

inspection report

FOSTERING SERVICE

Synergy Fostering Limited

78 Cannon Street

London

EC4N 6NQ

Lead Inspector

Sandra

Jacobs-Walls

Announced Inspection
31st May to 3rd June 2005 at 10:00am

The Commission for Social Care Inspection aims to:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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SERVICE INFORMATION

Name of service	Synergy Fostering Limited
Address	78 Cannon street, London, EC4N 6NQ
Telephone number	020 7433 2545
Fax number	
Email address	enquiries@synergy-fostering.co.uk
Name of registered provider(s)/company (if applicable)	Synergy Fostering Limited
Name of registered manager (if applicable)	Miss Shobha Patel
Type of registration	IFA
No. of places registered (if applicable)	
Category(ies) of registration, with number of places	

SERVICE INFORMATION

Conditions of registration:

Date of last inspection 30th August 2004

Brief Description of the Service:

Synergygy Fostering Limited is a small independent fostering service, in operation since May 2000. The primary role of the service is to recruit foster carers from within the London/M25 region and provide suitable placements for Children Looked After.

A diverse group of foster carers are sought from a range of social, ethnic and religious backgrounds to match children/young people requiring foster placements. The following services are provided: an initial enquiry duty desk for people interested in fostering; the assessment of applicants, group preparation and training for prospective carers. Ongoing training, information and support is available and experienced carers are encouraged to participate in NVQ level 3 training.

All carers are assigned a supervising social worker who is responsible for the monitoring and support of foster carers and placements. Staff of the fostering service come from a range of professional backgrounds; at the time of the inspection, a social work student was in placement.

Carers are expected to work closely with the children/young peoples' social worker in order to maximise placement success. Approved foster carers and their performance is reviewed annually and presented to the fostering panel for re-approval/de-registration decisions.

At the time of the inspection, Synergygy Fostering service had recently moved its office premises to a new location in Central London.

SUMMARY

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

The announced inspection was conducted over eight days between the end of May and the beginning of June 2005. The inspection process included observation of the agency's fostering panel meeting, interviews with management and all members of staff, individual interviews with four foster carers at their homes, review of returned foster carer questionnaires, the attendance at a foster carer team meeting and the review of key policies and procedures. Despite the majority of the inspection activity being conducted during the school half term, unfortunately, the inspector did not have the opportunity to speak with any young people in placement, although two very young children were seen.

The inspector was generally satisfied that Synergy Fostering Ltd provided high quality services that sufficiently met the needs of those young people who accessed the agency's fostering service for placement.

The inspection has resulted in nine requirements and five recommendations.

The inspector would like to thank all staff, foster carers, young people and members of the (May 2005) fostering panel who co-operated and contributed to the inspection process.

What the service does well:

The inspector was impressed with literature and information provided to foster carer and children and young people in placement. Foster carers who met with the inspector commented that written information provided was clear and user friendly. Most policies and procedures were in place and effectively implemented. The inspector was equally impressed by the level and quality of support provided to foster carers by all staff including managers of the service. Foster carers spoke very positively about their experience and appreciation of the level of support received via the agency.

The vetting, preparation and assessment of prospective foster carers was conducted thoroughly and the role of the fostering panel in making decisions regarding the approval of foster carers was effective. The agency's administrative support is robust; staff commitment to the welfare of children

and young people was strong and keenly evidenced. The individual files of foster carers and young people in placement were largely comprehensive, clear, well ordered and were maintained appropriately confidential.

What has improved since the last inspection?

The previous inspection of Synergy Fostering Ltd. was conducted in July 2004. The service has continued to provide a quality fostering service to authorities seeking foster placements for Children Looked After. The inspector was satisfied that areas identified for improvement at the previous inspection (e.g. evidence of young people's Pathway Plans, the appropriate recording of complaints, appropriate notification to the Commission, identified personnel and fostering panel issues) had been successfully addressed.

What they could do better:

The inspector was concerned for the level of training available and attended by approved foster carers. Seemingly, a combination of a limited range of training actually provided by the agency, an apparent lack of commitment to the training opportunities by some foster carers and practical problems highlighted by some foster carers regarding the timing, location and support provision, appear to hinder attendance.

Individual support to foster carers via supervising social workers was very good, however the lack of opportunity for foster carers to meet collectively for support needs to be addressed. Managers of the service acknowledged this.

The induction of new staff needs to be consistently co-ordinated, so that same or similar opportunities are available to newly recruited staff, which can be evidenced. The inspector noted that some staff personnel files reviewed failed to contain full information as required. This issue must be addressed as a matter of urgency.

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

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

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Being Healthy

The intended outcomes these Standards are:

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

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

JUDGEMENT – we looked at outcomes for standard(s) 12

Synergy Fostering Ltd promoted well the physical, emotional and social development of children placed with foster carers approved by the agency.

EVIDENCE:

The inspector reviewed the fostering agency's 'Children's Health' policy which provided foster carers with clear procedural and practical guidance with regard to their responsibility in ensuring the holistic healthcare needs of young people in placement are effectively met. Foster carers who were interviewed by the inspector evidenced well their understanding of their responsibility with regard to this area of their care; one foster carer had worked very closely with health care professionals of the local hospital prior to and after the newborn baby's discharge from the hospital to her care. Another foster care interviewed was actively working towards addressing the eating habits of one young person, diagnosed as 'morbidly obese'. A third foster carer interviewed spoke candidly about her concern for and efforts to address the mental health of a sibling group placed in her care that appear to have been subjected to traumatising experiences while living at home.

Written information reviewed on young people's files evidenced that the fostering agency and relevant professionals were monitoring and addressing a range of identified health care needs in accordance with documented care plans.

Staying Safe

The intended outcomes these Standards are:

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

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

JUDGEMENT – we looked at outcomes for standard(s) 3,6,8,9, 15 & 30

The inspector was satisfied that managers and staff of the fostering service were suitable to carry out their duties, however, all staff personnel files must evidence full information and documentation as outlined in Schedule 1 of the Fostering Services Regulations 2002. The service provides suitable foster carers and makes keen efforts to appropriately match Looked After Children with carers. In order to ensure the safety of foster carers' homes, issues identified at periodic health and safety check must be promptly followed through.

The fostering service had good systems in place to protect young people from abuse and neglect, but need to develop and implement policies that address bullying. The agency's fostering panels are efficiently and effectively organised.

EVIDENCE:

The registered manager and responsible individual of the fostering service are both qualified social workers with extensive experience of child care and fostering work. At the time of the inspection, only one supervising social worker was employed by the agency, since another has very recently resigned. The current post holder was also a qualified social worker. The inspector reviewed the personnel file for the agency's entire staff group and members of the fostering panel. All files reviewed evidenced current and satisfactory CRB disclosure forms. However, the inspector noted a number of required documents missing from personnel files. Omitted documentation for the

responsible individual included positive proof of identity and photograph, the registered manager's file evidenced two references, both written by the same referee, while for one member of the fostering panel, there was no evidence of relevant qualification, relevant (work) experience, positive proof of identity or photograph. From the file reviewed, it was difficult to ascertain how this individual was 'qualified' to participate as a member of the agency's fostering panel.

The inspector observed the agency's fostering panel meeting that was held in May as part of the inspection process. The fostering panel attended by the inspector was noted as being quorate, panel members were comprised of appropriate professionals, with the exception of one and other required independent members. Prospective foster carer assessments were presented for panel approval, as were foster carer reviews. Panel discussions were thorough and democratically facilitated. The chair of the fostering panel was also interviewed; he confirmed that panel members had access to relevant training and information.

In discussion with the agency's registered manager and responsible individual and review of relevant files, the inspector was satisfied that very keen efforts were made by the fostering agency to facilitate the effective 'matching' of Looked After Children with foster carers. The inspector was aware of matching decisions being based on key factors such as ethnic background, religion, foster carers' approved status, the particular skills and abilities of foster carers and accommodation considerations. The responsible individual commented that where the agency does not feel able to provide a viable 'match' then referrals for placement are refused. The inspector was satisfied that where exceptions to the matching process were considered, approval was sought initially via the chair of the fostering panel and discussed at the next fostering panel meeting and ratified by the agency's decision maker. There was clear written evidence of this process on file, for example in the approval of a sibling group to be placed on emergency basis with a foster care couple originally approved to care for one child only.

The safe caring of a child is a core competency prospective and approved foster carers are assessed against. The inspector saw the bedrooms of most young people placed with foster carers who were interviewed at their homes as part of the inspection process. All rooms seen were appropriately furnished and decorated and were conducive to the accommodation of young people. The inspector saw on file annual health & safety checks to foster carers' homes by supervising social workers. It was noted that in two cases, environmental issues highlighted at the previous health and safety check (the need for a fire blanket and evidence of foster carer's current car insurance) failed to be provided/produced. In order to ensure the safety of accommodated young people in foster carers homes, the fostering agency must ensure that identified health and safety issues are promptly addressed.

There was evidence of sound child protection policies in place; however, there was no evidence of a bullying policy. This will need to be developed and implemented within the service and publicised with young people in placement.

Enjoying and Achieving

The intended outcomes these Standards are:

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

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

JUDGEMENT – we looked at outcomes for standard(s) 7 & 13

The fostering service demonstrated a strong commitment to valuing diversity on many levels. The educational attainment of young people in placement is well promoted. The service does not provide short-term breaks.

EVIDENCE:

The inspector saw good evidence of the fostering agency's commitment to valuing diversity and promoting equality on many levels; there was an equal opportunities policy in place and good statistics were maintained to monitor the ethnicity of carers. The office premises are wheelchair assessable.

The staff group, in the recent past had been ethnically reflective of the communities it serves. The inspector recommends however, that the service consider the recruitment a permanent male worker in the near future since the service at the time of the inspection, was essentially an all female staff group. The fostering service had in the past employed (contracted) male workers to facilitate specific pieces of work such as foster carer assessments and to facilitate an all male foster carer group.

Foster carers are consistently assessed on their ability to care and nurture young people with a range of diverse needs. The matching process is well considered. The inspector recommends however, that effort should be made to recruit foster carers who have a range of skills and abilities to offer more specialised placements for young people e.g. Looked After Children who are disabled.

The fostering agency provides foster carers via the Foster Carers Procedures document of written guidance addressing the promotion of educational achievement of Looked After Children. Foster carers who spoke with the inspector were clear about their role and responsibilities in promoting educational attainment of young people placed with them. Files reviewed contained good supporting evidence of this.

The inspector was encouraged by the discussion held with one foster carer who had proactively sought to enrol a sibling group of children into schools of the local area where educational achievement was high. She had refused to enrol the children into schools she perceived as "failing" and those she considered

"....not good enough for my own children"

The elder sibling, in the absence of securing a place at an appropriate local school was receiving home tuition, funded by the placing authority. A younger child was awaiting assessment (statementing) for possible special (learning) needs. The carer showed the inspector the home's study area any child living at the house could use to complete homework/access the computer.

Making a Positive Contribution

The intended outcomes these Standards are:

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

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

JUDGEMENT – we looked at outcomes for standard(s) 10 &11

The fostering service promotes well contact arrangements for children and young people in placement. Effective consultation with young people is encouraged.

EVIDENCE:

Information to foster carers regarding the promotion of contact between Looked After Children and their birth families is highlighted in the Foster Carer Procedures document. The issue of parental contact was also featured on the anticipated training schedule for the forthcoming year. Foster carers files reviewed also evidenced consistent discussion between supervising social workers and foster carers regarding contact issues and working effectively with birth parents. Foster carers who were interviewed shared with the inspector efforts taken by both the fostering agency and themselves in ensuring contact between young people in placement and their birth parents. One foster carer described how the care plan of the baby she was caring for required frequent contact with parents who's parenting skills was formally being assessed in a residential setting.

The inspector was satisfied that children and young people in placement with the agency's foster carers had good opportunity to share their views and feelings. One foster care spoke about her empathy for the children placed with her following the death of another sibling in their family home. The foster carer talked about knowing the children must have mixed and confused feelings about their situation and the foster carer's feeling it was her role to offer comfort and a 'listening ear'.

Looked After Children files reviewed by the inspector evidenced the participation of (age appropriate) young people in statutory child care reviews; children and young people were asked their opinion as a component of foster carer annual reviews and were encouraged to complete consultation records. Children and young people have access to the agency's complaints procedure.

Achieving Economic Wellbeing

The intended outcomes these Standards are:

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

The Commission considers Standards 29 the key standard to be inspected at least once during a 12 month period.

JUDGEMENT – we looked at outcomes for standard(s) 29

The agency's foster carers consistently receive agreed allowance and expenses.

EVIDENCE:

The fostering agency had a written policy on fostering allowances, which the inspector reviewed. The service has robust administrative and financial systems that facilitate and support prompt, accurate payment to foster carers. Foster carer's files contained details of individual allowances and expenses. All foster carers who spoke with the inspector, with the exception of one, commented that allowances and any expenses were promptly paid by the agency. One foster carer commented that she felt she was entitled to an increase in payment due to the length of time she had been approved by the fostering agency. She intended to seek clarification of this issue via the supervising social worker.

Management

The intended outcomes these Standards are:

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

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

JUDGEMENT – we looked at outcomes for standard(s) 1,2,4,5,16,17,18,19,20,21,23,24,25,26,27 & 28

The fostering agency's Statement of Purpose outlines well the aims and objectives of the service. Both the registered manager and the responsible individual have a relevant qualifications and experience of statutory child care services, however, they must both complete required management training.

There are clear and effective procedures in place for monitoring and controlling the activities of the service; the management of the agency is effective and staff are generally well organised and supported. However, staff induction for

newly recruited staff must be consistently conducted and documented. The agency's staff group at the time of the inspection was appropriately qualified, experienced and sufficient in numbers; staff recruitment is based on sound recruitment practices. Support for individual foster carers is good and there are clear strategies in place to facilitate this however, the service must also facilitate opportunities for foster carers to meet collectively for support. Training opportunities and the attendance of foster carers at scheduled training sessions is in need of considerable improvement.

The agency's administrative records are well maintained; children's files seen were generally comprehensive. The fostering service has sound financial systems in place and the agency is financially viable. The office premises are suitable for the purpose of the fostering service.

EVIDENCE:

The fostering service's Statement of Purpose document was reviewed and was considered satisfactory, although it is recommended that information include the contact details of the local CSCI office. Managers of the fostering service are appropriately qualified and experienced to manage the service, however both the registered manager and responsible individual must complete relevant management training and achieve required management qualifications. The service maintained keen quality assurance information that effectively controls and monitors service activity. There are well-established lines of communication and good accountability between managers, staff and carers; all parties were very clear about these systems.

The training of newly recruited staff of the fostering agency was considered very good in one case seen and poorly evidenced in another. File documentation was unclear regarding the nature and extent of the induction process for one newly recruited staff member. The general management and support of carers as individuals was very good, clear strategies were seen on file and carers who spoke with the inspector confirmed support and supervision levels were effective. There is a need however, for foster carers to gain mutual support from each other; some foster carers indicated they would find the development of well co-ordinated support groups useful.

The training of carers was cause for considerable concern. The inspector reviewed the fostering agency's annual training programme for approved foster carers for the current and previous year. The programme, while comprehensive indicated that less than half of the scheduled programme had actually been conducted, managers and numerous foster carers confirmed that attendance at scheduled training was poor for a variety of reasons. Managers of the fostering service acknowledged this situation as problematic and were currently reviewing training strategies.

The inspector was also concerned for the apparent lack of familiarity with key policies and procedures of some foster carers. It was clear in one instance that the foster carers lack of recent training in child protection issues had led to poor practice resulting in investigation of a related incident. The inspector recommends that the managers re-evaluate subject areas to be considered as 'core' training and that, for example child protection training be made mandatory for all approved carers.

A number of foster carers who spoke with the inspector at the agency's team meeting alluded to the need for the agency to be more flexible in considering training venue, times and facilities. One carer commented that she would attend training and other agency meetings if, for example a crèche was available for children to support her consistent attendance.

The inspector met with one of the directors of the fostering agency who was responsible for overseeing business matters of the service. He confirmed that sound financial procedures were in place, the agency employed a bookkeeper and accountants to ensure necessary financial processes were appropriately being conducted and that the service remained financially viable. Written financial information supplied by managers of the agency confirmed the service's financial stability.

SCORING OF OUTCOMES

This page summarises the assessment of the extent to which the National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services have been met and uses the following scale. Where there is no score against a standard it has not been looked at during this inspection.

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

"X" in the standard met box denotes standard not assessed on this occasion

"N/A" in the standard met box denotes standard not applicable

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

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

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

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

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

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

NO

Are there any outstanding requirements from the last inspection?

STATUTORY REQUIREMENTS

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

No.	Standard	Regulation	Requirement	Timescale for action
1.	FS3	5 & 7	The responsible individual must ensure that the personnel files for herself and the registered manager contain all required information as specified in Schedule 1 of the Fostering Services Regulations 2002	01/08/05
2.	FS6	11	The registered manager must ensure that issues pertaining to the foster carers home environment highlighted via the health and safety checklist is promptly addressed	01/08/05
3.	FS15	19	The responsible individual must ensure that the personnel files of all fostering panel members contain information that confirms they are suitably qualified and experienced to perform required duties.	01/08/05
4.	FS19	21(4)(a)	The registered manager must ensure that staff induction for newly recruited staff is consistently conducted and documented.	01/08/05
5.	FS2	8	The responsible individual must ensure that both herself and the registered manager complete required management training	31/12/05
6.	FS23	17(1)	The registered manager must ensure that foster carer training	31/03/06

			as outlined in the agency's annual training programme is provided	
7.	FS23	17(2)	The registered manager must ensure that all foster carers are familiar with key policies and procedures of the fostering service	31/12/05
8.	FS9	12	The registered manager must develop and implement bullying policies	15/08/05
9.	FS20	17(1)	The registered manager must make provision for the development of foster carer support group meetings	31/12/05

RECOMMENDATIONS

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

No.	Refer to Standard	Good Practice Recommendations
1.	FS7	It is recommended that the fostering service consider the employment of a male worker to its staff group as further effort to promote diversity and encourage a range of perspectives of service provision.
2.	FS23	It is recommended that the fostering service review subject matters considered 'core' and mandatory training for approved foster carers.
3.	FS23	It is recommended that creche facilities be considered for use during foster carer meetings to encourage improved attendance by carers.
4.	FS7	It is recommended that efforts be made to recruit foster carers who have an increased range of skills and abilities to offer more specialised placements for young people
5.	FS1	It is recommended that the agency's Statement of Purpose include the contact details of the local CSCI office

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