



*Making Social Care
Better for People*

inspection report

FOSTERING SERVICE

Stockton Borough Council Fostering

**Council Buildings
Town Centre
Billingham
Stockton-on-Tees
TS23 2LW**

Lead Inspector
Stephen Smith

Announced Inspection
23rd January 2006 09:30

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 Stockton Borough Council Fostering

Address Council Buildings
Town Centre
Billingham
Stockton-on-Tees
TS23 2LW

Telephone number 01642 526218

Fax number 01642 526210

Email address

Provider Web address

Name of registered provider(s)/company (if applicable) Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council

Name of registered manager (if applicable) Mrs Jackie Ward

Type of registration Local Auth Fostering Service

Category(ies) of registration, with number of places

SERVICE INFORMATION

Conditions of registration:

Date of last inspection 7th March 2005

Brief Description of the Service:

Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council has an integrated fostering and adoption service. The Child Placement Team is located within the authority's department of Children, Education and Social Care. The fostering aspect of the service provides placements in respect of short term/temporary, long term/permanent, bridging, parent and child, short breaks/sharing the caring (children with disabilities), respite care and emergency carers. At the time of the inspection there were approximately 104 children placed with foster carers, most of whom live within the boundaries of the borough. A number of these carers are approved as family/friends foster carers or have children placed under Regulation 38 (emergency placements with family/friends) and the team has a supervising social worker to work specifically with this group of people.

SUMMARY

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

The inspectors would like to thank all the children, carers, staff and children's social workers consulted about Stockton Borough Council Fostering Service for their warm welcome and the way they worked hard to help the inspectors do their job and find out what the fostering service is like. All staff in the fostering team, carers and children spoken to were very helpful and many people spent time filling in questionnaires and sending them to the inspectors before the visit to the service. Information and evidence in this report comes from questionnaires sent to foster carers, fostered children and placing social workers before the inspection and from written information supplied by the manager as well as from the things the inspectors saw and the people they spoke to when they visited. Questionnaires were returned from 15 foster children and 28 foster carers. 54 questionnaires were returned from placing social workers, many of whom had filled in several questionnaires because they had a number of children placed with different foster carers. The inspectors want to say a special thank you to these social workers who made the time to fill in and send these forms to us; the information was very valuable. All this information was used when this report was written.

A team of two inspectors spent four days with the fostering team and gathered information by:

- Talking individually with children, carers and fostering staff;
- Visiting foster carers homes;
- Group discussion with carers;
- Group discussion with children;
- Group discussion with staff;
- Interviews with children's social workers;
- Reading children's, carers and staff files;
- Reading records;
- Studying the questionnaires sent back to us;
- Reading records of the fostering panel meetings.

The fostering service does a good job at helping children live good lives with foster carers and is run well. Foster children said things like "I get looked after well" and "I feel safe and loved." One foster child said "I get to go on holidays, I get my own money to spend. I get a lot more clothes than I used to." No children who filled in questionnaires thought that any changes should be made to how the fostering service is run.

Two young people asked, in the questionnaire they returned, for the inspectors to include the following comments in the report, "I'm happy!" and "I like being fostered."

What the service does well:

The fostering service does lots of things well.

It is very good at checking out new foster carers and making sure that they provide good homes to the children they foster. The work they do to find out all about foster carers to make sure that they are the right sort of people to foster children is very good and they write very detailed reports to the panel (the people who help decide whether people should foster or not.) The panel makes good recommendations to the person who makes the decisions about foster carers. The fostering service is good at making sure that children get to go to foster carers who will be the right people for them.

The fostering service is good at helping foster carers to work with children and giving them the support they need. One foster carer said, "I think the staff do a very good job and are very supportive" and "I feel my support worker is always there for me." Another said, "I would just like to say I enjoy fostering, the children are great even when they challenge us. I wouldn't do this if I didn't feel valued for the work I do and supported by the family placement team and the child's social worker."

The fostering service is good at keeping children safe. Children often see their social workers alone so can tell them any worries they have and nearly all children said that they know how to complain and that their foster carers and the fostering service asks them what they think about the important things in their lives. Children told inspectors things like, "I feel safe and loved" and "They (foster carers) make sure I'm clean and safe."

Foster carers get to know all that they need to know about a children going to live with them and this helps them look after the child properly. Foster carers, fostering social workers and children's social workers are good at talking to each other to make sure that everyone knows what they need to know so they can help children.

The fostering service is good at making sure children get their health needs met and get a good education. It does good work with foster carers to make sure that children get all the help at school or with their health that they need. The fostering service also helps foster carers to be good at helping children keep contact with their own families and friends.

The manager of the fostering service is good at making sure that she knows all the important things about what is going on in the fostering team and what is happening to foster carers and children. She is good at making sure that the right things happen to sort out any problems or to make things better.

What has improved since the last inspection?

Since the last inspection the fostering service has made a lot of things better and done nearly all the things that the inspectors said needed to be done.

There are now staff who can run the fostering team when the manager is away.

The social work forms that are used to write down plans for children and how they are to be helped and fostered are filled in better and more information is written down to help people know how to look after children better.

The work to look after people who are fostering children from their own family is now run from the fostering team; this means the manager can make sure these people get helped and supported like other foster carers.

The manager is putting together a bag of things that will be used to help children who do not read very well to understand the children's guide to the fostering service.

The way the fostering service checks up on new staff had got even better and it is now very careful how it check people out to make sure that they are the right sort of people to work with children.

What they could do better:

The fostering service should keep on working to get foster carers to go to training sessions because some people said that some foster carers don't go very often.

The service should keep on working at the training it provides to make sure that foster carers all get first aid training and that the foster carers who need it get trained in how to stop and sort out bullying. It also should write down when foster carers get 'training' from staff when they visit their homes so that they know what training people have got and what they need.

Not all foster carers have 'safe caring policies' for their homes. Foster carers should all have these to show how they look after children and keep them safe.

Nearly half the children that filled in forms for the inspection said that they had not been given a children' guide about the fostering service. This guide has a lot of good information for children in it and the service should make sure that all children are given a copy.

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

Stockton Borough Council Fostering Service works effectively with foster carers to ensure that children's health needs are met and their health and development is promoted.

EVIDENCE:

Foster carer's files examined contained placement agreements that contained good information about children's health needs and the carers visited during the inspection showed that they know the health needs of their foster children well. Placement agreement forms set out the arrangements for consent to medical treatment clearly. Commendably, all foster carers who completed questionnaires said that they consider that they get enough information about the children they take and although, in interview, some foster carers said that they do not always get full information at the beginning of the placement they acknowledged that this information is often not known. One foster carer stated in the questionnaire, "We don't always get to know everything immediately but we get what they (the placing social workers) have."

Foster carer agreements require foster carers to meet children's health needs and foster carers said in discussion and in their responses in questionnaires that they have had training in a range of health issues including first aid, first aid for babies, autism, epilepsy HIV/AIDS and care for drug dependent babies. The health training that foster carers had received was appropriate to the needs of the young people they care for. Of the four foster carers whose files were examined, two had up-to date first aid training and another was newly approved. The other foster carer did not have up-to-date first aid training. The manager said that there is a rolling program of health and safety and first aid training and that arrangements will be made to ensure that carers attend this training.

Examples of foster carers working to seek additional health support for children were noted during the inspection. Files contained good records of situations in which specialist health services had been sought for young people. Records showed that the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) are involved with young people where necessary and there was evidence to show that foster carers had worked well with the specific medical condition experienced by one young person. One foster carer described the efforts she had made to ensure that a foster child could be registered locally with suitable GP and dental services.

Where matching reports had been carried out for long term foster placements the health and medical information in these was appropriately detailed and comprehensive. Observation of panel minutes showed that consideration is given to children's health and the carers' ability to meet these needs.

Records in children's files showed that Looked After Children (LAC) medical checks take place annually as required and that this system is working very effectively. A process in place to make sure that foster carers and other parties make sure that any issues noted or treatment required are dealt with.

Young people spoken to who were able to express an opinion said that their health needs are met. One said, "My foster carer gets me to the doctor if I need it and looks after me when I'm unwell." Others stated in the questionnaires they returned, "(My foster carers) give me food that helps with my growth and keeps me healthy", "They make sure I'm clean and safe" and "My foster parents give me healthy food at home and at school. They also teach me how to keep safe."

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):

3, 6, 8, 9, 15 and 30

Stockton Borough Council Fostering Service provides competent and well supported foster carers who meet children's needs very well and works hard to ensure that children are safe. The service is very thorough in its foster carer assessment and approval process and is good at matching children with foster carers who will be good for them. The fostering panel is effective and makes good quality decisions about the approval of foster carers to promote and safeguard children's welfare. The organisation's recruitment procedure is robust and makes good checks on the background and suitability of the service's staff members.

EVIDENCE:

The manager of the fostering service is competent to run the service and previous inspections have shown that full information, as required by the Fostering Services Regulations 2002, is in place to demonstrate her suitability to work with children.

Case tracking visits to foster carers showed that those visited provide a safe and nurturing environment. All foster carers visited welcomed the inspectors to their homes and the inspectors would like to express their thanks for this hospitality and the openness with which they discussed matters.

All foster carers files contained Health and Safety checklists and all foster carers case tracked had completed training in Health and Safety, either during or since their assessment and approval. Health and Safety checklists contained evidence that motor vehicle licence, insurance and MOT certificates are checked to ensure that transport arrangements are safe. During visits to foster carers' homes the inspectors noted evidence of safe practice, such as electrical socket covers for those working with younger children.

The assessment and approval process for foster carers is thorough with commendably detailed 'Form F' (foster carer assessment) reports being completed. This assessment includes comprehensive consideration of the foster carers and their home including an examination of their caring ability and the physical safety of the home. Regular supervision of foster carers takes place and health and safety assessments are updated regularly at annual foster carers' reviews.

The Placement Information Record (PIR) forms used as placement agreements by the fostering service contain information about the matching arrangements for placements. Additionally the service uses Referral for Placement forms that contain detailed information about children's needs. These forms are completed jointly by the young person's social worker and the supervising social worker from the fostering team. These help provide comprehensive information to assist the matching process. Placing social workers spoken to said that the fostering service tries hard to provide foster carers that are well matched to the child's needs and have been effective in doing this despite pressures on services. One social worker said that, in his experience, the service tries hard to provide well matched foster carers even for emergency placements.

Every foster carer who completed a questionnaire said that they get enough information about children's background where this is known. This is commendable and the good level of information helps the matching process and improves the quality of the placement for the child. Social workers' level of satisfaction with the suitability of the foster placement their young person is living in is high. In response to the question, "How well do you think the foster carer is looking after this child?" 87% of questionnaires stated the child is looked after "Very well indeed." The remainder said "Quite Well" or "OK most of the time". No social worker expressed the view that the carer was looking after the child "Quite badly" or "Badly." The quality of the matching process is also evidenced by the social workers' views that 96% of children were being cared for in line with their Foster Placement Agreement (in the other cases the social worker said that the situations had changed and the agreement needed to be updated.) Responses also showed that social workers consider that every child for which they returned a questionnaire is being looked after in line with the local authority's plan of care for the child. This level of satisfaction with the quality of foster placements is extremely positive.

Detailed matching reports were in place in situations where young people were being matched with long term foster carers and these contained evidence of the thorough work undertaken to ensure that suitable foster carers are found to meet the needs of young people.

Children spoken to on visits to foster carers' homes spoke very highly of their foster carers. One said, "I'm at home here, I'm happy." Other comments made or written in questionnaires included "I get looked after well," "I'm made very happy" and "Even my bad days are good with my foster carers." One young person said the best thing about foster care was "Having a settled family."

Evidence was available to demonstrate the efforts made by the fostering service to provide support, advice and training to assist with placements for children from minority ethnic backgrounds. A development worker for the Black and Asian community is line managed within the family placement team on a secondment basis and the manager described the range of work being carried out to support foster carers in this area.

Foster carers receive clear guidance in their preparation training and in the foster carer handbook about protecting children. This includes information about managing children's behaviour, permitted and prohibited sanctions and child protection. Training needs including child protection are identified at foster carers' reviews. Foster carers interviewed said that they had not received child protection training for some time. The manager explained that child protection training is provided within preparation for fostering training and updated training is provided from the child protection committee when things change. She said that information and guidance is retained within the foster carers' handbook and any particular training need for foster carers in relation to a child being placed is identified when the placement match is carried out and appropriate training arranged. She said that supervising social workers carry out informal 'training' with foster carers within their supervision and that child protection issues are discussed within this forum. It was evident from records of foster carers supervision that any training needs are identified; it is recommended that a record is maintained of any 'training' provided to foster carers in this manner.

The foster carer agreement sets out that foster carers must follow Stockton Borough Council's policy on permitted and prohibited punishments and this is covered in the preparation to foster training and in the foster carers' handbook. 97% of foster carers who completed questionnaires and all those spoken to said that they understood the permissible and prohibited punishments and the great majority of foster children only reported permissible sanctions such as "grounding" and "loss of TV or activity".

One foster child said that she had received some sanctions that were not permissible, the supervising social worker was aware of these situations and provided information to show the situation was not as described and had been dealt with. Information about bullying and unauthorised absence is available in the foster carer handbook and an effective procedure for dealing with unauthorised absence is included as an appendix to this handbook. The manager maintains a central record of any unauthorised absences for monitoring purposes and a placing social worker cited an example of absconding being dealt with correctly by the foster carers.

It was noted that foster carers have not been provided training in identifying, preventing and responding to bullying and it is recommended that this is provided to those who need this.

Two of the four foster carers' files looked at contained a safe caring policy relating to the foster home developed by the foster parents. The manager said that such a policy should be in place in the other files. One safe caring policy was completed prior to the current child being in placement. The manager said that any specific safe caring needs relating to an individual placement would be identified on the foster placement agreement. Following discussion with the manager it is recommended that a specific section be created in this document to ensure this matter is covered. Foster carers files contain information about any allegations made about them and the action taken to investigate these and any outcomes. The manager maintains a central system to monitor allegations made. Over 83% of children said, in their questionnaires, that they know how make a complaint should they need to and questionnaires from social workers relating to 54 children (all those whose social workers answered the question) said that all those children are safe in their placement.

One staff member had commenced employment with the fostering service since the last inspection in March 2005. This staff member's recruitment file was examined. All information required by the Fostering Services Regulations 2002 and the Fostering Services National Minimum Standards was in place and showed that a thorough and rigorous recruitment procedure is operated. The fostering service has begun to apply for updated Criminal Records Bureau disclosures as some are nearing three years old.

Observation of minutes of the fostering panel showed that panel is thorough and robust in its consideration of prospective foster carers. Minutes showed that an in depth consideration of the merits of the application was considered with questions and comments being raised. The notices of approval for foster carers, signed by the agency decision maker recorded their approval and carried full details of the terms of that approval. It was noted that panel performs a quality assurance function regarding the quality and accuracy of the assessments presented to it.

The make up of panel meets the requirements of Regulation 24 of the Fostering Services Regulations 2002 and contains people with appropriate expertise. Panel includes people with the expertise and background set out in Standard 30 of the Fostering Services National Minimum Standards. Minutes of panel meetings showed that all meetings where decisions had been taken were quorate in line with the appropriate regulation.

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):

7, 13 and 31

The fostering service works with foster carers to provide children with positive educational and leisure opportunities and to promote their academic achievement. It ensures that diversity and equality are promoted.

EVIDENCE:

Observation and discussions during the inspection showed that foster placements examined were doing a good job of meeting the specific needs of the children in placement. As stated earlier in the report, placing social workers consider that children are being cared for well in line with their local authority care plan and placement agreement. Placement agreement forms contained information about young people's routines including activities and evidence was available, in questionnaires and from discussion, of young people taking part in a wide range of leisure activities. Young people told inspectors of the leisure activities they undertake and the support they receive from foster carers to do these activities. One young person said, "My foster carer takes me to sport and picks me up. Other activities undertaken by young people include, swimming, guides, karate, drama, music, football and so on. Two young people told an inspector they did not get to do many activities but then told of holidays and trips they have been on and talked about a lot of other activities they do. The local authority employs a Children's Rights and Participation Officer to help young people engage in activities and to seek their views and involve them in the service they receive.

Equal opportunities and anti-discrimination training is provided in the preparation to foster training and the service places a high priority on encouraging an awareness and understanding of the needs and lifestyles of other cultures. A development worker for Black and Asian communities is seconded into the family placement team and provides training and events for foster carers and other people. A buddy system is in place to support children from ethnic minority communities. LAC documentation examined contained information about children's background and culture and any needs are identified in the foster placement agreement.

Visits to foster carers and examination of their files and those of the children they care for demonstrated some very effective work to encourage and support young people with their education. Foster carers gave examples of the work they had done with schools. One new foster carer had proactively gone into school to introduce herself and inform school of the changes experienced by a child newly placed with her. Another described how she sought an appropriate nursery placement for a child. Foster carer agreements set out requirements of foster carers to promote educational achievement and arrangements for doing this are in the placement agreement. All young people's files examined had Personal Education Plans (PEPs) in place and up-to-date where they were needed and contained other educational information and school reports where appropriate.

The fostering service provides foster carers with resource bags (known as SPLATT bags) to help them promote foster children's educational achievement and training is provided in the use of these bags. The manager told inspectors about a plan to develop these into specific literacy and numeracy bags and develop more foster carer training. The service is planning to develop a fostered children club with the prime aim to offer foster carers a break to attend meetings and so on. It is, however, also planned that the Children's Rights and Participation Officer and a teacher will be present at this club to assist children with their homework.

A young person said, "I like school, I do a lot of things after school." Others commented in questionnaires about the help they get with their schooling including, "(My foster carer) helps me with my homework," "They (foster carers) help me a lot with everything to do with school" and "I am given the computer to use and I can do my homework at the table and they (foster carers) help me when I need it."

Clear arrangements are in place to ensure that parents remain the primary carers and decision makers in situations where children are receiving short term and respite care and for those provided services from support carers. Arrangements for approval, review, supervision, support and training are provided on the same basis as mainstream carers.

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 and 11

Children's contact with their families is well promoted by the fostering service. The fostering service is good at consulting with young people, their families and with foster carers.

EVIDENCE:

The importance of promoting appropriate contact between young people and their families is set out in the foster care agreement and information is included in the foster carers' handbook. The foster placement agreement contains information about contact arrangements and foster carers spoken to during the inspection told inspectors about the actions they take to support contact. Discussion with foster carers, supervising social workers and children's social workers showed that support arrangements are in place for young people to maintain contact with their families and examples of effective support for foster carers were evident. Foster carers spoken to gave specific examples of situations in which they had done a lot more than was expected to promote contact and support birth families. One foster carer had received a thank you card from a fostered child's birth parent saying that her care had been impressive.

Two young people spoken to during the inspection said that they are not allowed to have friends visit them or stay overnight at their foster home. The foster carer said that she is concerned about the suitability of some of the children's friends and the supervising social worker was aware of some issues with friends in the past.

Both the foster carer and supervising social worker said that one young person was going to have a friend stay overnight but that this had fallen through

because of the friends other commitments and the young person mentioned something about this to the inspector. The fostering service undertook to look into this situation.

With regard to how foster parents work with children's families, questionnaires were returned from social workers in respect of 54 children. Of these 62% said the foster carer worked with the child's family "Very well" and 26% rated this as "Fairly Well". 5% of questionnaires rated the work as "Average" with only 2% (1 questionnaire) rating it as "A little disappointing." No response rated the foster carer's work with the child's family as having a "Poor record."

Children interviewed as part of the inspection process told the inspectors of things that they had been asked about and about the choices they have in their lives. 13 of the 14 of children who answered the question in the survey said that their foster carers consult them about their care and the things that they do. Examples of the things they are consulted about include, punishments, school, holidays, food, clothes and activities. One said, "The things we do, where I go and what I want out of life." 13 of the 14 young people said that they had been asked their opinions about their foster carers. Records of information gained for foster carers' reviews contained evidence of children being consulted about their carers as part of the review process. 13 of the 14 young people who answered the question in the questionnaire said that they see their social worker alone and 12 of these children said that they know how to make a complaint.

Only just over half the young people consulted said that they had received a copy of the children's guide. The manager should investigate this and ensure all young people get a copy of this guide. The manager showed the inspectors the work being undertaken to develop a young person's guide in the form of a resource bag with pictorial, interactive and play tools to convey the necessary information to young people. The local authority's Children's Rights and Participation officer is engaged in activities with young people with the aim of giving them a voice in how they are cared for.

Foster carers also commented positively on the fact that they are consulted about the care of children. 92% foster carers who answered the question in the questionnaire said that they are consulted about the care of their foster children with 95% saying that they are listened to or sometimes listened to at reviews. All foster carers except one shared care foster carer said that they attend reviews.

All people consulted commented positively about the effectiveness of the working arrangements between foster carers, children's social workers and supervising social workers.

Children's social workers spoken to were very positive about the effectiveness and professionalism of the fostering team and 98% of children's social workers

said, in questionnaires, that they are kept well informed about events affecting the child in placement.

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)

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

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

29

The fostering service has an effective and appropriate system for making foster carer payments that enable carers to meet children's needs.

EVIDENCE:

Stockton Borough Council Fostering Service has a structured policy in place regarding fostering allowances. Foster carers receive information about payments appropriately and clear information is set out in the foster carer agreement. No foster carers cited problems with the system for making foster carer payments. Carers spoken to told the inspectors that they can claim expenses for additional costs of supporting the child. None of the foster carers with whom the inspectors had contact raised concerns about the level of allowances. Clear information is provided in the foster carer agreement about foster carer payments.

The manager and some foster carers told inspectors of a forthcoming change in the way payment bandings are handled and written information supporting this was provided. The new scheme will reward foster carers for completing training.

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, and 24 the key standards to be inspected at least once during a 12 month period.

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

17, 21, 22, 23 and 24

Children receive care from well supervised foster carers who receive a high level of support from the fostering team. Record keeping is good and children's records would help a child reading them to understand his or her circumstances. Foster carer training is good and individualised but foster carers' attendance at training events could be better.

EVIDENCE:

Evidence gathered from the inspection showed that the fostering team is sufficiently well staffed to carry out its responsibilities. Several foster carers stated in their questionnaires that they did not think that there is enough staff in the team but none cited problems that might suggest this and the overwhelming majority were extremely positive about the staff team and the support received from them. One foster carer said, "There's always someone you can go to for advice and if they can't help they always find someone who can." Another said, "It seems like a very good organisation, very friendly but still professional enough to carry out all the duties I have asked them to do." The staff of the fostering service are well qualified and experienced social workers and undertake ongoing training.

At the time of the inspection the service was engaged in a media campaign to attract new carers for a specialist foster carer scheme.

The quality of recent foster care 'Form F' assessments and approval reports inspected is very high. Discussion with supervising social workers and foster carers showed that a thorough and rigorous process is followed. This process takes into account the circumstances of the applicants and includes a very thorough checking and vetting procedure. The assessment and approval process of a new foster carer was seen to be well paced, though a number of foster carers said in their questionnaires that the process of assessment was too long for them. The great majority of respondents said that the process of assessment was appropriately thorough.

Where matching assessments had been carried out on foster carers being considered for long-term, matched placements with children these were detailed and thorough with close consideration of the suitability of the placement for the particular child.

The fostering service has a clear strategy for working with foster carers that is set out in brief terms in the foster carer agreement. The foster carers' handbook contains full details of what the fostering service expects from foster carers and vice versa. Training, an individual supervision system and support groups are provided and the fostering team operate a duty system offering foster carers telephone advice and support during the day. Clear information is available to foster carers about the Emergency Duty team and how to access this in emergencies overnight and at weekends. The manager said that offering out of hours support from within the fostering team is being considered.

Foster carers receive annual reviews with detailed reports being produced. The first review is presented to the fostering panel, after that a separate scrutiny panel monitors review reports for quality assurance purposes.

The great majority of people consulted reported good communications between children's social workers, fostering social workers and foster carers. One child's social worker said that this is the best thing about the fostering service and foster carers said things like, "Information is passed on well" and "I just pick up the phone to either the child's social worker or my link worker, I know they'll listen and pass things on." Children's social workers said, in questionnaires that communication with the fostering team is good with 98% stating they are informed about significant events affecting the child. One social worker cited an example in which he was not informed of a child being moved into a placement with a child he already had in the placement; in discussion he said that he thought that this was an emergency situation. Some foster carers said that communication with children's social workers is sometimes less good than with the fostering team but, generally, they accepted the pressure of work faced by the children's social workers.

Interviews with foster carers and supervising social workers and examination of foster carers' files showed that an effective supervision system is in place for mainstream and kinship foster carers. It is evident that regular visits take place to foster carers including unannounced visits. Foster carers' annual reviews take place appropriately and review reports were in place in the files examined. Foster care agreements set out the expectation that foster carers undertake training and receive supervision and also makes sure that foster carers understand the support and services they are entitled to from the fostering team. All carers spoken to had received and were aware of the contents of the foster carer handbook. One said, "It had a lot of useful things in it." Foster carers spoken to said that they know how to make a complaint about the fostering service and 88% of questionnaires stated that written information about this had been received. All foster carers spoken to said that they are very confident that the service will address any concerns that they have. One carer who said in their questionnaire that they had made a complaint said that it was satisfactorily resolved.

All foster carers from the fostering service visited as part of the inspection process and those who attended the meeting with inspectors said that they receive very good support from the fostering service and observation of supervision records confirmed this. The manager said that full foster carer supervision is scheduled on a three monthly basis with a less detailed supervision session taking place in between. Observation of records and discussion with foster carers and supervising social workers showed that generally supervisory visits take place with a monthly or six weekly frequency. Foster carers interviewed said that a duty worker is always available to speak to if their own supervising social worker is not available. Responses in questionnaires showed that foster carers are generally extremely pleased with the support offered by the fostering team. A great many foster carers questionnaires rated the high levels of support as the best thing about the fostering service.

Comments included, "It is friendly and supportive, there is always someone to help if you need it" and "Excellent support from link worker and the child placement team." 78% of foster carers' questionnaires stated that they are supported 'Very well indeed' and 22% said 'Quite well' or 'OK most of the time'. One foster carer said that not enough support is provided but this was an isolated view. Two foster carers told inspectors of difficulties they had experienced getting out of hours support from the authority's Emergency Duty Team. The manager and a foster carer informed inspectors that the fostering service is developing an out of hours support facility from within the fostering team.

All foster carers spoken to said that they have received a foster carers' handbook and 96% of foster carers' questionnaires stated that they had receive written information about the services' expectations of foster carers.

The preparation for fostering training is good and records contained information of the course content. Foster carers receive training on a wide range of issues and it is evident from discussion with foster carers, supervising social workers and the manager that training is individualised based on carers' specific needs. Training undertaken has included Adoption Act, autism, court training, sexual abuse awareness, behaviour management, first aid, attachment disorders and many others. Placing social workers spoken to said that they considered the foster carers to be sufficiently well trained to carry out their role. Although a wide range of training had been provided in the last year it was noted that some foster carers, according to records, had done very little training. The manager acknowledged that it is difficult engaging some foster carers in training and two foster carers echoed this view. The manager said that the proposed new foster carers' banding and payment scheme would require foster carers to undertake a certain amount of training to maintain their payment level. The service should continue to develop methods to try and engage more foster carers in training.

It was noted that no foster carers have received training in preventing and responding to bullying. It is recommended that this is provided to those foster carers who are working with children in situations where bullying is possible. It was also identified that two foster carers case tracked had not received first aid training although one was new and the manager said that training is to be provided. The service should make sure that all foster carers have suitable, up-to-date first aid training.

At the last inspection it was recommended that the fostering service should develop its ability to provide NVQ level 3 training in child care to foster carers. The manager said that this issue is being given priority and that the authority's training section is to take this forward.

During the inspection nine young people's case records were examined. With minor exceptions full LAC documentation was in place in these files including records of LAC medicals, all reviews and PEPs. Files contained core assessments and chronologies that would help a young person reading the file to understand his or her background. Foster carers keep records in relation to the children placed with them and have secure arrangements to store these records.

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	4
9	2
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	X
2	X
4	X
5	X
16	X
17	3
18	X
19	X
20	X
21	3
22	3
23	2
24	3
25	X
26	X
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	FS2	The manager should, as identified at the last inspection, continue to work towards completing the NVQ Level 5 in Management she is taking.
2	FS9	The foster carer supervision record should include a record of any "training" provided to foster carers during supervision sessions.
3	FS9	All foster carers should have safe caring policies in place.
4	FS9	Details of any safe caring issues discussed should be recorded within the foster placement agreement.
5	FS1FS11	The fostering service should ensure that all young people receive a copy of the children's guide.
6	FS23	The fostering service should continue to develop methods of encouraging foster carers' engagement in training.
7	FS23	All foster carers should receive first aid training and bullying training should be provided as necessary.
8	FS23	The fostering service should develop its ability to provide NVQ level 3 training in child care to foster carers.

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