



Champions for
Social Care
Improvement

inspection report

Fostering Services

Swindon Borough Council Fostering Service

Swindon Borough Council
Euclid St
Swindon
Wiltshire
SN1 2JH

2nd 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

Swindon Borough Council Fostering Service

Address

Swindon Borough Council, Euclid St, Swindon, Wiltshire,
SN1 2JH

Local Authority Manager

Terry Scragg

Tel No:

01793 463000

Address

Swindon Borough Council, Euclid St, Swindon, Wiltshire,
SN1 2JH

Fax No:

Email Address

Gsenior@swindon.gov.uk

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

11/09/03

Date of Inspection Visit		2 nd February 2004	ID Code
Time of Inspection Visit		10:19 am	
Name of Inspector	1	Rosie Hodgson	097235
Name of Inspector	2	Martin Davis	
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		Terry Scragg	

Introduction to Report and Inspection

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Description of Fostering Service

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Implementation of Statutory Requirements from last Inspection

Statutory Requirements from this Inspection

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Part B: Inspection Methods & Findings

(National Minimum Standards For Fostering Services)

- 1. Statement of purpose**
- 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**
- 7. Fitness of premises**
- 8. Financial requirements**
- 9. Fostering panels**
- 10. Short-term breaks**
- 11. Family and friend carers**

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Part D: Provider's Response

D.1. Provider's comments

D.2. Action Plan

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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 Swindon Borough 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.

Swindon Borough Council's fostering service is managed as part of children and family services. The service manager is the nominated manager for the family placement team. He also manages the 16+ and Family Resource teams. It should be noted that at the time of the last inspection the Borough were under special measures following the joint review of Social Services by the Audit Commission and the Social Services Inspectorate. As a result of this review the whole service was in a process of changing, with special measures in force. At that time, the family placement team manager was off-line operationally during the course of the inspection and an assistant team manager, family placement, was temporarily filling the manager's position. At the time of this current inspection, the family placement team manager was back on line and supervising two new assistant team managers with 11 family placement officers (4 full-time and 7 part-time) with 2 full time social services officers (unqualified) covering the range of services, including one worker who deals primarily with the short break placements for children with disabilities. The team has one administration officer and three administrative assistants.

There is strong emphasis within this team on keeping children in their families and community. Consequently there is a particularly large group numbering 25 kinship or specific-approval carers and these along with numerous private fostering arrangements enable children to, wherever possible, stay within their family of origin. Currently there are 33 children looked after by these carers. Historically the family placement team has been subdivided into specialist areas. The team now see themselves as more generic and work across the age range in fostering as well as undertaking the assessment and training of prospective adopters and Section 51 counselling. Caseloads reflect individual skills and experience. Whilst the inspectors applaud the work done to keep children and young people living in their community, the inspectors were concerned by a number of examples where a young person was placed inappropriately and in the inspectors' view causing risk to the young person and other children in placement in order to achieve this.

The fostering service has a new duty system staffed by social work assistants and overseen by the duty family placement officer and manager for the day. This duty system deals with requests from social workers seeking to place a child in a foster placement. If no placement is available or suitable from within the fostering team's own resources, the fostering service also has the responsibility of seeking out of Borough placements, which may be with other local authorities or with independent fostering agencies. The use of independent fostering agencies is at a low level. The fostering service workers if required also undertake the task of identifying non-fostering residential placements. This can involve considerable time in contacting numerous providers. The team also provide, on a rota basis, an out of hour's telephone support service to foster carers, in addition to the Borough's emergency duty service.

The fostering service currently has 81 'active' foster carers providing placements to 135 children. There are 20 carers who provide short break placements for children with disabilities. 37 children and families are currently in receipt of these services. Placements made with carers approved by Swindon Borough are supervised and supported by social workers from the fostering team. Swindon Foster Care Association run a support and advice group for carers. Training programmes are held on a rolling programme. The fostering service is able to refer to a play therapist who has time allocated for direct work with children in foster care or for use in a consultation role with carers. There are links with the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services. A support group for looked after children, is managed

by Swindon's Education and Community Department. This also provides a forum for meeting with agency staff and decision makers. A specialist education advisor for looked after children has now been in post for over a year, with the task to improve the educational experiences of looked after children. A health liaison worker for looked after children is also in post.

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.)

Introduction: This inspection took place at a time when the Borough was under particular scrutiny with special measures in operation in 2003 following a joint review of social services by the Audit Commission and the Social Services Inspectorate (SSI). Preparation was underway for an SSI inspection of children's services in March 2004. The first NCSC inspection of Adoption Services was also due and this fostering inspection was planned to coincide with the inspection of the adoption service. The NCSC lead inspectors for both the fostering and adoption inspections directly liaised with the lead SSI inspector prior to the inspection and following the fieldwork. These arrangements were made in order to co-ordinate planning of inspection activity as far as possible to reduce the impact of the potential overload on staff and carers.

The inspectors met with four sets of foster carers. Two other individual carers were interviewed. Inspectors spoke individually with two fostered children and attended the support group for fostered children. They met with the workers who undertook fostering assessments and also spoke to duty workers. The inspectors spoke with two parents of children fostered. Placing social workers were also contacted. Questionnaire responses were received from 20 foster carers, from 17 children and from 100 placing social workers. An analysis of these questionnaires is attached to the report.

The inspectors found that a proper management structure had been put in place since the last inspection, with responsibilities outlined, up to date job descriptions in place and lines of accountability clarified. The new assistant manager posts are welcomed in the team. Whilst the inspectors also welcomed these developments, it remains the inspectors' view that the management of the family placement team is not rigorously organised and managed in a manner that delivers the best possible childcare.

Comprehensive policy and procedure documentation is not readily available in an accessible format for staff. This made inspection difficult. Neither is there an up to date foster care handbook. Consequently it is the inspectors' view that staff and carers can be left to interpret their own way of carrying out the service. As a consequence of the above, inspectors found during this inspection that practice varied widely. There was some excellent as well as poor practice observed. This is not acceptable in relation to meeting minimum standards. An urgent review of policy documents and procedures is overdue.

Statement of Purpose (Standard 1)

This standard was not met

- The fostering service's policies, procedures and guidance to staff do not accurately reflect the Statement of Purpose. Inspectors found these documents either lacking, hard to access or very out of date. The Children's Guide has not been widely distributed.

Fitness to provide or manage a fostering service (Standards 2-3)

Two standards not met

- The day-to-day manager has no qualification in management. In the inspectors' opinion, the management of the family placement team is not rigorously organised, and managed in a manner that delivers the best possible childcare service. Requirements and a good practice recommendation are made here.

Management of the fostering service (Standards 4-5)

One standard met, one standard almost met

- Job descriptions for managers have been put in place since last year as well as clarification of roles and responsibilities. Further clarification in relation to monitoring is necessary.

Securing and promoting welfare (Standards 6-14)

Two standards are met, three almost met and four not met

- Dedicated workers in relation to the Health and Education of looked after children have brought visible improvements in the last year.
- Health and Safety checks on the homes of foster carers are being implemented. However, there were over half of all foster homes without an up to date check in place.
- In relation to matching, the service has put in place better systems to help decision-making. Developments in the duty system, matching documentation as well as the new SWIFT computer system have all served to improve the quality of information on which matching decisions can be made. Inspectors found that in emergency and short-term placements, matching was not always considered. The inspectors found instances where high risk assessed placements were sanctioned by managers. In the inspectors' opinion decision making about high-risk placements, including exemptions should to be more rigorously managed. The inspectors found that longer term placements of children were appropriately matched with carers capable of meeting the child's assessed needs. Requirements regarding matching have been made at the last two inspections.
- Safer care policies are being drafted for each foster home. These are overdue and should in the inspectors' opinion be implemented swiftly.
- Four children replying to questionnaires reported experiencing restraint in their foster home. Last year no children reported this. Policies in relation to restraint need updating and a monitoring system is needed.
- High value is placed on maintaining contact for looked after children wherever possible.
- The role of the Independent Reviewing Officers was seen to be an important part of the process in ensuring that children's views are heard. The fostered children FOCUS support group continues to be a voice for looked after children in Swindon.
- Compilation of complaints is haphazard and it is difficult to see resolution or outcomes.
- Young people aged 16 years and over speak very positively about the support they get from workers in the 16+ team.

Recruiting, checking, managing, supporting and training staff and foster carers

(Standards 15-23)

Two standards are met, two almost met and five not met

- There are continuing shortfalls in the vetting procedures for staff despite new systems and policies.
- Assessments, reviews and approvals of carers are not managed and implemented effectively. In this highly experienced staff group, inspectors found examples of individual practice that was both of a high standard and a poor standard. A clear expectation with regard to the assessment process for new applicants is needed.
- New auditing systems are in place for both foster carers and children's files.
- Sickness in the Home & Away staff team has left carers unsupported and unsupervised.
- A new foster carer recruitment strategy is in place to target gaps in the service for teenagers and ethnic minority children.
- Levels of supervision and appraisal for staff have improved since last year. Annual reviews for foster carers are still not rigorously undertaken, with some serious gaps.
- Foster carer agreements have been updated since last year to include matters in Schedule 5. These have now been implemented.
- The foster carer handbook has not been updated and remains seriously out of date.

Records (Standards 24-25)

Two standards were almost met

- There is no specific policy in place covering case recording in the family placement team. Consequently there is wide variety in practice. New systems for monitoring files are in place from 1st February 2004.
- There is no evidence of foster carers or fostered children accessing their files.

Fitness of premises for use as fostering service (Standard 26)

One standard is almost met

- The office premises used by the fostering service are identifiable, and accessible to visitors. However, the family placement team is located on the first floor and has use of a large meeting room, sometimes used for training carers. The Borough has identified that the team's premises has no wheelchair access.

Financial requirements (Standards 27-29)

Two standards are not applicable and one is met

- Foster carers and senior staff spoke to inspectors about the second phase of the fostering payments scheme. Foster carers have submitted their proposals to management for this new payments scheme. Senior staff confirmed to the inspectors that monies are now available to implement this second phase. In the inspectors' opinion if the service is to improve carer retention any enhanced scheme of payments to carers is in need of swift resolution.

Fostering panels (Standard 30)

One standard is not met

- Developments since last year were evidenced. The new chair no longer has any line management responsibility for assessors.
- Policy and procedure documents are being drawn up.
- Quality assurance is being developed. The agency decision maker is taking an active role in overseeing assessments and panel business.
- The panel do not currently receive management information about the outcome of foster carers' annual reviews. A requirement is made in this respect.

Short-term breaks (Standard 31)**One standard is met**

- Parents spoken to as part of the inspection expressed how much they valued the services they could access through this scheme.
- One Home & Away carer was visited during this inspection and in the inspector's opinion was providing care to a very high standard.

Family and friends as carers (Standard 32)**One standard is met**

- The fostering service places a high value on the contribution that family and friends can make by being approved as foster carers. This is reflected by the number of 'Specific-Approval' foster carers, numbering 20 with 24 children in placement at the time of inspection. Systems in place encourage the consideration of family and friends as carers.

Following this second inspection of the fostering services by the National Care Standards Commission in February 2004, the Commission for Social Care Inspection will be issuing a notice under Section 81(4) of the Health and Social Care (Community Health and Standards) Act 2003 to the council to improve its fostering service in order to bring it up to the standards within a specified timeframe.

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	38 (1) (b)	FS8	To ensure that when undertaking emergency placements the local authority must be satisfied as to the provisions of Regulation 33 (a) and Regulation 34 (1) (b) in ensuring the terms and approval are consistent with the proposed placement.	01/02/04
2	20	FS3	To hold information as required in Schedule 1 and Schedule 2 in respect of staff.	01:09:03
3	21(4)(a)	FS20	To ensure that all persons employed receive appropriate training.	Immediate & Ongoing
4	29	FS6	To ensure that a review of the approval of each foster parent takes place not more than a year after approval and then at intervals of not more than a year.	Immediate & Ongoing

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

COMPLIANCE WITH CONDITIONS OF REGISTRATION (IF APPLICABLE)

(Registered Independent Fostering Agencies only)

Providers and managers of registered independent fostering agencies must comply with statutory conditions of their registration. The conditions applying to this registration are listed below, with the inspector's assessment of compliance from the evidence at the time of this inspection.

Condition	Compliance	
NA		
Comments		

Condition	Compliance	
Comments		

Condition	Compliance	
Comments		

Condition	Compliance	
Comments		

Lead Inspector Rosie Hodgson **Signature** _____
Second Inspector Martin Davis **Signature** _____
Locality Manager Malcolm Sykes **Signature** _____
Date _____

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	3 (4)	FS1	To ensure that a copy of the Children's Guide is provided to each child placed by the fostering service.	02/05/04
2	3 (5)	FS1	To ensure that the fostering service is at all times conducted in a manner, which is consistent with its statement of purpose.	02/05/04
3	8 (1)	FS2	To ensure that the fostering services manager shall carry on the fostering service with sufficient care, competence and skill.	02/05/04
4	8 (3)	FS2	To ensure that the fostering service manger shall undertake such training as is appropriate to ensure that he has the skills necessary for managing the fostering service.	02/05/04
5	27 (2) (d)	FS6	To ensure that if the fostering service provider considers that a person may be suitable to act as a foster parent, it shall consider whether his household is suitable for any child in respect of whom approval may be given.	02/05/04
6	21 (4) (a)	FS19	To ensure that all persons employed receive appropriate training.	02/05/04

7	38(1)(b)	FS8	To ensure that when undertaking emergency placements the local authority must be satisfied as to the provisions of Regulation 33(a) and Regulation 34(1)(b) in ensuring the terms and approval are consistent with the proposed placement.	02/02/04
8	13 (1)	FS9	The fostering service provider shall prepare and implement a written policy on acceptable measures of control, restraint and discipline of children placed with foster carers,	02/05/04
9	22 (1) (3)	FS12	The fostering service provider shall maintain a record of all accidents occurring to children whilst placed with foster parents.	02/05/04
10	20 (1) (a) & (3)	FS15 & FS2	The fostering service provider shall not employ a person to work for the purposes of the fostering service unless that person is fit to work for the purposes of a fostering service. The requirements of Schedule 1 must be met in every case.	02/05/04
11	28 (2)	FS16	The fostering service provider shall not approve a person as a foster parent unless- (a) it has completed its assessment of his suitability; and (b) its fostering panel has considered the application.	02/02/04
12	29 (2)	FS21	The fostering service provider shall review the approval of each foster parent at intervals of not more than a year.	02/02/04
13	17 (1)	FS22	The fostering service provider shall provide foster parents with such support as appears necessary in the interests of children placed with them.	02/02/04
14	17 (2)	FS22	The fostering service provider shall take all reasonable steps to ensure that foster parents are familiar with, and act in accordance with the policies established in accordance with regulation 13 (1).	02/05/04

15	26 (2) (a) & (b)	FS30	<p>The foster panel shall</p> <p>(a) advise on the procedures under which reviews in accordance with regulation 29 are carried out by the fostering service provider and periodically monitor their effectiveness.</p> <p>(b) Oversee the conduct of assessments carried out by the fostering service provider.</p>	02/05/04
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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	FS2	To ensure that the manager exercises effective leadership of the staff and operation, such that the fostering service is organised, managed and staffed in a manner that delivers the best possible childcare.
2	FS4	To ensure that there are clear procedures for monitoring and controlling the activities of the fostering service and ensuring quality performance.
3	FS4	To ensure that persons who work for the fostering service are not also approved as foster parents by that service.
4	FS6	To ensure the foster home can comfortably accommodate all who live there. It is inspected annually to make sure that it meets the needs of foster children.
5	FS6	To ensure that the home and immediate environment is free of avoidable hazards that might expose a child to risk of injury or harm.
6	FS7	To ensure that each child with a disability receives support to help her/him to maximise her/his potential, including appropriate adaptation of the carer's home.
7	FS8	To ensure that each child or young person placed in foster care is carefully matched with a carer capable of meeting her/his assessed needs.
8	FS8	To ensure that written foster placement agreements contain specific reference to elements of matching which were taken into consideration in agreeing the placement and identify areas where foster carers need additional support to compensate for any gaps in the match between the child and carer.

9	FS9	To ensure that safer caring guidelines are provided, based on a written policy, for each foster home. These guidelines are cleared with the child's social worker and are explained clearly to the child.
10	FS9	To ensure that each foster carer is provided with full information about the foster child to enable the carer to protect the foster child, their own children, and other children for whom they have responsibility and themselves.
11	FS11	To ensure that children in foster care know how to raise any concerns or complaints, and ensure that they receive prompt feedback on any concerns or complaints raised.
12	FS12	To ensure that carers are provided with a written health record for each child placed in their care; this should be updated during the placement and move with the child.
13	FS13	To ensure that foster carers contribute to the assessment of the child's educational needs and progress for the planning and review process.
14	FS17	To ensure that there is a clearly set out assessment process for carers which defines those matters under Standard 17.6.
15	FS18	To ensure that there are management systems in place for carer supervision, appraisal and support.
16	FS20	To ensure that all staff have clear written details of the policies and procedures of the organisation.
17	FS21	To ensure that there is a clear strategy for working with carers that is documented and understood. This should include those matters under Standard 21.2
18	FS22	To ensure that on approval, carers are given a handbook which covers policies, procedures, guidance, legal information and insurance details. This is updated regularly.
19	FS22	To ensure that supervising social workers meet regularly with foster carers. Meetings have a clear purpose and provide the opportunity to supervise the foster carers' work. Foster carers' files include records of supervisory meetings. There are occasional unannounced visits, at least one each year.
20	FS22	To ensure that complaints are recorded and monitored and the outcome evaluated to inform future provision of services.
21	FS24	To ensure that there is a written policy on case recording which establishes the purpose, format and contents of files, and clarifies what information is kept on the foster carer's files and what information is kept on the child's files.

22	FS25	To ensure that records are in a form, which can be readily passed on if a child moves to another placement, or ceases to be looked after.
23	FS25	To ensure that children and foster carers are encouraged to access their records, make additions and comments and record personal statements, including any dissent.
24	FS30	To ensure that the foster panel has clear written policies and procedures, which are implemented in practice, about the handling of their functions.
25	FS30	To ensure that foster panel provides a quality assurance function in relation to the assessment process – in particular to monitor and review the work of the assessors; to provide feedback; to identify problems; and to ensure that there is consistency of approach in assessment across the service.
26	FS30	To ensure that the panel monitors the range and type of carers available to the authority in comparison with the needs of children.
27	FS30	To ensure that one of the independent members is a person who has at any time been placed with foster carers or whose child has at any time been placed with foster carers.

* 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
Survey of placing authorities	YES
Foster carer survey	YES
Foster children survey	YES
Checks with other organisations and Individuals	YES
• Directors of Social services	NO
• Child protection officer	YES
• Specialist advisor (s)	NO
• Local Foster Care Association	YES
Tracking Individual welfare arrangements	YES
• Interview with children	YES
• Interview with foster carers	YES
• Interview with agency staff	YES
• Contact with parents	YES
• Contact with supervising social workers	YES
• 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	02/02/04
Time of Inspection	9:00
Duration Of Inspection (hrs)	60.0

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?
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The inspectors read the new Statement of Purpose, which was approved by the elected members in December 2003. This document was found to include the details required under Standard 1.4. In questionnaires completed as part of this inspection, 88 out of 100 placing officers who replied to the question 'Has the fostering service provided you with a copy of its Statement of Purpose?' said 'Yes.'

The Children's Guide continues in a flexible format for children of different abilities. In questionnaires completed by children as part of this inspection, 10 out of 15 children who replied to the question 'Have you been given a Children's Guide about your fostering service?' said 'No.' In the inspectors opinion this raises questions about the distribution of this guide.

The fostering service's policies, procedures and written guidance to staff and carers do not accurately reflect the Statement of Purpose. The inspectors found these documents either hard to access, not in place or very out of date. The inspectors found that there were gaps and inconsistencies in service delivery that in the inspector's opinion reflected this lack of policies and procedural guidance for both staff and carers.

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?	1
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The nominated manager for the family placement team has the required expertise and both training and the management skills required under Standard 2.2. This person is not however, the day-to-day manager 'carrying on' the service. The team manager, who has many years experience of working with children as well as years of managerial experience, but no qualification for working at a managerial level, fills that position.

In the inspectors' opinion, the management of the family placement team is not rigorously organised, and managed in a manner that delivers the best possible childcare service. Requirements and a good practice recommendation are made here.

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?	1
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Evidence was provided that the senior managers responsible for the fostering service had satisfactory CRB checks.

As stated in Standard 15 there was insufficient evidence on personnel files to meet current requirements. Inspectors were told that new procedures were in place for new appointees to ensure telephone enquiries are made to verify references, and to ensure adequate documentation of evidence of suitability.

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 inspectors found that there are now job descriptions and roles outlined for managers and staff in the family placement team, as well as established lines of communication and of accountability between managers, staff and carers. The new Assistant Team Manager positions should in the inspectors' opinion afford some flexibility to the Manager and enable time to be devoted to monitoring and auditing of the service to ensure quality performance. There were areas in which effective management monitoring was not evidenced. Details about complaints were incompletely recorded and no clear system was in place. Outcomes were not documented in all cases. It is this area of management that in the inspectors' opinion is lacking. Inspectors considered that the roles and lines of accountability could be further clarified to ensure that proper monitoring and auditing of systems throughout the family placement team takes place.

There are financial procedures in place and a reviewing procedure to keep them up to date. Information is provided to purchasers and others where appropriate, including statements of the amounts paid to foster carers.

Carers, managers and staff are informed of their responsibility to declare any possible conflicts of interest. The inspector acknowledges the work done to move staff who are also foster carers either off the register or to other authorities. One staff member still needs to resolve her position.

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

X

Death of a child placed with foster parents.

0

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.

0

Outbreak of serious infectious disease at a foster home.

0

Actual or suspected involvement of a child in prostitution.

2

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

0

Serious complaint about a foster parent.

4

Initiation of child protection enquiry involving a child.

1

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

0

Number of the above complaints which were substantiated:

0

Standard 5 (5.1 - 5.4)

The fostering service is managed effectively and efficiently.

Key Findings and Evidence

Standard met?

3

The manager has a clear job description, which the inspectors read. This sets out both duties and responsibilities.

Generally the levels of delegation and responsibility of the manager, and lines of accountability are well defined. *(Detail regarding monitoring is picked up under Standard 4)*

There are clear arrangements in place to identify the person in charge when the manager is absent.

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?
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The inspectors read fostering assessment documents and saw that the assessment and training process specifically addresses the ability of carers to provide a safe, healthy environment. Foster carers spoken to as part of this inspection demonstrated a warm and nurturing approach to their care of children. The inspectors were impressed by the quality of care these carers were giving children placed with them. The inspectors heard that this care and nurturing is often given well beyond the child's time in foster care, with carers providing an essential support into adulthood. Foster carers spoke to inspectors about the lack of acknowledgement about this extended support they provide.

The inspectors visited foster homes as part of the inspection and found that they were warm, adequately furnished and maintained to a good standard. Not all fostered children have their own room and in one home the inspectors found that children's bedrooms changed depending on the combinations of children in placement.

The inspectors read computer records, which indicated that over half the Health and Safety checklists due for completion were not yet completed. The inspectors heard from senior staff that there is a backlog of checks and that the duty officers have taken on this mop up operation to help complete the task. The inspectors heard that duty workers and some of the family placement staff had not received specific Health and Safety training to help them in this role. *(This links to Standard 19 and a requirement is made).*

The inspectors saw risk assessment documents completed at the point of referral, which showed that in some instances there is a detailed assessment made of the appropriateness and safety of a new placement. These are completed where sharing of rooms is a consideration and children pose a risk. Documents seen during inspection showed in one instance that the assessed risk was 'high.' This was where a young woman was using drugs and possibly also selling drugs, was sexually active and thought to be involved in prostitution, she was also known to be a regular absconder. The girl she was to share a room with was assessed as 'young and vulnerable.' This placement went ahead with the comment from the manager 'Please ensure that young people in placement have been consulted before going ahead.' In the inspectors view this is poor practice and does not meet regulations or minimum standards of care. *(This links to Standards 8&9).*

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 inspectors read placement request documents which show that details about religion, ethnic origin, culture and any other specific issues are addressed prior to placement. There are only a small number of carers on the register from ethnically diverse backgrounds. The inspectors saw that as a result, children needing placement can be placed outside their culture. In these instances foster carers and family placement officers were aware of resources, information and support available for young people from different cultures to help them with their identity and to be able to deal with discrimination.

Foster carer training and written information given to carers includes emphasis on valuing diversity and dealing with discrimination. Helping children deal with discrimination is a theme in training and is discussed in ongoing supervisory sessions with carers.

Inspectors read about and met with the carer for one young man who had come to the country as an asylum seeker. This young man was offered a placement, which was culturally sensitive to his background. He chose to be placed with white British carers. Inspectors heard that the Borough is working to develop services for asylum seeking children and families. There is now a dedicated worker in this area.

For children with a disability, the inspectors read about and heard from parents and carers that there is access to specific services. Parents spoken to as part of the inspection expressed how much they valued the services they could access. These parents indicated that they would like to have a more flexible service with more respite opportunities for them and their family.

The inspectors heard that the 'Home and Away' carers tracked as part of this inspection had made an application to the Borough to help with financing an extension to the home and that this was turned down. These carers were providing respite breaks to four different children and had recently taken on two young boys on a short-term basis. The extension was eventually financed without help from the service. These carers were in the inspector's opinion providing a very valuable service. Under this Standard, carers should receive support, including where necessary and appropriate, adaptation of the carer's home, to help children in their care maximise their potential.

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?

1

The inspectors were able to witness and heard about developments in the duty system, referral and matching process, which indicated development and improvement in systems since the last inspection. Inspectors also heard about and observed the use of the new SWIFT computer system that affords the family placement team access to LAC documentation and other records at the point of placement. In the inspectors' view, these developments are all very positive. However, evidence presented under Standard 6 is also relevant here. The example given provides evidence that the service is not meeting this Standard. Final decision-making in this instance was not in the inspectors' opinion in these children's best interests.

In questionnaires completed as part of this inspection, 13 out of 19 foster carers who replied to the question 'Have you been asked to take a child in an emergency?' replied 'Yes.' 16 out of 19 foster carers who replied to the question 'Are you adequately informed about the backgrounds of children you take?' replied 'Yes.'

The inspectors looked in detail at current exemptions agreed for four carers. In these documents, there is limited evidence of consultation with placing social workers. The manager highlights in these documents the need to review exemption arrangements, but inspectors were not satisfied that reviews of these arrangement were happening. The inspectors noted a previous exemption in January 2003 that took a carer to six children. More recently, the highest number of children placed under exemption arrangements was five. The manager reported that he would provide details of families willing to consider exemptions to the emergency duty service. In the inspectors' opinion this is inherently risky practice, as the emergency duty service often have little background information and are often pressured for time. In the inspectors opinion workers at the emergency duty service will not be able to consult social workers for children already in placement and consequently will be unable to appropriately risk assess.

The inspectors read about and saw examples of children looking for longer-term placements through the 'home finder' system. In the inspectors' opinion this system does provide appropriate matches. In these instances a family placement officer oversees this search, working alongside the social worker for the child. Inspectors saw that currently there are seven children waiting in the system for long term fostering placements.

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?

1

The inspectors read the new draft safer caring policy and practice guidance, which includes the standard format for a safer care agreement. This document highlights the need to risk assess the decision to allow any looked after child to share a bedroom. It is the family placement officer's responsibility to do this and to record the outcome of the assessment. In the inspectors' view these documents provide a good basis for establishing safer care practice. These documents must now be implemented throughout the service. The inspector read in the policy that 'All new foster carers are required to complete a safer care agreement following their approval as foster carers.' In the inspectors' opinion this paragraph should be amended to include 'all foster carers' so that that the policy and agreement are retrospectively implemented for foster carers already in the system, not just for new foster carers.

Every placing officer replied 'Yes' to the question 'Is the child considered by you to be safe in this placement?' 16 out of 19 foster carers who replied to questionnaires reported that they were adequately informed about the backgrounds of children placed with them. 14 out of 18 foster carers reported that the fostering service staff are good at letting them know about things concerning their foster child. In the inspectors opinion these statistics indicated that there is room for improvement regarding information sharing to improve safer care.

The inspectors read about one child protection enquiry regarding a foster carer in the last year. The Child Protection Team confirmed this. This team also confirmed that protocols were followed in relation to this allegation. The manager in this team further confirmed that 'It is my experience that Child Protection procedures are understood and followed in relation to allegations against foster carers.'

In questionnaires completed as part of this inspection four children reported that they have been 'held to stop them hurting themselves or someone else, or doing a lot of damage.' It was difficult to evidence any documented reporting or incidents of restraint to children in foster care during this inspection. The lack of an up to date policy document also hampered the inspection. A requirement is made here. As part of this policy, it would be good practice in the inspectors' view for the manager to include systems of reporting and monitoring the use of any measures of control, restraint or discipline in respect of children accommodated. In the inspectors' opinion, foster carers may need the definition of a 'significant event' clarified in the safer care policy and agreement. In questionnaires completed as part of this inspection, 19 out of 21 foster carers who replied said 'Yes' to the question 'Has the fostering service made clear what punishments are acceptable?' 95 out of 99 placing officers asked 'Has the foster carers use of measures of control been made clear to you?' replied 'Yes.' Asked 'Do you find their control practice acceptable?' 94 out of 97 placing officers replied 'Yes.'

Foster carers confirmed that there is a clear procedure for use if the foster child is missing from home. In the inspectors' opinion, it would be good practice for the manager to put in place systems of reporting and monitoring all incidents of foster children missing from home.

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?****3**

In questionnaires completed as part of this inspection 74 out of 87 placing social workers replied 'Very well or Fairly well' to the question 'How closely do you consider the foster carer works with the child's family?'

Inspectors found evidence of foster carers promoting and supporting contact for children in their care. Inspectors also found evidence through their discussions with foster carers of help and support to carers in dealing with any difficult contact issues.

The inspectors read that training for foster carers emphasises that each child or young person in foster care is encouraged to maintain and develop family contacts and friendships. The fostering service places a high value on making local placements wherever possible to enable appropriate contact arrangements to be established and maintained. Contact arrangements are clearly articulated in the foster placement agreements observed on files.

An Independent Visitor Scheme, which includes both independent visitors and mentors, is available for children and young people who have little or no family contact. The inspectors observed that this service was heavily used.

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**

In questionnaires completed as part of this inspection 9 out of 15 children who replied reported that they had been told how to make a complaint. Only 4 out of 15 children reported that they knew how to get in touch with inspectors at the NCSC. In the inspectors' opinion the above figures reflect the statistic quoted in Standard 1 that only 5 out of 15 children reported that they had been given a Children's Guide.

Asked 'Do your foster carers ask you for your opinions and ideas?' 13 out of 16 children who replied reported that they were often or sometimes asked their opinions by their foster carers. 11 out of 14 children who replied reported that they had been asked by the fostering service for their opinions about their carers. 9 out of 15 children reported that they had not been asked about how the fostering service could be made better. The inspectors attended the FOCUS group as part of this inspection and found that this was a small but committed group of young people who were able to input ideas and opinions to senior staff.

The inspectors heard from foster carers that the new Independent Reviewing Officers were in a position to ascertain children's views. These carers confirmed that the IROs frequently make time alone with the child before the review. They felt this was a very positive development and the inspector would support this as good practice.

18 out of 21 foster carers who replied to questionnaires reported that they had been given information about how to make a complaint on behalf of a child in their care. 6 out of 20 foster carers who replied reported that they had made a complaint on behalf of a child.

The inspectors heard from foster carers that there are instances when complaints are not resolved satisfactorily and should in their opinion be taken outside the service. The role of outside organisations concerned with children's rights for example Voice of the Child in Care was discussed with carers who expressed these concerns.

90 out of 97 placing officers reported that they had been given information on the fostering service's complaints procedure. 5 placing officers reported that they had complained about the service. This number concurs with the complaints file

The inspectors read the complaints file and saw that it included formal complaints as well as concerns. In the inspectors' opinion, the concern level of the complaints procedure follows a clearly documented structure with outcomes and feedback on any concerns raised. The more serious complaints system is poorly documented to the extent that it was difficult for inspectors to be clear about the nature of the complaint, who was making the complaint and how it was dealt with and resolved.

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?**

1

The inspectors interviewed the LAC Co-ordinator for health. This worker has made great strides in the past year to improve the health provision for fostered children. There is a general Health Policy in place for accommodated children as well as a new Sexual Health Policy, which is in draft form. The inspector heard that requests for medicals have gone up to 100% and that 80% of these have now been completed. The remaining 20% are where the child has refused a medical. The inspector heard about ways in which medicals were being made more acceptable for children and young people and about important work done with young people 16+ years as part of the pathway planning in relation to health. The inspector heard that this worker is now giving input on health issues as part of the Choosing Course for new applicants. She is also addressing training issues on health for family placement officers; foster carers, social workers, the IROs and panel members.

Written health records were not in evidence on children's files. The inspector heard about work to address the confidentiality issues that such a record might throw up. Whilst the inspector understands the importance of these issues, it remains that fostered children do move placements and their carers should be given accessible information about health in order to care for them safely.

Foster carers reported that it is difficult to access the services of the local Child and Adolescent Mental Health team. Although some family placement officers refuted this, it was a strong theme picked up during the inspection. This was further confirmed by the LAC Co-ordinator for health, who indicated that although there is in theory a fast track system in place for fostered children a gap remains between the mental health needs of looked after children and provision. The inspector also interviewed the Play Therapist who has dedicated time to work with both children and carers in relation to mental health issues. In the inspectors' opinion this was a valuable but scarce resource. The inspector heard about possible developments in this area, including a suggestion that there is a Primary Mental Health worker based in Social Services. Inspectors were not shown systems or documents in place to record accidents to fostered children. A requirement is made here.

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**

The inspectors interviewed the LAC Advisor for Education and were impressed by the progress made here in the last year. This worker has made contact with all the local schools via the LAC nominated teacher. He has a list of these contacts and makes them available to the social workers and family placement officers. Emphasis is given to the importance of clear and early communication between key professionals including the social worker, foster carer and LAC nominated teachers. The department's education policy has been updated and re-written.

The inspectors did not see evidence under Standard 13.3 in foster carer files. It is suggested that a format for foster carer recording is developed which covers the general LAC headings. These can be weekly or monthly summaries which are then pulled together for LAC reviews.

The new policy emphasises the key role that the foster carer has to play in children's education. The LAC Co-ordinator for education attends the initial preparation course and has developed written guidance and a computer programmes for carers to use to enhance their ability to liaise with key individuals and promote educational achievement. This Co-ordinator and his team are 'on-call' to carers providing support regarding specific problems. His team talk to carer's about their role at parent's evenings and set out their responsibilities and what they can expect from teachers and schools.

The Borough has initiated a program to provide all carers with a computer. Approximately 75% now have computers. The LAC Co-ordinator also vets applications for laptops, and is working to provide Internet access to carers and children. This team have a supply of 'Story Sacks' that they loan to carers; these include books and interactive materials to encourage learning.

A number of monitoring systems are in place. These record the number of fixed term exclusions (28 children lost 228 days last year), number of permanent exclusions (none last year), the number of Personal Education Plans in place (of 152 Looked After Children, 28 don't have plans in place). Outcomes are also monitored against the Personal Education Plans via termly updates from the schools. The LAC Co-ordinator distributes this information to social work teams and the family placement team, and will become involved if a child is not reaching their targets, or if a pattern of non-school attendance emerges or when a child faces exclusion. Support packages are developed to reintroduce children to school, this can include home tutoring and working alongside a child at school. Direct work with teachers is also undertaken, helping to put 'problem' behaviours in to context for example.

Specific examples were given of the support offered to young people who have encountered bullying. There is also a newly designed leaflet developed for young people in relation to bullying.

Whilst the inspectors applaud the work done by this dedicated worker to improve the educational achievement of fostered children, it remains that during this inspection foster carers reported to the inspector that there are still long waits of up to three months in one instance when children are excluded from school and that this is often the last straw for difficult placements. Foster carers spoken to as part of this inspection expressed the view

that day care was not an answer to school exclusion and that proper educational provision should be put in place quickly. These carers reported that specialist centres for school-excluded children were often full with waiting lists and they as carers are left to struggle on.

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?

3

There is a comprehensive leaving care policy for children and young people fostered in Swindon. Training materials for carers include information about the preparation of young people for independent living.

The inspector heard directly from young people how much they valued the input they got from the 16+ team workers.

Files seen as part of the inspection had pathway plans in place. Young people spoken to confirmed that they were actively involved in decision-making processes and implementation of the pathway plan.

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?

1

Inspection of family placement team personnel files had been undertaken during the fostering inspection of March 2003 and in a follow up visit in September 2003. Shortfalls had been identified and a requirement had been made in relation to holding the relevant information on all staff. Files examined in the course of this inspection indicated that there were continuing omissions. The inspectors saw that photocopies of certificates providing evidence of qualification are not on file but managers sign a box to say that they have seen these. The inspectors found that no ID photographs are kept on file, but that a digital photo is kept on a central database. Inspectors found that there were limited examples where confirmation of applicants' ID was on file. Telephone follow-ups of references have not happened historically, but a new policy has now been written and is due to be implemented.

A system had been put in place to renew Criminal Records Bureau checks every three years. It was noted that an administrative worker started work prior to the arrival of the CRB disclosure. Inspectors were told that the Borough is no longer starting new employees until after the CRB check has arrived. There was however some confusion about this in the personnel department and inspectors advised that this is made clear.

Where unqualified staff carry out social work functions, for example within the duty system, they do so under the direct supervision of qualified social workers and managers.

Total number of staff of the agency:

21

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

2

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?

1

As stated in Standard 4 there have been significant changes in management, which have had a positive impact on the fostering service. The assistant Team Manager had 'acted up' for some months to manage the family placement team. By the time of the inspection the Team Manager and two Assistant Team Managers were managing the team. The Assistant Team Managers directly supervised the staff, oversaw and signed the Form F assessments and participated in meetings. One, whilst still holding some cases, was particularly involved in development work in relation to policies and procedures, working closely with the Service Manager.

By tracking individual carers as part of this inspection, the inspectors found evidence, which indicated that the structures and systems in place to ensure that assessments, approvals and reviews of carers are managed and implemented effectively are poor. The inspectors found two examples out of the four families tracked where there had been no approval in place prior to placement. For one carer this meant that no approval was currently in place since she returned to fostering in 1998 having remarried. The assessment of these carers as a couple had not been completed or taken to panel. This file contained no Health and Safety check and the last review took place in 1998. There is no record of training and diary recording is poor. Another carer who moved from another fostering provider took placements before they were approved. No checks were made as to why they left their previous employment. Whilst the inspectors acknowledge that the above examples might be exceptional, they remain examples of a system that is not efficiently or effectively managed.

The inspectors were given an example of an audit form that is to be used with foster carers' files from 1st February 2004. It states that the manager or assistant team manager completes the audit on three files each month and an agreed process followed to include input from the Quality Assurance Team and a quarterly report sent back. In the inspectors opinion this system will assist with rectifying this long-standing problem. The above examples highlight this gap.

The inspectors found no evidence of training portfolios either in carer's files or reported to be kept in the carers' home.

The inspectors found some improvements in the understanding of the different roles of the children's social workers and fostering social workers. However, there were also examples where roles were less clear and relationships strained. This was particularly so when there was no allocated social worker for the child.

Administrative procedures are in place for dealing promptly with enquiries from prospective carers and any new request for services.

Staff have copies of those matters under Standard 16.16. These are now available on the intranet.

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?

1

In questionnaires completed as part of this inspection, 15 out of 20 foster carers who replied said 'No' to the question 'Do you think there are enough staff in the fostering service.' The inspectors were informed that a member of staff who specialised in 'Home & Away' work had been off on long term sick and had now submitted her notice. It was clear in records seen by the inspectors that this staff members' work had not been covered other than in emergencies by the duty system.

In the absence of a clearly set out assessment process, the inspectors experienced difficulty obtaining clear evidence for this Standard. In practice the inspectors heard that individual family placement officers were interpreting their own model of assessment. The need for a clearly set out assessment process for all staff to follow is in the inspectors' opinion overdue. The inspectors are aware that this is a very established team of staff with years of experience in assessing applicants to foster. This is a great strength in the team. However, in the inspectors' opinion there is a need to update assessment practice in the light of new ways of working and suggestions were made to senior staff about this at feedback.

The inspector was informed that a recruitment strategy for carers was being implemented aimed at recruiting carers for teenagers and ethnic minority children. The inspector saw that advertising was being targeted for black and ethnic minority carers. Also the manager of the service was meeting with black and ethnic minority groups locally as a way of forging links and targeting recruitment. The inspector heard that there was a new Asylum Seekers Development Worker in post who has written to the community as a way of making links. The inspectors heard from a number of carers that they had considered extending their fostering to a wider category of approval, for example 'Home and Away' carers who wanted also to foster short term. These carers were reticent to put themselves forward, feeling constrained by their original approval. Feedback was given to managers about this as a possible way of increasing the pool of carers in Swindon.

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?****2**

Staff who met with the inspectors conveyed a strong sense of loyalty to their employer. They were aware that the Borough has been subject to some criticism. They informed inspectors that they had been provided with full information about the terms of their employment, that training opportunities had much improved. Inspectors saw evidence of good employment practices in the information provided by Human Resources.

Inspectors saw a whistleblowing policy and staff confirmed they had knowledge of it. Carers interviewed indicated that they would not hesitate to report any suspected abuse.

Two out of hours support services are available for foster carers. One is an emergency duty service run by a team of social workers outside office hours. The other is a family placement run out of hour's service, staffed on a voluntary rota basis by members of the team. Carers interviewed said they received good support from out of hour's services. They reported that they were more likely to use the family placement service. Levels of carer supervision, review and support are not consistent. Inspectors found evidence on file of carers receiving regular supervision whereas others had erratic records of both supervision and reviews. A health and safety policy is in place for staff and carers. Swindon foster carers are automatically members of Fostering Network who provide an insurance policy to cover costs arising as a result of child abuse claims against 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?****3**

A detailed staff training plan was seen. This was co-ordinated by the training department and included detail on induction. The fostering team staff reported that on going in-service and post-qualifying training was available. Social workers in the family placement team were appropriately qualified. One was working towards the Post Qualifying award. In the agency there were four social workers, two assistant team managers and one independent review officer with the award and two more social workers to complete by 2006. Carers are also included on training opportunities and a number report that they have been on a range of courses.

It is recommended that staff involved in assessment and the duty system have specific health and safety training in order to complete the health and safety checks on foster carers. It is also recommended that those family placement staff involved in assessing applicants for fostering have updated training on fostering assessments. The need for management and supervision training for the Assistant Team Managers was also highlighted.

Standard 20 (20.1 - 20.5)		
All staff are properly accountable and supported.		
Key Findings and Evidence	Standard met?	2
<p>The inspectors were able to read the new job descriptions in place for managers. This is a development since last year. Staff now have clear written details of the duties and responsibilities expected of them. Policy and procedure documents specifically for the family placement team are not in place in any coherent or accessible format. A good practice recommendation is made here.</p> <p>The inspectors saw in supervision records that regular and planned supervision of staff is taking place. Inspectors found that appraisals are also now taking place for staff. This is an improvement on the last inspection.</p> <p>Team meeting minutes were read and the inspectors saw that these meetings are both regular and frequent. Inspectors also saw evidence of team development days.</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?	1
<p>The Statement of Purpose does not clearly stipulate a strategy for working with and supporting carers. In particular there is no expected level of visiting required by the family placement officer. This strategy should also distinguish between supervision and support for foster carers so that roles and expectations are clear.</p> <p>The role of the Swindon Foster Care Association is outlined in the Statement of Purpose. This group was visited during the inspection and found to be an articulate and energetic resource, providing support to carers in a variety of ways.</p> <p>In questionnaires completed as part of this inspection, 11 out of 20 carers reported that they felt 'very well' or 'quite well' supported by the fostering service.</p> <p>The inspectors found that annual review reports were not in place on all files sampled. For some carers they had many gaps and for one carer there was no annual review in place since 1998. The inspectors were shown a system on the new SWIFT computer network to enable a regular bring forward of annual reviews so that these should not be missed. The system is clearly not working for all carers.</p>		

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?**

1

Updated foster care agreements were seen on files inspected and found to include matters and obligations specified in Schedule 5 (Regulation 28). Each approved foster carer is expected to be supervised and supported by a named, appropriately qualified social worker. The inspectors heard that currently the team is one staff member short and that her cases are being covered on duty, with no regular visiting.

Each foster carer is given a handbook on approval, which contains standards, policies and guidance agreed by the fostering service. Inspectors found that this handbook is still in need of updating. At the last inspection the inspectors were informed that this handbook was being worked on, but the old handbook remains in place.

Foster carers' files inspected include records of support and supervisory meetings. For some foster carers these meetings are not regular. In the inspectors' opinion these meetings should have a clearer purpose and a better system of recording. Unannounced visits are not recorded on the files sampled. Some, but not all, foster carers report that unannounced visits take place.

Foster carers report that there are systems of practical support that cover the details under Standard 22.7. Foster carers indicate that they are aware about procedures for dealing with complaints. Information about procedures for dealing with allegations is given to carers in the handbook. The inspectors heard that there is access through the Foster Care Association to independent support to foster carers during an investigation. The Borough at the point of approval provides membership of the Fostering Network, as an independent source of support and legal advice to carers.

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?**

3

The inspectors read and heard about current training for foster carers. Foster carers report that they can access good on-going training once they have completed their 'Choosing' training.

For carers the annual review is used to identify training and development needs. Inspectors witnessed the development of a new carers' annual review system that specified target areas for development with each carer. Inspectors felt that it would be important to get service user feedback to inform this process through the use of end of placement reports and disruption meetings.

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 inspectors were not shown a specific policy on case recording for foster carers and the family placement team. There is however a detailed recording policy for the Borough. The inspector heard from family placement officers that in practice they followed their own recording systems. This meant that a wide variety of systems were in place and no clear expected standard. The inspectors noted that in the recently designed Safer Care Agreement, the foster carers are required to keep a diary of significant events and to provide a monthly report on the child's progress in placement. In the inspectors opinion carers should be provided with the document format to do this recording.

It was noted that few of the foster carer files contained sufficient comprehensive recording about the process of assessment and the consideration of issues during that process. More consistent recording of this is recommended. The practice of contacting previous partners had not been consistently implemented.

The record keeping system was congruent with the LAC/Integrated Children's System. Decisions by supervisors were evidenced on case files in supervision notes. The handwritten case recordings were variable in legibility. Inspectors were informed that the council proposes that most recordings were to be electronic and this system had already been introduced in the fieldwork childcare teams. This new SWIFT computer system has in the inspectors' opinion improved the quality of recording. The current use of diary recording by foster carers does not in the inspectors' opinion ensure that an up-to-date, comprehensive case record can be maintained for children in foster care. It is recommended that this system be reviewed.

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

The inspectors did not find evidence to reassure them that the records under Schedule 7 were being kept and monitored by the fostering service manager. Whilst this Schedule only applies to fostering agencies, in the inspector's opinion it is good practice for these matters to be documented and monitored by the fostering service manager. There was a departmental complaints procedure, which produced quarterly reports. A separate file was maintained in the family placement team about complaints, concerns and allegations. This file related to both fostering and adoption. Information was not systematically filed, nor outcomes clearly recorded. 'Concerns' planning meetings were recorded which was good practice. Inspectors recommend that a more satisfactory, less confusing system be devised to enable more adequate management monitoring. Records about complaints seen on the relevant foster carers' files were also incomplete, sometimes with no record of outcome. Reports were seen which were not signed or dated.

The inspectors saw that new systems are in place to monitor the quality and adequacy of records so that remedial action can be taken when necessary.

The inspectors could not find evidence in the files sampled of either children or foster carers having access to their records. The inspectors questioned how children and foster carers could input into their SWIFT records.

Number of current foster placements supported by the agency:	158
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Number of placements made by the agency in the last 12 months:	230
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Number of placements made by the agency which ended in the past 12 months:	X
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Number of new foster carers approved during the last 12 months:	15
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Number of foster carers who left the agency during the last 12 months:	28
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Current weekly payments to foster parents: Minimum £	105	Maximum £	191
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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?

2

The premises used by the family placement team are on the civic centre campus, conveniently near the offices of the fieldwork social workers, and the annexe in which relevant senior manager had offices. The office premises used by the fostering service are identifiable, and accessible to visitors. However, the family placement team is located on the first floor and has use of a large meeting room, sometimes used for training carers. The Borough has identified that the team's premises has no wheelchair access. There is a security system and access is restricted through a coded entry system. Inspectors noted there was no signing in system and this would be an additional safeguard. Inspectors were able to see other buildings that are used for training, supervised contact and work with children. These were found to be adequate and fit for their purpose.

Family placement staff confirmed that since the last inspection, they are now on the intranet and that this has helped communication both with the fieldwork teams and within the family placement team.

The Borough had recently introduced SWIFT electronic recording systems and these were password protected. Inspectors were informed this system was robustly backed up. The paper records maintained in the family placement team were stored securely in metal cabinets. Inspectors were not confident about how fire proof this arrangement was.

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?
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	9
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Standard not applicable.

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?
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	9
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Standard not applicable.

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?

3

The inspectors read and heard from both staff and carers that the first phase of the fostering payment scheme implemented last year is running well, with payments made promptly and at the agreed time.

The inspectors heard about an arrangement to pay for transport expenses, which had resulted in inequalities between carers. This system has now been expended.

Foster carers and senior staff spoke to inspectors about the second phase of the fostering payments scheme. Foster carers have submitted their proposals to management for this new payments scheme. For those carers who have undertaken the NVQ they understand that they will be rewarded with enhanced financial payments for skills. The inspectors heard from carers in this position who are frustrated at the length of time taken to implement this second phase. Senior staff confirmed to the inspectors that monies are now available to implement this second phase. In the inspectors' opinion if the service is to improve carer retention any enhanced scheme of payments to carers is in need of swift resolution.

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?

1

Previous panel minutes were read, the panel chair interviewed and the panel was observed as part of this inspection. The inspector heard that new policies and procedures were being developed for the panel. The inspector read about the recent development morning for the panel, which was seen to address many of the issues under the Standards. Overall the inspector saw that there was a tightening up of procedures. In particular the role of the agency decision maker was seen to have developed, with a clear feedback system in place. The panel was found to be well organised and rigorous as well as 'user friendly' for applicants who attended. The chair of panel is new; this was only her second panel as chair. She is an experienced senior member of staff of the department who has no management responsibility for the family placement officers undertaking foster carer assessments or for social workers. Inspectors found that there was no current CRB check on her file.

There is no person on the panel who has been placed with foster carers or is a parent of a child who has been placed with foster carers (Standard 30.9). Efforts being made to fill this position at the last inspection have not come to fruition. Suggestions were discussed with the chair. The independent members include expertise in both education and child health. An experienced ex-foster carer from another local authority is on the panel.

The organisation and makeup of the panel was seen to be largely consistent with the national minimum standards and with the regulations. It was the inspector's view that panel business was rushed, and it was suggested that the length of panel meetings should be extended. Inspectors heard from the chair about her plans to develop the quality assurance function of the panel, in particular monitoring and reviewing the work of assessors and providing feedback to the fostering manager. Having read the assessments that came to panel and a number of assessments as part of the tracking, the Inspectors formed the view that this quality assurance function should be more rigorous, particularly in relation to the social work analysis of Form F information, and specifically in relation to health and safety issues and safer care. Suggestions were given to the chair at feedback. Under the Standards this monitoring role should cover the range and type of carers available to the authority in comparison with the needs of children.

Inspectors saw evidence that the panel was overseeing annual reviews. It is understood that all first reviews come to panel and after that a selection will be presented. The panel do not currently receive management information about the outcome of foster carers' annual reviews.

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?

3

The inspectors saw that the 'Home & Away' scheme has clearly suffered this year with a member of the team on long term sick. The inspectors chose a carer to track from this scheme who was not on this staff member's caseload. This carer was visited and in the inspector's opinion was providing care to a very high standard. The inspector heard from this carer about case planning for children that was in the inspectors view of a poor standard. Feedback was given about this to senior staff.

Parents spoken to as part of the inspection expressed how much they valued the services they could access. These parents also indicated that they would like to have a more flexible service with more respite opportunities for them and their family. These parents confirmed that they remain central to the promotion of health and education needs for their children. Arrangements recognise that the parents remain the main carer for the child.

The inspector interviewed the family placement officer for the tracked family who confirmed that the process of assessment and approval is the same for 'Home & Away' carers as it is for all carers. In practice the approval of this particular carer was no longer in place. (*This is picked up under Standard 16*). The inspector watched the new 'Home and Away' video that has been recently produced for recruitment purposes. This was of a good standard, but in need of some impetus to distribute it locally. The inspectors also heard about the separate 'Home and Away' training module that is tagged on to the choosing course for carers who want to look after children with a disability.

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?

3

The fostering service places a high value on the contribution that family and friends can make by being approved as foster carers. This is reflected by the number of 'Specific-Approval' foster carers, numbering 20 with 24 children in placement at the time of inspection. Systems in place encourage the consideration of family and friends as carers. Managers confirm that social workers and family placement social workers are encouraged where possible to explore this type of placement. Inspectors heard that since the last inspection this group of carers are now attending the 'Choosing to Foster' training that is run for other carers. Inspectors saw that specific training was also in place for 'Specific Approval' foster.

The family tracked as part of this inspection confirmed that had received general training. They felt closely supported by their family placement officer but not by the social work team. Their fostered child had experienced a lengthy period without a social worker and this had an impact on planning in the case. Inspectors heard from 'Specific Approval' foster carers that they are often struggling with difficult contact issues and in a unique and stressful position between their family and the department. They should in the Inspectors' opinion have clear plans in place and social work input for children in their care as a matter of urgency.

PART C

LAY ASSESSOR'S SUMMARY

(where applicable)

Not 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 week commencing 2 February 2004 and any factual inaccuracies:

Please limit your comments to one side of A4 if possible

The following factual inaccuracies have been identified:

- 1) Description of Services Provided (p 6) The FPT comprises 11 Family Placement Officers (= 8.4 f.t.e posts); 4 full-time and 7 part-time, + 2 f/t social services officers (unqualified.)
- 2) Restraint (p.30) A policy on control, restraint and discipline already exists and was shared with inspectors. It is also referred to in the foster care agreement/safe care policy and guidance.
- 3) Meeting Educational Needs -Standard 13, (p 33) Should presumably read "the inspectors interviewed the LAC *Advisor for Education...*" (not Co-ordinator for Health) in this context.

GENERAL COMMENTS.

1) There are repeated incidents throughout the report where *judgements* appear to have been based on a very small and unrepresentative sample/data base. *Example:* The case quoted in Standard 6 is quoted repeatedly as evidencing a more general failure to meet standards – i.e. as representing the rule rather than the exception.

The same extrapolation is not applied where positive feedback or evidence of good practice has been acknowledged. Whilst the individual examples raised are accepted as valid concerns, we consider that the report overall does not necessarily provide an accurate picture of the Fostering Service in this Authority. It certainly does not reflect what we consider to be the significantly positive feedback received from service users – foster carers, placing officers, and children and young people – as evidenced by the questionnaires analysis.

2) In our view, the conclusions arrived at regarding the Children's Guide may have been based on inadequate exploration of the data supplied. We suspect that a more specific question about whether they had received a compartmented file containing a number of leaflets and booklets could have elicited a much higher proportion of positive replies.

3) The report has acknowledged a number of areas where evidence has been found of developments and progress in meeting both Regulations and Minimum Standards, but where compliance with the standards has been judged to have remained static or even deteriorated from the previous year's Inspection. *Examples: Standards 1; 7; 9; 12; 13; 30.* We would welcome discussion as to the criteria under which some of these assessments have been arrived at.

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

Amendments to the report were necessary	<input type="checkbox"/>
Comments were received from the provider	<input type="checkbox"/>
Provider comments/factual amendments were incorporated into the final inspection report	<input type="checkbox"/>
Provider comments are available on file at the Area Office but some have not been incorporated into the final inspection report. The inspector believes the report to be factually accurate	<input type="checkbox"/>

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 31 March 2004, 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	<input type="checkbox"/>
Action plan was received at the point of publication	<input type="checkbox"/>
Action plan covers all the statutory requirements in a timely fashion	<input type="checkbox"/>
Action plan did not cover all the statutory requirements and required further discussion	<input type="checkbox"/>
Provider has declined to provide an action plan	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other: <enter details here>	<input type="checkbox"/>

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 _____ of _____ 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 _____ of _____ 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:

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.