



*Making Social Care
Better for People*

inspection report

FOSTERING SERVICE

Devon County Council Fostering Service

**County Hall
Topsham Road
Exeter
Devon
EX2 4QJ**

Lead Inspector
Romana Young & Jim Palmer

Announced Inspection
5 – 9 February 2007 10:00 am

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	Devon County Council Fostering Service
Address	County Hall Topsham Road Exeter Devon EX2 4QJ
Telephone number	01392 386052
Fax number	01392 386003
Email address	
Provider Web address	www.devon.gov.uk
Name of registered provider(s)/company (if applicable)	Devon County Council
Name of registered manager (if applicable)	Andrea Morris
Type of registration	Local Authority Fostering Service

SERVICE INFORMATION

Conditions of registration:

Date of last inspection 06/02/06 – 03/03/06

Brief Description of the Service:

Devon County Council fostering service is the major childcare county resource for children and young people looked after by the local authority. At the end of March 2006, the service had 320 approved fostering households, providing the following range of foster care services, for 423 children and young people:

- Long term or permanent care
- Time limited or temporary care
- Emergency care
- Short break care
- Family and friends or kinship care
- Parent and child care
- Family Care Worker Scheme (FCWS) or intensive fostering
- Remand care
- Private fostering

17% of approved fostering households provide the specialist fostering provision (FCWS or remand foster care). 40% of the approved fostering households have at least one child of the household, aged under 18 years, living at home.

The service operates three mainstream fostering office bases: one in Totnes (South and West team), one in Exeter (Exeter and East Devon team), and one in Barnstaple (North and Mid Devon team). There are three specialist fostering offices also. The two Family Care Worker Scheme teams are based in Totnes and Willand, and the remand fostering scheme is based in Exeter. The private fostering team is based at the Willand and Totnes offices. The fostering service employs 73 staff, on a full or part-time basis, including managers, supervising social workers and fostering support workers who work directly with foster carers, and office based administrative and support staff. The fostering service manager, based in the same office as the South and West mainstream fostering team, is supported in the management of the service by six locality based practice managers.

The service has links to specialist health, education, psychology and CAMHS services. There are now five designated nurses for children and young people looked after in Devon.

SUMMARY

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

This was an announced full key inspection to assess the fostering service's operation in line with the Fostering Services National Minimum Standards and Regulations, progress with matters arising from the previous inspection visit, and ascertain a baseline quality rating.

Two inspectors undertook this inspection over the course of one week, from 5 to 9 February 2007. Observation of the operation of a fostering panel and a foster care strategy group meeting took place prior to this, in January 2007, as neither of these were scheduled to be held within the week that was available for the inspection fieldwork activity.

During the course of the inspection, the inspectors visited the Exeter, Willand and Totnes fostering service offices and interviewed

- The fostering service manager
- One of the two fostering panel chairpersons
- Four of the six fostering service practice managers
- Three mainstream and one Family Care Worker Scheme (specialist fostering) supervising social workers
- The three fostering support workers who lead the "Children Who Foster" group
- One of the three placement coordinator
- The fostering panel administrator
- Fostering service administrative support staff.

The inspectors also observed one of each of the following meetings and spoke with some of the staff and foster carers who attended:

- A foster care strategy group meeting
- A male carers' support group meeting
- A mainstream fostering service staff meeting
- A fostering panel meeting
- A "Children Who Foster" group session
- Part of a mainstream fostering support group meeting
- Part of a training session foster carers on helping young people prepare for independent living.

Four foster homes (three mainstream fostering and one Family Care Worker Scheme) were visited and the inspectors spoke with the foster carers, and four of the children and young people living in those foster homes. One of the young people did not wish to speak with an inspector and so was not interviewed. Attempts were made to arrange for the parents of the children and young people placed in these foster homes to meet with the inspectors. An inspector was able to meet with a parent of one of the young people. Unfortunately, the parent of another had to cancel their meeting due to illness and another appointment could not be made within the timeframe available for

the inspection. An inspector tried to make contact by phone, instead, but was not successful.

Four foster carer files, and five children's and young people's case files, were inspected and the care managers for three of these children and young people were interviewed. The fourth care manager was on sick leave and so was not able to be interviewed.

A sample of fostering service staff files were inspected at County Hall and a visit was made to county's CRB disclosure office to check procedures for CRB vetting of staff.

70 young people's, 86 foster carers', 14 social workers' and 4 parents' survey questionnaires were returned. The responses in these were analysed and used to inform the judgements made in this inspection report.

Other documentation examined, and used to inform the judgements in this report, include the Annual Quality Assurance Assessment (AQAA), data sheets, and the appendix to PQA: policy and systems update form completed by the manager of the fostering service prior to the inspection; fostering service newsletters; the "Fostering A Better Education" foster carer training DVD produced by the fostering service; and other information supplied as requested.

A separate report has been produced on the arrangements for private fostering which were also inspected at this inspection visit. Due to a lack of time, the inspectors were not able to include the arrangements for kinship care in this inspection visit.

The inspectors thank the fostering service manager and staff, foster carers, young people, parents, and children's social workers for their cooperation and assistance with this inspection.

What the service does well:

Staff and foster carers show commendable enthusiasm for, and dedication to, providing a high quality fostering service for children and young people in need in Devon.

Generally, practice in the areas of the assessment, approval and support of foster carers is of a high standard. The role of the fostering support worker is highly valued by foster carers, particularly in relation to the activity programme they organise in school holidays and the support they give to children excluded from school. The foster panels are thorough in their considerations and well organised. Staff have opportunities for continuing professional development, and there is a clear management structure in place to support the work of the service.

Foster carers, generally, feel well supported by the service, particularly by their fostering supervisory social workers, and other foster carers. Some foster carers also reported that they receive excellent support from the child's social worker, although this was a very variable experience, with some foster carers reporting that they, and the child, had, at times, received a poor service from the child's social worker. Many foster carers also commented very positively on the support given to them, and young people, by fostering support workers, and they feel that this is a key role in helping to maintain placement stability and meeting individual children's needs. Foster carers feel that the training provided for their role is very good and that the foster carer support group meetings are a valuable source of support, information and guidance for them. The male carers' group observed by an inspector was well attended and highly valued by foster carers. The service also produces an informative and interesting fostering newsletter for foster carers three times a year.

Foster carers are child-focussed, and committed to providing a safe, stable, and caring, family environment for the children and young people in their care. Children and young people feel well cared for in their foster home. They also feel that foster carers listen to them, give them good support with their education and planning for their future, and encourage them to lead a healthy lifestyle. They feel included in the family life of their foster home and say that their foster carers are loving and kind to them.

Children's social workers feel that the service provides stable, caring, family based care for children and young people who are living away from their family, whether temporarily or long-term, and that children and young people are, generally, well, or very well, cared for. Some social workers commented that the service has some excellent foster carers who should be commended for their commitment and the level of support they provide for the children and young people in their care. The Family Care Worker Scheme is seen as a particularly successful part of the service.

What has improved since the last inspection?

There were four statutory requirements and four good practice recommendations made in the previous inspection report.

Action has been taken to ensure that all the statutory requirements and recommendations made at the inspection visit are being met, although further improvement is still needed in one of these areas:

- Recruitment and vetting checks are now better evidenced in staff files. Staff files are being audited to ensure that all required checks, for example, CRB checks, registration with the GSCC (for qualified social workers), are being undertaken, and renewed, where necessary.
- The fostering service has taken a number of steps to support the promotion of good educational outcomes for children and young people looked after. What still needs to be addressed are better strategic measures within the education system to ensure that all children and

young people are being provided with access to education and learning support which meet their needs.

- A new system for ensuring that the foster carer register is updated when changes are made to a foster carer's approval and that an updated foster carer agreement is then signed is now in operation.
- There is a stronger focus on ensuring that foster homes and the immediate environment are free of avoidable hazards. The health and safety check list has been amended, and an additional risk assessment completed if the foster home contains a dog. A check is made to ensure that any action required has been taken.
- Vacant social work posts have been successfully filled and the service should now be able to allocate a named, appropriately qualified social worker to supervise each approved foster carer.
- The system for approving a temporary exception to a foster carer's approval, or an exemption to the "usual fostering limit" of three children (unless they are all siblings) and the reviewing and monitoring of these arrangements, has been improved.

The "Children Who Foster" group for the support of foster carers' own children is an excellent development and model of good practice, led by skilled and enthusiastic staff. Children and young people at the group said that they enjoyed attending and welcomed the experience.

There is more stringent management oversight to ensure that foster carers' reviews are taking place within the statutory timescale.

A interesting new development for the service is the pilot scheme, being run in conjunction with the adoption service, to introduce concurrency planning to the range of care services on offer, with the aim of providing better continuity of care for babies and infants who may not be able to be successfully rehabilitated to their birth family.

What they could do better:

Many foster carers expressed concern about a lack of consistency in the support given to children and young people. They feel that the quality of the service a child or young person receives is dependent on how good, or competent, the child's social worker is, and that this is inherently unfair. Many foster carers said that many of the children's social workers provide a good, or even excellent, service, but that this is not the case across the children and families care management service as a whole. Many feel that social workers in children and families' care management teams work very hard, and do the best they can to provide a quality service, but are too overstretched, with too high a caseload, to give the time they need, to individual children and young people in their care. Some reported that social workers were not visiting, as they should, even when requested to by the child, and some children and young people said that they wanted to be able to see their social worker more often. Other foster carers reported that children's social workers change too often and that this is unsettling for the child and foster carer and can be

detrimental to the placement – one foster carer reported that, in less than a year, a younger child, in their care, had had three different social workers allocated to them. The inspectors are aware of the action plan currently being implemented, to improve consistency in service provision and quality performance monitoring, across the county, which should address these and other issues in the children looked after service.

Some foster carers reported difficulties in communicating with social workers, particularly if they work part-time. Many foster carers said that they had found using email an effective method of keeping in touch with social workers. Parents, generally, feel that their child's needs are being adequately met by the fostering service. The main issue raised by parents is that they do not feel well informed about their child's progress. All said that they would like more information about what is happening in their child's life, and their child's achievements, not just issues or difficulties that arise. Most said that they would like a regular written report on events in their child's life. Some complained that social workers are not communicating well with them and that agreed plans take a very long time to be implemented. The fostering service should investigate how these issues can be addressed strategically, and how foster carers and children's social workers can work together to keep parents appropriately informed of their child's progress and development.

While the service approved 43 new fostering households in the year to 31 March 2006, almost as many were lost, so there was only a small overall increase in the number of approved fostering households (up from 306 to 320). Children's social workers say that they are still finding limited (or no) choice in matching available to them, with continuing particular difficulty in meeting geographical need. More resources for the recruitment and assessment of additional foster carers is needed if the service is to increase the overall number of fostering households available and, thereby, offer greater choice in matching all areas of need.

An issue which is concerning not only for foster carers in this service, but, also, on a national level, is the number of allegations being made against foster carers and the devastating effect this, and any subsequent investigation, has on the foster carers, their family and the children in their care. Some foster carers perceive that there is an increasing risk of an allegation being made against them and, consequently, they are feeling more vulnerable and exposed than ever before. It is difficult to be certain if this is a general feeling amongst the foster carers as a whole, or if this specifically relates to those foster carers who have had contact with a foster carer who has had an allegation made against them recently, but concern about the level of risk of this, and how they might be treated, was a great worry for a significant number of the foster carers the inspectors had contact with. The service currently has a working group, which includes foster carer representatives, in place - tasked with looking at how the processes for dealing with allegations against foster carers, and any subsequent investigations, can be improved. A key focus of the work of this group is looking at the support available to foster carers at these times, and what are the best means to do this. Consideration should be given to

providing foster carers with individual membership of Fostering Network, as an additional support to foster carers, as this something that other local authority fostering services are now doing, which has had a positive impact on how foster carers feel valued and supported by their service.

The foster carer agreement is somewhat dated. The fostering service should consider reviewing and amending it to reflect, for example, core training requirements for foster carers, and the system for assessing and reviewing foster carers' skills and competencies now in place, and, also, make more specific reference to the written policies on safeguarding, and behaviour management, of children placed with foster carers, and the written procedure to be followed if a child is absent from a foster home without permission.

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. The summary of this inspection report can be made available in other formats on request.

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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.

JUDGEMENT – we looked at the outcome for Standard:

12

Quality in this outcome area is **good**.

This judgement has been made using available evidence including a visit to this service.

The systems in place to ensure that information about children and young people's health needs is obtained and shared with carers and that suitable health care provision is being provided are generally good.

EVIDENCE:

There are now five designated nurses responsible for ensuring that the health needs of children looked after by Devon County Council are being properly assessed and that children and young people are accessing appropriate health services. The designated nurses contribute an article on health promotion for each issue of the fostering newsletter.

In the questionnaire survey, young people reported that they get good advice and support from their foster carers about healthy living - particularly regarding healthy eating, keeping fit, personal hygiene and ensuring that they have regular medical/health check-ups and any necessary treatment.

Interviews with fostering service managers and staff, foster carers, young people, and their social workers and inspection of young people's case records and foster carer records demonstrated that there are good systems in place to ensure that young people's health needs are identified and provision made to ensure those needs are being met. Children and young people are registered with a GP and able to access to appropriate dental and optical services.

Discussions with foster carers and responses in the foster carer questionnaire survey confirm that foster carers are clear about their role in terms of helping

to promote the health of any child in their care and that they are provided good with advice and guidance in this area.

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.

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

3, 6, 8, 9, 15 and 30

Quality in this outcome area is **good**.

This judgement has been made using available evidence including a visit to this service.

There are good systems in place for the assessment, approval and support of foster carers but choices in matching are still limited, by a shortage of available placements. Staff recruitment and suitability checking procedures are sound. The foster panels are well organised and robust in their approach.

EVIDENCE:

Responses in the questionnaire survey show that young people feel well cared for in their foster homes. Some typical comments were "I feel part of the family"; "(my foster family) are kind and loving to me and take me everywhere"; "(I am) happy and content where I live"; "I feel I'm well cared for where I'm living now". All the young people who responded to the questionnaire survey said that they knew who to speak to if they were unhappy or had a personal problem. Most said that they would speak to their foster carer, social worker, teacher or a friend. Most said they were not being bullied. Some reported having experienced bullying at school, but also said that they had had the support of their teachers and foster carers in getting it dealt with.

94% of foster carers who responded to the foster carer questionnaire survey thought that the service was adequate or better at ensuring that they can meet the needs of children placed. 72% scored the service as good or excellent in this respect. 95% of foster carers who responded to the questionnaire survey thought that the service was adequate or better at supporting them in caring for the children they look after and 64% put the service's performance here at good or excellent. Foster carers also thought that they get good support from the service in maintaining placements, so that children and young people only move in a planned way. Children's social workers agreed with this. Both foster carers and social workers felt that the role of the fostering support worker is vital in helping to maintain placements under stress.

Discussions with foster carers, supervising social workers, and practice managers provided evidence that health and safety checks, and risk assessments, of foster homes are being undertaken and regularly updated. There was also some evidence that where action required to remove a hazard in the physical environment, or install a safety measure, a check is being made to ensure that this has been done.

Some further support is needed for foster carers in their day-to-day management of risks associated with specific behavioural needs of individual children, particularly for mainstream foster carers. Foster carers in the FCWS are given more guidance and, where necessary, a specific written risk management plan is drawn up, in conjunction with the young person's social worker. This approach should be more widely used with mainstream foster carers also, as some foster carers reported feeling "left on their own" to find suitable strategies to deal with specific behavioural issues, on a day to day basis, and unsupported by the child's social worker in this. An inspector was told that a new risk management and safe care policy is being developed but is not yet in operation. This needs to ensure that placing social workers, and other professionals, are included in drawing a written safe care/behaviour management plan, which is specific for each child placed, to supplement the generic safe care plan drawn by the foster care household.

Children's social workers still feel that there are not enough approved fostering households to provide sufficient choice in matching and that many children and young people are still having to be placed too far from their families and local communities.

The inspectors examined seven files of staff employed by the service since the last inspection visit and the CRB. All of the files held all of the required information. There was evidence that the GSCC registration of qualified social workers is being checked and that staff files are being audited. However, managers should always audit the staff file, when an internal appointment is made, to ensure that all the required information is held on the file and that

this is up-to-date, as the inspectors found one or two minor gaps in files for redeployed staff. The inspectors were given assurances by the senior HR officer and senior managers for the service that these would be rectified immediately.

The fostering panel observed was quorate, well organised, and very ably chaired. Material was sent out to panel members in advance. The panel members were well prepared, and focussed on relevant issues.

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.

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

7 and 13

Quality in this outcome area is **good**.

This judgement has been made using available evidence including a visit to this service.

Foster carers, generally, act as good advocates for the children and young people placed with them and try to ensure that children and young people receive the care and support, and access to opportunities and services, they need. Important links have been made between the service and the education service to improve support for young people who have been excluded from school but more needs to be done at a strategic level to ensure that all children and young people looked after are receiving adequate educational provision suited to their needs.

EVIDENCE:

In the questionnaire survey, young people were very positive about the help and support they are receiving with their educational achievement from both their foster carers and their teachers. Several young people said that they attended a "good school". One young person reported that, with the support and backing of their foster carer, they were able to change their school to one more suited to their needs. Others mentioned that they receive additional support within school, or attend a specialist school, to help with their special needs.

The service has done much in the past year to promote the foster carers' role in helping children and young people attain their educational potential. Guidance for foster carers, in the form of articles in the fostering newsletters, and a foster carer training DVD "Fostering A Better Education" has been produced.

However, discussion with fostering service practice managers and foster carers elicited that there are still some children and young people who are excluded from school and not receiving educational provision adequate for their needs. Examples given of this were of a child who has a Statement of Special Educational Need, which states that 0.8 support should be provided, but was only receiving one hour of tuition per day, and another child who received no educational input at all for several months. Staff and foster carers felt that there are still problems with interagency working, and that the designated teachers were not fulfilling their role as they should. Also fostering support workers who provide one-to-one support to young people excluded from school would like more assistance and guidance from schools in setting work for young people to do when they are excluded from school. They feel that they are too often left to work to their own initiative in this. These are strategic issues, not solely, or even mainly, within the control of the fostering service, and for this reason, and taking into account the measures the service has already taken to promote good educational outcomes for children looked after, a recommendation, and not a requirement, has been made.

Foster carers confirmed that they receive training in valuing diversity and promoting equality.

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.

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

10 & 11

Quality in this outcome area is **good**.

This judgement has been made using available evidence including a visit to this service.

In conjunction with the children and families service, the fostering service provides support and assistance to promote and maintain consistent and meaningful contact between children and young people and their families. Young people feel that foster carers are good at communicating with them. Foster carers are good advocates for the children in their care and keen to ensure that the child's voice is heard.

EVIDENCE:

The responses in the young people's questionnaire survey showed that young people feel that their foster carers are very good at listening to them and taking notice of their opinions. Some typical comments were "(my foster carer) is brilliant. If I have any problems I feel I can talk to her. She listens and helps"; "They listen to what I have to say and try to help me in any way they can"; "I can tell them things and they understand". Most young people also felt that their social worker listened to them and took notice of their opinion, although a small minority of young people did not feel this was always the case. Some made very positive comments about their relationship with their social worker, for example, "my social worker is wonderful – I talk to her a lot about what I want to do" and "he always listens to what we have to say", but a few said that they did not see their social worker often enough, or that they did not get on well with their social worker, or felt that sometimes their social worker did not always take enough notice of their opinions.

Discussion with foster carers and young people, and responses in the foster carer questionnaire survey showed that foster carers have very good understanding of how vital it is for a child to be encouraged and assisted to maintain contact with their family, and that they have a key role in this. Foster carers were open to promoting contact in a variety of ways (in accordance with the care plan), including hosting contact visits and review meetings in their home, encouraging and supporting telephone and written contact, and maintaining open communication with parents and other people of importance to the child. While some children's social workers feel that some foster carers should be more proactive in supporting a child's contact with their family, most reported that foster carers generally work very well in promoting and supporting contact, often in difficult circumstances.

Achieving Economic Wellbeing

The intended outcomes for these Standards are:

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

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

14 & 29

Quality in this outcome area is **good**.

This judgement has been made using available evidence including a visit to this service.

There are systems in place to help young people prepare for adulthood. The system of payments to foster carers generally works well.

EVIDENCE:

In the questionnaire survey, young people confirmed that they are helped to think about and plan for their future by their foster carers, who encourage and support them to do as well as they can educationally and to develop independence skills; by teachers and careers advisors at school; and by their social worker. However, a few young people commented that they needed more advice about what their options at age 18 are, and what support is available to them from the local authority aged 18+, if they are going onto university or further education/training.

One inspector met with some foster carers who were attending a training course on “preparing for independence”, led by a social worker from the leaving care team and a young person who had formerly been in the care of the local authority. Foster carers felt that the training was relevant and informative.

The service produces a booklet on current fostering allowances, each year, which is distributed to all foster carers.

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 1, 16, 17, 21, 24, 25 and 32 the key standards to be inspected.

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

2, 4, 5, 16, 17, 18, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25 and 26

Quality in this outcome area is **good**.

This judgement has been made using available evidence including a visit to this service.

Staff and foster carers are well managed and supported. Foster carers are provided with good quality training and encouraged to improve and develop

their skills. Overall, the management of the service is sound, although information management and the review of quality of care would be easier and more efficient with a more integrated, and fit for purpose, electronic record system.

EVIDENCE:

In November 2006, the fostering service manager was seconded to another senior position within the local authority, although she continued to be responsible for the collation of information, and preparation, required for this inspection visit. The management arrangements to cover for her absence from the service have been disrupted, as the temporary manager appointed left to take up a permanent position with another service, at the end of January 2007. CSCI were notified in writing of the appointment of another interim manager who is responsible for managing the service, from 1 February 2007, while the nominated manager continues with her seconded role. This disruption to the management arrangements does not appear to have had any overall detrimental effect to the service, at this time. In general, management of the service is good and the fostering service manager has provided good leadership for the service.

Discussions with foster carers, and responses to the foster carer questionnaire survey, showed that foster carers generally feel well supported by the service and feel that the training provided is very good, and relevant to their needs. Foster carers reported, in the main, to having good, even excellent, working relationships with the child's social worker and feel that, in these cases, the social workers are working in partnership with them, and that they value and acknowledge the foster carers' skills and experience. However, sometimes, foster carers feel that the child's social worker does not see them as an equal part of the "professional team" and does not give enough weight, or respect, to what they, as the child's carer, have to say about the child's needs. This appears to be more an individual failing, rather than a structural issue, and the planned reorganisation of the care management teams, with specialist teams of social workers responsible for the care of children looked after, and improved performance management systems, should address such inconsistent approaches within the care management service.

The foster carer assessments, and foster carer review reports, seen were detailed and comprehensive. Discussions with staff and foster carers, feedback in the foster carer questionnaire survey, and inspection of foster carer files, confirmed that supervising social workers are undertaking unannounced visits to foster homes, as well as planned visits to support and supervise foster carers. However, the inspectors found that there are still a small number of foster carers who are not being adequately supervised by an appropriately qualified social worker, although they are receiving regular and substantive visits from a fostering support worker. In discussion with an inspector, senior managers for the service agreed to take immediate steps to ensure that qualified social worker input is increased, in these anomalous cases, to a level

that meets NMS 22, and which includes regular visits, including unannounced visits, to the foster home by the named, appropriately qualified, supervisory social worker, with a record of these supervisory meetings being included in the foster carers' files. With this assurance, and given that this was an issue that affected only a very small proportion of the county's foster carers, this standard has been judged as met.

The inspectors found that the system for ensuring that the foster carer register and foster carer agreement are updated when a foster carer's approval has been altered (either following presentation of an assessment or reassessment at a foster panel, or after a foster carer review) is much improved.

In discussion with fostering service practice managers, the inspector was told that an exception certificate was in place for all foster carers who had a placement outside their current approval range, and an exemption certificate was in place in cases where a foster carer was caring for more children than the "usual fostering limit" of 3 (unless they are all siblings). Examination of a sample of foster carer files and the centralised exception/exemption record showed this to be the case. Foster carers confirmed that they had received written notification of exemptions.

There was evidence that these arrangements are being reviewed by fostering service practice managers. In some cases, the review of the arrangements appeared to be more perfunctory, than a robust review of the circumstances. Consideration should be given, in every case, to gathering the views of all parties involved as to how the arrangements are working, and whether it is in the best interests of all the children placed, and the foster carer's own children, for the arrangement to continue, or be extended. Where arrangements are of a longer standing nature, a foster carer review should be held and consideration given to whether or not the carer's approval should be changed. The level of exceptions/exemptions, and other evidence, shows that the service is still under-resourced in terms of numbers of placements available. The use of exceptions/exemptions is monitored quarterly.

The main difficulty to ensuring that correct data is in place, is that the IT and electronic information management system is far from ideal for purpose, lacking in integration and compatibility. It is necessary to input information, for example, on placements made, or a foster carer's approval status or availability, more than once, into different parts of the system, in order to maintain required records. This redundancy leads to a higher risk of inputting errors and is time consuming and wasteful of support staff time. Also, fostering service practice managers and social workers are not able to access the Care First children looked after electronic record system, which is again inefficient and creates communication difficulties. A recommendation has been made that the IT information management systems are reviewed and rationalised.

SCORING OF OUTCOMES

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

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

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

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

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

ENJOYING AND ACHIEVING	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
7	3
13	2
31	X

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

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

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

Are there any outstanding requirements from the last inspection? No

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

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.	FS26	Electronic information systems should reviewed and, where necessary, upgraded to allow for more efficient, integrated, and fit for purpose management of the information that the service is required hold, collate and review.
2	FS24	The local authority should review how systems for keeping parents appropriately informed of their child’s progress and development, while they are in foster care, can be improved.
3.	FS17	The fostering service should draw up an action plan for substantively increasing the number of approved fostering households, particularly in areas of unmet geographical needs.
4	FS13	The fostering service should ensure that education provided for those children not attending school is suitable to the child’s age, ability, aptitude and any special educational needs he may have.

5	FS9	The fostering service should ensure that foster carers are given, where necessary, a written behaviour support/risk management plan, which has been drawn up in consultation with and agreed by the child or young person's social worker, and which supports the foster carer in meeting any specific behavioural needs the child has, on a day to day basis.
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Commission for Social Care Inspection

Ashburton Office

Unit D1

Linhay Business Park

Ashburton

TQ13 7UP

National Enquiry Line

Telephone: 0845 015 0120 or 0191 233 3323

Textphone: 0845 015 2255 or 0191 233 3588

Email: enquiries@csci.gsi.gov.uk

Web: www.csci.org.uk

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