



Champions for
Social Care
Improvement

inspection report

Fostering Services

**Northamptonshire County Council
Fostering Service**

Oxford House
West Villa Road
Wellingborough
Northants
NN8 4JR

9th to 18th February 2004

Commission for Social Care Inspection

Launched in April 2004, the Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI) is the single inspectorate for social care in England.

The Commission combines the work formerly done by the Social Services Inspectorate (SSI), the SSI/Audit Commission Joint Review Team and the National Care Standards Commission.

The role of CSCI is to:

- Promote improvement in social care
- Inspect all social care - for adults and children - in the public, private and voluntary sectors
- Publish annual reports to Parliament on the performance of social care and on the state of the social care market
- Inspect and assess 'Value for Money' of council social services
- Hold performance statistics on social care
- Publish the 'star ratings' for council social services
- Register and inspect services against national standards
- Host the Children's Rights Director role.

Inspection Methods & Findings

SECTION B of this report summarises key findings and evidence from this inspection. The following 4-point scale is used to indicate the extent to which standards have been met or not met by placing the assessed level alongside the phrase "Standard met?"

The 4-point scale ranges from:

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

'O' or blank in the 'Standard met?' box denotes standard not assessed on this occasion.

'9' in the 'Standard met?' box denotes standard not applicable.

'X' is used where a percentage value or numerical value is not applicable.

FOSTERING SERVICE INFORMATION

Local Authority Fostering Service?

YES

Name of Authority

Northamptonshire County Council Fostering Service

Address

Oxford House, West Villa Road, Wellingborough,
Northants, NN8 4JR

Local Authority Manager

Ms Jan Slater

Tel No:

01536 410342

Address

Oxford House, West Villa Road, Wellingborough,
Northants, NN8 4JR

Fax No:

Email Address

Registered Fostering Agency (IFA)

NO

Name of Agency

Tel No

Address

Fax No

Email Address

Registered Number of IFA

Name of Registered Provider

Name of Registered Manager (if applicable)

Date of first registration

Date of latest registration certificate

Registration Conditions Apply ?

NO

Date of last inspection

12/05/03

Date of Inspection Visit		9th February 2004	ID Code
Time of Inspection Visit		10:00 am	
Name of Inspector	1	Ms Sika Schaad	076079
Name of Inspector	2	Ms Maria Johnson	
Name of Inspector	3		
Name of Inspector	4		
Name of Lay Assessor (if applicable) Lay assessors are members of the public independent of the NCSC. They accompany inspectors on some inspections and bring a different perspective to the inspection process.			
Name of Specialist (e.g. Interpreter/Signer) (if applicable)			
Name of Establishment Representative at the time of inspection		Mrs Jan Slater – service manager	

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(National Minimum Standards For Fostering Services)

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- 2. Fitness to carry on or manage a fostering service**
- 3. Management of the fostering service**
- 4. Securing and promoting welfare**
- 5. Recruiting, checking, managing, supporting and training staff and foster carers**
- 6. Records**
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- 9. Fostering panels**
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INTRODUCTION TO REPORT AND INSPECTION

Independent and local authority fostering services which fall within the jurisdiction of the National Care Standards Commission (NCSC) are subject to inspection, to establish if the service is meeting the National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services and the requirements of the Care Standards Act 2000, the Fostering Services Regulations 2002 and the Children Act 1989 as amended.

This document summarises the inspection findings of the NCSC in respect of Northamptonshire County Council Fostering Service. The inspection findings relate to the National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services published by the Secretary of State under sections 23 and 49 of the Care Standards Act 2000, for independent and local authority fostering services respectively.

The Fostering Services Regulations 2002 are secondary legislation, with which a service provider must comply. Service providers are expected to comply fully with the National Minimum Standards. The National Minimum standards will form the basis for judgements by the NCSC in relation to independent fostering agencies regarding registration, the imposition and variation of registration conditions and any enforcement action, and in relation to local authority fostering services regarding notices to the local authority and reports to the Secretary of State under section 47 of the Care Standards Act 2000. The report follows the format of the National Minimum Standards and the numbering shown in the report corresponds to that of the standards.

The report will show the following:

- Inspection methods used
- Key findings and evidence
- Overall ratings in relation to the standards
- Compliance with the Regulations
- Notifications to the Local Authority and Reports to the Secretary of State
- Required actions on the part of the provider
- Recommended good practice
- Summary of the findings
- Report of the Lay Assessor (where relevant)
- Providers response and proposed action plan to address findings

This report is a public document.

INSPECTION VISITS

Inspections will be undertaken in line with the agreed regulatory framework with additional visits as required. This is in accordance with the provisions of the Care Standards Act 2000. The following inspection methods have been used in the production of this report. The report represents the inspector's findings from the evidence found at the specified inspection dates.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE SERVICES PROVIDED.

The Northamptonshire Fostering Service is part of the local authority social care and health directorate. The service manager Mrs Jan Slater has overall responsibility for the fostering service, though many day-to-day management responsibilities are delegated to the three team managers. One such post was vacant and under review at the time of inspection. The service manager is currently reviewing the previous separation of services for 0-12 year olds, and adolescents, but the provision of 'ring-fenced workers for specific areas of recruitment and support has further expanded and now includes kinship carers as well as remand carers. A further post has also been identified for the specific recruitment of minority ethnic carers.

The family link service recruits, approves and supports carers who provide short-term breaks for families with children with severe disabilities. The family link team is part of the services for children with disabilities within the directorate, but is included in the remit of this inspection. There is a small recruitment team, responsible for the recruitment and the strategy for retention of foster carers.

PART A SUMMARY OF INSPECTION FINDINGS

Inspector's Summary

(This is an overview of the inspector's findings, which includes good practice, quality issues, areas to be addressed or developed and any other concerns.)

The NCSC methodology for this inspection required the inspectors to case track four sample foster carers and the children placed at the time of the inspection. This year, the four cases selected comprised of one family offering remand care; one kinship carer; one respite carer and one specific placement. The findings of this report therefore primarily reflect the individual areas of services inspected and is part of the ongoing service development, the service manager will need to continue to review and evaluate the service as a whole against the National Minimum Standards. It is anticipated that areas of the service not inspected on this occasion will be targeted as part of the next scheduled inspection. The Inspectors were also pleased to receive a total of 75 responses to the pre-inspection questionnaires that were sent out to children, foster carers and placing officers. The feedback from these questionnaires, as well as feedback from children, foster carers and staff spoken to during the course of the inspection, have been incorporated into this report.

There were 38 children's questionnaires and their feedback as to the quality of their current placements was overwhelmingly positive. Feedback from the 36 foster carers questionnaires was overwhelmingly positive about the support from link workers, with concerns more focussed on difficulties accessing support and services from other agencies and teams. Only one placing officer completed a questionnaire and gave very positive praise of the foster service and carers with whom they have placed a child.

Statement of Purpose and Function – Standard 1

This Standard is not yet fully met. The Statement has been further revised and improved. Inspectors advise that information about complaints dealt with should be illustrated in a more statistical manner rather than detailing each individual issue. The Statement for the Family Link Service has included more detailed information over and above the requirements and is commended as good practice. The Statement of Purpose for the fostering service, and the Children's Guides do not fully reflect the specific variations related to the specialist areas of service such as kinship care; remand care; therapeutic care; parent and baby placements; and professional contracted care. The service manager should now consider how this would be addressed. Children's guides are good and the need to develop children's guides related to specific areas of service such as remand and kinship care should now be considered. Since the last inspection, a comprehensive handbook of guidance for foster carers has been produced and disseminated to all foster carers. This has been well received by carers spoken to and provides comprehensive information related to the service. Guidance in the handbook is not always cross-referenced to the relevant policy and procedure, and therefore there can be an inconsistency of expectations, for example in the case of responding to bullying. Arrangements for complaint investigations other than issues of inappropriate discipline, and child protection, were unclear. Overall, the new service manager identifies the need to develop service specific policies, procedures and written guidance for staff. This is subject to a recommendation.

Fitness to provide or manage a fostering service – Standards 2 –3

Both of these Standards are met. The fostering service management and staff are well skilled to manage and provide the service efficiently. Processes are in place to ensure the required checks are undertaken on all staff working for the service, to safeguard and promote the welfare of children. Some staff are still awaiting their checks which have been delayed by operational difficulties.

Management of the fostering service – Standards 4 - 5

One standard of these Standards was fully met with shortfalls in the other. Some progress has been made since the last inspection to improve the service management information systems. These remain fragmented, and the service manager informed the inspector of a strategic process now being implemented to integrate the various systems to improve the effectiveness of monitoring and controlling the activities of the service including review of areas of financial procedures. This is subject to a recommendation. The service is effectively managed. All staff have job descriptions. There are clear lines of accountability and on call management arrangements.

Securing and promoting welfare – Standards 6 - 14

There are some shortfalls in all of these Standards and related recommendations and requirements are made.

Information from records read; feedback from children, and visits to foster homes indicate that the service does provide suitable foster carers. There are a variety of services in place designed to support the valuing of diversity and promotion of equality. Issues of valuing diversity and dealing with discrimination are addressed in the training for foster carers. It is policy that such issues continue to be addressed through the assessment and review process, and reflected in a scoring system which scores “levels of acceptability”. However, the basis of the score given is rarely qualified or evidenced in review records.

The service has a diverse range of foster carers, though for some time, the service for short term placements has been at the point of saturation, with demand for placements being greater than the range of placements available. Consequently needs determined by gender, religion, ethnic origin, language, culture, disability and sexuality are often not matched. It continues to be evident that there are a high number of trans-racial placements, and a number of instances where children are placed outside the terms of approval of the carers. It remains a primary objective of the recruitment team to recruit and increase the numbers and diversity of carers to meet the needs of all children needing placements more effectively. Records kept by the foster service and foster carers reviewed during this inspection do not evidence formal planning to enable children to pursue their talents, interests and hobbies. Feedback from children who completed questionnaires was variable, with some children pursuing a range of interests and others reporting none. The service manager informed the Inspectors that she has already identified as an area for improvement, the need for written procedures and policies for financial support for pursuing talents, interests and hobbies. A related requirement is made.

The short-term service makes good effort to match children with carers who can meet their needs, within the constraints of resources available. Placement agreements do not adequately record matching considerations and how any additional support needs of carers’ to meet children’s needs will be addressed and supported.

Many foster carers continue to report concerns about a lack of information sharing before placements are made, and Inspectors are encourage that the new procedures for pre-placement planning meetings are now being implemented to redress this.

Standards of written records of assessed need and plans for care continue to be varied, and there are instances of poor recording on the Looked After Children (LAC) paperwork by the responsible placing social workers. The service manager and staff describe this as an ongoing issue, which they continue to take up with the responsible authority.

The service has effective written procedures for protecting children from abuse, neglect, exploitation and deprivation. Records read and feedback from foster carers highlight shortcomings in practice concerning poor information sharing and failure to always follow child protection procedures when allegations are reported. Notification procedures following abscond are not made clear to carers in the written guidance they have received. These shortfalls are subject to requirements and recommendations. The service manager identifies a need to improve management information systems to enable her to more effectively monitor child protection issues and allegations of inappropriate discipline.

The foster carer handbook sets out expectations for contact and responses from foster carers and service staff indicate that there is a strong commitment to promoting contact for each child with the significant family and friends. Case records reviewed on this inspection did not always detail contact arrangements as required and this is now subject to a requirement. Some foster carers and staff report that at times contact arrangements have been undermined by difficulties with transport arrangements. Transport difficulties are highlighted as impacting on other areas of some children's life chances and are being addressed by the service manager. There are no systems or procedures in place for foster carers to record and feedback their perception of outcomes of contact arrangements and this is now subject to a recommendation.

The opinions of children, their parents and significant others are primarily sought through care planning and review processes and records evidence some good practice in this area. Beyond these processes, there is no coherent policy or process for ascertaining the views of children and this is subject to a recommendation.

Since the last inspection, good progress has been made to improve the arrangements for health care planning for all children looked after by the local authority, through a range of services provided by the Local Authority's 'Centre for Health'. Shortfalls remain in the levels of recording of health care needs and some aspects of information sharing with carers and these are subject to a requirement. The responsibility for securing specialist health care remains with the child's social worker and some carers said that these are not always followed through efficiently, and delays are common due to long waiting lists. Inspectors are however encouraged that since the last inspection, a service level agreement has been secured for some direct access to clinical psychology and therapy. The service manager needs to ensure all carers are aware of how to access these services. Foster carers have access to training on health and hygiene issues, as well as first aid training, though not all foster carers have up-to-date first aid training and this is identified as a good practice recommendation.

There has been no significant improvement in the arrangements for promoting educational achievement of children in foster care since the last inspection. The service has no procedures for monitoring the educational attainment, progress and school attendance of children placed with foster carers and this is subject to a requirement. The fostering service is dependent on the contribution of professionals from other departments for fully and effectively promoted the educational achievement of children in foster care and some difficulties are reported. Policy and guidance for education is given to foster carers, and staff and carers spoken to confirmed a strong commitment to supporting children's education. The service manager informed the Inspectors of positive developments in the local authority 'Life Chances' services. The forthcoming annual foster carers conference has as its theme 'Promoting the Life Chances of Looked after Children'. It is expected that carers and staff will be provided with information about expectations for education; services available, and how to access them. The level of information recorded in the foster service placement

agreements reviewed on this inspection remains inadequate and this is subject to a requirement. There is not formalised policy or budget for funding of school trips, and extra-curricula activities, including leisure interests and this is subject to a requirement. Many carers and staff continue to report severe difficulties with the transport arranged by the department, to transport children to and from their education. The service manager identifies this as an ongoing problem, which she is addressing concertedly. A review of the fostering handbook identified that information for carers regarding leaving carer had not been included. Interviews with staff confirmed that this information is being developed and will soon be included in the handbook. Due to the ages of the children reviewed as part of this inspection an in depth review of this standard was not undertaken.

Recruiting, checking, managing, supporting and training staff and foster carers – Standards 15 - 23

Two of these Standards are fully met. Shortfalls are identified in the remaining Standards and some related recommendations and requirements made.

All social work staff have an appropriate qualification as required for Standard 15.5. The staff group overall is well experienced and skilled to undertake the responsibilities of their roles, as was evidenced from staff records and interviews. It was noted that the foster panel has approved foster carers before confirmation of the CRB clearance has been received. The panel chair expressed total confidence that no placements would be made before clearance is confirmed, however, there is no monitoring system in place for the panel or the approver to formally confirm satisfactory CRB clearance and this is subject to a requirement. Since the last inspection there has been pressures on staffing and management due to sickness, and staff turnover. Most vacancies are now filled and the new service manager is completing a review of the management structure. Collaborative working between the service and children's social workers continues to be problematic due to service pressures in field work and the service manager is taking action to address these difficulties. A training calendar of courses available is provided to carers every 6 months. Carers are encouraged to attend unlimited training within this programme and a crèche facility is usually available. Since the last inspection, foster carers have been given a resource to maintain a training portfolio, though only one of the carers visited during the course of the inspection had completed their portfolio. Staff confirmed inspectors that this is new and still being implemented.

The service manager identifies the need to review current staffing levels, particularly in light of the planned expansion of the service through increased recruitment of carers and diversification of areas of special skills. The need to provide staff with clear guidance to ensure a more consistent approach to and quality of assessments of prospective carers is identified as an area for improvement. Records and procedures reviewed confirm that the fostering service is a fair and competent employer, with sound employment practices and good support for its staff and carers. The need to implement a whistle blowing policy for carers is identified. All staff have access to the comprehensive social care and health directorate staff development training programmes, and staff training records were being updated at the time of inspection. The fostering service has both the comprehensive corporate induction programme, as well as a service specific programme. At the time of the inspection interviews with staff indicated some confusion to the implementation of the programme, which the service manager agreed needed to be reviewed and clarified. All staff receive regular supervision, annual appraisal and attend regular team meetings, in line with corporate policy.

Since the last inspection, a handbook for foster carers has been compiled, which includes information on support issues set out in Standard 21.2. Foster carers generally report that they receive good support from the fostering service. A number of support groups for foster

carers meet across the county. However, most foster carers who feedback do not consider that they are effectively consulted over the fostering service, and they receive no feedback as to how issues raised at the twice yearly forum for foster carers are addressed by senior management. The service manager is advised to consider implementing more effective systems for communication and consultation as part of the strategy for working with and supporting carers. Procedures are in place for foster carers to receive regular supervision and annual review, which is reviewed by the fostering panel. The need for more detailed recording to better evidence the adequacy and effectiveness of supervision and reviews is identified as an area for development. Foster carers can access independent mediation and support, though in one case reviewed, the foster carers reported that their link worker had not informed them of this service at a time when this may have been appropriate. The fostering service approval process includes a training programme, which should be completed prior to approval or else within one year. A good practice recommendation states that the training should always be completed prior to approval. The ongoing programme of training is good, and the service's support and encouragement to NVQ training is commended, as is the incentive system of skills levels and related financial rewards has been implemented for carers who complete at least 5 further courses during each year.

Records – Standards 24 - 25

There are shortfalls in both these Standards and related recommendations and requirements are made.

The fostering service relies heavily on the LAC paperwork provided by the responsible social workers. These records are not always complete and up to date. Within foster placements, there is a variable level of recording of children's daily life and progress. The service manager identifies the need to review the service's practices in relation to children's records and this is also subject to a recommendation. The fostering service has systems in place to maintain all administrative records as required. There is a comprehensive procedure 'Recording With Care' for records management and access to records. Inconsistencies and shortfalls in recording standards are subject to requirements of this inspection.

Fitness of premises for use as fostering service – Standard 26

This Standard is fully met. Visits to a sample of office bases, and feedback from staff and the service manager confirmed that they continue to be appropriate for the purpose. Administrative systems accord with the Standards, and all premises are adequately insured with public liability insurance.

Financial requirements – Standards 27 - 29

The Commission is not required to appraise Standards 27 and 28 in Local authority foster services. Standard 29 identifies a potential shortfall based on feedback from many carers who consider allowances for birthdays, Christmas and holiday costs to be inadequate. Other than that, foster carers receive the agreed allowances and expenses through prompt payment systems. The service manager confirmed that a full review of allowances paid is imminent.

Fostering Panels – Standard 30

This Standard is not yet fully met and recommendations are made. The organisation and conduct of the short term fostering panel is efficient and effective in many areas. The chairing is highly effective, and all members actively participate.

There are still no written procedures for the panel and this is an area for development subject to a recommendation. The panel observed as part of this inspection exercised a quality assurance function in relation to the review process. Panel members identified and commented on the inconsistency of information detail recorded in reviews of foster carers. These observations were fed back to the team managers present, and possible resolutions were discussed. The ongoing service development raises further issues of training for panel members to ensure that they have a good understanding of the operational expectations and complexities of care being provided within all areas of fostering services. Independent panel members do not yet include expertise in education or a person with experience of being fostered. This remains an area for consideration by the service manager.

Short term breaks – Standard 31

The family link service provides exclusively short-term breaks for children with disabilities. This is a well-established area of service, which is being operated to a very high standard. The family link service was inspected through case tracking as part of the Inspection in April 2003 and was not reviewed through case tracking on this inspection.

Family and friends as carers – Standard 32

This Standard is met with minor shortfalls relating to the development of the new kinship care team. The fostering service has a background of assessing and supporting family and friends as approved foster carers. Such carers are given the same opportunities for training as any other carer. Since the last inspection, progress has been made to develop a specific kinship care fostering team with two workers now appointed to post. Policies and procedures for the service were still being developed and the steering group was in the initial stages of evaluating the level of the provision to be provided.

The fostering service has been highly co-operative and helpful in organising and contributing to all aspects of this inspection. The service and team managers positively received all feedback, and expressed a strong commitment to redressing the shortfalls identified. The Inspectors further express thanks to all children, foster carers and placing officers staff who have contributed to this inspection.

Reports and Notifications to the Local Authority and Secretary of State

(Local Authority Fostering Services Only)

The following statutory Reports or Notifications are to be made under the Care Standards Act as a result of the findings of this inspection:

Report to the Secretary of State under section 47(3) of the Care Standards Act 2000 that the Commission considers the Local Authority's fostering service satisfies the regulatory requirements:

NO

Notice to the Local Authority under section 47(5) of the Care Standards Act 2000 of failure(s) to satisfy regulatory requirements in their fostering service which are not substantial, and specifying the action the Commission considers the Authority should take to remedy the failure(s), informing the Secretary of State of that Notice:

YES

Report to the Secretary of State under section 47(4)(a) of the Care Standards Act of a failure by a Local Authority fostering service to satisfy regulatory requirements which is not considered substantial:

NO

Report to the Secretary of State under section 47(1) of the Care Standards Act 2000 of substantial failure to satisfy regulatory requirements by a Local Authority fostering service:

NO

The grounds for the above Report or Notice are:

Implementation of Statutory Requirements from Last Inspection

Requirements from last Inspection visit fully actioned?

NO

If No please list below

STATUTORY REQUIREMENTS				
Identified below are areas not addressed from the last inspection report which indicate a non-compliance with the Care Standards Act 2000 and Fostering Services Regulations 2002.				
No.	Regulation	Standard	Required actions	
1	34	FS28 & FS22	The foster service must monitor closely and take steps to ensure the requirements for making placements are rigorously and consistently met.	As action plan
2	34.3	FS12 & FS13 & FS22 & FS8 & FS6	The foster service must ensure that the foster placement agreement consistently provides a level of information as set out in Schedule 6, in sufficient detail to enable the foster parent to care for the child.	As action plan
3	35	FS7 and FS11 and FS21	The fostering service must take steps to ensure that the welfare of each child placed is monitored as required by Regulation 35.	As action plan

Action is being taken by the National Care Standards Commission to monitor compliance with the above requirements.

STATUTORY REQUIREMENTS IDENTIFIED DURING THIS INSPECTION

Action Plan: The appropriate Officer of the Local Authority or the Registered Person (as applicable) is requested to provide the Commission with an Action Plan, which indicates how requirements and recommendations are to be addressed. This action plan will be made available on request to the Area Office.

STATUTORY REQUIREMENTS

Identified below are areas addressed in the main body of the report which indicate non-compliance with the Care Standards Act 2000, the Children Act 1989, the Fostering Services Regulations 2002, or the National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services. The Authority or Registered Person(s) is/are required to comply within the given time scales in order to comply with the Regulatory Requirements for fostering services.

No.	Regulation	Standard *	Requirement	
1	34.1.b	FS6	The service provider must ensure that all placements are in accordance with foster carers' terms of approval.	
2	34.3	FS12 and FS13 and FS22 and FS8 and FS6	The service provider must ensure that the foster placement agreement consistently provides a level of information as set out in Schedule 6, in sufficient detail to enable the foster parent to care for the child.	
3	16.4	FS7	The service provider must make provision to ensure that foster parents are able to promote the leisure interests of children placed with them.	
4	35	FS21 and FS11 and FS7	The service provider must take steps to ensure that the welfare of each child placed is monitored as required by Regulation 35.	
5	34 and Schedule 6	FS8	The service provider must record the matching process and any identified shortfalls; and how these will be addressed.	
6	12	FS9	The service provider must ensure that all suspicions and allegations of abuse or neglect are fully investigated in accordance with approved child protection procedures.	

7	14 and Schedule 6	FS10	The fostering service provider must, subject to the provisions of the foster placement agreement promote contact between a child placed with a foster parent and his parents, relatives and friends. This must include appropriate arrangements for transport as required.	
8	17; 34 and Schedule 6	FS12	The service provider must ensure that foster placement agreements specify accurately the child's state of health and identified health needs; and the arrangements for giving consent to the medical or dental examination or treatment of the child.	
9	34 and Schedule 6	FS13	The service provider must ensure that the foster placement agreements specify accurately the educational needs of the child.	
10	16	FS13	The service provider must establish a procedure for monitoring the educational attainment, progress and school attendance of children placed with foster parents.	
11	16	FS13	The service provider must promote the participation in school activities of school aged children placed with foster parents.	
12	34	FS28FS22	The service provider must monitor closely and take steps to ensure the requirements for making placements are rigorously and consistently met.	

GOOD PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THIS INSPECTION

Identified below are areas addressed in the main body of the report which relate to the National Minimum Standards and are seen as good practice issues which should be considered for implementation by the Authority or Registered Person(s).

No.	Refer to Standard *	Recommendation Action
1	FS1	To enable the service ensure it is being conducted in a manner which is consistent with its statement of purpose, in line with Regulation 3.5, it is strongly recommended that service specific policies, procedures and written guidance for staff is produced and implemented.

2	FS7	It is strongly recommended that the service manager puts in place robust policies for ensuring the religious persuasion, racial origin, and cultural and linguistic background of the child is given due consideration in the placements made.
3	FS9	It is strongly recommended that the service manager improve the management information systems to enable her to effectively monitor incidents as outlined in Standard 9.5.
4	FS9	It is strongly recommended that safe caring guidelines are implemented for each household and agreed by placing officers and explained to the children.
5	FS9	It is strongly recommended that foster carers be provided with written procedures for notifying any unauthorised absence of a child to the appropriate persons.
6	FS10	It is strongly recommended that the service manager implements procedures for foster carers to record the outcomes of contact arrangements and their perceived impact on the child, and this information is fed back to the child's social worker.
7	FS11	It is strongly recommended that the service manager fully reviews and develops current arrangements for consulting children and significant others, to fully meet the Standard.
8	FS12	The service manager is strongly advised to implement procedures to ensure all foster carers complete the essential training as required, including training in first aid.
9	FS15	The service provider is strongly advised to put in place processes to identify shortfalls in the assessment process and mechanisms to evidence when these shortfalls have been met and that approval is then granted. E.g. in the matter of CRB clearances for prospective carers.
10	FS23	The service provider is strongly advised to review current policy to ensure that all carers complete their induction training prior to being approved.
11	FS24	The service provider is strongly advised to develop a written policy on case recording which establishes the purpose, format and content of files and clarifies what information is kept on the foster carer's files and the child's files.
12	FS30	The service provider is strongly advised to put in place clear written policies and procedures for the fostering panel, which are implemented in practice, about the handling of their functions as outlined in Standard 30.

* Note: You may refer to the relevant standard in the remainder of the report by omitting the 2-letter prefix e.g. FS10 refers to Standard 10.

PART B**INSPECTION METHODS & FINDINGS**

The following inspection methods have been used in the production of this report

Number of Inspector days spent	9.5
Survey of placing authorities	YES
Foster carer survey	YES
Foster children survey	YES
Checks with other organisations and Individuals	YES
• Directors of Social services	YES
• Child protection officer	YES
• Specialist advisor (s)	YES
• Local Foster Care Association	YES
Tracking Individual welfare arrangements	YES
• Interview with children	YES
• Interview with foster carers	YES
• Interview with agency staff	NO
• Contact with parents	NO
• Contact with supervising social workers	NO
• Examination of files	YES
Individual interview with manager	YES
Information from provider	YES
Individual interviews with key staff	YES
Group discussion with staff	YES
Interview with panel chair	YES
Observation of foster carer training	NO
Observation of foster panel	YES
Inspection of policy/practice documents	YES
Inspection of records	YES
Interview with individual child	YES
Date of Inspection	09/02/04
Time of Inspection	09.30
Duration Of Inspection (hrs)	63

The following pages summarise the key findings and evidence from this inspection, together with the NCSC assessment of the extent to which the National Minimum Standards have been met. The following scale is used to indicate the extent to which standards have been met or not met by placing the assessed level alongside the phrase "Standard met?"

The scale ranges from:

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

"0" in the "Standard met?" box denotes standard not assessed on this occasion.

"9" in the "Standard met?" box denotes standard not applicable.

"X" is used where a percentage value or numerical value is not applicable.

Statement of Purpose

The intended outcome for the following standard is:

- There is clear statement of the aims and objectives of the fostering service and the fostering service ensures that they meet those aims and objectives.

Standard 1 (1.1 - 1.6)

There is a clear statement of the aims and objectives of the fostering service and of what facilities and services they provide.

Key Findings and Evidence

Standard met?

2

The organisation has revised and improved the Statement of Purpose. Further advice was given that information about complaints dealt with should be illustrated in a more statistical manner rather than detailing each individual issue.

The Statement for the Family Link Service has included more detailed information over and above the requirements is commended as good practice.

The Statement of Purpose for the fostering service, and the Children's Guides do not fully reflect the specific variations related to the specialist areas of service such as kinship care; remand care; therapeutic care; parent and baby placements; and professional contracted care. The service manager should now consider how this will be addressed.

Children's guides have been produced for Family Link; 0 –12 year old fostering and adolescent fostering services. They all provide good information as required and are presented in accessible formats. The respective team managers state that the guides can be produced in a wider range of formats and translations as required. A 'jargon buster' accompanies the adolescent guide and is a helpful tool to help children understand the language of social services. The service manager identifies the need to explore different media for presenting the children's guide to make it more accessible, including production of video or CD.

Since the last inspection, a comprehensive handbook of guidance for foster carers has been produced and disseminated to all foster carers. This has been well received by carers spoken to. The handbook includes the National Minimum Standards, and a series of Appendices with more detailed procedural information relating to specific issues such as bullying and child protection investigations. Guidance in the handbook is not always cross-referenced to the relevant policy and procedure, and therefore there can be an inconsistency of expectations, for example in the case of responding to bullying. Arrangements for complaint investigations other than issues of inappropriate discipline, and child protection, were unclear (See also Standard 22). The adequacy and effectiveness of policies varies between different teams of the service. Policies and procedures within the Family Link service are comprehensive and up to date. There are areas of weakness in the policies and procedures for other areas of service. Little progress has been made since the last inspection, and the new service manager stated that she identified the need to develop service specific policies, procedures and written guidance for staff. This is subject to a recommendation.

Fitness to Carry On or Manage a Fostering Service

The intended outcomes for the following set of standards are:

- The fostering service is provided and managed by those with the appropriate skills and experience to do so efficiently and effectively and by those who are suitable to work with children.

Standard 2 (2.1 - 2.4)

The people involved in carrying on and managing the fostering service possess the necessary business and management skills and financial expertise to manage the work efficiently and effectively and have the necessary knowledge and experience of childcare and fostering to do so in a professional manner.

Key Findings and Evidence	Standard met?	3
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The fostering service management and staff are well skilled to manage and provide the service efficiently.

Standard 3 (3.1 - 3.4)

Any persons carrying on or managing the fostering service are suitable people to run a business concerned with safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children.

Key Findings and Evidence	Standard met?	3
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Processes are in place to ensure the required checks are undertaken on all staff working for the service, to safeguard and promote the welfare of children. Some staff are still awaiting their checks which have been delayed by operational difficulties.

Management of the Fostering Service

The intended outcomes for the following set of standards are:

- The fostering service is managed ethically and efficiently, delivering a good quality foster care service and avoiding confusion and conflicts of role.

Standard 4 (4.1 – 4.5)

There are clear procedures for monitoring and controlling the activities of the fostering service and ensuring quality performance.

Key Findings and Evidence

Standard met?

2

The fostering service only provides placements for Northamptonshire social services. There are three team managers within the management structure, for each area of service, and they have clear roles through their job descriptions. Lines of communication and responsibility are clear and effective overall. All staff and carers are required to declare any conflict of interest as part of recruitment processes.

The designated recruitment team has as part of its role responsibility for monitoring the retention of carers; as well as developing a customer care approach to the retention of and support for carers.

Some progress has been made since the last inspection to improve the service management information systems. These remain fragmented, and the service manager informed the inspector of a strategic process now being implemented to integrate the various systems to improve the effectiveness of monitoring and controlling the activities of the service.

The service manager also identifies the need to review areas of financial procedures, particularly to establish budgets to support activities for improving life chances of children in placement. (See also Standard 13).

Number of statutory notifications made to NCSC in last 12 months:

X

Death of a child placed with foster parents.

1

Referral to Secretary of State of a person working for the service as unsuitable to work with children.

0

Serious illness or accident of a child.

X

Outbreak of serious infectious disease at a foster home.

0

Actual or suspected involvement of a child in prostitution.

0

Serious incident relating to a foster child involving calling the police to a foster home.

X

Serious complaint about a foster parent.

X

Initiation of child protection enquiry involving a child.

X

Number of complaints made to NCSC about the agency in the past 12 months:

1

Number of the above complaints which were substantiated:

X

Standard 5 (5.1 - 5.4)

The fostering service is managed effectively and efficiently.

Key Findings and Evidence

Standard met?

3

All staff have job descriptions. There are clear lines of accountability and on call management arrangements.

Securing and Promoting Welfare

The intended outcome for the following set of standards is:

- The fostering service promotes and safeguards the child/young person's physical, mental and emotional welfare.

Standard 6 (6.1 - 6.9)

The fostering service makes available foster carers who provide a safe, healthy and nurturing environment.

Key Findings and Evidence

Standard met?

2

Information from records read; feedback from children, and visits to foster homes indicate that the service does provide suitable foster carers. All foster carers receive an inspection of their home as part of their annual review of approval. This is recorded only in the environmental risk assessment, which does not comment on the overall comfort and standard of furnishings and décor. The annual review report should be developed to include such aspects, to fully evidence Standard 6.

The foster carers handbook sets out expectations for arrangements for children 's sleeping accommodation, and arrangements for sharing bedrooms that accord with the Standards. However, the inspection has identified instances where the Standards have not been met. For example, a child sleeping in communal areas of a household and a lack of recorded evidence that risks from known abuse have been fully assessed in determining the suitability of room sharing. The lack of written risk assessments where required is further commented upon in Standard 9.

Records do not evidence that all health and safety issues are adequately considered and reviewed through the review process. Many Health and safety issues are now helpfully addressed in the carers' handbook. The family link service guidelines include extensive health and safety guidance on matters related to the care of children with disabilities, but this is an area for development within the guidance in the other areas of the fostering service. The fostering service has co-operated well with all aspects of this inspection. Carers interviewed were aware that they were to be visited as part of the inspection process.

Standard 7 (7.1 - 7.7)

The fostering service ensures that children and young people, and their families, are provided with foster care services which value diversity and promote equality.

Key Findings and Evidence

Standard met?

2

The fostering service can not evidence the extent to which it ensures that children and young people, and their families, are provided with foster care services which value diversity and promote equality. Over the past year, the service has been developing management information systems to evaluate and monitor this aspect more effectively. There are a variety of services in place designed to support the valuing of diversity and promotion of equality. Issues of valuing diversity and dealing with discrimination are addressed in the training for foster carers. It is policy that such issues continue to be addressed through the assessment and review process, and reflected in a scoring system which scores "levels of acceptability". However, the basis of the score given is rarely qualified or evidenced in review records. In the case of remand foster carers, the service does not apply the "levels of acceptability" and there are no clear procedures for determining anti-discriminatory attitudes. 'The Carers for Black Children Group' monitors trans-racial placements, with the aim of informing recruitment and service provision. The service has a diverse range of foster

carers, though for some time, the service for short-term placements has been at the point of saturation, with demand for placements being greater than the range of placements available. Consequently needs determined by gender, religion, ethnic origin, language, culture, disability and sexuality are often not matched. It continues to be evident that there are a high number of trans-racial placements, and a number of instances where children are placed outside the terms of approval, including the inappropriate placement of children with placements such as remand carers and respite carers. The service manager explained that a recent recruitment drive resulted in a number of carers being currently assessed, which should alleviate some pressure. A primary objective of the recruitment and retention team is to develop effective strategies for the recruitment and retention of foster carers, including a more diverse range of carers from minority ethnic communities and carers for adolescents, and children on remand. Limited progress has been made since the last inspection, and Inspectors were informed on this inspection, that a part-time worker is due to be appointed to the team with a specific role to assist in the recruitment of minority ethnic carers. Inspectors commend this initiative as an indicator of a more pro-active approach to redressing this area of shortfall. Inspectors were informed that the role of the new worker will be to attract potential black carers to the service but will not be responsible for assessment and support thereafter. The service manager should consider the implications of this practice in relation to the retention of carers. The department has not addressed the issue of ring-fencing carers that are able to offer specific care to children of minority groups with the constant demand for placements. This has culminated in carers with attributes to meet specific needs not being used to their full potential.

Records kept by the foster service and foster carers reviewed during this inspection do not evidence formal planning to enable children to pursue their talents, interests and hobbies. Feedback from children who completed questionnaires was variable, with some children pursuing a range of interests and others reporting none. The service manager explained that this area should be more effectively addressed through the new planning process that is being implemented. The service manager informed the Inspectors that she has already identified as an area for improvement, the need for written procedures and policies for financial support for pursuing talents, interests and hobbies. This will be supported by an identified budget, and improved planning and recording in individual children's placement plans. (See also Standard 24) A requirement is made.

Standard 8 (8.1 - 8.7)

Local authority fostering services, and voluntary agencies placing children in their own right, ensure that each child or young person placed in foster care is carefully matched with a carer capable of meeting her/his assessed needs. For agencies providing foster carers to local authorities, those agencies ensure that they offer carers only if they represent appropriate matches for a child for whom a local authority is seeking a carer.

Key Findings and Evidence

Standard met?

2

The short-term service makes good effort to match children with carers who can meet their needs, within the constraints of resources available. The last inspection identified that the service benefits from great stability within the staff teams, and link workers have good knowledge of the approved carers, their particular strengths and limitation. This knowledge is often used for matching decisions and only limited information about the decision making process is recorded. Though since the last inspection some improvement has been made in the recording of matching considerations on cases handled directly through duty, the recording remains insufficient in detail, and does not clarify how identified shortfalls will be met. These initial shortfalls are also reflected in the written foster placement agreements, which also lack detailed information (See also Standard 24). A related requirement is made.

In one case tracked, the lack of information provided by the responsible social worker, and the lack of communication between said professional, the fostering service and prospective carer was very poor and of significant concern. Shortfalls included a lack of risk assessment for known high-risk behaviours or detailed written information to the carer.

As commented in Standard 7 above, there continues to be a high proportion of trans-racial or trans-community placements made, where children's assessed racial, ethnic, religious, and cultural needs are not closely matched to the foster family's characteristics. The service manager identifies this as a shortfall attributed to a shortfall in the pool of foster carers available at any given time. Whilst there has been an increase in the diversity of carers, there are no systems in place for retaining carers from minority ethnic communities to provide placements for children of similar ethnicity, and many minority ethnic carers are also caring for children of very different ethnicities. The service policy statement that trans-racial placements should be exceptional is not being achieved.

The service manager identifies a number of areas of need that the service often is unable to meet in matching children to placements, including geographical match and placement of sibling groups. Occasionally, a child may have several short-term placements before a suitable long-term placement can be found.

Inspectors are encouraged by a newly implemented policy that for each new short term placement, a pre-placement planning meeting must take place, including the responsible authority, link worker, foster carer and where appropriate the child. This should redress concerns that many carers continue to report at a lack of information provided about the child being placed. It is also a step towards meeting Standard 8.7. which is concerned with arrangements for introducing children to proposed placements. An area for development is to formalise expected care practices for Standard 8.7. in written policies and procedures, and closely monitor achievement of expected practices.

Standards of written records of assessed need and plans for care continue to be varied, and there are instances of poor recording on the Looked After Children (LAC) paperwork by social workers. The service manager and staff describe this as an ongoing issue, which they continue to take up with the responsible authority.

Standard 9 (9.1 - 9.8)

The fostering service protects each child or young person from all forms of abuse, neglect, exploitation and deprivation.

Key Findings and Evidence	Standard met?	2
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The service follows the procedures laid down by the Area Child Protection Committee (ACPC) and local authority procedures, and in service procedures are good. Pre and post approval training for foster carers includes training in child protection issues. All foster service staff undertake child protection training as part of their core training. Each foster family is provided with the National Foster Care Association 'Safe Caring' book and guidance and the service's 'Safe Caring' policy guide to help families to work out their own policy. Not all of the cases tracked, showed evidence that each household has written safe caring guidelines or that these are cleared with the social worker and explained to the child, as required by Standard 9.3. In discussion, the service manager expressed an explicit expectation that all carers were now undertaking this, and the shortfall highlights a need for more rigorous monitoring of compliance with this safe caring practice. Shortfalls remain in practices for ensuring the protective care practices are assured, for example ensuring children have the clothing specified in the guidelines when they are placed, particularly as many foster carers continue to report instances when children arrive with very little suitable clothing and belongings overall.

The service provides written information about acceptable and prohibited punishments to foster carers and placing social workers, including a 'no smacking' policy. The vast majority

of children who completed questionnaires state that their foster carers use acceptable punishments and are fair.

Since the last inspection, little progress has been made to improve the management information systems in place to collate and evaluate information about allegations of inappropriate discipline, or child protection incidents of a child in foster care. The service manager acknowledged that she does not have a full overview of these issues in the service. The service manager identifies this as an area for development and this is re-affirmed in a recommendation for good practice.

The recently implemented handbook for foster carers includes written guidelines for carers on dealing with bullying and missing children, and this is an improvement since the last inspection. It is noted that the notification procedures that carers are expected to follow are not clearly stated, and this is an area for development.

The Inspector considers that insufficient progress has been made since the last inspection, to evidence that the service shares full information about a child with foster carers. In those records reviewed, foster carers had not received a copy of any written risk assessments that are undertaken on each child, and foster placement agreements do not clearly identify areas of risk and how the child is to be protected and cared for in relation to known risks. (See also Standard 8). Some foster carers feedback that the information that they receive lacks sufficient detail allow them to protect the child placed, other children in placement or themselves. One foster carer expressed concern to the Inspectors that she had become aware that a child had made an allegation against her, but no actions were taken to investigate fully and this had left her feeling very vulnerable. This issue was brought to the attention of a link worker and the service manager for action. A requirement is made.

Percentage of foster children placed who report never or hardly ever being bullied:	X	%
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Standard 10 (10.1 - 10.9)
The fostering service makes sure that each child or young person in foster care is encouraged to maintain and develop family contacts and friendships as set out in her/his care plan and/or foster placement agreement.

Key Findings and Evidence	Standard met?	2
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The foster carer handbook sets out expectations for contact arrangements and the foster carers responsibilities in supporting and facilitating contact. Responses from foster carers and service staff indicate that there is a strong commitment to promoting contact for each child with the significant family and friends. Case records reviewed on this inspection did not always detail contact arrangements as required by Standard 10.7. This was identified as an area for development at the last inspection and is now subject to a requirement. Some foster carers and staff report that at times contact arrangements have been undermined by difficulties with transport arrangements. Such difficulties range from resource shortfall to poor reliability. Such transport difficulties also impact on education and in turn some general aspects children's life chances, as noted else where in this report, and this is an area of significant concern being addressed by the service manager. Whilst the handbook guidelines state that foster carers can discuss their views of contact with the childcare social workers, there are no systems or procedures in place for foster carers to record and feedback their perception of outcomes of contact arrangements, as a matter of routine in line with Standard 10.9. and this is now subject to a recommendation.

Standard 11 (11.1 - 11.5)
The fostering service ensures that children's opinions, and those of their families and others significant to the child, are sought over all issues that are likely to affect their daily life and their future.

Key Findings and Evidence	Standard met?	2
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There is no coherent policy or processes for ascertaining the opinions and views of children in line with Standard 11.3. Existing arrangements include the inclusion on carers review forms of a section for the child to express their view of the placement. The importance of listening and responding to children's views is addressed in foster carer training. The majority of children who completed the questionnaire state that they know how to raise concerns and complaint. Some children and foster carers raised concerns that they do not receive good support from their social workers once in placement and this would include a lack of visits to the foster placement to ascertain children's opinions and views. The need to develop arrangements for consultation to meet this Standard fully is subject to a recommendation.

Standard 12 (12.1 - 12.8)
The fostering service ensures that it provides foster care services which help each child or young person in foster care to receive health care which meets her/his needs for physical, emotional and social development, together with information and training appropriate to her/his age and understanding to enable informed participation in decisions about her/his health needs.

Key Findings and Evidence	Standard met?	2
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Since the last inspection, good progress has been made to improve the arrangements for health care planning for all children looked after by the local authority, through a range of services provided by the Local Authority's 'Centre for Health'. Carers and staff spoken to are increasingly aware of the services available at the Centre, and procedures are due to be implemented for each child to have a written Health Plan as required. Presently however, the service is still heavily reliant on the LAC records, which are not always up-to-date. There is an inherent difficulty of the service having up-to-date health information on children looked after in remand placements. This is due to the immediacy by which such placements are made, often involving children who are not already in the care of the local authority. Discussion with the remand foster service workers indicated that they make good efforts to obtain all of the required information as a matter of priority. In records read, arrangements for consent for medical treatment are not always clearly stated and authorised and this is an area of recording that needs more rigorous monitoring and improvement. These shortfalls are subject to a requirement.

The responsibility for securing specialist health care remains with the child's social worker and some carers said that these are not always followed through efficiently. Appointments for medical attention are subject to the National Health Service processes, and access to other specialist clinical health services such as Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) are delayed by service level constraints and long waiting lists. Inspectors are however encouraged that since the last inspection, a service level agreement has been secured for some direct access to clinical psychology and therapy. The service manager needs to ensure all carers are aware of how to access these services.

Foster carers have access to training on health and hygiene issues, as well as first aid training, though not all foster carers have up-to-date first aid training and this is identified as a good practice recommendation.

Standard 13 (13.1 - 13.8)

The fostering service gives a high priority to meeting the educational needs of each child or young person in foster care and ensures that she/he is encouraged to attain her/his full potential.

Key Findings and Evidence**Standard met?****2**

There has been no significant change since the last inspection, in the arrangements by which the fostering service promotes the educational achievement of children in foster care. The fostering service aims to contribute to the educational attainment of children within the framework of the joint policy and practice guidelines as issued by the social care and health and education directorates. These guidelines demonstrate a strong commitment to promote the life chances of children in public care through educational attainment. The policy and guidance designates clear lines of responsibility for all professionals and carers involved, and it is expected that foster carers contribute to any meetings and processes for planning and reviewing children's education. As so many of the responsibilities fall with inter-departmental processes, the foster service is dependent on the contribution of other professionals to fully and effectively promote the educational achievement of children in foster care as required by this Standard, and some difficulties are reported. However, the service manager informed the Inspectors of positive developments in the local authority's 'Life Chances' services. The forthcoming annual foster carers conference has as its theme 'Promoting the Life Chances of Looked after Children'. It is expected that carers and staff will be provided with information about expectations for education; services available, and how to access them. In addition, written information about life chances and education is provided in the form of booklets for all carers. The new handbook does outline guidance for foster carers' expected involvement in education and related meetings and staff and carers spoken to confirmed a strong commitment to supporting children's education.

No progress has been made to increase the level of information recorded in the foster service placement agreements. Some of the records reviewed did not accurately set out the educational needs of the child. For children who were of compulsory school age, but not receiving full time education, records did not evidence that other suitable arrangements had been made.

The service manager and a team manager informed Inspectors that funding for school trips is always provided, however, funding of extra-curricula activities, including leisure interests, is dependent on availability of funds, and there is no formalised policy to ensure a fair, consistent and transparent approach. The service manager explained that there is no budget designated specifically for this and she intends to review this matter as part of the service development plan.

Many carers and staff continue to report severe difficulties with the transport arranged by the department, to transport children to and from their education. The service manager identifies this as an ongoing problem, which she is addressing concertedly.

The fostering service has no procedures for monitoring the educational attainment, progress and school attendance of children placed with foster carers, as is required. This is subject to a requirement.

Standard 14 (14.1 - 14.5)

The fostering service ensures that their foster care services help to develop skills, competence and knowledge necessary for adult living.

Key Findings and Evidence**Standard met?**

2

A review of the fostering handbook identified that information for carers regarding leaving carer had not been included. Interviews with staff confirmed that this information is being developed and will be included in the handbook. Due to the ages of the children reviewed as part of this inspection an in depth review of this standard was not undertaken.

Recruiting, Checking, Managing, Supporting and Training Staff and Foster Carers

The intended outcome for the following set of standards is:

- The people who work in or for the fostering service are suitable to work with children and young people and they are managed, trained and supported in such a way as to ensure the best possible outcomes for children in foster care. The number of staff and carers and their range of qualifications and experience are sufficient to achieve the purposes and functions of the organisation.

Standard 15 (15.1 - 15.8)

Any people working in or for the fostering service are suitable people to work with children and young people and to safeguard and promote their welfare.

Key Findings and Evidence

Standard met?

2

All social work staff have an appropriate qualification as required for Standard 15.5. The staff group overall is well experienced and skilled to undertake the responsibilities of their roles, as was evidenced from staff records and interviews. The sample of staff records reviewed as part of the case tracking methodology identified that staff involved in the assessment of foster carers were qualified social workers. The fostering service does not employ any other professional staff such as educationalists and psychologists. Such specialist services are commissioned for specific needs as required.

The service manager identifies that the process of obtaining CRB clearances for all staff has continued to be delayed by organisational difficulties in the directorate's human resource service, and these are being resolved. It was noted that the foster panel has approved foster carers before confirmation of the CRB clearance has been received. The panel chair expressed total confidence that no placements would be made before clearance is confirmed, however, there is no monitoring system in place for the panel or the approver to formally confirm satisfactory CRB clearance and this is subject to a recommendation.

Total number of staff of the agency:

X

Number of staff who have left the agency in the past 12 months:

X

Standard 16 (16.1 - 16.16)

Staff are organised and managed in a way that delivers an efficient and effective foster care service.

Key Findings and Evidence

Standard met?

2

Since the last inspection there has been change in the management of the service overall, with the introduction of a new service manager and a current review of the service structure taking into account vacancies at management level. Information from the service manager, staff and records identified that collaborative working between the service and children's social workers continues to be problematic due to unallocated cases that has resulted in placement blockages and ineffective care planning implementation. Discussions with the service manager confirmed her awareness of this situation and the action that she is taking to address these difficulties. She explained that ongoing meetings with managers within the local authority children's services overall have been planned to ensure this matter continues to be reviewed and addressed.

A review of staff records identified that during periods of staffing shortfalls there was an element of disruption to the level of supervision and support available to staff and carers.

Discussions with staff identified that since staffing levels have been stabilised this has had a positive impact on the level of support now being provided.

A training calendar of courses available is provided to carers every 6 months. Carers are encouraged to attend unlimited training within this programme and a crèche facility is usually available. Since the last inspection, foster carers have been given a resource to maintain a training portfolio, though only one of the carers visited during the course of the inspection had completed their portfolio. Staff confirmed inspectors that this is new and still being implemented.

All teams have dedicated clerical and administrative support, which social work staff say is effective. The recruitment team deals with enquiries from prospective carers.

Standard 17 (17.1 - 17.7)

The fostering service has an adequate number of sufficiently experienced and qualified staff and recruits a range of carers to meet the needs of children and young people for whom it aims to provide a service.

Key Findings and Evidence

Standard met?

2

Through discussions with members of staff staffing levels were reported to be adequate, though feedback from carers was contradictory with a high proportion expressing the view that the service was understaffed. The service manager identified that current staffing levels are an area to be reviewed, particularly in light of the planned expansion of the service through the increased recruitment of approved carers and diversification of areas of special skills.

Since the last inspection, the service has developed an evidenced based approach to assessment, based on the BAAF competence based process. Written guidance for staff does not give clear direction of expectations in this area of practice. Records and interviews with staff indicated some inconsistency in practice and confusion over expectations as to which assessment formats were to be used. This again identifies the need for detailed guidance for, and training of staff in the model to achieve a consistent standard of assessment. Written information is provided to prospective foster carers about the assessment process both for fostering. The fostering hand book provides information about the approval process, panel and appeals processes.

Standard 18 (18.1 - 18.7)

The fostering service is a fair and competent employer, with sound employment practices and good support for its staff and carers.

Key Findings and Evidence

Standard met?

3

The employees of the fostering service are subject to the employment policies, procedures and support of the local authority, and these are developed within a legal framework and duty of care. Employment practices in relation to carers are generally supportive, with the majority of foster carers stating that they receive good support from their foster service link worker. All foster carers are aware and know how to contact the out of hours social work teams. Inspectors were informed that the organisation had recently recruited carers specifically to work with the out-of-hours team to provided emergency placements. There is a whistle blowing procedure in place for staff. As previously identified there remains a need to develop such a policy for carers.

Standard 19 (19.1 - 19.7)		
There is a good quality training programme to enhance individual skills and to keep staff up-to-date with professional and legal developments.		
Key Findings and Evidence	Standard met?	2
<p>All staff have access to the comprehensive social care and health directorate staff development training programmes. Since the last inspection, supervising staff have begun a process of updating staff training profiles and identifying any outstanding training needs. An area for development in the training programme relates to the developing areas of service including kinship care and remand care.</p> <p>The fostering service has both the comprehensive corporate induction programme, as well as a service specific programme. At the time of the inspection interviews with staff indicated some confusion to the implementation of the programme, which the service manager agreed to review and clarify.</p>		

Standard 20 (20.1 - 20.5)		
All staff are properly accountable and supported.		
Key Findings and Evidence	Standard met?	3
<p>All staff receive regular supervision, annual appraisal and attend regular team meetings, in line with corporate policy.</p>		

Standard 21 (21.1 - 21.6)**The fostering service has a clear strategy for working with and supporting carers.****Key Findings and Evidence****Standard met?****2**

Since the last inspection, a handbook for foster carers has been compiled, which includes information on support issues set out in Standard 21.2. and further supplements the information set out in the Statement of Purpose and Function. Records reviewed identified some inconsistencies of practice relating to the structure of support visits to carers. Records of contact between the link workers and carers do not always clearly record advice given in response to support needs identified, and do not always adequately evidence how issues are followed up or monitored, for example in relation to issues of behaviour management. The service manager identifies these as shortfalls in recording rather than practice and identified these as areas to address through improved supervision and monitoring activity. Across the county, various support groups have been established both formal and informal. These are largely organised by carers and meet with varying regularity. One carer expressed said they could not access their local support group due to the rural location in which it meets. Inspectors met with one of the support groups. Whilst the carers who take part in this group find it an effective forum for mutual support, they expressed frustration that this forum does not provide an effective means for communicating wider policy issues to management and receiving feedback. Feedback from carers in their questionnaires also identified a high proportion who did not consider that their views of the service are sought. There is an open forum for carers to meet twice a year with the service manager. However, no record of these meetings could be located for inspectors to review and the service manager was unaware of any action plan resulting from issues raised. The service manager is advised to review this and consider implementing more effective systems for communication and consultation as part of the strategy for working with and supporting carers.

Many carers continue to express concern at a lack of support for the placement through direct services for the child in placement. Life chances services are being developed to improve access to direct work for children.

Standard 22 (22.1 - 22.10)

The fostering service is a managed one that provides supervision for foster carers and helps them to develop their skills.

Key Findings and Evidence**Standard met?****2**

The format of the foster care agreement covers all aspects of Schedule 5 of the Regulations. As stated above, a foster carers handbook has been developed and disseminated to all carers since the last inspection.

Each approved carer has a named link worker who is responsible for supervising them.

Since the last inspection, some guidance has been issued to staff in the form of a "suggested agenda" for supervising visits. Discussion with staff however identified an inconsistent perception as to what extent the agenda should be followed on each visit.

Records of visits do not evidence the "suggested agenda" forming the basis of supervisory visits. Inspectors again identify the need to consolidate established practices for the role of the supervising worker into clear written instruction to ensure consistent practice for supervising carers.

There are arrangements for the annual review of foster carers. Since the last inspection, procedures for all reviews to be considered by the fostering panel as required have been implemented. The review reports reviewed highlighted an inconsistent standard of reporting in some areas including profile of placements made; training completed and foster carers' development needs.

The service provides the range of practical support as required by 22.7. The service has a contract with the Fostering networks Advice and Mediation scheme to support carers, generally and particularly if they are subject to allegations. In one case reviewed, the foster carers reported that their link worker had not informed them of this service at a time when this may have been appropriate.

There is a format for making a referral to the secretary of state of a person considered to be unsuitable for working with children. No such referrals have been made since the last inspection. Since the last inspection, the complaints procedures have been revised.

However, guidance to foster carers in the handbook does not make clear the investigation procedures for all complaints of issues not related to child protection, and this is identified as an area for development (See Standard 1). The vast majority of children and foster carers who completed the questionnaires stated that they know how to complain.

Standard 23 (23.1 - 23.9)

The fostering service ensures that foster carers are trained in the skills required to provide high quality care and meet the needs of each child/young person placed in their care.

Key Findings and Evidence**Standard met?****2**

The foster service approval process includes a programme of training for foster carers.

Existing foster carers take part in the training as facilitators. Foster carers gave positive feedback about the quality and effectiveness of pre-approval and post-approval training.

The service has promoted NVQ training in childcare for foster carers, and feedback from carers confirmed that they are being supported to undertake such studies. The ongoing progress in this area is commended. The NCC also pays individual membership fees for all foster carers within the Fostering Network.

Present policy remains that all foster carers should complete the induction training prior to approval, or else within one year of approval. It is again recommended that this policy be reviewed to ensure all carers complete their training before approval.

There is an ongoing programme of training for foster carers, and the take up of this training is variable, with high numbers of carers choosing not to undertake any further formal training. An incentive system of skills levels and related financial rewards has been

implemented for carers who complete at least 5 further courses during each year. It is the service's policy that all carers must complete training on safe caring linked to the provision of the written guidance on developing a safe caring policy.

Records

The intended outcome for the following set of standards is:

- All appropriate records are kept and are accessible in relation to the fostering services and the individual foster carers and foster children.

Standard 24 (24.1 - 24.8)

The fostering service ensures that an up-to-date, comprehensive case record is maintained for each child or young person in foster care which details the nature and quality of care provided and contributes to an understanding of her/his life events. Relevant information from the case records is made available to the child and to anyone involved in her/his care.

Key Findings and Evidence

Standard met?

2

The fostering service is provided with key information about the child's needs at the time of placement in the form of the LAC paperwork. Copies of these are kept on the foster carers records and given to the foster carer as the basis for care to be provided. These documents generally lack sufficient detail of the information required in Schedule 6 and specific information shortfalls are subject to requirements in this report. The service manager informed the Inspectors that she will be reviewing this practice and is yet to develop a written policy on case recording as required by Standard 24.2.

The responsibility to ensure children know about and understand their care plan is with the child's social worker. Many children who gave feedback did not know of their care plan indicating current arrangements are not fully effective. This is an area for improvement as the service manager progresses her discussions with fieldwork services over more effective collaboration for services to the placed children.

The foster carers role to encourage the child to reflect on and understand their past as outlined in Standard 24.5. is not made explicitly clear. A number of foster carers state that they do not receive sufficient information about the child's background and life experiences. Whilst training in these areas is available, there is no evidence that carers are routinely trained and given equipment to record significant life events in accordance with Standard 24.6., and in one case tracked, there had been a lack of support for this work to be undertaken even though it had been identified as an area of need in a review.

Within placements, there is a variable level of recording of children's daily life and progress. The fostering service does not make it sufficiently clear what level of record keeping is required, and does not effectively ensure consistent minimum standards of recording are maintained.

Standard 25 (25.1 - 25.13)			
The fostering service's administrative records contain all significant information relevant to the running of the foster care service and as required by regulations.			
Key Findings and Evidence		Standard met?	2
<p>The fostering service has systems in place to maintain all administrative records as required. There is a comprehensive procedure 'Recording With Care' for records management and access to records.</p> <p>The system for keeping records is congruent with the Looked After Children (LAC) system though care needs to be taken to ensure the LAC paperwork is consistently fully completed. Related recommendations and requirements are made in this report. There are policies and procedures for accessing records by children and foster carers, including the right to ask for information to be amended or views to be recorded. It is not evident that they are actively encouraged to access their records and record personal statements including any dissent. The service register of carers meets the information requirements as set out in Regulation 31.</p>			
Number of current foster placements supported by the agency:			X
Number of placements made by the agency in the last 12 months:			X
Number of placements made by the agency which ended in the past 12 months:			X
Number of new foster carers approved during the last 12 months:			X
Number of foster carers who left the agency during the last 12 months:			X
Current weekly payments to foster parents: Minimum £		X	Maximum £ X

Fitness of Premises for use as Fostering Service

The intended outcome for the following standard is:

- The premises used as offices by the fostering service are suitable for the purpose.

Standard 26 (26.1 - 26.5)

Premises used as offices by the fostering service are appropriate for the purpose.

Key Findings and Evidence

Standard met?

3

Visits to a sample of office bases, and feedback from staff and the service manager confirmed that they continue to be appropriate for the purpose. Administrative systems accord with the Standards, and all premises are adequately insured with public liability insurance.

Financial Requirements

The intended outcome for the following set of standards is:

- The agency fostering services are financially viable and appropriate and timely payments are made to foster carers.

Standard 27 (27.1 - 27.3)

The agency ensures it is financially viable at all times and has sufficient financial resources to fulfil its obligations.

Key Findings and Evidence

Standard met?

9

The Commission is not required to appraise this Standard in local authority foster services.

Standard 28 (28.1 - 28.7)

The financial processes/systems of the agency are properly operated and maintained in accordance with sound and appropriate accounting standards and practice.

Key Findings and Evidence

Standard met?

9

The Commission is not required to appraise this Standard in local authority foster services.

Standard 29 (29.1 - 29.2)

Each foster carer receives an allowance and agreed expenses, which cover the full cost of caring for each child or young person placed with him or her. Payments are made promptly and at the agreed time. Allowances and fees are reviewed annually.

Key Findings and Evidence**Standard met?**

2

There is a comprehensive statement of allowances to be paid for placements. There is a written policy for the payment of allowances including a skill based enhancement scheme. Allowances are made and paid as required. Carers report an improvement in the prompt payment of fees and only a few reported still not receiving prompt payments. A number of foster carers expressed the view that allowances for birthday, Christmas and holiday costs are inadequate, and pressure is on carers to supplement the allowances, which for many is not feasible. The service manager is advised to review this area alongside her evaluation of finances available for Life Chances. The service manager confirmed that a full review of allowances paid is imminent.

Fostering Panels

The intended outcome for the following set of standards is:

- **Fostering panels are organised efficiently and effectively so as to ensure that good quality decisions are made about the approval of foster carers, in line with the overriding objective to promote and safeguard the welfare of children in foster care.**

Standard 30 (30.1 - 30.9)

Fostering panels have clear written policies and procedures, which are implemented in practice, about the handling of their functions.

Key Findings and Evidence

Standard met?

2

The organisation and conduct of the short term fostering panel is efficient and effective in many areas.

The chairing is highly effective, and all members actively participate. Observation of the short-term foster panel found that panel members were rigorous in their scrutiny of reports and questioning of presenters. Since the last inspection, the panel has implemented policy that foster carers are invited to attend panel as part of their approval and subsequent reviews. This is commended as good practice.

At the last inspection, the service manager identified the need to put in place written procedures for the panel, including specification of the broader quality assurance function of the panel; and to implement training for panel members to develop their monitoring role.

This has not been achieved, and remains an area for development subject to a recommendation. The panel observed as part of this inspection did exercise a quality assurance function in relation to the review process. Panel members identified and commented on the inconsistency of information detail recorded in reviews of foster carers. These observations were fed back to the team managers present, and possible resolutions were discussed.

There is an ongoing development of the service management and administration processes, and growth of the services and the diversity of care being provided, the most recent being the development of the kinship placement team. This raises further issues of training for panel members to ensure that they have a good understanding of the operational expectations and complexities of care being provided within all areas of fostering services. Independent panel members do not yet include expertise in education or a person with experience of being fostered. This remains an area for consideration by the service manager.

Short-Term Breaks

The intended outcome for the following set of standards is:

- When foster care is provided as a short-term break for a child, the arrangement recognises that the parents remain the main carers for the child.

Standard 31 (31.1 - 31.2)

Where a fostering service provides short-term breaks for children in foster care, they have policies and procedures, implemented in practice, to meet the particular needs of children receiving short-term breaks.

Key Findings and Evidence	Standard met?
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The family link service provides exclusively short-term breaks for children with disabilities. This is a well-established area of service, which is being operated to a very high standard. The family link service was inspected through case tracking as part of the Inspection in April 2003 and was not reviewed through case tracking on this inspection.	
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Family and Friends as Carers

The intended outcome for the following set of standards is:

- **Local authority fostering services' policies and procedures for assessing, approving, supporting and training foster carers recognise the particular contribution that can be made by and the particular needs of family and friends as carers.**

Standard 32 (32.1 - 32.4)

These standards are all relevant to carers who are family and friends of the child, but there is recognition of the particular relationship and position of family and friend carers.

Key Findings and Evidence	Standard met?	2
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The fostering service has a background of assessing and supporting family and friends as approved foster carers. Where family and friends are being approved, the terms of approval make explicitly clear if the approval is for the named child(ren) only. Such carers are given the same opportunities for training as any other carer.

Since the last inspection, progress has been made to develop a specific kinship care fostering team. At the time of inspection two workers had been appointed to post although the service supervisor explained that policies and procedures for the service were still being developed and the steering group was in the initial stages of evaluating the level of the provision to be provided.

PART C

LAY ASSESSOR'S SUMMARY

(where applicable)

Lay Assessor _____ **Signature** _____
Date _____

D.1 Registered Person's or Responsible Local Authority Manager's comments/confirmation relating to the content and accuracy of the report for the above inspection.

We would welcome comments on the content of this report relating to the Inspection conducted on 9th – 18th February 2004 and any factual inaccuracies:

Please limit your comments to one side of A4 if possible

Action taken by the NCSC in response to the provider's comments:

Amendments to the report were necessary

YES

Comments were received from the provider

YES

Provider comments/factual amendments were incorporated into the final inspection report

NO

Provider comments are available on file at the Area Office but have not been incorporated into the final inspection report. The inspector believes the report to be factually accurate

YES

Note:

In instances where there is a major difference of view between the Inspector and the Registered Provider responsible Local Authority fostering service Manager both views will be made available on request to the Area Office.

D.2 Please provide the Commission with a written Action Plan by the 28-day date of the covering letter, which indicates how statutory requirements and recommendations are to be addressed and stating a clear timescale for completion. This will be kept on file and made available on request.

Status of the Provider's Action Plan at time of publication of the final inspection report:

Action plan was required

YES

Action plan was received at the point of publication

YES

Action plan covers all the statutory requirements in a timely fashion

YES

Action plan did not cover all the statutory requirements and required further discussion

NO

Provider has declined to provide an action plan

NO

Other: <enter details here>

NO

Public reports

It should be noted that all NCSC inspection reports are public documents. Reports on children's homes are only obtainable on personal application to NCSC offices.

D.3 PROVIDER'S AGREEMENT

Registered Person's or responsible Local Authority Manager's statement of agreement/comments: Please complete the relevant section that applies.

D.3.1 I Mrs Jan Slater of NCC Fostering Services confirm that the contents of this report are a fair and accurate representation of the facts relating to the inspection conducted on the above date(s) and that I agree with the statutory requirements made and will seek to comply with these.

Print Name _____
Signature _____
Designation _____
Date _____

Or

D.3.2 I Mrs Jan Slater of NCC Fostering Services am unable to confirm that the contents of this report are a fair and accurate representation of the facts relating to the inspection conducted on the above date(s) for the following reasons:

Provider's comments and Action Plan are available at the Area Office where these have been submitted.

Print Name _____
Signature _____
Designation _____
Date _____

Note: In instance where there is a profound difference of view between the Inspector and the Registered Provider both views will be reported. Please attach any extra pages, as applicable.