



*Making Social Care
Better for People*

inspection report

FOSTERING SERVICE

Thurrock Fostering Agency

**Civic Offices
PO Box 140
New Road
Grays Thurrock
Essex
RM17 6TJ**

Lead Inspector
Jacqueline Graves

Key Announced Inspection
20th November, 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

Reader Information	
Document Purpose	Inspection Report
Author	CSCI
Audience	General Public
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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	Thurrock Fostering Agency
Address	Civic Offices PO Box 140 New Road Grays Thurrock Essex RM17 6TJ
Telephone number	01375 652419
Fax number	01375 652762
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Provider Web address	
Name of registered provider(s)/company (if applicable)	Thurrock Council
Name of registered manager (if applicable)	Dianne Keens
Type of registration	Local Auth Fostering Service

SERVICE INFORMATION

Conditions of registration:

Date of last inspection 20th February, 2006

Brief Description of the Service:

The fostering service is funded and managed by Thurrock Council. The service is a significant aspect of the provision offered for looked after children.

The office is based in The Civic Centre in Grays. There is parking nearby and rail and bus links. The office space is shared with adoption and shared care staff.

Administration staff support the fostering team.

SUMMARY

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

This inspection was carried out only nine months after the previous inspection due to the transfer of children's regulatory work to a new body requiring inspections to be completed by January, 2007. A light touch inspection was undertaken.

The inspector visited three foster families and checked files as part of a case tracking exercise. The inspector also observed a fostering panel meeting. Pre-inspection information was provided by the service. Five carer surveys and five children's surveys gave views on how the service is performing.

The inspector would like to thank the manager, staff, carers and young people for their assistance with this inspection.

What the service does well:

In response to the question in surveys, 'Do you feel well cared for where you are living now?' all children responded, 'Always.' One wrote:
'Because we are all treated fairly and we get all the help we need.'

Carers reported training offered by the service to be very good. Some spoke of the challenges presented by NVQ training and how this helped them develop their practice. Ten carers have achieved NVQ level 3, with a further twenty registered to train this year.

Some carers gave positive views about the service:
'Offer me advice, support and provide a wide range of training.'
'Are very professional, dedicated and go that extra mile. They are a pleasure to work with.'
'Make sure the finances are in place. Supply any equipment. My link worker visits when I have a placement.'

Carers described staff as helpful and supportive. All carers had a supervising social worker visiting them regularly.

Young people are given a voice and their views considered regarding all matters affecting their lives.

Activities, provided both after school and during the school holidays, were considered outstanding by carers and children.

What has improved since the last inspection?

Improvements to the way panel functions have been made. People presented to panel are now asked their views on the experience, to develop quality assurance. Also, a person who has experienced foster care has been invited to attend panel.

An annual pantomime was performed with thirty-four looked after children taking part during the inspection. Some of the children involved said how much they had enjoyed this. It was apparent from talking to carers and staff what an impact this had on children's confidence and self-esteem.

After last year's performance it was reported that positive outcomes had included children taking up drama at GCSE, gaining a place on a performing arts course and improving achievements at school. The staff must be commended for their effort to give children new opportunities.

It was reported that seventy-five looked after children had attended a wide range of activities at the Oaktree Resource Centre this year.

Thurrock acknowledges that not all children are ready to leave the supportive environment of a foster home when they reach the age of eighteen. The service is looking into adjusting payments to carers to encourage them to keep children past the age of eighteen as a supported lodgings placement.

The service reports that the system for assessing and checking prospective carers is now smoother and quicker, with the manager signing off all checks prior to an assessment being presented to panel.

A simpler financial system has been implemented which carers understand.

What they could do better:

Some experienced carers of young children or babies felt that newly recruited carers were given priority over them when placements were made, and that favouritism was shown by social workers when placing children.

The manager was aware of this concern and advised that no further carers of babies were to be recruited and that length of time without a placement was now taken into account when considering matching a baby to a carer, to address this.

Some carers said they would like link workers to keep in touch when they do not have a child placed with them. A minority reported not feeling supported by their link worker but felt they received good support and information from senior management, other staff and carers.

Comments on what the service could do better were:

'Less change round of social workers although I appreciate ill health and other factors beyond their control affect this.'

'Link worker to understand/listen and not jump to conclusions.'

Some children reported that their social workers don't always listen to what they are saying. A minority of carers were concerned at the frequent change of children's social worker:

'The only difficulty I encounter is when a social worker is not from England and the language barrier can be difficult for the children. Also, social workers change so often that 'trust' becomes an issue with the looked after children.'

Carers suggested that more activity clubs both during the week and in school holidays, to allow children to build relationships and develop self-esteem would improve the service.

The service wishes to further raise carers' awareness of diversity and of children at risk of sexual exploitation, in the future.

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

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

DETAILS OF INSPECTOR FINDINGS

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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

Carers promote the health of children.
Quality in this outcome area is good.

EVIDENCE:

Records showed that children had received statutory medicals and other regular health services. The manager advised that she tracks all initial health appointments before the first review.

Carers reported receiving guidance on healthy eating and the use of supplements. Young people spoken to say they get plenty to eat and are encouraged to eat healthily, with sweets seen as a treat. A few reported that they could always have something to eat but had to ask rather than help themselves, with meal times being quite rigid and no snack or drink on return from school.

Some young people said they were glad to be provided with foods compatible with their cultural and religious background. They also took part in many sporting activities and exercise, which helped them to mix with other people as well as keep fit.

The service has a nurse for looked after children who liaises with health visitors carrying out health assessments on children under five. A designated doctor, who is a consultant paediatrician, is available.

Records showed that referrals for therapeutic services had been made and children's names added to a waiting list for such. Therapeutic services are run from the Oaktree Resource Centre; a multi agency referral service is also provided here.

Young people also have access to a nurse who advises on sexual health and relationships.

Staying Safe

The intended outcomes for these Standards are:

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

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

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

3, 6, 8, 9, 15, & 30

The panel is organised efficiently to reach good quality decisions about carers. Quality in this outcome area is good.

EVIDENCE:

The panel observed had representatives from health and education. The manager advised that a care leaver has been invited to join the panel.

The panel fulfilled its quality assurance function by questioning gaps and errors in an assessment and examining some delicate evidence presented for review. All panel members took part giving the benefit of their different experiences and expertise. There was a cohesive approach to decision making with the deputy and chair providing leadership.

The panel now has responsibility for approving supported lodgings placements. The inspector was informed that to ensure a thorough assessment and to maintain quality, panel requested that all applications be submitted as Form 'F' assessments, with full checks and compulsory attendance for prospective carers on 'Skills To Foster' training.

The service advised that since the last inspection, new staff have attended child protection training. Child protection matters have been notified to the Commission.

Three staff recruitment files were seen. Recruitment checklists are now used to monitor that all checks have been carried out and evidence on files was generally thorough, with CRB checks recorded. The service has systems to highlight when further checks are due.

On one file, there was only one reference and some time was not accounted for in a work history. The Head of Service advised that a second reference was available but this was not seen by the inspector on the day. After the inspection, the service advised that the perceived gaps in employment had in fact been accounted for.

The service advises that there is a new system in place to make direct checks of references, but as no new staff have been appointed since the last inspection, this was not yet evidenced.

Those carers visited felt the children placed with them had been well matched to their families. A carer wrote:

'There is always information available and help. A child is almost always placed where all their needs are met.'

The service reports recruiting eighteen new carers this year, including three specifically for shared carers, so reducing independent fostering agency (IFA) placements. The majority of children in IFA placements are children to whom a long-term commitment has been made. There is a recruitment programme so that further carers can be provided to suit children's needs.

Enjoying and Achieving

The intended outcomes for these Standards are:

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

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

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

7, 13, & 31

Thurrock promotes school attendance and encourages achievement.

Quality in this outcome area is good.

EVIDENCE:

On those files seen, children had personal educational plans (PEPS). The service reports an improvement in the quality of PEP's through auditing and initiating PEP's for all looked after children who are in pre-school.

The service holds events to acknowledge the educational and personal achievements of children. Absences of children who are fostered are monitored to deal with any non-authorised absences.

Carers spoke of attending school open evenings and of encouraging young people to complete homework.

The ability of carers to encourage the wider interests of children, for example, to learn a musical instrument, join libraries or out of school clubs, varied. The service reports needing to get a better understanding 'of how to capture the individual aspirations of children.'

One family visited had been provided with extra tuition and aids to assist the education of children learning English as a second language, to help them make the most of their educational opportunities. The children reported a good match to their carers in terms of culture and religion.

Forty placements are made in shared care. It was reported that good links are maintained with the Team for Disabled Children. A group offering support and training is available to shared carers.

Making a Positive Contribution

The intended outcomes for these Standards are:

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

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

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

10 & 11

Children's views are considered and promoted.

Quality in this outcome area is good.

EVIDENCE:

Contact arrangements with family members were clearly recorded and reviewed, where possible, taking into account children's views and any impact contact had on their well being. Carers described supporting contact in various ways and of going to considerable lengths to ensure contact with families was maintained.

A carer reported an excellent example of supporting the long-term interests of a child. The carer had worked with both a child and their parent and contributed to an assessment report, resulting in the family being reunited.

A care leaver has been invited to represent the views of young people, at training and recruitment events.

Young people confirmed that their opinions were considered at reviews and records corroborated this, although some decisions made had not been in accordance with a child's wishes but taken to support their long-term best interests, for example in moving a school placement. The service reported 91% participation of looked after children in reviews, which is considerable.

The views of young people speaking English as a second language had been gauged through the use of interpreters.

In surveys, children said they knew how to make a complaint and this information was available to them in the Children's Guide.

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):

14

The service provides support for young people to become independent.
Quality in this outcome area is good.

EVIDENCE:

Carers described the ways in which they encourage children to develop skills to help them become independent. Some young people were observed to clean and tidy their rooms, assist with laundry and organise their time and money.

The service has recruited further carers for its supported lodgings scheme and continues to target recruitment at carers for this service.

It is commendable that the service is exploring how support might be provided to those young people who are not ready to leave foster care when they reach the age of eighteen.

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):

17, 21, 24 & 32

The service has a clear strategy for recruiting, working with and supporting carers.

Quality in this outcome area is good.

EVIDENCE:

Those children's records seen showed a good chronology of their lives and contained the necessary information. Thurrock reports that information in files is regularly shared with children.

The manager reports that staffing levels have remained stable over the past year. People outside the immediate team conduct some assessments of prospective carers.

Sufficient staff have been recruited so that each carer has a supervising social worker, one of whom links specifically to kinship carers. The service reports that twenty-seven children are living in kinship placements and that the placement of children within extended family and with relatives remains a priority.

Agreements signed by carers and the service were on file and set out the expectations of the service. Carers reported getting regular supervision and records showed that some visits made by supervising social workers were carried out unannounced. They had been supplied with handbooks giving guidance and information.

In surveys, carers said that support and advice were always available. Out of hours management support is provided and the emergency duty team can contact senior managers if required.

The recruitment strategy aims to present Thurrock Fostering as a recognized 'brand.' As well as recruiting generally, recruitment is targeted where there is need, specifically for carers from ethnic minorities, for carers for young people with challenging behaviour, for supported lodgings and for disabled children.

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	3
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	3

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

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

No

Are there any outstanding requirements from the last inspection?

STATUTORY REQUIREMENTS

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

No.	Standard	Regulation	Requirement	Timescale for action
1.	FS15	20 Sch. 1	Gain two written references on people working for the service.	31/01/07

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.	FS7	Help all carers to consider the wider interests of children, for example, joining a library, learning to play an instrument, developing hobbies or interests and so on.
2.	FS12	Ensure all carers are child focussed in their provision of food and drink.
3.	FS31	Further carers need to be recruited to meet the needs of children and families.

Commission for Social Care Inspection

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