



*Making Social Care
Better for People*

inspection report

FOSTERING SERVICE

Gateshead Council Fostering Service

**Council Offices
Prince Consort Road
Gateshead
Tyne and Wear
NE8 4HJ**

Lead Inspector
Stephen Graham

Key Announced Inspection
21st August 2006 10:00

The Commission for Social Care Inspection aims to:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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SERVICE INFORMATION

| | |
|---|---|
| Name of service | Gateshead Council Fostering Service |
| Address | Council Offices Prince Consort Road Gateshead Tyne and Wear NE8 4HJ |
| Telephone number | 0191 4338333 |
| Fax number | 0191 4776645 |
| Email address | |
| Provider Web address | |
| Name of registered provider(s)/company (if applicable) | Gateshead Council |
| Name of registered manager (if applicable) | Christine Pearce |
| Type of registration | Local Auth Fostering Service |

SERVICE INFORMATION

Conditions of registration:

Date of last inspection 31st October 2005

Brief Description of the Service:

The Fostering Service is part of the Services for Children and Families in the Learning and Children Group, Gateshead Council. The service continues to provide a number of different types of placements to meet the assessed needs of the young people requiring care and accommodation.

Mainstream carers provide care to:

Pre-adoption children, mainly infants.
Emergency placements for younger children.
Short, medium and long term placements.

The service also has a number of carers who are paid a fee and are known as contract carers. Contract carers provide care to:

Emergency placements.
Remand placements.
Task focused placements that aim to return the young person home or prepare them for independent living.
Mother and baby placements.
Long-term and shared care for disabled children.

The service also provides respite care with Respite and Home from Home carers. The council have obtained funding to develop Treatment Foster Care and are currently in the process of recruiting carers to this scheme.

SUMMARY

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

The inspector would like to thank the children, carers and staff at Gateshead Fostering for their welcome and the important part they played in the inspection. Information and evidence in this report was gathered by two inspectors over a 5 day period through:

- Talking individually with children, carers and staff.
- Visiting foster carers' homes.
- Group discussions with staff and carers.
- Talking with the managers of the service.
- Reading children's, carer's and staff files.
- Reading policies, procedures and records.
- Children's questionnaires.
- Carers questionnaires.
- Children's social workers questionnaires.
- Observing the fostering panel.
- Talking with the Chair of the fostering panel.
- Talking with the designated nurse for looked after children.
- Talking with co-ordinators of education, employment and children's rights support services for fostered children in Gateshead.

Throughout the course of this visit the inspectors noted the commitment both from managers, staff and carers to maintain good standards, whilst working to further improve the range and quality of service provided.

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

What the service does well:

Previous inspections had confirmed that the overall service provided by Gateshead Fostering to its carers and children placed with them was good. Positively, the views of carers gathered during this visit confirmed that the service continues to provide to this standard.

During this inspection, a number of very positive comments were received from placing social workers, carers and children.

Carers described how the "link workers give you advice and support where necessary." How the service "provides any material help" and "provides essential equipment and ongoing support." Carers also highlighted the "good

support from our support worker (always willing to listen) and from other members of the team.”

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

Very positive descriptions were received from children explaining why they felt this was true. One young person simply stated: “I feel that I am part of the family, more than just a foster child.”

One social worker described how staff at the fostering service “support foster carers to liaise with district social workers” (to promote good outcomes for children).

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

What has improved since the last inspection?

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

Positively, the service has consulted with children regarding the quality of the children’s guide. This has been updated and re-distributed to children placed through the service. A parent’s guide has also been developed and recently introduced, initial feedback from parents is being encouraged and analysed by the service. The Statement of Purpose including complaints information for the service has been re-distributed to all managers of placing social workers with additional copies of this, as well as previous inspection reports, available upon request.

The manager of the service has successfully completed their required management training. The service has taken a lead role in the regional development of the ‘Sahara Project’ and has worked closely with it’s staff to improve the recruitment of carers from a broader range of ethnic communities as well as providing specialised advice and support to foster carers and the children placed with them.

More foster carers were able to report that they are receiving better information about the children placed with them resulting in better 'matching' of carers with children and more stability for children placed. The agency is better at ensuring that carers work within their existing terms of approval regarding the agreed maximum number of children placed with them at any one time.

Arrangements to consult with young people have been further improved.

More un-announced visits to carers are being completed allowing supervising social workers to check further on the quality of care being provided to children.

What they could do better:

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

The inspectors, however, identified a number of areas where they felt further improvements could be made. These are in summary that;

The service must continue to work to ensure that all placing social workers provide the service with the information needed both to 'match' children successfully and fully inform carers of children's ongoing care needs. Children's case records should be kept up to date, with required information provided promptly and maintained in good order.

Visits to children by their placing social workers should continue to be monitored to ensure that children placed with the service are visited regularly by their own social worker and asked for their opinion about the care they receive.

The service should review the current arrangements to manage the administrative support provided to the service. Staff vacancies should be filled with arrangements put in place to ensure that immediate cover is provided when staff vacancies exist or staff members are absent.

The service should continue to review the current levels of participation in the training programme provided and work to further encourage the attendance of carers at training events provided to improve their skills and knowledge.

Arrangements to store and archive carer records should be reviewed to ensure that this is efficient and the health and safety needs of staff are recognised.

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

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

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Being Healthy

The intended outcome for this Standard is:

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

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

JUDGEMENT – we looked at the outcome for Standard:

12

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

EVIDENCE:

One young person, whilst confirming that they always receive support and advice about being healthy, stated: "my carer cares about dieting and nutrition and wants me to grow up healthy." Other young people also confirmed that they receive support in meeting their health needs. One described this as important "because if I was eating junk food I wouldn't be very healthy so that is why I eat healthy stuff so I don't eat junk food and become fat and unfit". Another stated: "my carer is always telling me to eat more and stay healthy", whilst another stated that: "I always get a check up."

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

The overall response from carers was that the support provided was either good or excellent, a small number described it as, at least, adequate. Carers gave a number of good examples of the support received from the service and the dedicated Looked After Children's Nurse. One highlighted: "plenty of courses available for us to attend, also regular letters from the service asking us for updates on (individual children's) health." Another stated that: "through training I am kept informed of good practice regarding health matters."

Very positive evidence was also received from social workers placing children through the service. When asked, "How well does the fostering service enable the children placed to be healthy and have healthy lifestyles" nearly all who responded described this as either good or excellent.

The manager of the service highlighted the provision of good training and detailed policies and procedures to carers, used by them to support their provision of effective health care to children and young people. Carers were also able to confirm this through their questionnaire responses and in direct discussion with the inspectors. One example of an extensive delay in the completion of 'refresher' specialist training was acknowledged by the carers themselves and highlighted to the manager for their review.

Discussion with the dedicated LAC (Looked After Children) nurse highlighted the additional support provided to carers to ensure that children are able to access local dental services. Discussion also confirmed that children are registered with Doctors, with additional support provided where necessary to ensure that children have access to the full range of medical support they may require. Positively, although a gap had existed in the provision of psychological support to children, this gap has now been filled through recruitment by the local authority. Carers spoken to and the LAC Nurse themselves were happy to confirm the positive benefits to children from this support. Positively, statistics provided by the service and discussion with the LAC Nurse confirmed that nearly 80% of children had benefited from attending their statutory annual medical review. Positive steps are being taken to engage further with older children in particular, to encourage them to attend and benefit from these appointments.

Examination of care files highlighted occasional delays in obtaining appropriate medical consents from placing social workers. This was acknowledged by the LAC Nurse who was able to describe the procedures in place to monitor and respond positively to these situations. They also confirmed that the information leaflets provided to children and their carers are currently in the process of being updated and re-distributed to ensure that the information and guidance provided is accurate and up to date.

Staying Safe

The intended outcomes for these Standards are:

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

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

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

Quality in this outcome area is good. This judgement has been made from evidence gathered both during and before the visit to this service. The manager of the service is both suitable and competent to provide it. Young people are placed with carers who provide safe homes. Arrangements to match young people with carers are generally effective although delays in the provision of essential documentation by placing social workers could affect this. The overall arrangements put in place by the service keep children safe, are documented fully and consistently with any concerns responded to promptly. The fostering panel is well comprised and is making good decisions and recommendations to the decision maker. Some improvements are recommended in the procedures by which the panel monitor and review the ongoing suitability and qualities of carers in meeting the needs of children placed with them.

EVIDENCE:

Positively, the manager of the service was able to confirm that as previously recommended, they have now successfully completed their personal training leading to the award of their required management qualification. They were also able to confirm that those members of staff in the fostering service, (who are required to be CRB checked), every foster carer, and all adult members of the households of foster carers, have had their required checks completed.

Discussion with carers, staff and an examination of carer files provided good evidence that the service works to ensure that carers provide an environment to children which is free from hazards and routinely checked to ensure that it remains safe and suitable for the care of children. Health and safety checklists are in use. However, it was recommended that these should be signed and dated to provide evidence of when they were completed and subsequently reviewed. 'Safe caring policies' are also in use and were available within carers' files, again although completed in detail these did not indicate whether they had been reviewed when the placements of children and circumstances within the households changed.

The previous inspection had recommended that the service should work to ensure that social workers placing children with the service provide the information needed both to 'match' children successfully and inform carers of children's ongoing care needs. Examination of care files found variations in the quality of this information, with some positive examples, but others still poor. The views of carers either interviewed or responding by questionnaire also reflected the file evidence. When asked how they would rate the information they received about the child before they were placed, the overall majority responded positively, with over half describing this as 'excellent' or 'good' with a further quarter describing it as 'adequate.' One carer stated that "I've always found that I get good detailed information prior to placement, sometimes written other times verbal followed by appropriate paperwork." Another commented on the: "comprehensive 'about me' pack, which helped in the initial stages of our relationship." However, just under a quarter of those responding described the information received about children as 'poor.' One of these carers commented that information was "patchy-depends on the Social Worker, but fostering staff do what they can."

Positively, carers provided a better indication of the planning and sharing of information taking place when children are moved to new placements. When asked "How good is the fostering service at supporting you in maintaining placements, so that children only move in a planned way," carers described this as 'excellent', 'good' and 'adequate' in equal proportion, with only one respondent describing this as poor. One carer confirmed positively that there are: "always meetings before children are moved and their best interests are always put first."

Positive evidence of the quality of care provided was also received through children's questionnaires. When asked the question: "Do you feel well cared for where you live now?" nearly all children were able to respond 'always.' Very positive descriptions were received from children explaining why they felt this was true. One stated: "I feel that I am part of the family, more than just a foster child." Another said: "cause they care and (are) one of the best foster carers in Gateshead." A third described how "my foster carers look out for me

if anything goes wrong. They look after me every day and night." Another stated "because they do everything for me to keep me safe."

Placing social workers responding also confirmed their belief that children placed through the service are well cared for. However, some raised concerns regarding the stability of placements, with one commenting "For children entering foster care recently there have been too many moves." Social workers also highlighted concerns regarding placement choice for children with one highlighting problems in the recruitment of new carers as the likely cause. In response, the manager highlighted the increased numbers of children aged 16 and over requiring placement and the difficulties in providing sufficient carers with skills in working with this age group.

Positively, placing social workers rated the information they receive from the fostering service about the child as either excellent or good, one of those who responded commented: "social workers in the fostering team are committed and child focussed and are willing to pursue information required."

Foster placement agreements examined did contain the information needed to allow the appropriate 'matching' of children to carers, however, some examples of delays in the provision of placement agreements as well as delays in the arrangement of placement agreement meetings were noted. One example of a child in placement with carers, where no placement agreement meeting had yet taken place was highlighted to the manager. Whilst acknowledging this the manager was also able to confirm that the placing social worker concerned had been formally requested both to provide the documentation and to attend an agreement meeting.

To ensure effective matching and the ongoing stability of placements, carers should be provided with additional training and support where necessary. Examination of carers' files highlighted examples of some gaps in carer training. With one of these examples there was no evidence of the carers having received any training in the previous two years, with no evidence of them having received training in core areas such as Child Protection, Safe Caring or First Aid. This was highlighted to the manager who confirmed that although these carers had not attended training courses, training materials in these areas had been provided for home study, supported by their supervising social worker.

To ensure that children are cared for safely, carer agreements contain confirmation that no forms of corporal punishment must be used with children placed. The service has an appropriate system in place to collect and monitor any allegations of abuse received. This is closely monitored by the manager of the service. Positively from the questionnaire responses received and children interviewed, only one concern regarding bullying (at school) was received. The concerns of this one young person were fed back to the manager for their review with the young person, their carers and supporting social work staff.

The agency has clear procedures for carers to support them in dealing with any instances of children being absent without authorisation. Carers interviewed confirmed their awareness of these. However, some carers and their supervising social workers highlighted how the lack of initial written information about children placed can cause initial problems in ensuring that they can both protect and support children effectively. Carers were very positive about the qualities and persistence of their supervising social workers in working to obtain the required information from placing social workers.

Examination of the record of complaints received regarding foster carers confirmed that each had been thoroughly investigated and concluded. Although the manager acknowledged that investigations and outcomes could be lengthy, they were also acknowledged to be thorough. The manager highlighted how carers are given access and support from an independent complaints representative throughout any investigation. They added that this can add to the overall length of each complaint investigation and outcome.

The service is staffed by experienced and well-qualified social workers. Those interviewed were positive regarding access to ongoing training, and the direct support and supervision provided to them by their managers. The manager was able to confirm that those members of staff in the fostering service, who are required to be CRB checked, (every foster carer, and all adult members of the households of foster carers) have had their required checks completed.

The quality of initial carer assessments completed by social work staff and presented to panel during this inspection were seen to be of a high standard. Annual review reports for carers were also well presented. However, examination of files and the observations of panel members during the panel attended confirmed that some issues regarding the routine, three-yearly, re-submission of Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks for carers. Direct discussion with carers regarding the regularity of these checks also confirmed this. These issues were highlighted to and acknowledged by the manager. They confirmed that additional administrative processes have been introduced to ensure that these checks are completed at the required regularity and believed that these should prove their effectiveness over the coming months. Discussion within the panel and with the manager also confirmed that the service is currently reviewing the processes to both review and renew original health checks for carers. It was recommended that the dates of previous checks could be summarised and presented to panel through carers annual review reports to allow further scrutiny and monitoring to take place by them.

As previously recommended, the plans in place to increase the independence of the Chair of the fostering panel have progressed and the service has recently appointed an experienced Chair, more independent to the service. During this inspection the newly appointed Chair was in attendance and was introduced to panel as part of their induction. Discussion with the current

Chair confirmed the overall programme of induction being provided and also confirmed that the new Chair would take responsibility for monitoring and agreeing any emergency exemptions to normal fostering limits for carers, with the manager of the service. The manager was able to report positively that the need for such exemptions had fallen considerably since the last inspection due to better placement planning and is now uncommon.

During the meeting of the fostering panel attended by the inspector, panel members (as in previous inspections) appeared comfortable in their roles and as previously highlighted, the presentation of written reports for their information was generally good. Discussion was thorough, with members able to raise and challenge any issues regarding the ongoing suitability of foster carers subject to initial assessment or their annual reviews. There were also good examples of the scrutiny of the Fostering Services Decision Maker, with issues raised by them being further scrutinised by the panel where necessary. The manager highlighted the additional training opportunities provided to panel members in the assessment of carers recruited, to provide 'treatment' foster care for the service. They also highlighted the efforts being made to improve the representation of diversity within the panel by recruiting a member with direct experience of being placed with carers.

Independent reviewing officers take key responsibility for planning and undertaking annual carer reviews. With some examples, it was noted that the timescale from the review itself to the review report being presented to panel for their scrutiny was excessive. With one example the timescale was in excess of 6 months. Concerns regarding these timescales were also noted and raised by some panel members during the meeting. In subsequent discussion the Chair confirmed that a number of delays had occurred. They highlighted that the independent review team did not include an appointed 'minute taker,' which although not delaying the reviews, had contributed to delays in the completion and presentation of the reports to panel. It was also noted that review reports contained limited evidence of the views of children themselves regarding the quality of care that they receive from their carers. Although it was acknowledged that placing social workers could present children's views on their behalf, it was recommended that the process by which children's views are gathered and presented to these meetings be reviewed.

During the panel attended, as a result of a 'conflict of interest' declaration by a member of panel, one carer assessment was withdrawn from the agenda. In subsequent discussion with the manager, the processes by which any panel member can provide a 'declaration of interest' when considering reports were reviewed, with steps to allow a formal declaration to be made at the outset of the meeting, agreed with the manager.

Enjoying and Achieving

The intended outcomes for these Standards are:

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

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

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

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

EVIDENCE:

The previous inspection had recommended that the agency should continue to improve the recruitment of carers from a broader range of ethnic communities. The manager was able to confirm that the service remains leading partners in the 'Sahara Project' which works to recruit black and minority ethnic carers. Although the service does have a small group of carers of non-white British and other backgrounds, the number is low. The manager highlighted that joint-screening visits have taken place with workers from the project to try to promote the recruitment process. Sahara project workers have also been used by the service to provide specialist advice on ethnicity and cultural issues for children.

The service works to provide carers that value issues of equality and diversity in the provision of care to children placed with them. Positively, when carers were asked "How well does the fostering service address issues of equality and diversity such as culture, ethnicity and disability," the large majority described

this as either 'excellent' or 'good.' No-one responding felt that this support was less than adequate. One carer stated positively, "I've done the training! These issues are always considered at reviews." Equally positive examples of additional support, advice and equipment being provided to carers caring for children with disabilities, were also received. The majority of placing social workers who responded were also equally positive regarding this aspect of the service.

With regard to access to activities in the community, carers were also positive regarding the support received from the service. When asked to 'describe how well the fostering service helps you in supporting the children you care for undertake activities in the community,' two thirds of those responding again described this as either 'excellent' or 'good,' with the other third describing the support as at least 'adequate.' Positive acknowledgments regarding the support received in this area of care were also received from placing social workers and those carers interviewed individually and in groups. 'Max cards' and 'Leisure Cards' provided to children and carers by the service were highlighted as being of positive benefit. One carer highlighted how the service had "increased financial support to allow (the child) to undertake activities." Another stated that " I have been provided with a 'Gateshead Active Card' and I have been funded for equipment I have bought."

With regards to how the fostering service and carers promote educational attainment, children and young people were asked directly about the level of support they received. Very positively two thirds of those who responded stated that they 'always' get the help and support they need. None of the responses received indicated that they did not receive support. One young person stated that "I (k)now if I need help with any of my homework I just need to ask." Another described how "I get loads of encouragement to do my school work." A third stated that "I am always told to do my homework and reading and go to school every day and we have been told not to stay of school every day."

Carers were also positive about the support and advice received with regards to the education of children placed with them. Two thirds of those responding described this as 'good' or 'excellent' with one third describing it as 'adequate.' One carer highlighted the "good communication between schools, social workers and myself." Another stated: "I contact the school and try to get extra help when needed. Social Worker offers to attend meetings with me if required and has rung 'RELAC' to see what help is available." Social workers placing children and young people through the service were equally positive in their responses, with all describing the educational support provided to children and young people as 'good.'

Interviews with carers did raise some individual concerns and issues with regard to previous educational support for individual children. These (two) examples were fed back to the service manager for their review. One example

highlighted by a carer of a broken computer, provided to a young person to support their education was fed back to the manager for action.

During this inspection the manager of the 'RELAC' service was interviewed. They confirmed the close links established with the Fostering Service and the positive monitoring role afforded through their membership of the fostering panel itself. The role of the 'RELAC' team in working with foster carers directly and providing support where children are changing school or have been excluded was confirmed.

The team are able to provide carers and children with direct access to a specialist teacher and dedicated educational support worker where necessary. Tuition is provided where needed at local libraries or through home visits. Access to books and additional educational materials for children are provided through local initiatives and regular 'book fairs' for children and their carers. Examination of care files provided some examples of delays in the provision of personal education plans (PEPs). The manager confirmed that the service has good systems to monitor the provision of personal education plans and the individual and collective educational attainment of looked after children. The close links developed with Independent Review Officers also allow individual monitoring and requests for outstanding PEPs. RELAC staff are also directly involved in the provision of training to carers in meeting educational needs, including any special educational needs. The service also attends care reviews where school staff are not available. Positively, statistics provided by the service confirmed that of those children leaving the care of the fostering service over the last 12 months 92% have been awarded at least one GCSE or GNVQ.

The RELAC team also work closely with the 'Teenagers 2 Work' scheme and 'Leaving Care' team to support their local initiative which promotes and recognises the practical achievements of older looked after children. The key-staff member for the 'Teenagers 2 Work' scheme was also interviewed during this inspection. The scheme provides opportunities for young people above the age of 14 years to benefit from direct work experience either within council services or with external employers. Positively, they were able to confirm that in the last six years 269 fostered children had benefited from work experience through the scheme, with good links developed with fostering staff, placing social workers, leaving care and 'RELAC' teams as well as foster carers themselves, to support, co-ordinate and achieve this.

As part of overall case tracking arrangements during this inspection carers providing 'short break care' to children and their families, were interviewed and care files examined. This provided very positive examples of the quality of the joint working arrangements put in place, as well as confirming that these arrangements positively recognise and support parents in their role as main carers to their children. One example of the placing social worker having not

visited the child placed whilst with their carers, was highlighted to the manager for their review.

Making a Positive Contribution

The intended outcomes for these Standards are:

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

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

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

10, 11.

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

EVIDENCE:

The overall response of carers when asked about the quality of children's networks with family and friends was 'good.' Those social workers responding were also positive when asked to comment on these areas.

Overall, the files examined contained clear recording and good evidence of the work done by carers to support appropriate contact between children, young people and their families.

Carers responding by questionnaire confirmed that they support appropriate contact to the benefit of children and young people in their care. One highlighted: "regular contact with family, always has plenty of friends." Another confirmed that the young person "always has contact regularly."

Some foster carers did highlight some individual issues with the potential to affect contact arrangements. One described that although a placing social worker had planned contact well in advance and provided written confirmation of these arrangements, they had failed to consider the carers commitment to other children also placed with them. To further promote and support contact between children and their families the service provides clear written guidance

to carers regarding the financial support available to them in meeting any mileage costs incurred. Despite the provision of this guidance, some individual carers spoken to during the inspection did express some uncertainty regarding their claiming mileage whilst facilitating contact. This was fed back to the manager for their review.

The previous inspection had recommended that the service work to ensure that processes to consult with children and young people are effective and that children be given clearer information on how to complain. Through discussion with young people, examination of their questionnaire responses and also a selection of their care files, it was confirmed that all young people, with two exceptions, knew how to complain if necessary. With regard to the two exceptions, positively, the same young people were able to confirm that they did know who to speak to if they were not happy or had a personal problem. However, their details were provided to the manager to ensure that they had received complaints information. Those children spoken with directly as a group were able to confirm that they had been provided with written information about the service through the young person's guide. However, some raised concerns regarding contacting their placing social worker by phone. In their questionnaire response one young person stated; " I usually contact my social worker (if I have a problem) but sometimes have to wait a few days or more to speak to her which is stressing if I really need to talk."

With regard to overall consultation, young people gave a number of very positive examples. With regard to carers asking their opinions one young person stated: "my carers talk to me about what I want in the future and help me so that I can achieve this." Another stated; "when I want a hobby she (my carer) will tell people to get what I would like and does what she can."

When carers were asked. 'How would you rate the fostering service at involving the children and young people that you care for in decisions about their day to day lives,' the overall majority described this as 'good,' with others describing this as either 'excellent' or at least 'adequate.' Only three negative responses were received from carers and in each of these the limited contact by the placing social worker was highlighted as the key weakness in consultation with the child placed.

Questionnaire responses received from placing social workers described the work undertaken by the service to consult with and involve young people in decisions about their lives as either good or adequate.

Carers were also positive about how the service involves children in how it (the service) is run. The vast majority described this as 'good' or 'adequate' with some describing this as 'excellent.' Some carers described access to the 'One Voice' children's consultation group and the 'Gateshead Youth Assembly' as positive ways in which this is achieved.

To review how the service was working to ensure that processes to consult with children and young people are effective, staff from Gateshead's 'Children's Rights' Service were also interviewed. They provided a number of examples of the direct work undertaken to support young people in providing their opinions to their own care reviews and also in gathering their overall views on the quality of support they receive from the service. The manager of the fostering service also highlighted the continuing aim of the service to further improve the arrangements by which children are encouraged to give written feedback to both their own and their foster carer's reviews. The manager also confirmed that since the previous inspection, the Children's Guides to the service had been re-issued to all children following consultation with them regarding the kind of advice and information children themselves feel they require when they are placed into foster care.

Achieving Economic Wellbeing

The intended outcomes for these Standards are:

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

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

29

Quality in this outcome area is good. This judgement has been made from evidence gathered both during and before the visit to this service. Gateshead Fostering ensures that appropriate and prompt payments are made to carers in accordance with its policies and procedures.

EVIDENCE:

Policies and procedures in respect of fostering allowances and payments to carers are in place. This information is made available to carers and staff through the foster carers handbook. Carers raised no concerns regarding their receipt of the necessary fostering allowances and the prompt payment of them by the agency. One carer did wish to clarify payment rates for carers providing respite and this was fed back to the service manager for their review.

In discussion, one carer highlighted how they had received allowance payments from the service to cover the cost of maintaining an empty foster care bed where 'safe care' issues were evident and had been planned for in the care of the one child placed with them.

Discussion with administrative staff and with the manager of the service confirmed that although administrative support to the service is currently limited due to staff shortage, priority is given by the team to ensure prompt payments are made to carers. The manager reported the positive feedback they had received from carers regarding this.

Management

The intended outcomes for these Standards are:

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

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

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

1,2,16,17,21,22,23,24,25 and 32

Quality in this outcome area is adequate. This judgement has been made from evidence gathered both during and before the visit to this service. Gateshead Fostering is an effectively managed service. Its team of social work practitioners provide good quality supervision and support to its carers. Management systems and records in use at the service are generally robust, however further recommendations are made regarding administrative staffing and their management arrangements as well as children's and carer's documentation.

EVIDENCE:

The previous inspection had recommended that the service should ensure that the Statement of Purpose (SoP) for the service as well as previous inspection reports were promoted and made available upon request to each social worker seeking to place children with the service. The manager was able to confirm that all team managers had been directly provided with this information, which additional copies made available upon request. As highlighted earlier in this report, the service has made further efforts to ensure that children do receive a copy of the Children's Guide to the service, with a positive response received by inspectors from the children interviewed.

The manager was also able to confirm that they have now completed their work and had obtained their required management qualification. This had unfortunately been delayed at the previous inspection due to their prolonged absence from work following serious personal injury.

The previous inspection had highlighted staff shortages within the service, particularly with regard to administrative support. Positively, recruitment had taken place earlier this year with positive benefits reported by staff to the service overall. Unfortunately, vacancies have subsequently occurred leading to a further shortage of staff, the effect of which was apparent during this inspection. Supervising social work staff gave examples of the direct impact of this, including more responsibility for record keeping, file maintenance and the preparation of carer training materials. Supervising social workers described the negative impact of this on the time available to them to provide direct support to and supervision of carers. The administrative staff interviewed were equally concerned by this and in discussion highlighted how their work was organised to ensure that priority was given to key areas of responsibility such as payments to carers and providing administrative support to the fostering panel. The previous inspection report had recommended that the service should review the arrangements in place to manage the administrative support provided to the service. Both the manager and administrative staff confirmed that this remained unchanged, with line management based outside of the fostering service, thereby limiting the direct support provided to the team itself.

The previous inspection also highlighted that some children placed with the service were not being visited regularly by their own social worker to ask about the care they received from their foster carers. Again during this inspection, examples of limited visiting were highlighted both by children placed and their carers. Positively, managers at the service were able to highlight the steps implemented in the limited time since the previous inspection to ensure that visits are carried out at the prescribed intervals. Team Managers have been

instructed both to monitor the completion of these statutory visits and to report back on the effectiveness of this to Senior Managers at regular intervals. Examination of children's files during case tracking provided some very positive examples of visit monitoring sheets being used and being checked by social worker line managers. However, other files did not contain these documents. In addition, poorly completed records created difficulties for inspectors in confirming that children's own statutory care reviews were taking place at the required intervals. These examples were fed back to the service manager for review with placing team managers and the independent review team.

The previous inspection had highlighted that not all foster carers were receiving statutory un-announced visits from their supervising social workers at least once each year. Examination of files and discussion with carers and staff confirmed that although some problems continue to exist in fulfilling this recommendation (mainly due to carers being out engaged in activities with children when their supervising staff call) there was good evidence that staff are working to fulfil this obligation and are monitored in this both by their managers, the fostering panel and independent review officers during each carer's annual review.

When asked to describe, 'how well the fostering service supports you in caring for the children you look after?'; carers were very positive in their questionnaire responses. The majority described the support received as 'good' with all others describing it as either 'adequate' or 'excellent.' One carer stated that: "Link workers are always there for you." Another described how "every resource, advice, requests for clothing has been responded to positively." Other comments received included: "Always there if you need to talk" and "they support us tremendously."

One carer raised their concern with regard to an individual response from the council's 'out of hours' social work duty team. This was fed back to the manager for their review. Supervising social workers highlighted their concern that dealing with initial enquiries from potential new carers through their own 'day time' duty system could cause delays in their ability to respond to duty calls from approved carers with children placed, again this was highlighted to the manager for their review.

When asked to comment on 'How good is the fostering service at ensuring that you can meet the needs of the children and young people placed with you?' carers were equally positive. With the majority also seeing this as good, none as poor. One carer stated: "link workers very good, district (placing) social workers need to be in more regular contact and ring the carers more regularly to maintain good information about the child."

The previous inspection report had recommended that the levels of participation of carers in training should be reviewed by the service. Although the manager was able to confirm that participation levels remained under

constant review, they acknowledged recent difficulties in arranging and supporting the services training programme effectively. Although a training budget is in place, shortages in administrative support and the loss of some training personnel had affected the provision of training in the short term. Positively, the manager highlighted the linking with trainers from the local "Fostering Network." Through this a special programme and series of workshops has been arranged regarding safe caring practice for carers, the programme will cover areas such as dealing with allegations and whistleblowing. Carers interviewed were positive about access to training needed to protect children. More experienced carers were able to highlight the extensive training previously undertaken and gave examples of refresher training being routinely provided aimed at ensuring that children are cared for safely. The take up of NVQ training by carers was noted to be low, in acknowledging this the manager highlighted the overall experience of carers working in Gateshead which may be contributing to a reluctance to participate in additional NVQ training. The manager confirmed that the service would continue to promote the benefits of this training and encourage carers to attend. Some evidence of the training provided is included within individual carers files, although within some files this record was not fully completed. It was recommended to the manager that a central record of training provided to and attended by carers would help the service both to plan future training and monitor the success of individual carers. The manager also confirmed that current Foster Care agreements in use would be reviewed to ensure that they state more clearly the obligation of foster carers to participate in required training.

During case tracking a number of children's files were examined. The quality of the information held within and overall presentation varied considerably, however, one file examined was commended to the manager both for the clarity in which information was presented and the prompt completion and provision of required information by the placing social worker. Other files provided examples of delays in the completion of required information as well as examples of poorly completed documentation. These were fed back to the manager for review with appropriate team managers and individual social workers. Positively, the manager was able to highlight plans to introduce a joint training programme for placing social workers and foster carers aimed at raising awareness and understanding of required LAC documentation.

The previous inspection had highlighted concerns regarding arrangements to store and archive carer records and the report had recommended that this be reviewed. Discussion with both the manager and administrative staff confirmed that this had not been achieved, with 'on site' storage at capacity and potential health and safety issues arising for staff from the current arrangements. A further recommendation is made with regard to this.

Appropriate policies and procedures are in place to assess, encourage and support the care of children and young people by family members and friends.

Support group meetings for these carers are facilitated and include elements of training to support carer development and good practice.

SCORING OF OUTCOMES

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Are there any outstanding requirements from the last inspection? Yes

STATUTORY REQUIREMENTS

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

| No. | Standard | Regulation | Requirement | Timescale for action |
|-----|----------|------------|---|----------------------|
| 1. | FS8 | 34 | Ensure that placing social workers provide the service with the information needed both to 'match' children successfully and fully inform carers of children's ongoing care needs. Children's files must contain all necessary 'LAC' documentation. | 01/01/07 |
| 2. | FS21 | 35 | Children placed with the service should be visited regularly by their own social worker and asked for their opinion about the care they receive. (Previous Timescale 1/3/06) | 01/01/07 |

RECOMMENDATIONS

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

| No. | Refer to Standard | Good Practice Recommendations |
|-----|-------------------|---|
| 1. | FE6 | Health and safety checklists should be signed and dated to provide evidence of when they were completed and subsequently reviewed. 'Safe caring policies' should also |

| | | |
|----|------|--|
| | | indicate that they had been reviewed, particularly when the placements of children and circumstances within the household changed. |
| 2. | FS15 | Arrangements to ensure that routine, three yearly, re submission of Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks for carers should be reviewed. The service should also ensure that procedures to routinely update medical checks for carers be confirmed. |
| 3. | FS16 | The service should review current arrangements to manage the administrative support provided to the service. |
| 4. | FS17 | The service should work to fill their current staff vacancies and improve the arrangements to provide cover to staff who may be absent. |
| 5. | FS21 | it was recommended that the process by which children's views are gathered and presented to carer review meeting's be reviewed. |
| 6. | FS23 | The service should continue to review the current levels of participation in the training programme provided. The service should work to further encourage the attendance of carers at training events provided to improve their skills and knowledge. |
| 7. | FS25 | The current arrangements to store and archive carer records should be reviewed to ensure that this is efficient. |
| 8. | FS30 | The agency should improve the timescales for the presentation of carer review reports to the fostering panel. |

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