



Champions for  
Social Care  
Improvement

# inspection report

Fostering Services

## **Local Authority Fostering Service**

Social Care for Children

134B Cowley Road

Oxford

OX4 1JH

23rd – 27th 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**

Oxfordshire County Council  
Social & Health Care

**Address**

134B, Cowley Road  
Oxford  
OX4 1JH

**Local Authority Manager**

Sarah Clayson

**Tel No:**

01865 854432

**Address**

Yarnton House, Rutten Lane, Yarnton, Oxford OX5 1LP.

**Fax No:**

01865 841666

**Email Address**

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**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**

Feb 2003

<b>Date of Inspection Visit</b>		23rd – 27th February 2004	<b>ID Code</b>
<b>Time of Inspection Visit</b>		09:30 am	
<b>Name of Inspector</b>	<b>1</b>	Clare Davies	105285
<b>Name of Inspector</b>	<b>2</b>	Carole Moore	129627
<b>Name of Inspector</b>	<b>3</b>		
<b>Name of Inspector</b>	<b>4</b>		
<b>Name of Lay Assessor (if applicable)</b> 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.			
<b>Name of Specialist (e.g. Interpreter/Signer) (if applicable)</b>			
<b>Name of Establishment Representative at the time of inspection</b>		Sarah Clayson, Service Manager	

**Introduction to Report and Inspection**

**Inspection visits**

**Description of Fostering Service**

**Part A: Summary of Inspection Findings**

**Reports and Notifications to the Local Authority and Secretary of State**

**Implementation of Statutory Requirements from last Inspection**

**Statutory Requirements from this Inspection**

**Good Practice Recommendations from this Inspection**

**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**

**Part C: Lay Assessor's Summary (where applicable)**

**Part D: Provider's Response**

**D.1. Provider's comments**

**D.2. Action Plan**

**D.3. Provider's agreement**

## 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 Local Authority Fostering Service. The inspection findings relate to the National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services published by the Secretary of State under sections 23 and 49 of the Care Standards Act 2000, for independent and local authority fostering services respectively.

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

The report will show the following:

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

This report is a public document.

## INSPECTION VISITS

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

## BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE SERVICES PROVIDED.

The Social and Health Care Directorate operates a family placement service that provides services in relation to both adoption and fostering.

This amalgamated service comprises three geographically based family placement teams, a countywide family placement team for children with disabilities and a countywide placement support service. A unit manager leads each of these teams and their services are further supported by a recruitment officer, fostering and adoption panel and an advisor to the panel.

The disability family placement team is part of the Directorate's disability service for children and young people, and is managed by the Disability Service Manager. That team does however apply the same standards as the wider service and is party to its development work. The Placements Service Manager manages the teams that constitute the family placement service.

Particular features of the geographical areas covered by the mainstream family placement teams do to some extent determine the priorities of each team and give them a different character. The most notable example of this is the concentration of asylum seeking minors in Oxford City. In spite of this the family placement service is a cohesive entity whose staff adhere to common standards and procedures. Senior staff of the service assume responsibility for specialist areas of work across the county.

The following services are provided:

- Recruitment, preparation, assessment, training and support of foster carers
- Placement finding for all children and young people, including those with disabilities
- Relief placements
- Short term placements
- Long term placements
- Emergency placements
- Short breaks for children and young people with disabilities
- Mother and baby placements
- Fostering Plus; a fee paid service for foster carers who accept children and young people with challenging behaviour
- Recruitment of carers for asylum seeking minors

On 31st January 2004 there were 290 children and young people placed in foster care. At the time of the inspection the county had 323 approved foster carers.

## **PART A SUMMARY OF INSPECTION FINDINGS**

### **Inspector's Summary**

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

This inspection took place over a week in February 2004. It is the second inspection conducted by the National Care Standards Commission (NCSC) against the National Minimum Standards.

The inspection found that out of the 30 Standards that were assessed only three were not met. The Local Authority Fostering Service received very favourable comments from its foster carers, particularly in relation to the support they receive from their link workers. The managers have a wealth of experience in the field of family placement and embrace new initiatives with enthusiasm. The Fostering Service is very well supported with teams in education, health and leisure.

The Inspectors would like to thank everyone who completed a questionnaire;  
54 responses received from foster carers  
42 responses received from children and young people  
100 responses received from placing social workers  
Information from the questionnaires has been woven into this report.

### **Standard 1 Statement of Purpose**

The Statement of Purpose is well presented and up to date, though had not been formally approved by elected members at the time of the inspection. The Fostering Service had agreed on suitable formats for children's guides for differing age groups and abilities but they had not been issued to children, young people and foster carers; therefore this standard is not fully met.

### **Standard 2-3 Fitness to provide or manage a fostering service**

The responsible individual and service manager are suitably qualified and manage an effective service. The service manager is very well supported by unit managers located throughout the county.

### **Standard 4-5 Management of the fostering service**

The local authority has sound policies and procedures in place to support the function of the Fostering Service.

### **Standard 6-14 Securing and promoting welfare**

All but one of these standards was met and indeed one was exceeded. Foster carers are provided with good quality information to secure and promote the welfare of the children and young people in their care. There are good training opportunities and written guidance on child protection issues. Consultation with children and young people is excellent with many creative projects targeting different age groups. Support by designated staff in health,



education and the Outreach service are a strength of the Fostering Service. Whilst the consultation is very good the Fostering Service has not provided children and young people with details on how to contact the Commission as detailed in The Fostering Services Regulations 2002.

### **Standard 15-23**

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

Generally there are robust vetting procedures in place for carers and staff. Foster carers report excellent support from their link workers and the Fostering Service provides a thorough training programme.

### **Standard 24-25 Records**

The Fostering Service maintains good records. One standard was not met with the absence of documentation in the recruitment of one carer. The Inspectors recommend that foster carers adopt a more consistent approach in their record keeping; the Fostering Service plans to implement a placement file for each child and young person that will assist in this area.

### **Standard 26 Fitness of premises for use as fostering service**

The offices are located in five areas of the county sited along with other services within the local authority. Each area office is suitable for the effective running of the Fostering Service, but staff would benefit from increased access to IT systems that are currently at a bare minimum.

### **Standard 27-29 Financial requirements**

Standards 27 and 28 were not assessed as they relate to fostering agencies, not local authority services. The remaining standard was fully met with no reported concerns identified about payment to carers.

### **Standard 30 Fostering panels**

The Fostering Service has a new panel chair and panel advisor. Together they have identified how to develop the role of the panel by producing policy guidance and providing training for panel members. A significant number of panel members had not applied for clearance from the Criminal Records Bureau.

### **Standard 31 Short-term breaks**

The Breaktime scheme offers respite care to families of children with disabilities. The inspection did not look in depth at this part of the Fostering Service and this will be focussed upon during the next inspection.

### **Standard 32 Family and friends as carers**

The Fostering Service supports a high number of kinship carers and is developing the service through facilitating support groups and providing information that is tailored to kinship caring as opposed to mainstream fostering.

The Inspectors would like to thank managers, staff, carers and children & young people for their valuable time and willing assistance to the inspection process.

## **Reports and Notifications to the Local Authority and Secretary of State**

### **(Local Authority Fostering Services Only)**

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

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

NO

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

YES

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

NO

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

NO

### **The grounds for the above Report or Notice are:**

Five Requirements have been made as a result of this Inspection. They relate to;

- the absence of a children's guide and no contact details of the Commission provided to children and young people. The local authority had draft versions of a children's guide and reported it would be distributed in the very near future.
- the Statement of Purpose has not been formally approved by elected members.
- the absence of a second reference for a carer and lack of CRB clearance for panel members.

## Implementation of Statutory Requirements from Last Inspection

Requirements from last Inspection visit fully actioned?

NO

**If No please list below**

<b>STATUTORY REQUIREMENTS</b>				
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	3	FS1	That a written guide to the fostering service be produced for the benefit of children and young people.	Dec 2003
2	3	FS1	That a copy of the children's guide be made available to each child or young person placed by it and to every foster carer.	Dec 2003
3	12	FS11	That the complaints procedure for children and young people be revised to include the contact details of National Care Standards Commission and routinely distributed to all children and young people at the start of a placement.	Sept 2003

**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	
Comments		

Condition	Compliance	
Comments		

Condition	Compliance	
Comments		

Condition	Compliance	
Comments		

Lead Inspector Clare Davies Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Second Inspector Carole Moore Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Regulation Manager Sandra Lemon Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date 07.05.2004

## 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(3)(4)	FS1	<p>The Fostering Service must complete the proposed various versions of the children's guide and make available to each child or young person and every foster carer.</p> <p>The Fostering Service must arrange for the Statement of Purpose to be formally approved by elected members.</p>	August 2004
2	12(2)(f)ii	FS11	The Fostering Service must provide children and young people with contact details for the Commission.	August 2004
3	27(2)(b)	FS25	The Fostering Service must ensure that all information listed in Schedule 3 is obtained.	August 2004
4	20(3)	FS30	The Fostering Service must ensure that information is held in relation to panel members as detailed in Schedule 1.	August 2004

### 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	FS4	The Fostering Service should clarify the expectations of foster carers in respect of declarations of conflicts of interest.
2	FS10	The Fostering Service should ensure that carers adopt a consistent approach to records made in relation to any contact with birth families.
3	FS15	The Fostering Service should ensure that there are systems in place to monitor the renewal of disclosures from the Criminal Records Bureau every three years.
4	FS16	<p>The Fostering Service should consider increasing access for staff to IT systems.</p> <p>The Fostering Service should consider if administrative tasks such as completion of CRB applications with foster carers and other adults in the home can be delegated to support staff.</p> <p>The Fostering Service should undertake a reappraisal of the division of tasks between social workers and family placement workers.</p>
5	FS18	The Fostering Service should liaise with the emergency duty team to ensure that they have access to advice in relation to fostering matters.
6	FS23	The Fostering Service should consider arranging for out of county foster carers to access some training from the local authority in which they live.
7	FS24	<p>The Fostering Service should have a system in place to ensure that recommendations from the panel are followed.</p> <p>The Fostering Service should ensure that foster carers receive adequate information regarding the children and young people they care for.</p> <p>The Fostering Service should produce an action plan detailing how placement files will be implemented.</p> <p>The Fostering Service should promote consistency with foster carers record keeping.</p>
8	FS30	The Fostering Service should produce clear guidance for decision making by the panel when members are not in agreement.

\* 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	13
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	NO
Tracking Individual welfare arrangements	YES
• Interview with children	YES
• Interview with foster carers	YES
• Interview with agency staff	YES
• Contact with parents	NO
• 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	23/02/04
Time of Inspection	09.30
Duration Of Inspection (hrs)	107

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 Fostering Service of Oxfordshire County Council, Social & Health Care Directorate provided the Inspectors with a recently published Statement of Purpose. This document is attractively presented using images from the services' recruitment campaign. The information provided meets the requirements of the Regulations as specified in the National Minimum Standards. At the time of the inspection the Statement of Purpose had yet to be formally approved by elected members but this was scheduled to occur.

An A-Z reference guide has been incorporated into the Statement of Purpose and this is an excellent document for carers. For children and young people there has been work undertaken to produce a guide to the Fostering Service in response to a requirement of the last inspection. At the time of this inspection the service was consulting with staff on the use of the BAAF (British Association for Adoption & Fostering) publication 'Fostering; What it is and what it means' for younger children. In addition a guide for older children and young people (10years +), was about to be published having been produced with input from young people in care entitled 'Our Voice'. The Disabilities Team informed the Inspectors that they were developing a children's guide in a format that would be suitable for children with special needs.

The Inspectors support the use of these documents. The guide for young people, 'Our Voice' requires contact details of the National Care Standards Commission; from 1st April 2004 this will become the Commission for Social Care Inspection.

It is important that these documents are distributed to children and young people in the Fostering Service as soon as they are available.

## Fitness to Carry On or Manage a Fostering Service

The intended outcomes for the following set of standards are:

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

### Standard 2 (2.1 - 2.4)

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

#### Key Findings and Evidence

Standard met?

3

The Inspectors assessed that the service is well run by experienced senior staff with a wealth of knowledge in the field of fostering and adoption. The service manager has professional qualifications in Social Work and a Certificate in Management Studies. In addition to the Fostering Service, the service manager has responsibility for several other areas of children's services and the Inspectors noted that this can place high demands upon her role.

The manager is very well supported by the unit managers within the service and they have direct line management responsibility for their team's practice and staff. The unit managers reported that despite the service manager's need to manage many other areas of children's services she supports them well.

### Standard 3 (3.1 - 3.4)

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

#### Key Findings and Evidence

Standard met?

3

The inspection confirmed that the local authority is a suitable organisation to carry on the Fostering Service and that the identified fostering manager meets the requirements under regulation for that role. The local authority has appropriate systems in place to ensure that regular updating with the Criminal Records Bureau occurs.

## 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?**

3

The service manager is able to monitor the countywide service by receiving monthly statistics from each unit manager. Each family placement social worker submits a monthly return detailing the amount and types of assessments they have done, visits to carers as their link worker, training events and any other areas of responsibility. The unit managers collate this information to provide data to the service manager along with details of; staff vacancies, sickness, carers support groups, carers training and any serious incidents. This monitoring is enhanced through formal mechanisms of regular supervision, staff meetings and the fostering panel process.

There are clear and well established lines of communication and of accountability between managers, staff and carers. While existing local authority procedures required staff to declare possible conflicts of interest, the position with carers was less clear and needed confirmation.

Placing officers were surveyed and asked, 'How well do you think foster carers are looking after this child?' and 84% replied 'Very Well' 13% 'Quite well'.

Local authority fostering services are not statutorily required to notify the Commission of any of the circumstances listed below.

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

0

**Death of a child placed with foster parents.**

X

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

X

**Serious illness or accident of a child.**

X

**Outbreak of serious infectious disease at a foster home.**

X

**Actual or suspected involvement of a child in prostitution.**

X

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

X

**Serious complaint about a foster parent.**

X

**Initiation of child protection enquiry involving a child.**

X

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

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 service manager is responsible for several areas of children's services in addition to the Fostering Service placing heavy demands upon her time. This appeared to be manageable at the time of the inspection, though the Inspectors were concerned at the breadth of the service manager's remit that was relying on her committing to many hours over and above a full time equivalent post. There was clarity about the various levels of decision making within the fostering service and, where required, at more senior levels in the local authority. Overall management was effective and efficient and reflected the high levels of skills and experience within the Fostering Service.

Appropriate arrangements were in place to cover managerially for any absences by the service manager.

## 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?	3
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The importance of a safe environment is given a high priority during the assessment process and subsequently reviewed each year. A Safety Checklist is used which covers all aspects of the accommodation, security of outside play space, behaviour of pets/wildlife, car safety and insurance details, fire safety equipment, first aid facilities and many other areas in and around the foster home.

Each foster carer has a safe caring policy that has been individually tailored to each foster home. The Fostering Service provides training in the following areas of safety; Safe Caring, First Aid, Health and Safety and correct fitting of car seats. The foster carer handbook provides comprehensive details on all of these areas and offers guidance on insurance arrangements.

The foster carer agreement specifies that as part of the Commission's inspection process carers may be interviewed or visited.

### 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?	3
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The Fostering Service has a clear commitment to valuing diversity and promoting equality. This approach is evident through recruitment of carers, training and support. All reasonable efforts are made to ensure that there is appropriate matching of placements in terms of culture and ethnicity. The Fostering Service approach to kinship care arrangements further promotes culturally appropriate placements being made available.

The team located in the city of Oxford has recruited and assessed many carers to provide placements to unaccompanied young people who are seeking asylum. Many of these carers have moved into the county as they seek asylum themselves to secure their stay in the UK. They are able to provide placements that can meet the needs of the young people who may otherwise feel culturally isolated in the county of Oxford. The fostering team based in the city has developed good working relationships with the adult team who are supporting those seeking asylum and with support groups such as Asylum Welcome.

Training for foster carers is available in;

- Promoting a positive sense of identity and self-esteem.
- Helping a child to maintain appropriate contacts.
- Race, religion & culture in the care of children.

A priority identified for 2004 is specific training in valuing diversity. A pilot project of using the Promoting Good Race Relations workbook will be used, with a group of British born foster carers who provide placements for young people seeking asylum. The groups will work through the book with a facilitator to raise awareness of race issues. After evaluating the process it is hoped that selected carers will facilitate groups.

The foster carer handbook has information about promoting identity and details of the local authority's anti-discriminatory policy.

The Disabilities Family Placement team has formed good links with health care professionals and special education in order to provide information and support to their carers. Foster carers providing placements to children with disabilities reported that the Fostering Service had provided specialist equipment where necessary and supported adaptations to the home.

The local authority has been committed to promoting leisure opportunities for children and young people in care and the Placement Support team has provided some excellent events to support this initiative.

#### **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.**

<b>Key Findings and Evidence</b>	<b>Standard met?</b>	<b>3</b>
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The matching of children and young people to placements is given careful consideration and this was evidenced through discussion with staff and carers, examination of files and observation of panel proceedings.

Initial placements, except those made in an emergency, are discussed at a placement panel that meets fortnightly. A representative from each of the 3 fostering teams is present along with the manager of Outreach Placements and the project manager of 'Alternative to Care'. Placement availability is discussed and newly approved carers acknowledged and then invited social workers present information on any children and young people who require a fostering placement.

The meeting may be able to conclude that a family support package and involvement with Alternative to Care project can prevent the need for a child or young person to become 'Looked After'. Matching is given great importance at these meetings but lack of placement choice makes it difficult to achieve at times and compromises are made. Lack of placements may require the Senior Managers to consider approaching an Independent Fostering Agency where matching will be considered but may still not be achieved.

Due to lack of placement choice the local authority has been unable to match some children with particular needs and it has meant that some children under 10 years old are accommodated in residential care.

Emergency placements, by their very nature, will have less opportunity for appropriate matching to be considered. The local authority has a number of carers identified to be available for emergencies with the intention of the child/young person being subsequently discussed at the placement panel to be more appropriately placed. Some emergency placements have necessitated carers going outside their terms of approval. The service manager reported that such cases are subject to risk assessment and regularly reviewed.

Long term placements are considered by the fostering panel upon receipt of a comprehensive report compiled by the child's social worker. Some foster carers expressed frustration that they felt that they had been denied an opportunity to contribute to the panel meeting, as they may know a child very well having been their carer for some time.

The Fostering Service uses the Department of Health Looking After Children (LAC) documents to record placement agreements. These contain specific reference to any needs that cannot readily be met by the placement and details the plans made to compensate for any such omissions.

#### **Standard 9 (9.1 - 9.8)**

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

<b>Key Findings and Evidence</b>	<b>Standard met?</b>	<b>3</b>
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The Fostering Service overall has a clear understanding of the potential risks faced by children and young people in foster care settings and has taken appropriate steps to minimise the likelihood of abuse occurring. The Inspectors examined some files and were satisfied that generally robust vetting procedures were in place (see Standard 25). The handbook provides clear guidelines on how to respond should a child disclose that they have been abused.

Training in the area of child protection for foster carers has been identified as a priority topic for 2004. The training officer reported that 24 foster carers attended child protection training in 2003 (totalling 61 carers since March 2001). Training is planned in conjunction with NSPCC to provide a multi-agency forum in a wide variety of venues and at varying times of the day. Alternatives to training sessions are being considered such as workbooks.

Safe caring is clearly defined in the handbook and a written safe caring policy is produced with each carer relevant to their family members, home circumstances and children placed. Corporal punishment must not be administered to any child placed with foster carers and this is specified in the foster carers agreement. This was fully understood by all the carers who met the Inspectors or who completed a questionnaire.

There are management systems in place to collate and evaluate information on the circumstances, number and outcome of any allegations of neglect or abuse of a child in foster care. The Service Manager for Child protection and Quality Assurance informed the Inspectors that a meeting was held quarterly to look at any allegations that have been made in relation to Looked After Children and review how decisions were made.

The Fostering Service provided guidance and advice on how to recognise and respond to any incidents of bullying. Carers reported to the Inspectors that they felt very well supported by link workers when dealing with any issues of this nature.

Foster carers reported that they generally receive full information about children and young people and their families to enable them to protect the foster child, their own children and themselves. However, 17% of carers who responded to a questionnaire reported that information had been withheld that placed them at some risk.

The Fostering Service has a clear policy on how to respond should any foster child and/or young person go missing.

**Percentage of foster children placed who report never or hardly ever being bullied:**

X

%

**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

Training with foster carers considers the 'importance of working in partnership with parents'. This is further supported by guidance in the handbook that looks at; The importance of contact, How contact normally happens, Transport to contact, Possible reactions to contact and Emergencies that may arise.

Where required appropriate arrangements and facilities are set up for the safe management of supervised contact. Questionnaires received from foster carers highlighted their commitment to facilitating and promoting contact with birth families and friends. Foster carers are expected to maintain records of outcomes of contact arrangements and this was observed, by the inspectors, to be inconsistently applied.

**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

There are a variety of ways in which children and young people are consulted and the questionnaires completed by them towards the inspection confirms that they feel involved and their opinions are sought. 65% reported that their foster carers ask for their opinions and ideas, 27.5% reported 'sometimes' and only 7.5% reported that they are not asked.

Similarly the questionnaires returned by foster carers report generally that they feel consulted and their role as advocates for the children and young people in their care was evident.

In addition to day to day consultation there are formal processes such as child/young persons statutory review meetings and the annual review of foster carers (where carers children are also consulted).



The Outreach Team arrange workshops using music and drama as a medium for consultation with children and young people and the Inspectors commend the work undertaken in October 2003 discussing the issues raised in the Government Green Paper, Every Child Matters.

Consultation with children and young people is a strength within Oxfordshire Social and Health Care. The Children's Rights service has been targeting a project with the disability service and have plans to set up a support group for looked after children aged 13-16yrs. The local authority is involved in the national Blueprint Project, which in consultation with young people, practitioners and researchers aims to develop children's services by exploring new approaches to ensuring young people are at the centre.

The local authority also has a service level agreement with a provider for an independent visitor scheme for looked after children, eight have been appointed.

As highlighted earlier in this report, the children's guides were not distributed at the time of the inspection and therefore details on how to raise any complaint appeared sketchy with only one outdated leaflet provided by Oxfordshire County Council that does not provide contact details of the Commission. However, 55% of the children and young people who responded to the questionnaire stated that they did know how to make a complaint. The Inspectors believe that this is a reflection of the good communication and advocacy within the Fostering Service.

This standard is not fully met and is let down by the Fostering Service not providing information to children and young people that would enable them to contact the National Care Standards Commission. Once the children's guides have been distributed this standard will be met.

#### 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.**

<b>Key Findings and Evidence</b>	<b>Standard met?</b>	<b>3</b>
<p>All children and young people placed by the Fostering Service have the necessary information relating to health care, which meets the physical, emotional, social and developmental needs of that child or young person. This information is in the looked after children documents and placement information forms which the foster carers have prior to the placement.</p> <p>Those foster carers interviewed confirmed that they mostly had the relevant information about the health of children placed with them and that they had not encountered any difficulties in registering them with local GPs or in accessing health services.</p> <p>Appropriate references to health related matters are well documented in the foster carer's handbook.</p>		

The Authority has a health liaison nurse who is employed by the Primary Care Trust and funded by Quality Protects. She is informed when a young person is placed with foster carers and then she informs the local health visitor. The health visitor then contacts the foster family and arrangements are made to carry out the initial health assessment, which forms the basis of the health action plan. All action plans are presented at the annual reviews.

The health liaison nurse confirmed that as a result of four years working together, there has been a vast improvement on the health assessments of all looked after children.

Training is another part of the health liaison nurse's role and she provides advice and training to foster carers in relation to drug awareness, sexual health and any other health related issues which the foster carers may request.

The directorate have a new psychology service, The Attach Team. (Attaining Therapeutic Attachments for Children). This service promotes permanency for foster children and provides a consultation service to carers, social workers and other professional colleagues. The clinical psychologists provide direct assessment and treatment and referrals can be made by carers, social workers and the young people themselves.

The service extends to supporting unaccompanied minors and this is an area of expertise that needs to be developed in relation to the differences in culture.

The Disability fostering service has very good links with local health services and foster carers reported that the health needs of children with disabilities were met.

**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?**

4

Inspectors found evidence of very good support for meeting children and young people's educational needs both in individual foster placements and within the local authority as a whole. The 'Reach Up' project is delivered by a multi-disciplinary team of people working in established educational provision and on new initiatives to raise the educational achievement of children and young people in Oxfordshire. It has a particular focus for Looked After Children and aims to:

- raise awareness of the responsibility of all agencies as 'Corporate Parents' to prioritise attention to the educational issues for children in public care;
- develop initiatives that will provide additional support for the education of children in care;
- provide data and information that will inform practice for raising the educational achievement of children and young people in public care.

The Reach Up Team should be commended for its initiatives and core activities. The Development Officer reported how the service aims to deliver support by enabling children and young people in care to access services that are available to any school age child in the county, thereby reducing any stigma attached. After school clubs, Behaviour Support teachers, mentoring scheme with Oxford University, additional funding of a Learning Support Assistant (LSA), home tutors and the Right to Read project. These provide a variety of different types of support for children and young people with their educational needs. In addition there is IT tuition for carers who not only benefit personally but are then able to assist children and young people in their care making use of computer skills.

Foster carers reported to Inspectors that they had found the service very helpful and responsive to the needs of the children and young people in their care. Information systems are in place to monitor the educational achievements of children and young people in public care, as this is a performance indicator for the Social & Health Care Directorate.

Foster carers reported that the Fostering Service encourages them to make links with the schools and attend any meetings, involving birth parents where appropriate. Guidance is provided in the handbook on education related matters.

Records evidenced that Personal Educational Plans (PEP) were in place. If any child or young person is out of education, additional support is provided by the Rapid Response Team who will assist with finding a school placement and providing a level of education whilst out of school.

**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**

The Fostering Service handbook provides good practical guidance on how to prepare young people for leaving care. The local authority has a Leaving Care Team that provides personal advisors to support young people and also provides assistance and advice to foster carers. The local authority has developed a model for engaging young people fully in changing the care system whilst offering accredited training and skills, The Leaving Care Consultation Project. This project aims to train young people aged between 16-21 years old to become Source Workers. In addition the project aims to facilitate a monthly consultation group and a newsletter run by young people.

The Social and Health Care Directorate has commissioned a local Housing Association to develop life skill packs for use by foster carers and practitioners with young people.

Appropriate links are in place with the Connexions service and it was reported to the Inspectors that young people had Pathway Plans in place. The Leaving Care Team has produced some good leaflets in an attractive, yet straightforward style.

## 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?

3

Recruitment procedures and practice applied to those employed in or for the Fostering Service met National Minimum Standards on the whole and complied with the requirements of Regulations, with the exception of one carer, where it was unclear if a second reference had been received; this deficit had been identified by the fostering panel in October 2003. (see Standard 25).

A random sample of staff recruitment records were examined by the inspectors and they were found to be well organised and contained the required documents as specified in Schedule 1 of the Fostering Services Regulations 2002. The only omission was documentary evidence of proof of identity. It was however clear that the evidence was seen at interview but not retained on file. This is an area which the manager confirmed was being addressed.

The authority is aware of the need to review Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks every three years and one record examined was in breach of this, but the member of staff concerned was being asked to complete new application forms at the time of the inspection.

All family placement staff have an appropriate qualification. Several family placement workers have also completed post-qualification awards in Child Care.

Family placement workers do not carry out assessments on prospective foster carers until they have completed the home study training course.

**Total number of staff of the agency:**

38

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

6

**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?**

**3**

The overall organisation and management of the Fostering Service was found to be satisfactory. There is a very clear management structure with designated lines of accountability. Staff are managed by experienced people with appropriate skills and qualifications.

A system to prioritise work is well known amongst the staff and produced within the Statement of Purpose. Regular supervision and collation of monthly activity ensures that work is being processed appropriately and within identified timescales. Prior to Inspection there had been a number of staff vacancies, which, combined with a heavy demand in terms of kinship placement assessments, had led to workload pressures over the last year. Appropriate use had been made of other relevantly experienced staff within the Social and Health Care Directorate, or occasional use of short-term contracted staff to ease these pressures.

Whilst staff reported that clerical and administrative personnel were very helpful, there was a level of frustration with the lack of IT equipment and therefore restrictions on typing reports and letters directly, having to produce hand written notes and pass on for typing. The Inspector visited one office that had to share one computer between 4 staff; this appeared to be similar at most offices. Some staff reported to Inspectors that there are administrative tasks involved with the assessment process that take up a lot of time and could be delegated in order to maximise the use of their social work skills, e.g. processing applications for disclosures from the Criminal Records Bureau, particularly when there are several for one household.

The Fostering Service has greatly benefited from appointing a recruitment officer since July 2003. As part of the recruitment strategy a system has been set up to deal promptly with enquiries from prospective carers centrally for the county at Customer Services and all enquiries now receive a follow up telephone call to maintain interest until a social worker can respond to the referral. A short survey has also been produced to establish why prospective carers did not pursue their enquiry to identify any areas for improvement.

The Inspectors were informed of some working relationship difficulties between fostering service staff and children and young people's social workers. This was not highlighted as a major problem and was felt to be due to a lack of understanding of each other's roles. It was reported that a meeting was being held to air differences with the aim of improving upon working relationships. The service manager reported that there are plans to undertake a reappraisal of the division of tasks between social workers and family placement workers.

The local authority has documents established and distributed to staff with regards to; working practices in respect of grievances and disciplinary matters, equal opportunities policy, health and safety procedures, job descriptions and conditions of service.

**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?****3**

Allowing for the impact of some staff vacancies, Inspectors felt that there was a satisfactory staffing establishment in place to meet the needs of the service. 68% of foster carers who responded to the questionnaire said that they did not think that there were enough staff in the Fostering Service; however most carers who said this praised the quality of the family placement workers who provided a good level of support and advice. Comments raised in the questionnaires frequently referred to a high turnover and lack of social work staff to support children in placement, denying them continuity and the opportunity to get to know their social worker.

The Service Manager reported that there had been staff shortages during 2003, particularly in social work teams in the North of the county and in family placement teams in the South, though this had improved at the time of the inspection.

Full details of the staffing structure, qualifications and length of service have been produced in the Statement of Purpose. Retention strategies have included supporting staff in studying for the Post Qualifying Award in Childcare, regular supervision and training opportunities.

The local authority recognises the need to develop a broad range of foster carers to provide placement choice for all the children and young people in the care of Oxfordshire. The welcomed appointment of a Recruitment Officer in July 2003 has proved profitable with initial enquiries for October, November and December 2003 showing an increase of 19% compared to the same period in 2002. A recruitment committee involving approved carers meets regularly to discuss promotions and marketing campaigns.

The Fostering Service uses an assessment framework that covers all the areas listed under this National Minimum Standard. There are three levels to assessment with written guidance detailing each component, the assessments are recorded in the style of the BAAF Form F. 21% of foster carers who responded to the questionnaire reported that the recruitment process that they experienced was very lengthy.

The Inspectors commend the Fostering and Adoption Panel for producing a document, 'Panel Papers, An easy guide for social workers'.

**Standard 18 (18.1 - 18.7)**

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

**Key Findings and Evidence****Standard met?****3**

The level and nature of support provided to foster carers by link workers and unit managers was reported to the Inspectors to be very good. 41.5% of carers who responded to the questionnaire said they were 'very satisfied' when asked, 'how well do you feel supported by the Fostering Service?' and 32% reported 'OK most of the time'. 7.5% stated that they 'don't get enough support'.

Staff reported that they received formal supervision and were able to readily access support from colleagues and senior staff. Health and safety policies are in place and the foster carer agreement specifies that the Social and Health Care Directorate have a whistleblowing policy.

A Duty Team that can be accessed through a free phone telephone number provides out of hours support. Some carers reported to the Inspectors that their experience of contacting the out of hours service had been poor and they had felt unsupported. Other support systems are available out of office hours, such as carer co-ordinators and carers operating a buddy system.

**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**

Staff interviewed confirmed that the local authority provides suitable training opportunities at a local level and jointly with foster carers on a regular basis. Staff also confirmed that the local authority tries to ensure adequate provision of study leave to support longer-term training courses. Each year staff are expected to attend a workshop, 'Strengthening Performance' where current national issues in social care are explored and then applied to local policies and procedures.

The training officer reported that a creative approach was being applied to the delivery of training for staff and carers.

**Standard 20 (20.1 - 20.5)**

All staff are properly accountable and supported.

**Key Findings and Evidence****Standard met?****3**

All staff have job descriptions and contracts and are able to access the policies and procedures of the Directorate and the local authority as a whole.

Staff confirmed that they receive regular formal supervision and are appraised once a year. Without exception those family placement workers to whom inspectors spoke stated that the quality and level of support that they received from their line managers was extremely good. Regular Team meetings are held and there are meetings for the fostering service countywide.

**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?****3**

The local authority has good and effective structures in place to support and work with foster carers. This was evidenced by records, documentation and from feedback received directly from carers. In addition to having an allocated link worker the Statement of Purpose lists the following as placement support:

- Day care for young people excluded from school and the excluded pupils project.
- Outreach to support placements.
- Consultation service to field social workers and other agencies.
- Access to psychology services for carers.
- Buddy scheme.
- Care co-ordinator scheme.
- Support groups for carers e.g. Foster Care Association.
- Access to education supports.
- Access to health supports and resources e.g. drug advice, sexual health advice and counselling.
- Holiday provision.
- Duty service.
- Access to out of hours support through emergency duty team.
- Newsletter.
- Social events for carers and children.

Foster carers and young people who met the Inspectors spoke very highly of the outreach support team and the activities provided. An Inspector visited a youth group for unaccompanied teenagers seeking asylum, this is provided through a voluntary group 'Asylum Welcome' and the Social and Health Care Directorate fund the venue. Young people and carers spoke highly of this group and the social and leisure support it provides.

All carers receive membership to the Fostering Network. This provides publications, training courses, legal advice and public liability insurance cover. The Fostering Service also contributes to an advice and mediation service in order that carers can access if required.

Annual reviews are held where a report is produced by the link worker in conjunction with carers. First Reviews and Reviews where there is significant change are presented to the Fostering Panel to approve and monitor.

Generally the quality of information given to foster carers was assessed to be appropriate, well written and translated where English is not a first language. Communication between the Fostering Service and the children's social workers was reported to be generally effective, though there were some reported difficulties believed to be due to a lack of clarity on each other's role. The Inspectors were informed that a meeting was being held to address this issue.



**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?****3**

The foster carer agreement describes the responsibilities associated with the task and the support that will be made available; this is in line with Schedule 5 of the Fostering Services Regulations 2001.

The foster carer handbook is a very large file and whilst the Inspectors thought it looked heavy and cumbersome, foster carers reported that it was a useful tool and a good reference guide. There is a chapter on complaints, this includes a section entitled; 'What happens if a complaint is made against you' and one that advises carers about the action that they should take if they wish to make a complaint about the Fostering Service. Information about the procedure for making complaints should be routinely made available to children and young people entering foster care. 11% of foster carers reported that they had not received written guidance on how to make a complaint on behalf of any children and young people in their care. It would seem most carers have a good relationship with their link worker and would report the matter to them.

Foster carers and staff may access the services of an Advice and Mediation Worker appointed by The Fostering Network. The appointed person reported to the Inspectors that the local authority promoted her service very well and many carers and staff have taken the opportunity to access it.

Supervision of carers generally takes place regularly, though some carers reported that they would appreciate a telephone call in between visits. Unannounced visits are referred to in the foster carers' agreement, though the Inspectors were informed that in practice these visits rarely occur.

Complaints and allegations of abuse are recorded, investigated and monitored and there is a clear policy framework to deal with the removal of carers from the foster care register.

**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**

All foster carers attend Information & Preparation training initially. At the time of the inspection changes were being made to adapt to a training programme issued by Fostering Network, 'The skills to foster – a foundation for quality care'.

The foster carers agreement specifies what areas training will focus on and it is expected that carers will attend at least 3 courses per year though this is not specified as a requirement. An appraisal of training development and identified needs will form part of the annual review of carers. The Fostering Service has a dedicated training officer who has

produced a training strategy for 2003-2005. A target for 2004 is to provide alternatives to traditional training sessions to attract those who may be reluctant to attend. The Inspectors commend this approach with the use of; videos, reading materials, workbooks, open learning and e-learning. Two foster carers have used a CD rom to learn how to promote social skills with young people and give information about sexuality.

A training programme is devised to allow carers time to plan their attendance, scheduling events for daytime and some evening sessions. Some carers who live outside of Oxfordshire feel that they are unable to access the training offered and would like an arrangement with their local authority to be able to attend localised training. The Inspectors recommend that this is considered.

Each carer is developing a Training Portfolio, this is a new initiative and not all carers had one in place at the time of the inspection. Safe Caring has been discussed individually between link workers and carers in the production of safe caring policies. Caring for Children and Young People NVQ level 3 is available to foster carers, 7 commenced this training in 2003 and there are plans for another 10 carers to undertake this qualification. One carer has qualified as an NVQ assessor with another completing the training at the time of the inspection.

Family placement workers provide support and help to the sons and daughters of foster carers as necessary, one foster carer's child attended the First Aid training. All participants are requested to complete an evaluation questionnaire that is collated by the training officer and used as a basis to plan future training.

## 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?	3
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Case records for individual children were held and maintained within the social work team responsible for supervising the child's placement and a sample of these were seen and discussed with the placing officer's concerned. The files seen generally contained the areas of information expected by this standard. The Inspectors noted that a Fostering panel recommendation in May 2003 for Life Story work to be undertaken had not been actioned by the social worker.

Foster carers informed the Inspectors that generally adequate information regarding the children and young people they cared for was provided though 17% of carers who responded to the questionnaire reported that information had been withheld. The local authority utilises placement agreements from LAC documentation.

The Inspectors commend the County Council Executive for agreeing to purchase lockable cabinets for foster carers to store records.

There is guidance in the handbook on how to collate Life Story books and this is further supported by training sessions. A planned training was fully subscribed to but unfortunately had to be cancelled, the training officer reported that this would be re-scheduled this year.

The Inspection report from last year and the foster carers' agreement refer to 'placement files' for each child/young person, though at the time of this inspection they had not been widely distributed and therefore have yet to be fully implemented. The foster carers' agreement and the handbook refer to expectations of record keeping by foster carers, though in discussion with many carers there appeared to be many inconsistencies and a lack of supervision from link workers to promote consistency. The Inspectors anticipate that the implementation of 'placement files' will be supported with guidance and training and provide a structure to record keeping.

**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 sampled some records and found them to be suitably maintained and containing relevant information with one exception, where it was unclear if a second reference had been provided, this deficit had been identified by the fostering panel in October 2003. (see National Minimum Standard 15)

It is the role of an administrator in the City office to collate the register of foster carers countywide and to maintain a list of placements and vacancies. This information is updated weekly and made use of at the fortnightly family placement meeting.

The local authority has a policy and procedural guidance on the confidentiality and retention of case files and on access to records.

<b>Number of current foster placements supported by the agency:</b>	289
<b>Number of placements made by the agency in the last 12 months:</b>	486
<b>Number of placements made by the agency which ended in the past 12 months:</b>	293
<b>Number of new foster carers approved during the last 12 months:</b>	47
<b>Number of foster carers who left the agency during the last 12 months:</b>	50
<b>Current weekly payments to foster parents: Minimum £</b>	124
<b>Maximum £</b>	351.14

## Fitness of Premises for use as Fostering Service

The intended outcome for the following standard is:

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

Standard 26 (26.1 - 26.5)

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

**Key Findings and Evidence**

**Standard met?**

3

The Fostering Service offices throughout the county are all attached to other services provided by Social and Health Care. Each office varies in size and design and at the time of the inspection there were discussions about relocating some teams internally within their current building and for others a move to a new building.

As referred to earlier in this report, many staff expressed their frustration at the lack of IT systems available to them. The Inspectors concluded that the premises and facilities are fit for purpose, but the introduction of IT would greatly enhance the Fostering Service.

## Financial Requirements

The intended outcome for the following set of standards is:

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

### Standard 27 (27.1 - 27.3)

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

#### Key Findings and Evidence

Standard met?

9

The separate financial viability of the service was not assessed due to its position as part of the overall local authority structure, rather than a registered fostering agency.

### Standard 28 (28.1 - 28.7)

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

#### Key Findings and Evidence

Standard met?

9

The financial processes and systems of the service were not assessed due to its position as part of the overall local authority structure rather than a registered fostering agency.

### 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

Foster carers did not raise any concerns about significant delays or disruption to allowance payment systems, indeed there was praise for the efficiency of the finance officer. Fees and allowances were reviewed annually. The standard rates and fees were clearly documented and generally understood by carers.

## Fostering Panels

The intended outcome for the following set of standards is:

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

### Standard 30 (30.1 - 30.9)

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

#### Key Findings and Evidence

Standard met?

2

The Directorate has three panels for fostering and adoption. The same person chairs all three panels and is supported by a panel advisor. The panel structure and organisation is intended to ensure consistency and avoid delay, it comprises of individuals who have a sound history of serving on previous panels and those who are new to the task, the panels include a medical advisor, an elected member, foster carers and professionals from education and child health.

The panel chair and advisor were new to their posts at the time of the inspection having been appointed in December 2003. The Inspectors were informed of their plans to develop the panel as follows;

- To arrange training for panel members. Training programme given to Inspectors featuring four events throughout the year.
- To circulate an 'easy guide' to social workers re panel papers.
- To introduce a feedback form for social workers who have attended panel.
- To produce a policy document with regard to disagreements between panel members over recommendations.

The Inspectors support these developments and will assess them during the next inspection.

Recruitment records of panel members were not fully available and the inspection highlighted a deficit of several panel members not having applied for clearance from the Criminal Records Bureau. This should be addressed as a matter of urgency.

Observation of one panel meeting and access to recent panel meeting minutes, confirmed that the panel was appropriately rigorous in its scrutiny of assessments and household reviews. Healthy debate and differences of opinion were discussed openly and managed well by the panel chair.

The panel chair reported to the Inspectors that she is clear about her responsibilities and provides a quality assurance function with initial screening of reports through to presentation of information at panel. Members of the panels receive guidance through the publication, 'Effective Panels' and the local authority has plans to produce further written guidance at a local level.

## Short-Term Breaks

The intended outcome for the following set of standards is:

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

### Standard 31 (31.1 - 31.2)

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

Key Findings and Evidence	Standard met?
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The Fostering Service provides the Breaktime Scheme where disabled children are linked to one carer/family who provide a regular pattern of planned short break care.

The Disability service uses an assessment tool along with an in depth assessment report to establish the level of need and eligibility for the service. A priority panel considers the request for short break care. Carers and staff informed the Inspectors that the quality of the service provided was good but availability of such care is inadequate to meet the demands of disabled children and their families in Oxfordshire. Some carers reported to the Inspectors their concerns that the time offered to families had significantly reduced and therefore the scheme was not supporting families as well as it has done in the past.

The Inspectors were unable to gather views directly from the parents of disabled children receiving this service during this inspection; these issues will be examined in greater depth at the next inspection.



## 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

Oxfordshire have a Kinship Care scheme, which has been in operation since June 2002, and it is still developing. There are two designated workers, one in the south of the county and one in the north.

The local authority is sensitive to pre-existing relationships in assessing and approving family and friends as foster carers and this area is being further developed. A new assessment framework is currently being researched and when developed will be presented to the Fostering panel.

The support and training needs of Kinship carers are assessed and met in the same way as foster carers. There is a Kinship Care Co-ordinator scheme, which has been in operation since December 2003 providing individual support between carers, and it is hoped a support group for kinship carers will be introduced in the near future.

An information booklet has been implemented and given to all new kinship carers alongside information from The Grandparents Federation providing useful sources of advice both legal and practical.

**PART C**

**LAY ASSESSOR'S SUMMARY**

**(where applicable)**

**Lay Assessor** \_\_\_\_\_ **Signature** \_\_\_\_\_  
**Date** \_\_\_\_\_

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

We would welcome comments on the content of this report relating to the Inspection conducted on 23rd – 27th February 2004 and any factual inaccuracies:

Please limit your comments to one side of A4 if possible

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

Amendments to the report were necessary

 YES

Comments were received from the provider

 YES

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

 YES

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

 NO

**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**

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

Action plan was required

 YES

Action plan was received at the point of publication

 YES

Action plan covers all the statutory requirements in a timely fashion

 YES

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

 NO

Provider has declined to provide an action plan

 NO

Other:

 NO

**Public reports**

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

**D.3 PROVIDER'S AGREEMENT**

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

**D.3.1 I .....of .....confirm that the contents of this report are a fair and accurate representation of the facts relating to the inspection conducted on the 23rd – 27th February 2004 and that I agree with the statutory requirements made and will seek to comply with these.**

**Print Name**                    SARAH CLAYSON  
**Signature**                    \_\_\_\_\_  
**Designation**                Service Manager  
   Placement Services  
**Date**                            20 May 2004

**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.