



*Making Social Care
Better for People*

inspection report

FOSTERING SERVICE

St Helens Council Fostering Service

**St Helen`s Council
73 Corporation Street
St Helens
Merseyside
WA10 1SX**

Lead Inspector
Mrs Lynn Paterson

Key Announced Inspection
20th November 2006 10:00

The Commission for Social Care Inspection aims to:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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SERVICE INFORMATION

Name of service	St Helens Council Fostering Service
Address	St Helen`s Council 73 Corporation Street St Helens Merseyside WA10 1SX
Telephone number	01744 456 526
Fax number	01744 611 550
Email address	
Provider Web address	
Name of registered provider(s)/company (if applicable)	St Helens Council
Name of registered manager (if applicable)	Mr A Gardiner
Type of registration	Local Auth Fostering Service

SERVICE INFORMATION

Conditions of registration:

Date of last inspection

Brief Description of the Service:

St. Helens Social Services Fostering Team are based in Wesley House which is situated in St. Helens town, close to car parks, bus and train stations making it open and accessible to visit.

The office accommodation is sited on the fourth floor and provides adequate space for the fostering staff to carry out their role. The fostering team comprise of specialist workers who are trained and experienced in the areas of fostering with their main functions being to recruit, assess, train and support foster carers. Professional and experienced administrative staff provides assistance and support to the team.

SUMMARY

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

The inspection of St. Helens Fostering Service commenced on 20th November 2006 and was carried out over a five -day period. Prior to the inspection discussions had been held with the service manager and team manager and a timetable had been arranged as to how the visit would be organised.

The first day was spent meeting with the team manager and staff and reading files. The following days involved discussions with agency staff, supervising social workers attending a fostering panel, foster carers training, foster carer's forum and visits to foster carers and young people.

Eight foster carers and young people looked after files were examined in detail. Agency staff files records were verified, panel files were looked at and panel records viewed.

Six carers had been contacted by telephone for discussion about their perception of the agency and letters had been sent to all foster carers and young people in placement to gain insight into how they viewed the level of support provided to them from the agency.

Policies and procedures were also looked at during the site visit and a tour of the premises was undertaken.

Fieldwork included discussions with "placing" social workers, "looked after children's" nurses, "looked after children's" education officer, and observations of various agency meetings.

Over seventy completed questionnaires were returned from foster carer's and young people.

What the service does well:

The fostering team have benefited from a change of premises since the previous inspection and they now are able to work together in the one area. Staff revealed this has enhanced team working and information sharing systems.

The team have recruited more support workers and feedback from staff, foster carers and young people is that these workers are of enormous value to the service.

Staff said the atmosphere in the team is one of great positivity and comments from staff included: -

"We work well together as a team and assist each other and share information",

"The team is well managed, the manager is supportive and works hard to maintain our team spirit",

"The support workers have made a great difference to our work load, they are a most valuable part of our service",

"We all get on and assist each other to make sure we get it right for the foster carers and young people looked after".

The statement of purpose has been revised and the agency mission statement clearly identifies that the services main mission is to provide good quality alternative families for children who need to be looked after by foster carers.

Staff revealed they have clear job descriptions and those spoken with displayed good knowledge of their role and the aims and objectives of the service.

All staff presented as qualified experienced people who had a true commitment to providing positive outcomes for looked after children.

Most Foster carers said they received good quality training and good support from the fostering service staff. Comments included: -

"Staff are reliable and supportive and our link worker is very experienced and asks regularly how things are",

"The fostering services are good and any problems I may have are dealt with immediately by my link worker"

"They provide support and guidance and keep carers up to date on policies and procedures".

"Our link worker supports us all the way and is there whenever needed".

"The fostering service, help with any difficulties I may encounter. The support workers also provide excellent assistance, the service should employ more".

"The training is good and we are trained to understand how to provide quality care for looked after children to include contact and life story work".

Documentation examined revealed that the fostering service carry out a high standard of pre approval assessment and foster carers files held details to show that foster carers are provided with good quality post approval support.

Children and young people spoken with and information obtained from questionnaires identified that they were generally happy with the care and support they received. Comments included: -

"I am well looked after and I get help when I need it",

"I am helped to think about my future because it should be good and I don't think about the past because its history".

"I get listened to all the time and never get ignored"

"I am happy here, my carer listens to me and helps me with things".

"I am happy with my carer and I feel safe and loved "

"I am happy and feel safe where I live".

What has improved since the last inspection?

Documentation, discussions and observations identified that the service has made many improvements in the past year.

The restructuring of the service and appointments of many new staff has brought about changes to practice, which has enhanced service delivery and provided more positive outcomes for foster carers and children/young people looked after.

Children and young people have been encouraged to contribute their views to the corporate parents action plan and are included in interviewing members of staff.

The child placement strategy has been implemented and has focused on increased recruitment and retention of foster carers in order to give greater placement choice.

The foster carers training programme has widened and most foster carers said they were now offered training to meet individual need.

The service has established a foster carers forum, which is chaired by the Senior Assistant Director and attended by foster carers and managers throughout the Children and Young Peoples Service. Observations of this meeting revealed it was a well- managed meeting in which information sharing and new ideas are welcomed and will be instrumental in leading future service development.

New guidelines on child safe care practices have been introduced and foster carers said they have been provided with updated information about child restraints in respect of transportation.

The foster panel has an independent chair and the education officer for looked after children, has joined the panel.

Foster carers payments have been revised and increased and most carers stated they were happy with this increase.

The community support workers have increased in number which was seen to be a very positive addition to the service by staff, foster carers and young people who said the support provided was excellent.

New policies and procedures have been put in place in respect of foster carers attending The Fostering panel, the structure of the annual review panel and communication systems between social workers and managers in the field - work teams.

Discussions with the service manager and team manager identified that improvements had also been made to the quality of inter agency working in relation to providing support to carers and children especially in the area of community support workers.

Discussions also revealed, the service has designed a specific training for kinship foster carers. Kinship carers spoken with said they were happy with the higher level of training and support now provided.

What they could do better:

Whilst the service has implemented many new policies and procedures, feedback from some foster carers and young people continues to be negative in respect of communication, contact and information sharing from the fieldwork social workers. Comments from foster carers included: -

“We got a poor level of information about the child, I think we should know about what a child has been through, so we can help the child”,

“The communication between the child’s social worker could be much improved”,

“We know nothing about this child before placement and as a consequence the placement broke down. This was not fair on us or the child”

“Communication of information varies greatly. Sometimes information is given in written format – quite jumbled- just papers in a file with no structure. We should be talked through the process”,

“Nobody asks my foster child about her/his day to day living, or any other care, so his/her views are not dealt with”.

Comments from children/young people included: -

“My mums link worker supports us both but I don’t get enough support from my social worker or the education service”

“I know about things because my foster mum tells me but social services don’t give me information about anything”.

“I don’t know who my social worker is, they change all the time”,

"My foster child has not had a visit from his/her social worker for over five months",

"S/he had not had a social worker visit for ages and then one day a man appeared with no introduction to say he was now his/her social worker, it did not seem right".

It should be noted however that there were also many positive comments received about the input of children's/young people's social workers and it was accepted that their role was sometimes one in which time management was difficult.

Discussions were held with the fostering team manager who advised that she was meeting with children's field work managers with a view to addressing any shortfalls in this area.

Other concerns raised involved the limitations of out of hours support. The current system used is The Emergency Duty Team, (EDT) which deals with all out of hours duty calls and is not a specific service for Foster Carers. Foster carers revealed that when they have had a need to use this service what they see as an emergency has not been seen as a priority to EDT.

Foster carers also said they felt vulnerable if a complaint/concern was raised and the service had nothing in place to support them.

Kinship carers spoken with identified that whilst the service had improved upon the level of support they received they felt they were not afforded the same terms and conditions as other non- kinship foster carers.

Records show that the provision of short -term breaks, is dealt with by the Children with Disabilities team and a dedicated worker is provided to manage this service provision. It would be recommended that the fostering team develop more recruitment and approval of carers to enable them to manage the provision of this specialist service.

Whilst the fostering panel was seen to be well managed it was noted that panel training and panel member's police checks had been neglected.

All the above issues were discussed with the team manager who advised that she was aware of these shortfalls and was in discussion with senior managers with a view to providing systems to resolve these matters.

Details of requirements and recommendations noted at this inspection are recorded in the back section of this report.

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

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

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Being Healthy

The intended outcome for this Standard is:

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

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

JUDGEMENT – we looked at the outcome for Standard:

12.

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

This judgement has been made using available evidence including a visit to this service. The fostering service promotes children's health and development.

EVIDENCE:

Discussions with health professionals revealed that the Looked After Children's Health Team monitors and promotes the general health of all Looked After Children (LAC). LAC nurses spoken with said they provided training for foster carers both in groups and individually to enable foster carers to address individual children's needs. Observation of a training session identified that the subject was interesting, informative and well delivered.

Foster carers spoken with said the LAC nurse arranges medicals and health assessments for the children and provides training and support for foster carers in respect of The Health Care strategy for improving the health of looked after children.

Records show 100% of children in foster care have received annual health checks in the last year and children's files held information to show they are registered with a General practitioner and Dentist.

Most foster carers said they had been provided with some health information regarding the child prior to placement, however it was noted that full medical details had not always been provided. Foster carers advised that this had disadvantaged both themselves and the child and had resulted in placement breakdown. It is essential that all known health information is shared with the foster carer prior to placement to enable full needs to be met.

Staff advised that the service had introduced a non- smoking policy for new applicants applying to foster young children and encourage existing carers to give up smoking by providing support and smoking cessation literature.

Young people revealed they were given help and advice in respect of being healthy and comments included: -

"I want to stay healthy and my foster carer helps me by giving me proper healthy food and lots of fruit and vegetables",

"I get plenty of fruit and exercise and eat healthy meals",

"I know about healthy eating and taking exercise and my foster mum make sure I eat well".

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):

3.6.8.9.15.30.

Quality in this outcome area is **good**

This judgement has been made using available evidence including a visit to this service. The management of the service is good and policies, procedures and training are in place to ensure safe care practices are utilised to protect children placed with foster carers

EVIDENCE:

Foster carers files examined show that they had been thoroughly assessed prior to approval to make sure wherever possible they were suitable to carry out their caring role. Files identified also that all foster carers were subject to police checks (CRB) and had provided clear references about their suitability.

Foster carers spoken with said they had safe caring policies and had received good pre and post approval training in respect of safe care to include health and safety and child protection.

Training records show that ongoing training is provided in safe care to include guidelines on the safe transportation of children and road safety.

Records show that child protection and safe care training is mandatory and foster carers are paid a fee for attending.

Files viewed show that foster carers homes are assessed annually to make sure that they provide a safe healthy and nurturing environment and are free from avoidable hazards.

Foster carers said they have a safe care policy for the household and have received training to risk assess their homes to ensure the child/children in their care are not exposed to injury or harm.

Foster carers revealed they have been provided with a copy of the foster carers hand –book, which they said held useful information about safe care and how to deal with any concerns, complaints or other issues that may arise.

The statement of purpose held details of the qualifications and experience of agency staff and this information together with the agency mission statement and stated aims and objectives revealed that the fostering service provides qualified and experienced staff who are fully committed to the provision of a high quality service.

Staff spoken with advised they were required to provide references and undertake police checks prior to being offered employment and files previously examined revealed that police checks and references are obtained as part of the recruitment and selection process with all information being held on file. The recruitment and selection policy appeared clear and followed good practice guidelines in safeguarding children and young people. Staff said that all job specifications held full detail of the relevant qualifications and experience necessary for the stated position and staff who were responsible for the recruitment and selection of staff were trained and knowledgeable in this area.

Two newly appointed staff said they had received a thorough induction had been very much accepted and supported by the team and felt the agency was a highly professional, well managed service.

As part of the inspection the Inspector visited a number of foster carer homes. Foster carers are made aware and understand that they may be interviewed or visited as part of the inspection process.

All of the homes visited were warm, adequately furnished and maintained to a good standard of cleanliness. Within the homes visited, all the fostered children/ young people had their own bedrooms. The accommodation arrangements reflected the child's/ young person's assessed need for privacy and space.

Through discussions with key staff, foster carers and inspection of files, it was possible to effectively track the process of referral and placement of children/ young people. The fostering team said they try to ensure that comprehensive information is provided from the children's fieldwork teams that takes into account the child's/ young person's care plan and written assessments of the child/ young person and their family, prior to the identification of a foster carer. Effective matching is promoted by means of information sharing and the involvement of all relevant professionals and individuals. However it should be noted that health issues play a very important part in the matching process and if any information is withheld it could impact most unfavourably upon the placement.

Foster carers spoken with revealed that a lack of health information had culminated in placement breakdown and comments included: -

"We were not provided with full information on the child prior to placement and as a consequence the placement broke down. I wonder if any medical history is considered before selecting the best carers available?"

It is essential therefore that all known information is provided and shared with the foster carers as part of the matching process.

Observation of the fostering panel revealed it was well organised and effectively managed.

The panel agenda was varied and covered Foster carer approvals, viability assessments, annual foster carer reviews, matching, withdrawal of foster carers and discussions re other issues pertaining to fostering arrangements. The Inspector observed robust discussion of issues and appropriate facilitation by the panel chair. Current panel members have expertise in education, family placement, child health, child protection and medical expertise. However it would be recommended that the panel invite a young person, previously part of the looked after system, and a former foster carer to join the panel to ensure the members have varied life experience.

The fostering panel has been shown in previous inspections to meet all regulatory and good practice requirements. However on this occasion it was noted that Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks had expired for 2 of the panel members and none of the panel members spoken with had undertaken specific panel training. This was discussed with the fostering team manager who advised that panel training had been arranged for the near future and additional panel members were being sought. She advised that CRB updates would be requested as a matter of urgency and that the 2 panel members involved would not sit on the panel until the updates had been received.

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):

7.13.31

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

This judgement has been made using available evidence including a visit to this service. In meeting individual and diverse needs, the service encourages children to develop self-esteem and reach their potential.

EVIDENCE:

Through discussion with agency staff and foster carers; attendance at the fostering panel and support group, there was a lot of evidence to demonstrate that the fostering service ensures that children/ young people and their families are provided with foster care services which value diversity, promote equality and recognise address her/his needs in terms of gender, religion, ethnic origin, language, culture and sexuality. This principle is consistently reinforced through policy and procedure and regular supervision and training.

Foster carers said they received training in issues relating to equality and diversity and held understanding of how to promote individual need.

From discussions with staff, foster carers, case tracking, feedback questionnaires, policies and good practice guidance there was a lot of information to demonstrate that the fostering service as an agency, and foster

carers individually, give a high priority to meeting the educational needs of each child/ young person.

Foster carers were seen to promote an environment in which education and learning is promoted and valued. Feedback from foster carers indicated that there was pro-active involvement from the agency in matters such as school attendance and they had valued the input and support of the agency at Personal Education Planning meetings and liaison with local educational authorities.

Discussions with staff revealed the agency makes every effort to ensure that the children's/ young person's care package links in with the individuals educational package. Information on files show requests for information in respect of addressing a personal education plan and it was noted there is a standing item on the Supervising Social Worker (SSW) Visit Form, which prompts SSW to discuss educational needs and attainments.

The Education officer for LAC is a member of the fostering panel and The Foster Carers Forum and agency staff said they have developed strong working links to ensure effective communication in respect of the educational needs of looked after children.

Foster carers are clear in respect of their role in school contact, for example parent's evenings, open days, discussions with teachers. Foster carers said they attended school in the parental role however; this would be shared with the birth parent(s) according to levels of contact.

The foster placement agreement identifies the financial responsibility for all associated school costs.

Records show that 83% of LAC achieved at least one GCSE grade A to G, 28% achieved 5 plus GCSE grade A to C and the service ensure that Year 11 Action Group meet very half term with schools to maintain these good standards.

The expansion of the community support workers has enabled the service to regularly provide direct work with children/young people. This work includes the provision of a variety of learning experiences by way of visits to museums, zoo / safari park, animal sanctuaries and adventure parks.

Records show that the provision of short -term breaks, is dealt with by the Children with Disabilities team and a dedicated worker is provided to manage this service provision. It would be recommended that the fostering team develop more recruitment and approval of carers to enable them to manage the provision of this specialist service.

Making a Positive Contribution

The intended outcomes for these Standards are:

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

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

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

10.11

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

This judgement has been made using available evidence including a visit to this service. Children are generally enabled to make a positive contribution to their own lives and to the lives of others, however social work visits are sometimes inconsistent.

EVIDENCE:

Staff spoken with said they felt contact was very important to the children/young people in foster care to enable them to maintain links with their birth families or any other people who played a significant part in their lives. They said that in order to do this a high level of supervised contact is arranged for the children both in and out of the Borough.

Social workers and support workers from the fostering team said they liaised with the foster carers and the child's/young persons social worker to assist wherever possible with contact arrangements.

Foster carers revealed they were provided with good quality training in respect of contact and carers said this training assisted them to understand about the importance of children/young people being able to maintain contact with family and friends and any other people who play a significant part in their lives. Foster carers said that this training also enabled them to "look and listen" to the children before and after contact and raise any issues with the fostering

team if they felt the child/young person was experiencing any difficulties with the contact.

Children/young people spoken with said they were happy with their individual contact arrangements. They said they were asked by their foster carers, social workers, support workers "how things had gone" and said they felt they could tell them "if things were not right".

The fostering service ensure that young people attend their reviews and records show 95.3% of children/young people attended their reviews in the past year.

St. Helens Local Authority arranges two Children's Consultation Groups, one of which has been short listed for a Community Care Award.

Looked After Children are represented on the Corporate Parenting Forum and it is the intention of the service to include them in the consultation process on the Green paper—Care Matters.

Foster carers said that all children/young people are asked their views by their social worker about the foster carer and the foster placement prior to the foster carers annual review.

Whilst the service work hard to facilitate consultation it was noted that many young people did not have regular contact with their social workers. Foster carers advised that they did not have much contact/communication with the children's social worker and felt this disadvantaged both the foster carer and the young person in placement. It would be suggested therefore that more consultation methods be introduced to ensure Looked After Children are enabled to pass on their views.

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. Staff of the service support children to achieve economic wellbeing by the provision of sufficient finance for their care and through training foster carers to have the knowledge and skills involved to prepare young people for adulthood.

EVIDENCE:

Files examined show that young people have a pathway plan and agency staff said that all the children who are fostered have this plan.

Foster carers spoken with said they are encouraged to contribute to these plans to make sure all information is included.

Foster carers revealed they are provided with quality training to enable them to assist young people to prepare for independent living.

Observation of a Foster Carers Training Strategy meeting identified that the LAC nurse has provided a range of ideas and options for the continuing training of foster carers in respect of them advising and supporting the young people to gain valuable life skills in preparation for their future. To add to these ideas it would be recommended that young people be offered places on some foster carers training to include health and hygiene, safe care and first aid to enable

them to share life skills with the experience of adults and build upon their own skills for the future.

From discussion with agency staff and foster carers there was a lot of evidence in relation to positive and inclusive preparation of young people for adulthood. Foster carers said in general young people preparing to move to independent or semi-independent living are consulted about their future and actively involved and encouraged to be involved in decision-making and the development and implementation of the Pathway Plan.

From documentation seen and discussion with foster carers there was evidence to show that each foster care receives an allowance and agreed expenses, which cover the full cost of caring for each child/ young person placed with him/ her. Foster carers commented that they always received their payments promptly and at the agreed time. They receive clear information about allowances and expenses payable and how to access them, before a child/ young person is placed with them. Foster carer's said they had received adaptations and equipment from the agency as additional resources required by children/young people.

The agency has a written policy on fostering allowances and fees are reviewed annually.

Management

The intended outcomes for these Standards are:

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

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

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

16.17.21.22.24.25.32.

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

This judgement has been made using available evidence including a visit to this service. The service is well managed by people who are qualified and experienced in the child -care arena and staff are trained and motivated to provide a high level of support to foster carers. However out of hours support, information sharing and policies and protocols in respect of allegations against carers need to be addressed in order for the foster carers to be fully supported in their role.

EVIDENCE:

Discussions with staff and pre inspection documentation revealed that St. Helens Local Authority Children's/young peoples services has recruited an Assistant Director, Service Manager and Fostering Team Manager and it was said that this has consolidated the management team and refocused the direction of the service.

Records show that the implementation of The Child Placement Strategy, which is a planned strategy with the aim to achieve a multi-agency approach to the provision of quality child care placements for children looked after by St. Helens Council, has given the fostering service a high profile.

The fostering service has been restructured and now amalgamates the previous two teams into one and an increase in staff numbers has enabled the service to recruit a greater number of foster carers.

Staff said they have clear line management systems in place, which assists them and are provided with good quality supervision, which is pre arranged and time limited.

Staff said they were offered training as an ongoing process to assist them to improve upon their professional skills and practice.

Records show the fostering service has an adequate number of sufficiently experienced and qualified staff to meet the needs of children/ young people for whom it aims to provide a service and is line with the agency's Statement of

Purpose. However it was noted that there is currently a vacant senior social work post that has clearly delayed some areas of service development. This was discussed with the management team who advised that they **have attempted to fill this vacancy for a number of months to no avail and continue to endeavour to** fill this vacancy as a matter of urgency.

There is a clearly set out process for the assessment of foster carers that is further supported by a consistently high standard of Form F assessments and the monitoring of this standard by the team manager and the panel chair.

Policies show Foster carers are recruited in line with the British Agencies for Fostering and Adoption (BAAF) Guidance and the Competency Framework in the assessment of qualities, competencies and aptitudes.

From discussions with foster carers, feedback received from questionnaires and comments made in the support group it was very evident that foster carers generally felt well supported by the agency. Foster carers said that staff, are responsive and foster carers felt their opinions were listened to and valued. Foster carers advised that they had very recently attended a foster carers award evening, which was held in local hotel. Feedback from several carers was that this event was a wonderful experience in which they felt very much valued by the fostering service.

However foster carers revealed that they do not always get sufficient information about the child/young person prior to placement. This was addressed with the team manager who advised she would make contact with the children's field -work team with a view to establishing more robust systems of communication. Information sharing is most important in the matching and management of placements and this shortfall will be recorded in the requirement section of this report.

Observations of The Foster Carers Forum identified that foster carers are encouraged to reveal their feelings about the way the service is run and to share ideas for the future.

Foster carers commented positively on the level of support they received from their supervising social workers and the fostering service as a whole. However it was noted that foster carers feel the current out of hour's support system is not tailored to the needs of foster carers. It is essential that foster carers have a fully effective and responsive on call service both night and day. This will therefore be recorded in the requirement section of this report.

Foster carers said they are encouraged to attend the support groups and they are generally well attended.

Records show all foster carers are reviewed annually and reports are prepared and presented to the Fostering Panel.

Comments in feedback from foster carer's and completed questionnaires included:

" My social worker visits me regularly and gives me any help/advice I may need. I don't know what I would do without him/her".

"We are encouraged to attend training and support groups and get excellent service from the fostering team".

From discussion with staff and through examination of case records and policy/ procedural guidance it shows the Local Authority in general maintains comprehensive and well organised records for each child/ young person. There is a written policy on case recording, which establishes the purpose, format and contents of files. Foster carers identified they understood the policy on confidentiality and the importance of storing information in a secure manner. Foster carers said they receive training and ongoing support in how to record information and significant life events for the child/ young person, through encouraging children/ young people to reflect on and understand his/ her history and keep appropriate memorabilia.

Records examined at this inspection contained all significant information relevant to the operation of the fostering service and as required by regulation. There is an effective system for monitoring the quality and adequacy of records and to ensure legibility all records are typed and countersigned by the manager. There is a reliable method of diarising/ bring forward, to ensure records are maintained and up to date, for example references and checks. The records of complaints and allegations were examined and were clearly recorded with full details of investigation, conclusion reached and action taken.

However it was noted that a number of foster carers said they were unhappy about the lack of procedural guidance in respect of allegations against carers. This was discussed with the team manager who advised that she was currently in discussion with neighbouring authorities with a view to providing a solution to this problem. It is essential that all foster carers feel fully supported when concerns/allegations are made. This will therefore be recorded in the requirement section of this report.

Family and friend carers spoken with said that the fostering service had improved its policies, procedures and practices in respect of "kinship care", however it was said that the service continues to treat them differently to other foster carers, in respect of training, support and payments. Discussion with the management team identified that they feel this support service is in need of developing and it is their intention for a social worker from the fostering team along with the community support workers to develop the support service to all Kinship foster carers.

SCORING OF OUTCOMES

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

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

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

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

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

ENJOYING AND ACHIEVING	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
7	4
13	3
31	3

MAKING A POSITIVE CONTRIBUTION	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
10	3
11	2

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	X
4	X
5	X
16	4
17	3
18	X
19	X
20	4
21	2
22	2
23	X
24	3
25	3
26	X
27	X
28	X
32	3

no

Are there any outstanding requirements from the last inspection?

STATUTORY REQUIREMENTS

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

No.	Standard	Regulation	Requirement	Timescale for action
1.	FS8	34	The manager must ensure that all relevant information is provided to the foster carers prior to the child/young person's placement to enable the matching process to be undertaken.	20/01/07
2.	FS11	35	The manager must ensure that all children/young people looked after receive visits from their social workers and are able to make their views known.	20/01/07
3	FS21	17	The manager must ensure the service has a clear strategy for working with and supporting foster carers. This includes a protocol for the support of foster carers in the event of them being subject to allegations of misconduct.	20/02/07
4	FS22	17	The manager must ensure that foster carers are provided with supervision and support. This includes out of hours support.	20/02/07
5	FS30	24	The manager must ensure that all fostering panel members are subject to Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks and receive training in the policies	20/02/07

			and procedures pertaining to the panel role.	
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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.	FS11	It is recommended that the service utilise additional consultation methods to ensure that all peripheral services are fully conversant with the services aims, objectives and purpose. This will enable a more effective consultation system to be in place for foster carers and young people living in their homes.
4.	FS30	Whilst the fostering panel was seen to be well organised and managed it would be recommended that consideration be given to extending the panel members to include a young person who had experienced the looked after system and person who had experience of being a foster carer.
5.	FS31	It would be recommended that the fostering service develop an in-house process for the assessment and provision of short -term break foster carers.

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