



*Making Social Care
Better for People*

inspection report

FOSTERING SERVICE

Northumberland Fostering Service

Family Support & Placement Service

Tweed House

Hepscott Park

Morpeth

Northumberland

NE61 6NF

Lead Inspector

Stephen Graham

Key Announced Inspection

2nd October 2006

10:00

The Commission for Social Care Inspection aims to:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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SERVICE INFORMATION

Name of service	Northumberland Fostering Service
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Telephone number	01670 534450
Fax number	01670 533451
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Provider Web address	
Name of registered provider(s)/company (if applicable)	Northumberland County Council SSD
Name of registered manager (if applicable)	Ann Fimister
Type of registration	Local Auth Fostering Service

SERVICE INFORMATION

Conditions of registration:

Date of last inspection 16th January 2006

Brief Description of the Service:

Northumberland Fostering Service is part of the Family Support and Placement Service based at Tweed House, Hepscott Park, Stannington, Morpeth. The Fostering Service recruits, assesses and supports foster carers to provide a range of placements for children and young people. They include long and short-term foster care and short break care.

The Northumberland team are also part of a regional project (Sahara Project) to recruit and advise foster carers from the black and ethnic community.

At the time of the inspection the service was supporting approximately 200 placements. The Fostering Service operates with a team of supervising social workers, the manager and administrative support staff.

SUMMARY

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

The inspectors would like to thank the children, carers and staff at Northumberland Fostering for their welcome and the important part they played in the inspection. Information and evidence in this report was gathered by two inspectors over a 6 day period through:

- Talking individually with children, carers and staff.
- Visiting foster carers' homes.
- Group discussions with staff, children and carers.
- Talking with the managers of the service.
- Reading children's, carer's and staff files.
- Reading policies, procedures and records.
- Children's questionnaires.
- Carer's questionnaires.
- Children's social workers questionnaires.
- Observing the fostering panel.
- Talking with the Chair of the fostering panel.

Since the previous inspection changes have occurred to the senior management arrangements for this service with the service manager themselves subsequently taking on additional monitoring responsibilities. Despite these changes and throughout the course of this visit the inspectors noted the commitment both from managers, staff and foster carers to maintain good standards, whilst working to further improve the range and quality of service provided.

Inspectors found that the service has responded positively to the previous requirements set and recommendations made. The views of children, their carers and placing social workers received during the inspection further endorsed this.

What the service does well:

During this inspection, a number of very positive comments were received from children, carers and placing social workers. One carer stated that the service: "offer regular support, advice and listen to any problems we may have and act upon any problems."

When asked: "Why do you choose to foster for this service?" carers gave many positive responses. One carer gave their view that they chose Northumberland Fostering "because it is a local authority and we wanted to help local children". Another carer stated that: "This is my local authority social services and I have fostered for them for 25 years with no problems so I will stay with them." Other carers described the service as "very professional and friendly" another simply stated "they are excellent people." When asked: "What does the

service do to help you care for children?" carers again gave positive responses. One carer highlighted how the service provided "support, advice and runs courses on relevant topics". Others stated that: "(they) keep in touch on a regular basis to make sure everything is running smoothly and give advice when necessary" that they "provide support and advice regarding health, education and general preparation to face adult life and their futures" and "they help with anything you ask them."

Children and young people were happy to confirm that they generally felt safe and well cared for and that their views are listened to both by their carers and staff. Children felt that their overall health and educational needs are well met and that they are supported in maintaining contact with their families where appropriate. They also enjoy the benefit of activities and hobbies and are involved within their communities.

Very positive descriptions were received from children explaining why they felt this was true. One young person said of their foster home: "I am very happy here and would not want to go anywhere else." Another stated: "I like the house and love everyone here." With regard to health needs one young person confirmed that they got help from their carers: "Because they care for me and want me to have a healthy body, eyes and teeth." Another young person confirmed that if they were unhappy they would speak to: "My social worker." Another stated: "I have several people to share my problems with." With regard to their education, one young person stated that: "my carer helps me with things I am not sure of." Another confirmed that: "I get help with my homework everyday"

Overall the inspectors found that the service creates positive outcomes for children in meeting their health needs, keeping them safe, supporting their education, contact with family and friends and involvement in the community. Importantly, inspectors also found that children feel listened to by their carers, social workers and the fostering staff.

What has improved since the last inspection?

The service has continued to work to ensure good outcomes for children and to further improve the service by ensuring that previous requirements and recommendations made are fully implemented.

Carers and children's placing social workers were asked to comment on whether they felt that since the previous inspection the service was better, worse or not changed. Positively, of those responding, most felt that the service had not changed with nearly all others feeling that it was better.

In response to the recommendation made at the previous inspection the service has introduced systems to monitor and collate information about the attendance and educational achievement of children in foster care. During this

inspection, these systems were used to positively demonstrate the good educational outcomes for foster children in Northumberland.

As previously required, the service has worked to ensure that all foster carers are regularly provided with training in the protection and safe care of children and that all foster carers are trained in developing the appropriate skills and knowledge to care for foster children successfully.

As previously recommended, the clarity of recording within children's care files has been improved, making them easier to read and understand.

The service has also issued all carers with foster carer agreements, which meet the requirements of Schedule 5 to the fostering regulations.

What they could do better:

The views of children and carers interviewed or responding by questionnaire during the inspection did not highlight any major common areas in need of improvement. However, some individual comments received regarding possible changes are included within the main report and were fed back to the manager to be considered and addressed by the agency.

The inspectors did identify a number of areas where they felt further improvements could be made. These are in summary that:

Foster carers must be provided with sufficient information about the children placed with them to ensure that they are appropriately matched with them and are cared for safely.

The foster carer 'Safe Care' agreements, used to confirm how fostered children will be kept safe, must be completed in full detail.

To ensure effective monitoring of the service by the manager, the recording and reporting systems for allegations and other significant events must be improved.

Staff files must contain all the information required by Schedule 1 of the Fostering Services Regulations 2002.

The service must ensure that all children and young people placed through it know how to complain if they are un-happy.

As an area of good practice, foster carer supervision agreements should be signed by the carers themselves.

The service must work to ensure that carers can access 'Out of Hours' emergency support and can contact children's social workers for advice and support where necessary.

The service must continue to work to ensure that children in foster care are visited at least every three months by their own supervising social workers.

The service must improve the current timescales for the presentation of foster carer annual review reports to the fostering panel.

The service must ensure that the views of children and young people are gathered and presented to carer review meetings.

To ensure that the care needs of children are met, their care files must contain all required information.

The service must ensure that the processes for the assessment and approval of relatives and friends as carers comply with agreed procedures and fostering regulations.

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

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

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Being Healthy

The intended outcome for this Standard is:

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

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

JUDGEMENT – we looked at the outcome for Standard:

12

Quality in this outcome area is good. This judgment has been made from evidence gathered both during and before the visit to this service. Northumberland Fostering works to ensure that the health needs of children placed with their carers are effectively promoted and monitored.

EVIDENCE:

One young person, whilst confirming that they usually receive support and advice about being healthy, stated: "I don't eat a lot of junk. I like vegetables." Another described how their foster carers support their diet as: "I get lots of fruit and plenty of good food."

The overall response received from young people was very positive regarding the support received from their carers and the service in meeting their health needs. Of the children and young people responding all were able to report that they had received help in meeting their own health needs. Nearly two thirds of those responding stated that they 'always' get support in meeting these needs, with others describing this as 'usually' or 'sometimes' provided.

Nearly all of the carers who responded by questionnaire were able to confirm that the support provided to them was either good or excellent. Carers gave a number of good examples of the support they had received from the service. One highlighted that: "they (the fostering service) check that (the child) receives the best attention for her health and education through her school and doctor." Another stated that: "Courses are available on healthy eating, regular health checks with Nurse for LAC and medicals with our GP. We also have to ensure regular dental checks and optician."

Positively, the manager themselves was able to confirm that in the last 12 months 97% of children placed through the service had received their annual

health check. The service benefits from the direct involvement of the dedicated LAC nurse in the fostering panel, it was also confirmed that the nurse shares office accommodation with the team of independent review officers allowing good communication and close involvement with children's care reviews.

Examination of children's care files and discussion with carers themselves provided lots of evidence that carers receive a full description of the health needs of the children they care for, are supported in ensuring that children are registered with doctors and dentists and that appropriate consents for any medical treatment required are provided. Carers are also supported to access necessary training in meeting children's health needs and first aid.

Very positive evidence was also received from social workers placing children through the service. Of those responding by questionnaire, most were able to describe the fostering service as providing either excellent or good support to children in working to ensure that they are enabled to have a healthy lifestyle.

Staying Safe

The intended outcomes for these Standards are:

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

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

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

3, 6, 8, 9, 15 and 30

Quality in this outcome area is adequate. This judgment has been made from evidence gathered both during and before the visit to this service. The manager of the service is both suitable and competent to provide it. Young people are placed with carers who provide safe homes. Arrangements to match young people with carers are generally effective. The overall arrangements put in place by the service work to keep children safe. The fostering panel is well comprised and is able to make good decisions and recommendations to the agency decision maker. Some improvements are recommended in the procedures by which children themselves can comment on the ongoing qualities of carers in meeting their needs, staffing information and the monitoring of the service by the manager.

EVIDENCE:

The manager was able to confirm that those members of staff in the fostering service, (who are required to be CRB checked), every foster carer, and all adult members of the households of foster carers, have had their required checks completed.

Discussion with carers, staff and an examination of carer files provided good evidence that the service works to ensure that carers provide an environment to children which is free from hazards and routinely checked to ensure that it remains safe and suitable for the care of children. Health and safety checklists

are in use and were available within those carers' files examined; there was also good evidence that these are being updated routinely through carer's annual review meetings. However, one example where no 'pet safety' checklist was available on file, where the foster carers were confirmed to be dog owners was highlighted to the manager for their review.

To ensure that children are cared for safely, full information is required from social workers placing children to allow the fostering service itself to 'match' children successfully and inform carers of children's ongoing care needs. When asked how they would rate the information they received about the child before they were placed, positive responses were received from two thirds of the carers who completed questionnaires, who described this as either 'good' or 'excellent'. Nearly all others were able to describe this as 'adequate.' One carer gave their view that: "every effort is made for information to be given at the time of placement."

Although the overall response from carers was positive with regard to information received, a number of them did describe some difficulties. One carer stated that: "some information is sometimes not immediately forthcoming." Another commented that: "sometimes the information is slow to arrive." Another gave their view that they: "would like to know more. It is important as a foster carer to know as much as the social worker, including the wider family of the child to enable you to support, care and protect the child." Another carer described their experience as follows: "for my current placement, no complaints however on several occasions have been told little or that there was nothing untoward and the placement has been a nightmare." Each of these concerns was fed back to the service for their consideration and review.

Positively, carers provided a good indication of the planning and sharing of information taking place when children are moved to new placements. When asked "How good is the fostering service at supporting you in maintaining placements, so that children only move in a planned way?" nearly all carers described this as 'good.' One carer confirmed positively that: "I have no concerns about the support I receive." Another highlighted how they had received: "regular visits by family placement worker and phone calls to see that everything is alright."

Carers responded very positively when asked "How good is the service at ensuring that you can meet the needs of the children and young people placed with you?" with nearly all of those responding describing this support as either 'good' or 'excellent.' One carer described the support received as follows: "regular discussions and advice is given. Both our SW (Social Worker) and child's SW go out of their way to solve any problems." Another highlighted that: "if I need something they will try and get help for me." Another described the service as being "always positive and encouraging."

Examination of care files and direct discussions with carers themselves provided some good examples of good quality information being provided leading to appropriate matches of children to carers. However one example of limited information being provided to a carer by the child's placing social worker during an emergency placement was acknowledged by the service. This situation had subsequently led to police involvement following a serious incident involving the child placed and a formal complaint being made both by the carer themselves and their supervising social worker.

Positively, evidence of the quality of care provided through the good matching of children with carers was also received through children's questionnaire responses. When asked the question: "Do you feel well cared for where you live now?" nearly all the children were able to respond 'always', with no 'negative' responses received. Very positive descriptions were received from children explaining why they felt this was true. One stated: "I am always happy as since I've lived at (this) home things keep getting better and better." Another said: "I am looked after and cared for."

In their questionnaire responses social workers placing children with the service were generally positive regarding the choices of placement made available by the fostering service and the work undertaken to ensure stability. Some however, felt that some limitations did exist with regard to placement choice, one gave their view that this was "very difficult as there is a shortage of placements, however no child is left in placement who is un-happy." This, and other similar views were fed back to the manager for their information and review.

Positively, the number of emergency placements of children with carers made by the service represented approximately a quarter of all children placed in the previous 12 months. Again, some evidence of the quality of matching of children with carers was indicated by the relatively low number of un-planned endings of placements for the service in the 12 months prior to this inspection.

To ensure that children and young children are protected from abuse and neglect, it is necessary to provide carers with training in both recognising and responding to any such events as they occur. The previous inspection had highlighted the necessity for foster carers to be provided with training in child protection. Positively, examination of the carer training programme for the service and discussion with carers themselves confirmed that required training in the protection and safe care of children and young people is regularly provided by the service.

'Safe Care' agreements were in place within those carer files examined, however one example of an agreement which was not dated and which lacked sufficient detail was highlighted to the manager for their review.

As a result of changes to the senior management arrangements for the service, occurring since the previous inspection, the service manager is now taking direct responsibility for the system in place to collect and monitor any allegations of abuse received. The recording system for allegations and other significant events were examined and these along with direct discussion with the manager confirmed that further improvements in reporting and recording procedures are necessary to ensure effective monitoring.

Positively, from the questionnaire responses received and those children interviewed, no concerns regarding bullying were received. In addition most children and young people were also able to confirm that they had someone to speak to if they were un-happy. Some exceptions to this were evident and these were fed back to the manager for their review and action.

The fostering service is staffed by experienced and well-qualified social workers. Those interviewed were positive regarding (access to ongoing training), and the direct support and supervision provided to them by their managers. An examination of a selection of staff files held within the personnel department highlighted that not all of the information required by Schedule 1 of the Fostering Services Regulations 2002 was available. One example of a 'missing' application form was noted, as was an application form that did not contain full details of the previous employment history of the applicant, with years rather than months of employment recorded. One file examined did not contain a photograph of the staff member. Certificates confirming professional qualifications obtained by staff were also absent, although files did contain some evidence that original certificates had been checked at interview. These issues were highlighted to the service manager for their review and action.

Examination of foster carers' files had provided good evidence of the quality of initial carer assessments undertaken by the fostering service and presented to the fostering panel. Files examined also provided evidence of the scrutiny of these initial assessments by the fostering panel during their meetings. The panel chair highlighted proposed changes being introduced to encourage initial applicants to attend the panel, giving panel members the opportunity to meet and question applicants directly.

During the meeting of the fostering panel attended by the inspector, panel members appeared comfortable in their roles. Discussion was generally thorough, with members able to raise and challenge any issues regarding the ongoing suitability of foster carers subject to initial assessment or their annual reviews.

The quality of the reports from the annual reviews of foster carers varied, as did the timescale for their presentation to panel for their consideration. Review officers do not currently attend panel to present or answer the questions of panel members regarding their written reports and in discussion

with the panel chair it was acknowledged that their attendance would be of benefit to panel members when reviewing their reports and considering quality of care provided by foster carers to children placed with them.

The panel chair was positive with regard to the provision of additional training opportunities for panel members and highlighted the attendance of panel members at a 'development day' attended jointly by staff members from the family placement team. A new panel chair had recently been appointed and was in attendance as a visitor at the panel attended. In discussion, the new chair highlighted their awareness of and intention to participate in the regional independent panel chair forum.

Enjoying and Achieving

The intended outcomes for these Standards are:

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

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

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

7,13 and 31

Quality in this outcome area is good. This judgment has been made from evidence gathered both during and before the visit to this service. Northumberland Fostering through its foster carers works to provide placements, which value diversity and promote equality. Children placed with the services carers are provided with good support, which actively promotes their educational achievement. Where short-term breaks are provided arrangements ensure that the parents of children are recognised as remaining the main carers for the child.

EVIDENCE:

The service works to provide carers that value issues of equality and diversity in the provision of care to children placed with them. Positively, when carers were asked: "How well does the fostering service address issues of equality and diversity such as culture, ethnicity and disability?" nearly all carers who responded described this as 'good.' One carer stated positively, "These issues have always been addressed through courses and in the training we have had." Most social workers placing children with the service who responded were also positive regarding this aspect of the service, although some did raise concerns regarding access to respite care for younger children with disabilities, these concerns were fed back to the manager of the service for their review.

Although the service does have a small number of carers of non-white British and other backgrounds, the number is low. At the time of the inspection nearly all children placed through the service were of white British background. Positively, the manager was able to confirm that the service is continuing to

develop good links with the 'Sahara Project', which works to recruit black and minority ethnic carers.

With regard to access to activities in the community, three quarters of carer's described the support received from the service as either good, excellent or at least adequate. When asked to 'describe how well the fostering service helps you in supporting the children you care for undertake activities in the community,' one carer highlighted that: "The service encourages this and (the child) takes part in lots of activities e.g. Tuesday Club, canoeing, riding etc." A number of carers highlighted the provision of 'Max Cards' by the service as being of positive benefit in accessing community activities. One carer described how the service "provide cards to visit places." and "give out info regarding the local activities." However some carers highlighted limitations with these, for example one carer stated: "we are given max cards for free entrance into certain places, but these really need to include, swimming bath's, skating rinks, cinema tickets."

With regards to how the fostering service and carers promote educational attainment, children and young people were asked directly about the level of support they received. Very positively most of those who responded stated that they 'always' get the help and support they need, with other responses received indicating that they 'usually' or 'sometimes' receive this support. One young person stated that: "my carer helps me with things that I am not sure of." Another described how: "I get help with my homework everyday." A third confirmed how they: "get help with homework from (foster) family." During a home visit one young person was happy to highlight how the fostering service had provided her with a 'laptop' computer to help her with her school exams. Positively, discussion with senior managers for the service confirmed the ongoing work to promote the 'corporate parent' responsibilities of the local authority. Positive practical examples of this were highlighted and included initiatives such as sending letters of congratulation to children and young people for their academic achievement and presenting them with award certificates to celebrate their good attendance at school. Senior managers also described how the authority recognise and celebrate the overall non-academic achievements of young people through their "Rewarding Success" events. They also confirmed that they would continue to look at additional ways of recognising and celebrating the overall non-academic achievements of young people living in foster care in Northumberland.

Carers were also positive about the support and advice received with regards to the education of children placed with them. All of those responding described this as 'good', 'excellent' or at least 'adequate'. One carer described the support as 'good': "particularly now that children are being provided with computer and printer in their GCSE years." Another carer highlighted that: "if I need them to come to school meetings they always try to come with me." A third stated simply "we have always had excellent support." Whilst another

carer described how: "the service supports and encourages carers to be involved in educational matters."

Care files examined during the inspection along with discussion with carers, children and their placing social workers also provided positive evidence of good educational support being provided to children. Almost all of the placing social workers that responded by questionnaire were able to describe the educational support provided to fostered children as 'good', 'excellent', or at least 'adequate'.

The previous inspection had recommended that the service consider putting systems in place to monitor and collate information about the attendance and educational achievement of children in foster care. Systems have been put in place by the service to achieve this and very positively, statistics provided by the service confirmed that of those children leaving the care of the fostering service over the last 12 months 72% have been awarded at least one GCSE or GNVQ, with 4% (1child) having achieved 5 GCSEs.

Included in the overall questionnaire responses received during the inspection were a number of comments from children, carers and placing social workers regarding 'short break care' provided to children and their families. Examples of these were fed back to the manager of the service, particularly the comments of one young person regarding contact issues with their social worker and the quality of information they had received from the service. In addition, one placing social worker raised their concerns regarding the number of respite placements for children with disabilities currently available through the fostering service. The policies and procedures put in place by the service regarding the arrangements for 'short break care' do positively recognise and support parents in their role as main carers to their children.

Making a Positive Contribution

The intended outcomes for these Standards are:

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

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

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

10 and 11

Quality in this outcome area is good. This judgment has been made from evidence gathered both during and before the visit to this service. Northumberland Fostering actively promotes and supports contact between children and their families and friends where this is appropriate. Arrangements are in place to seek children's views about their lives and the care they receive.

EVIDENCE:

The overall response of carers and placing social workers when asked about the quality of children's networks with family and friends was described as 'good', 'excellent' or at least 'adequate'.

Overall, the files examined contained clear recording and good evidence of the work done by carers to support appropriate contact between children, young people and their families. Interviews with carers and children during home visits also provided positive examples of contact being supported and promoted. One placing social worker commented that: "with (the child's) family much effort and support is invested in maintaining contact." Another commented that: "(the) child has regular contact with his family and has made friends in the community." One carer highlighted how they; "encourage and enable (the child) to maintain contact with family and friends." Another carer highlighted how "both children I have fostered have had regular contact times (with family) and mixed well with friends."

Through their questionnaire responses and through direct discussion with inspectors, nearly all of the young people responding were able to confirm that they did know who to speak to if they were unhappy or had a personal

problem. Only one exception to this was received, unfortunately the questionnaire did not contain sufficient detail to allow the young person themselves to be identified. Negatively, one third of young people responding were unclear when asked 'Do you know how to make a complaint?' Their details were provided to the manager for clarification with the young people themselves.

The overall response from children and young people when asked: "Does your (own) social worker listen to you and take notice of your opinions?" was generally positive with over three quarters describing this as being 'always', 'usually' or 'sometimes' true. Three young people raised their concerns regarding the quality of consultation with their own placing social worker; the issues raised were fed back to the service manager for their review.

With regard to overall consultation, young people gave a number of very positive examples. With regard to carers asking their opinions young people responded very positively, with nearly all stating that this 'always' happens. One young person said of their carers that: "they sit down and listen to what I have to say." Another stated that: "we sit and talk about things then try to sort it out".

When carers and placing social workers were asked: 'How would you rate the fostering service at involving the children and young people that you care for in decisions about their day to day lives?' almost all of those responding described this as 'good', 'excellent' or at least 'adequate'. Carers were also generally positive about how the service involves children in how it (the service) is run.

Positively, the manager of the service highlighted how they had contracted N.Y.A.S. (the National Youth Advocacy Service) to advocate for looked after children on any issues of concern they would wish to raise.

Achieving Economic Wellbeing

The intended outcomes for these Standards are:

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

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

29.

Quality in this outcome area is good. This judgment has been made from evidence gathered both during and before the visit to this service.

Northumberland Fostering ensures that appropriate and prompt payments are made to carers in accordance with its policies and procedures.

EVIDENCE:

Policies and procedures in respect of fostering allowances and payments to carers are in place. This information is made available to carers and staff through the foster carers' handbook. Carers raised no concerns regarding their receipt of the necessary fostering allowances and the prompt payment of them by the service.

Management

The intended outcomes for these Standards are:

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

The Commission considers Standards 17, 21, 24 and 32 the key standards to be inspected at least once during a 12 month period.

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

16.17.19.21.22.23.24.32.

Quality in this outcome area is adequate. This judgment has been made from evidence gathered both during and before the visit to this service. Northumberland Fostering is an effectively managed service. Its team of social work practitioners provide good quality supervision and support to its carers. Management systems and records in use at the service are generally robust, however some recommendations are made regarding administrative records,

staffing, aspects of support and supervision to children and carer's as well as their personal records and documentation.

EVIDENCE:

Discussion with the fostering service administrative team highlighted the extensive responsibilities and key role they hold in the overall administration of the fostering service. Team members were able to highlight areas of responsibility currently held which although essential in ensuring the smooth running and effectiveness of the fostering service overall were felt not to be included in their current job descriptions or reflected in their current level of employment and grading. These issues were fed back and acknowledged by the managers of the service.

The service has appropriate policies and procedures in place for the recruitment and assessment of carers. Files examined provided good evidence of the quality of the assessments undertaken with potential carers. Discussion with a number of carers highlighted some individual concerns regarding the timescales for their initial assessment and approval as foster carers. Some examples of staff sickness and holidays contributing to delays as well as the cancellation of the fostering panel due to insufficient members being available were highlighted by carers and fed back to the manager for their review.

The previous inspection report had highlighted that foster carers should undertake regular training to ensure they have appropriate skills and knowledge to care for foster children. The administrative staff team at the fostering service maintain a detailed record of the attendance of foster carers at recommended and required training events and this was examined during this inspection. Although some concerns regarding the numbers of carers attending required first aid training were highlighted to the manager for their review, the training programme overall was seen to be well organised and to be actively promoted by staff at the service. Staff team members at the fostering service are directly involved in the provision of training and participate in a variety of events alongside carers. Overall, carers spoken to were satisfied with the opportunities provided to them to access training with some highlighting the presence of more experienced carers at initial training as being of particular benefit. Some carers did raise concerns regarding travel to training events due to the geographical size of the authority. The manager highlighted that the potential use of 'distance learning' packages is currently being considered to support carers who experience travel difficulties to access training.

Examination of a selection of carers annual review reports highlighted that although independent reviewing officers are identifying and highlighting gaps in carer training through their reviews these are not always presented as recommendations in the review report themselves. More positively, those

'foster carer' agreements examined highlighted the responsibility of carers to attend necessary training to the benefit of the children they care for.

The numbers of carers participating in National Vocational Qualification Training (NVQ) was acknowledged by the manager to be low. Positively, they were also able to confirm that a number of staff at the fostering service are now qualified and are available to assess carers participating in this training. Consequently the manager was able to report that a new intake of foster carers wishing to participate in NVQ training has now been arranged. The manager also highlighted plans to recruit and train more experienced foster carers as NVQ assessors.

When asked to describe, 'how well the fostering service supports you in caring for the children you look after' carers were positive in their questionnaire responses. Nearly all carers were able to describe the support received as 'good'. Carers provided a number of positive examples of this support. One carer described how: "we were experiencing some problems with our child and our social worker arranged sessions with a consultant psychologist to help us cope with understanding their behaviour". Another stated that "We have no complaints, the family placement worker visits and telephones regularly to check on progress. There are information booklets sent to us with useful information" Other comments received included: "The support is always there, I have never felt unable to make contact." and " if I need equipment I get what I need and if I have any problems (which is very rare) I only have to phone" and "They are only a phone call away if we need any advice." Carers themselves were able to confirm that they benefit from access to regular support group meetings with guest speakers and training events included.

Examination of records of supervision within carer files and discussion with carers during a number of home visits confirmed that they receive regular supervision from their own fostering social workers. Although those supervision agreements examined were detailed not all had been signed by the carers themselves.

Although the overall evidence of support to carers was good, some individual concerns regarding difficulties in telephone contact with the 'Out of Hours' Emergency Duty Team as well as contact with one local area office were raised by carers in group discussion and highlighted to the service manager for their review.

The skills of carers in caring for the children placed with them are subject to annual review and positively, in discussion the manager of the independent review team was able to highlight that 97% of carer reviews had taken place 'as scheduled' in the 12 months prior to this inspection, with the dates of the next annual review also agreed and 'pre-booked' in advance. Through group discussion, carers themselves were also able to confirm that this was now their experience. However, one carer whilst confirming their recent review,

contrasted this with their previous experience of not having received a review for a period of 5 years. From the selection of review reports examined, one example where the report described a series of five visits to the carer by the supervising social worker was not evidenced through the record of contact in the carers file. Additionally, examination of carer files also highlighted delays in the required presentation of annual review reports to the fostering panel for their consideration and confirmation. Each of these issues was fed back to the service manager for their review. Whilst acknowledging that review reports currently contained limited evidence of the views of children regarding the quality of care that they receive from their carers, the manager was able to confirm that work is ongoing to improve procedures and ensure that the views of children and young people are gathered and presented to carer review meetings.

The previous inspection had highlighted concerns regarding the frequency of visits to children in foster care by their own supervising social workers. Although those files examined contained good evidence of visits being completed at the required frequency, group discussion highlighted the concerns of a significant number of carers that visits to children continued to be infrequent. These concerns were fed back to the service manager for their review. Positively, discussion with the manager, carers and examination of carer files provided good evidence that as requested at the previous inspection, all foster carers have now been issued with a foster carer agreement which meets the requirements of Schedule 5 to the fostering regulations.

The previous inspection report had recommended that the service must ensure that the written recording in children's files are clearly written and easy to read. During case tracking a number of children's files were examined and with some of these the quality of the information held within and overall presentation of information was generally good. However, although recording was clear and easy to read, a number of examples of Looked after Children (LAC) documentation containing insufficient detail or requiring update were noted. These were also highlighted to the manager for their review.

Although appropriate policies and procedures are in place to assess, encourage and support the care of children and young people by family members and friends, the previous inspection had highlighted difficulties within the service in meeting the required timescales for these assessments. Consequently, during this inspection relative carers currently involved in the assessment process were visited and a selection of case files for relative/friends carers were examined. In each case, the assessments were seen to be thorough, however, particularly with one example, the timescale of assessment was again noted to be prolonged. Positively, there was good evidence of the close monitoring and ongoing review of the interim care arrangements by social work staff to ensure positive outcomes for the children and their relative carers. Discussion with carers and social workers involved in the assessment process highlighted initial

delays in the notification of the care arrangement to the fostering team for assessment and subsequent delays in the processing of required police checks and associated documentation. Positively, examination of other examples of the assessment of family and friends as carers confirmed that these had been completed thoroughly with better timescales evident for the assessment process overall.

SCORING OF OUTCOMES

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

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

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

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

STAYING SAFE	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
3	3
6	3
8	3
9	2
15	2
30	3

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

MAKING A POSITIVE CONTRIBUTION	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
10	3
11	2

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

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

Are there any outstanding requirements from the last inspection? Yes

STATUTORY REQUIREMENTS

This section sets out the actions, which must be taken so that the registered person/s meets the Care Standards Act 2000, Fostering Services Regulations 2002 and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider(s) must comply with the given timescales.

No.	Standard	Regulation	Requirement	Timescale for action
1.	FS32	38	Ensure compliance with Regulation 38 of the fostering Services Regulations 2002 and in the Fostering Services own procedures in respect of the assessment and approval of relatives and friends as carers. (Previous timescale of 1/8/06 not met).	31/03/07

RECOMMENDATIONS

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

No.	Refer to Standard	Good Practice Recommendations
1.	FS8 FS9	Foster carers must be provided with sufficient information about the children placed with them to ensure that they are appropriately matched with them and are cared for safely.
2.	FS9	All foster carer 'Safe Care' agreements must be completed in sufficient detail.
3.	FS9	To ensure effective monitoring of the service by the manager, the recording and reporting systems for

		allegations and other significant events must be improved.
4.	FS15	Staff files must contain all the information required by Schedule 1 of the Fostering Services Regulations 2002.
5.	FS11	The service must ensure that all children and young people placed through it know how to complain if they are unhappy.
6.	FS21	The service must work to ensure that carers can access 'Out of Hours' emergency support and can contact children's social workers for advice and support where necessary.
7.	FS22	The service must work to improve the current timescales for the presentation of foster carer annual review reports to the fostering panel.
8.	FS22	The service must ensure that the views of children and young people are gathered and presented to carer review meetings.
9.	FS24	To ensure that the care needs of children are met their care files must contain all required information.

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