector saw one file that contained four different spellings, on official departmental documents, of one child's forename. The correct spelling was contained in the birth certificate that was stored at the back of the file.

The reorganisation of the team had created a specialist worker for kinship care. It had been decided that the assessment team would undertake kinship care assessments. Given the particular issues affecting kinship care, and the recognised effectiveness of kinship care, the manager could review the role of the kinship care worker for it to include kinship care assessments.

See recommendation 10

The Directorate had set out to promote the service it offered to "kinship" carers, and had created a specialist kinship carer post in the fostering team. Given the complexity of the issues facing social workers in placing children with family and friends, often in emergencies or at short notice, consideration could be given to formalising the contact between the children's team and the fostering team to ensure that support and assistance was available to actual and prospective placements as quickly as possible. Issues to do with payment and support can be addressed quicker and more effectively. Viability assessments could be undertaken jointly between the children's social worker and the kinship care worker, and assessments required by the Court can be built into the workload of the team in a more planned fashion.

See recommendation 11.

The manager and staff of the Fostering Team all felt that their office accommodation was unsuitable. The team occupied a relatively small area, and accommodation was crowded. In addition there were not enough computers and telephones for staff to use. Technical issues meant that four workers had to share one telephone, and workers using the telephone to dictate reports would further compromise this.

Equipment for foster carers, such as cots, car seats and stair gates had to be stored in the basement of the office. Staff said there was no inventory of equipment, that it had to be lifted and moved when it was required, and that the storage space meant it was dusty and sometimes not up to required standards for use by foster carers and children.

Staff from the Contracts Department occupied desks near to the storage cabinets for foster carer files.

Staff felt that the issues of accommodation and equipment had an impact on effectiveness and morale. The manager said that the matter was constantly being reviewed, and that more telephone lines were about to be installed.

See recommendation 12

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	3
8	2
9	3
15	3
30	2

ENJOYING AND ACHIEVING	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
7	3
13	4
31	3

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	3
2	3
4	3
5	3
16	2
17	3
18	3
19	3
20	3
21	3
22	2
23	3
24	3
25	3
26	2
27	X
28	X
32	2

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
1	FS8	34(3) Schedule 6	The Manager must ensure that the authority enters into a written placement agreement with every foster carer for each placement.	30/04/06

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 Manager could ensure that copies of written foster placement agreements are held on foster carer files.
2	FS30	The Manager could ensure the Panel is provided with sufficient training and development opportunities to enable it to undertake its functions as effectively as possible
3	FS30	The Manager could review the membership of the Panel in order to include a social work manager.
4	FS30	The Panel could be asked to prepare a regular overview of general childcare matters arising from analysis of agenda items.
5	FS10	The Manager could ensure that all foster carers record contact issues effectively.

6	FS5	The manager could ensure that the changes to the organisation of the team are monitored and reviewed by senior managers.
7	FS22	The manager could review the role of supervising social workers to ensure they were clear about their responsibilities in working with foster carers.
8	FS22	The manager could produce a written supervision agreement setting out the frequency of visits, including unannounced visits, for each placement.
9	FS25	The managers of the Fostering Team could undertake audits of foster carers' files.
10	FS32	The manager could ensure that the specialist kinship care social worker undertakes kinship care assessments.
11	FS32	The manager could ensure that there is a systematic and formal process for the involvement of the fostering team in every case where placements with family and friends are being considered.
12	FS26	The manager could review the premises, equipment and storage facilities used by the team to ensure they are appropriate for the purpose.

Commission for Social Care Inspection

Northwich Local Office

Unit D

Off Rudheath Way

Gadbrook Park

Northwich

CW9 7LT

National Enquiry Line: 0845 015 0120

Email: enquiries@csci.gsi.gov.uk

Web: www.csci.org.uk

© This report is copyright Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI) and may only be used in its entirety. Extracts may not be used or reproduced without the express permission of CSCI