



*Making Social Care
Better for People*

inspection report

FOSTERING SERVICE

Northamptonshire County Council Fostering Service

**Oxford House
West Villa Road
Wellingborough
Northants
NN8 4JR**

Lead Inspector
Sharon Treadwell

Announced Inspection
Thursday, 24th November 2005 09:00

The Commission for Social Care Inspection aims to:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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SERVICE INFORMATION

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Telephone number	01933 220730
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Provider Web address	
Name of registered provider(s)/company (if applicable)	Northamptonshire County Council
Name of registered manager (if applicable)	Ms Jan Slater
Type of registration	Local Auth Fostering Service
No. of places registered (if applicable)	0
Category(ies) of registration, with number of places	

SERVICE INFORMATION

Conditions of registration:

Date of last inspection 14th February 2005

Brief Description of the Service:

The Northamptonshire County Council Fostering Service is an integral element of the Northamptonshire Children and Families Service and its Service Manager is Mrs. Jan Slater.

Day to day management of the Fostering Service is delegated to two Team Managers: Mr. Roger Chapman and Mrs. Diane Camm.

The service offers a wide range of fostering placements: Long Term, Short Term, Therapeutic, Remand, Kinship, Supported Lodgings and Emergency and these services are based across five offices.

The authority additionally provides a Family Link Scheme, which is separately managed and is part of the Inclusion Service. This service provides flexible short breaks for children who have physical and/or learning disabilities and/or sensory impairment.

At the time of this inspection the Fostering Service was supporting 225 carers of which 32 were providing kinship placements, 8 remand, 12 supported lodgings, 14 respite and the remaining 159 short and long term placements. Thirty two carers were in the process of assessment.

The Family Link Scheme was supporting 88 carers with 12 new carers in the process of assessment.

At the time of this inspection 267 children were being looked after in 'in house' foster settings whilst a further 77 were being looked after in independent agency foster settings.

SUMMARY

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

This Announced inspection was undertaken by two inspectors over four days and took 120 hours in total including pre-inspection visits, Fostering Panel attendance, questionnaire analysis and inspection planning.

For the purposes of this inspection four carers and the children placed with them were tracked through the inspection of case files, some home visits (two of the carers tracked requested not to be visited and were spoken to by telephone) and discussions with supervising Social Workers. Additional case files and Form F assessments were examined during the inspection. The inspectors additionally met with a group of carers.

Questionnaires were returned by 21 carers, 12 children and 33 placing social workers, and these have been referred to within the body of this report.

Prior to this inspection the Service Manager completed a Pre-inspection questionnaire and information supplied therein has also been incorporated into this report.

The Fostering Panel was attended on November 16th 2005 and a telephone interview was conducted with the Fostering Panel Vice Chair, who chaired the Fostering Panel on that occasion.

The above information has provided the major component of inspection evidence. Policies and procedures, the agency's Statement of Purpose, the Carer's Handbook and other documentation have been fully inspected during previous inspections and were consulted only for clarification purposes on this occasion.

The Family Link Service was fully inspected during the previous inspection and has not been incorporated into this inspection except in the obtaining of an updated Statement of Purpose and details of current service provision.

The carers tracked on this occasion were representative of four areas of service provision: long term, remand, kinship and therapeutic care.

Some very positive new initiatives have been developed within the Fostering Service and also within the Children and Families Service generally, which have the potential to impact well on foster placement stability. Whilst several of these initiatives are referred to within this report, it has not been possible within this inspection to assess their impact on the care provided to children in placement since their implementation is not yet fully evidenced.

What the service does well:

Placing Social Workers commented very positively on the standard of care provided by foster carers.

Carers spoke highly of the training opportunities provided by the Fostering Service and of the support provided by their named Link Worker.

Fostering Service staff, carers and Fostering Panel members evidenced a good awareness of 'safe care'. Training is provided to carers and each household has a 'safe care policy'

What has improved since the last inspection?

The Fostering Service has re-introduced a Skills Payment scheme for mainstream carers and is working to bring the fostering allowance in line with the Fostering Network recommended minimum rate.

The Centre for Health has become actively involved in monitoring the health of young people in foster care and in promoting their access to health services and advice.

The 'Virtual School' is developing systems to monitor the attendance and educational achievements of young people in foster care.

The Fostering Service has acquired a second Team Manager.

The Placement Management Service has been established to improve placement stability for Looked After Children. New pro-forma recording systems are being introduced, which should improve information available at the time of placement thus better facilitating the matching process.

The Fostering Service has recently negotiated and signed a contract with an Independent Fostering Agency for the use of a CD-ROM tool, which enables children and young people to interactively communicate their wishes and feelings.

What they could do better:

Staff personnel files do not contain appropriate information.

Unqualified staff are currently undertaking social work tasks such as carer supervision and the completion of Form F assessments.

Records retained by the Fostering Service and its carers do not currently detail young people's health and educational needs or evidence how these will be met. Young people's records do not currently contain essential information.

The Fostering Service needs to review the membership of its Fostering Panel. Fostering Panel members should be supplied with written guidelines. Fostering Panel Minutes should be fully reflective of membership and matters discussed.

A signed Placement Agreement must be on file in respect of each young person placed.

The Fostering Service should better clarify the frequency and nature of support to be provided to its carers. Recording of carer supervision should be more consistent.

The carer review format presents as a very informal document and does not constitute a good source of evidence of a carer's development.

The Fostering Service should clarify its internal structure for carers and other service users and the structure must evidence clear lines of accountability.

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 outcomes these Standards are:

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

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

JUDGEMENT – The intended outcomes for these Standards are

The fostering service is not currently retaining appropriate health records in respect of young people in placement and is therefore unable to evidence the appropriate promotion of young people's access to health care services despite its access to an innovative internal resource.

EVIDENCE:

Standard 12 inspected.

The Centre for Health is part of the Children and Families Service and has been operational for two years. The Team Manager was interviewed as part of the inspection process. Its staff team operate a range of excellent initiatives to monitor and improve the access of looked after children to appropriate health care services. The Centre's initial remit was to target young people in residential care but since this remit was extended to include young people in foster care the staff team have become involved in Carer Training, monitoring young people's annual medicals and their access to dental and optical treatment and providing an advocacy service to young people in accessing sexual health advice and treatment. Centre for Health staff are qualified health professionals and are also available to offer advice and input to carers or young people in respect of individual health issues.

The Centre for Health staff have good access to a nominated Child Psychologist and have established partnership working links with designated community doctors and nurses and the Community Dentist and are working to develop a comprehensive database of health information of the young people in foster care.

The Team Manager of the Centre for Health informed the inspectors that she had not been requested to do any recent training with the Fostering Service staff on the role and function of the Centre for Health. The Fostering Service

Manager advised inspectors that an initial presentation was undertaken in 2003 to the Fostering Team and in March 2004 information was presented to the Carers' Conference, which some link workers attended. It is important that Link Workers are fully up to date with services on offer if they are to enable carers to fully access the services provided.

Although one carer detailed a useful input from the Centre for Health in relation to a young person's enuresis another said she was advised by her Link Worker to 'look on the internet' for advice on the same condition.

A Looked After Children's nurse, employed by the Centre for Health operates as a member of the Fostering Panel. She was noted to offer sound advice to Fostering Panel members in relation to young people's health needs and to operate pro-actively where a delayed annual medical was impacting on plans for permanence for young people.

The Carers' Handbook contains good detail regarding the 'normal' process of child development and describes potential presenting behaviours due to interruption of the cycle.

Currently carers are not retaining separate records in relation to the health of young people in their care (except for carers providing Therapeutic placements who complete a weekly written report pro-forma, which specifically addresses health). Health appointments are generally recorded in the carers' own diaries in respect of all young people in placement. The current carer review format does not capture information relating to young people's health needs.

The Fostering Service system for retaining information on young people in placement is changing. Currently a section of the carer's file is devoted to each child in placement and information contained therein does not always include relevant health information or full Looked After Children documentation. Details were supplied to the inspectors of the service's proposals to develop separate children's files, which will include a separate health section.

The fostering service must develop carer recording practices in relation to young people's health needs in order to ensure that a comprehensive written health record is available in respect of each young person. This record should be updated throughout placement and should move with the child.

Children referred in their questionnaires to being prompted by carers to eat healthily, take exercise and keep clean: 'I eat cereal and toast, drink water and run around a lot', 'eat fruit, clean clothes, clean beds, great house', 'I am encouraged to eat fruit at home and I have it in my lunch box at school'.

Several Placing Social Worker questionnaires spoke of improvements in children's health during placement: '...s encopresis is now under control and he

is able to interact with peers, which he could not do before. This has been achieved in three weeks’.

Staying Safe

The intended outcomes these Standards are:

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

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

JUDGEMENT – The intended outcomes for these Standards are

Although the Fostering Service has many appropriate practical strategies for the provision of safe care in its foster homes, its recruitment practices do not evidence the prioritising of the safety and welfare of young people.

EVIDENCE:

Standards 3, 6, 8, 9, 15 and 30 inspected.

The management team of the fostering service are appropriately qualified and experienced. The newly promoted Team Manager is currently undertaking internal training in relation to strategic management.

In April 2005 a Placement Management Service was set up to deal with referrals for placements of Looked After Children. The service is the central element of Northamptonshire's aim to improve placement stability for Looked After Children.

The request for placement form comprises three elements with part two specifically addressing the young person's needs and the placement objectives under the five Every Child Matters outcomes. Once a potential foster placement has been identified the Placement Planning Strategy requires that a planning meeting be held during which a Placement Agreement pro-forma is completed and signed.

The Placement Agreement and the Request for Placement Form are commendably comprehensive and the inspectors consider that they have the potential to improve the matching process and placement stability.

The information contained therein meets the requirements of Schedule 6.

At the time of this inspection the files tracked did not evidence the full use of this new placement planning strategy and it has therefore not been possible at this early stage to assess its impact.

The inspectors noted that in the files examined during this inspection, which did not evidence use of the new Placement Planning Meeting/Agreement pro-forma and no Looked After Children Placement Agreement was on file, the existing information does not meet the requirements of Schedule 6.

Some of the files tracked did evidence the use of a matching matrix considering carers' skills alongside young people's identified needs.

Integral to the Placement Planning Strategy is a more systematic use of Independent Fostering Providers attempting to keep young people within a thirty mile radius. The Commissioning Manager confirmed that currently over 90% of placements with independent agencies met this requirement.

A Health and Safety Risk Assessment of each carer's home is completed at the point of approval and procedural guidelines details that this should be updated at the point of the carer's annual review. In some of the files tracked this had been overlooked and the Fostering Service is reminded of the need to ensure regular review of this document.

Carers were noted to be very aware of safe caring and to have household 'safe care policies'. Again the Fostering Service is reminded of the need to ensure that the policies are regularly reviewed by the carer, with their Link worker and that they remain relevant to the young people in placement. The Fostering Panel were noted to be very aware of the importance of 'safe care policies' requesting that they be included in approval paperwork.

One Placing Social Worker in her questionnaire said of a placement: 'The children are in a safe and stable environment where they get emotional warmth, stimulation and appropriate education'.

In the home of one of the carers visited the child placed was sharing a bedroom with three other children. No risk assessment had been completed in relation to this arrangement (Standard 6.4). The carer was approved in April 2005 but did not receive a visit from an allocated Link Worker until November. The Foster Care Agreement was signed during this initial visit in November.

Currently the Fostering Service Link Worker completes a written Risk Assessment, which is subsequently signed by a manager, when a young person is placed outside a carer's approval status. Such a situation constitutes a variation to approval status and should be recorded as such.

A Fostering Panel was observed during this inspection. The Vice Chair was noted to exercise good leadership and to make applicants welcome, explaining the Panel process well. The Fostering Service provides an informative leaflet to carer applicants prior to attendance at Fostering Panel. The remit of the Fostering Panel has recently changed to include applications for long-term care and permanence, previously heard by the Adoption Panel. The inspector noted that the Fostering Panel had received appropriate training on matching prior to this change. The Vice Chair confirmed that the Panel was regularly updated on legislative developments by the Team Manager and received training. They were included in the Fostering Service training day earlier this year.

The list of Fostering Panel members supplied to the inspector with the pre-inspection material indicated that the Panel was not currently constituted in accordance with the Fostering Regulations. Both Social Worker posts were detailed as vacant and Regulation 25(1) details that at least one Social Worker employed by the Fostering Service must be present for the Panel to be quorate. The inspector notes that the Panel Vice Chair is a qualified Social Worker with Child Care expertise (Regulation 24(3(a))), though she is not listed as such, and that currently one of the Fostering Team managers and one of the Fostering Team Social Workers are listed as Fostering Panel Advisors. The Fostering Service must reconsider its Fostering Panel membership to ensure full compliance with regulatory requirement.

Currently the Fostering Service does not issue written guidelines to Panel members, only supplying them with a copy of the BAAF Panel Handbook. Written guidelines should specifically detail requirements in relation to this Fostering Panel and should cover the decision-making process where there is disagreement.

The minutes of Fostering Panel Meetings do not currently detail the Panel membership and are not fully reflective of discussions held, for example the reasons for a Panel member's disagreement about approval.

During observation of the Fostering Panel one applicant was approved where Criminal Records Bureau clearance had not been received. The Panel Chair should ensure that it is clear in such a case that the recommendation to approve is 'subject to satisfactory CRB clearance', and that this is recorded in the Fostering Panel minutes.

During the inspection the inspectors examined information held by the Team Manager relating to Fostering Panel Members. This information was unacceptable. Criminal Records Bureau checks were not available for all

members; confidentiality agreements had not been signed by all members; no information at all was held relating to some Fostering Panel members. The Fostering Service should note that Fostering Panel Members are 'persons employed by the Fostering Service'.

The inspectors note that the Fostering Service has recently developed an Action Plan to review the operation of the Fostering Panel and that some of the issues identified within this inspection will be addressed by its implementation.

Personnel records were examined for six members of the Fostering Service staff. Gaps were noted in all six files. Some files contained no evidence of Criminal Records Bureau clearance, some contained only one reference, some contained no evidence of the applicant's qualifications. In the case of a worker transferring from within the local authority the inspectors could find no evidence of an application or interview process nor of the taking up of references. The Fostering Service is therefore unable to evidence that it 'employs people suitable to work with children and to safeguard and promote their welfare'.

Currently the Fostering Service is employing unqualified staff to supervise carers and to complete Form F Assessments. The management are aware of this situation and the Service Manager detailed that it was 'an historical situation within the authority', which she was aware needed to be addressed.

Enjoying and Achieving

The intended outcomes these Standards are:

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

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

JUDGEMENT – The intended outcomes for these Standards are

The Fostering Service now has access to newly developed systems to monitor young people's attendance and educational achievements. Written records retained by both the Fostering Service and its carers must be developed to clearly identify young people's educational needs and evidence how they are being met.

EVIDENCE:

Standards 7 and 13 inspected.

A Family Link service is provided as part of the Inclusion Service. Full written information was provided to the inspectors regarding the staffing and organisation of this service. Two Family Link carers were tracked and visited during the previous inspection in February 2005 and the Fostering Service was assessed as meeting Standard 31. This standard has not been inspected during this inspection.

The local authority has developed a range of Equality Action Plans and these incorporate service specific objectives. The Fostering Service has therefore, a series of identified goals for ensuring equality of access to and experience of foster care in terms of disability, gender, sexuality and race. Strategies include a commitment to recruiting black carers since a shortfall has been identified. The Fostering Service has a dedicated recruitment team for the recruitment of carers and a ½ post recruitment support worker post has been allocated for the recruitment of black carers.

The Fostering Service operates a Support Group specifically for black carers facilitated by one of the Link Workers.

Young People in foster care are able to access an advocacy service specifically for disabled children through the Disability Team.

No carers visited during this inspection were providing placements to young people with specific ethnic, cultural, linguistic or disability needs.

In April 2005 the local authority established a 'Virtual School'. During the inspection the inspectors spoke with the joint Head Teacher who detailed that initially this is an Achievement Plan Programme funded for fifteen months. The 'school' has begun to establish a register of Looked After Children and aims to develop a full database to enable monitoring of attendance and attainment. Attendance is the current priority and the 'school' is utilising the services of an external agency to carry out daily checks on attendance and is linking with Education Department and Legal colleagues to establish the viability of any exclusions.

The 'Virtual School' is working closely with colleagues from the Life Chances Team to provide support to individual young people where appropriate.

The team is also monitoring the appropriate provision of Personal Education Plans.

To date the Virtual School Team have not been involved in the provision of carer training but it is planned for a pilot training session to be staged in a particular geographical area to include carers, designated teachers, school governors and social workers in March next year.

The Service Manager confirms that Life Chances Team are already involved in the provision of carer training and, since January 2004, have delivered a number of sessions including: 'Motivating children to enjoy school', 'Life Chances Education-an explanation of PEP's' and 'How can we help children to make the most of their education'.

Currently the carer review format does not capture information relating to young people's educational progress and carer recording does not specifically detail educational achievements. Some of the children's records examined during the inspection contained Personal Education Plans and educational information but not all. The fostering service must develop carer recording practices and its own Children's Records in relation to evidencing how young people's educational needs are being met. The inspectors would note that the weekly report sheet completed by carers offering Therapeutic placements does contain a separate section covering the young person's education.

A representative from the Life Chances Education Team operates as a Fostering Panel Member providing advice to the Fostering Panel. During

Fostering Panel observation she was noted to be pro-active in questioning prospective carers' commitment to education.

Some carers in their questionnaires raised concerns regarding the lack of support when young people are excluded from school. This is a situation with the potential to put great strain on a placement and the Carers' Handbook should detail the support systems available when this happens and Link Workers should also be fully aware of these in order to appropriately inform/advise carers.

During the previous inspection a recommendation was made for transport initiatives to be reviewed since arrangements for school transport were causing concern. There has clearly been some improvement since few carers raised this as an issue in their questionnaires but one child commented: 'The transport is not as good as it could be. I never know whether I will be collected from school or not when I do extra activities. Sometimes my carer has to come out to collect me and this takes a little while as I am 6½ miles away'. The child particularly asked for this comment to be included in the inspector's report and therefore is clearly worried by the problem. The Service Manager confirmed that she had met with the Head of the Integrated Transport System and that a Working Party was currently in process to assess service provided.

Making a Positive Contribution

The intended outcomes these Standards are:

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

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

JUDGEMENT – The intended outcomes for these Standards are

The Fostering Service is developing systems for consultation with children and young people and should better evidence where their views have been sought and acted upon.

EVIDENCE:

Standard 11 inspected.

Standard 10 was inspected in February this year and was assessed as met. This standard has not been fully inspected during this inspection. The carer tracking exercise during this inspection did not provide inspectors with any evidence of carers' involvement in facilitating contact although carers spoken to and in their questionnaire responses stated that they positively promoted contact and, where necessary provided transport. There was some confusion amongst carers regarding the financing of this.

The Fostering Service has recently negotiated and signed a contract with an Independent Fostering Agency for the use of a CD-ROM tool, which enables children and young people to interactively communicate their wishes and feelings. The inspectors have previously had a practical demonstration of this tool and consider it excellent. The Fostering Service has not yet begun to use it.

The Pre-Inspection Questionnaire details that the Participating Officer has been involved with a group of young people in foster care in making a DVD giving their views on foster care. It also details that the Children's Rights Service has a team of sessional workers who will undertake individual or group work with young people in foster care. A Summer Fun Day was held by the Children's Rights Service, for all Looked After children, in August.

The Fostering Service provides a well presented 'Guide to Foster care in Northamptonshire' for children and young people and is in the process of developing 'Carer Profiles' to be presented to young people prior to placement. These were viewed in some of the files tracked and are noted as a good way of introducing a child to a prospective foster family.

Carer reviews examined during this inspection contained no evidence of contributions by young people in placement even though the Fostering Service has a pro-forma for obtaining these views. Link Workers are currently asked to express the young person's views. The remand fostering service issues feedback forms to all young people placed.

Currently the Fostering Service does not evidence consultation with carers' own children except during the initial approval process and occasionally as part of the carer supervision process.

At the point of a carer's annual review the Fostering Service should provide the opportunity for young people in placement and carers' own children to express their own views.

In their questionnaire responses nine of the twelve young people said that they were often consulted by their carers.

Achieving Economic Wellbeing

The intended outcomes these Standards are:

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

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

JUDGEMENT – The intended outcomes for these Standards are

The Fostering Service is currently working to ensure that carers' allowances are fair and are reflective of experience and expertise.

EVIDENCE:

Standard 29 inspected.

Some carers commented in their questionnaires that current payments were not in line with the Fostering Network recommended allowance. The appointment of a Business Development Manager to take the lead on a review of carer allowances has resulted in the development of an action plan to revise payments to carers. The Service Manager has stated that by October 2006 the local authority will be matching the Fostering Network minimum recommended allowance and in the case of some carers will exceed it.

The Fostering Service has recently re-introduced a Skills Level Payment Scheme applicable to mainstream carers. The Fostering Service offers a range of payment schemes relating to other types of foster placement. The skills level scheme offers a financial incentive to carers to develop their skills, knowledge and expertise and to evidence this in the gathering of a portfolio, which can be submitted at any time to the relevant Principal Social Worker to be referred to the Skills Level Accreditation Fostering Panel for accreditation. There are three skills levels and the criteria and training requirements are clearly defined. There is good cross-referencing with the National Minimum Standards and with the five key desired outcomes for young people.

Carers confirmed during the inspection that payments were made promptly and that their payment slip clearly detailed the breakdown of their allowance

into maintenance, clothing and allowance in respect of young people's personal needs.

The Statement of Purpose details the payment of additional allowances for birthdays, Christmas and holidays as well as the capacity to access discretionary grants to cover the cost of school uniforms and trips.

The Fostering Service should better clarify for its carers, financial responsibility in respect of transporting young people for contact arrangements. Discussion with carers during the inspection indicated confusion with some carers submitting claims in respect of these expenses and others believing that their allowance included these costs.

Management

The intended outcomes 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 – The intended outcomes for these Standards are

The Fostering Service structure and lines of accountability need to be clearer for service users and systems of carer support need to be streamlined.

EVIDENCE:

Standards 16, 17, 21, 24 and 32 inspected.

Since the previous inspection a dedicated Kinship Team has been established with 2.8 staff. The inspectors spoke with the Principal Social Worker from this team during the inspection. Joint policies and procedures have been negotiated with fieldwork teams to encourage consideration of all legal options to determine the most appropriate means of meeting a young person's needs. The Team utilises a referral and assessment process, which is specific to kinship carers aiming to obtain interim approval from the Fostering Panel within six to eight weeks and to then complete the full approval process when it is clear that the placement will continue. The Principal Social Worker evidenced a good awareness of the need to develop training opportunities appropriate to the kinship role. A range of good paperwork has been produced detailing the nature of Kinship Care. A kinship carer was tracked and visited during this inspection. The carer was approved in April and was not allocated a Link Worker until November. This appears to inspectors to be a lengthy and inappropriate delay, which was not explained in the carer's file. It was noted by the inspectors that this assessment was not completed by a member of the Kinship Team. Figures supplied to the inspectors evidence that Kinship Care is a growth area with referrals increasing. The Fostering Service should regularly review the staffing complement of the Kinship Team to ensure its capacity to provide appropriate support to its carers.

The inspectors found the organisation of the Fostering Service complex and difficult to grasp and feel that carers and other service users have the same experience. The Management Structure, which appears in the Carers' Handbook details only the Senior Management within Children's Services. The Fostering Services Statement of Purpose also details the Senior Management structure. The lines of accountability are not currently clearly stated. One carer, in their questionnaire commented on being 'passed from one person to another and still not getting what you phoned for' whilst another commented 'When a member of staff is absent due to illness there is very little chance of anyone able to deal with problems' and several carers cited communication as a significant difficulty.

Currently the Fostering Service operates a duty system only between 1pm and 5pm Monday to Friday from its Oxford House base.

Some positive comments were made by carers, particularly those offering emergency or therapeutic placements, on the support provided by workers from the local authority out of hours duty system. The Fostering Team Management has worked well to develop this relationship.

There are operational differences across the various elements of fostering provision, which the organisational structure should reflect. The Remand

Fostering Scheme has only two Social workers and they are jointly supervised by a Principal Social Worker from the Fostering Service (with nominated responsibility for Kinship Care) and a Team Manager from the Youth Offending team. These workers provide their own out of hours cover and carers are involved in training provided by the Youth Offending Team.

The Fostering Agency employs a number of Principal Social Workers who have nominated responsibility for certain areas of fostering provision but the current organisational structure does not clarify these workers as occupying a middle-management role. Two Principal Social Workers, with nominated responsibility for Kinship Care and Therapeutic Fostering were interviewed during this inspection and this is clearly how they see their role.

The inspectors noted in their discussions with the Team Managers that they were beginning to assume nominal responsibility for specific elements of service provision.

The Fostering Service should clarify its internal structure for carers and other service users and the structure must evidence clear lines of accountability.

Carers' files examined during the inspection evidence great variation in the frequency of carer supervision and in the recording of those visits, and annual review records do not record the required frequency of visits to individual carers. One carer in her questionnaire stated that she had not been visited by a Link Worker for four months.

One carer's file examined during the inspection contained no record at all of formal supervision.

The Fostering Service operates a Therapeutic Scheme and support, training and payment to these carers is at an enhanced level.

The Fostering Service should clarify the required supervision frequency for each carer (the Foster Care Agreement states 'regular') in accordance with individual situation and need. This would be best addressed within the Foster Care Agreement and annual review process.

The carer reviews examined during the inspection do not fully capture essential information and in two of the files tracked eighteen months had elapsed between approval and first review.

Whilst the inspectors note the positive comments of staff on the crucial role of the administrative staff at Oxford House in circulating information to all staff about new systems and recording requirements, there is little evidence of consistency of practice in carers' files.

Currently, although the file monitoring sheet details that unannounced visits to carers are taking place, it is difficult to locate any record of these in carers' files. A standard pro-forma for recording these visits would make this easier.

Link Workers spoken to during the inspection did confirm that they regularly attended full Team Meetings, that managers were approachable and supportive and that there were good informal support systems across the team. Several carers commented positively on the support provided to them by their link worker, with many citing this as the most positive thing about the Fostering Service.

Currently Fostering Service records relating to young people in placement are generally poor. The disparate nature of the service means that Child-Care Operational team files are not readily available to the Fostering Team. The inspectors noted that Looked After Children documentation was incomplete in all files examined, and that the only information on a file relating to one young person in placement was a recent review. The Fostering Service has clearly recognised the shortfall in this area and has developed a new file policy to remedy it, which is currently being implemented. The contents sheet developed indicates that all relevant information will be incorporated. No requirements or recommendations have therefore been identified. The Fostering agency should review its policy on carer recording to achieve greater consistency. Expectations should be better clarified since currently the Carers' Handbook states 'Most of you will find it helpful to keep records', which does not imply any requirement. It would be advisable for carers to be provided with some training on record keeping, particularly in respect of young people's health and educational needs.

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	2

STAYING SAFE	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
3	3
6	2
8	2
9	3
15	1
30	2

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

MAKING A POSITIVE CONTRIBUTION	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
10	X
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	2
17	3
18	X
19	X
20	X
21	2
22	x
23	X
24	2
25	X
26	X
27	X
28	x
32	3

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
1	FS8	34	The Fostering service must ensure that an appropriately signed Foster Placement Agreement, covering the matters specified in Schedule 6, is in place in relation to every young person placed.	01/01/06
2	FS15	20	The Fostering Service must ensure that full records are retained in relation to all persons working for the service in accordance with Schedule 1 of the Fostering Services Regulations 2002.	01/12/05
3	FS30	24, 25	The Fostering Service must ensure that its Fostering Panel membership is always in full compliance with regulatory requirement.	01/12/05

RECOMMENDATIONS

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

No.	Refer to Standard	Good Practice Recommendations
1	FS24	The Fostering Service should clarify its expectations in relation to carer recording and should provide carers with some training on record keeping, particularly in respect of young people's health and educational needs.
2	FS22	The Fostering Service should clarify the required supervision frequency for each carer in accordance with individual situation and need. This would be best addressed within the Foster Care agreement and annual review.
3	FS22	The use of a standard pro-forma for recording unannounced visits to carers' homes would make these visits more easily identifiable in carers files.
4	FS16	The Fostering Service should clarify its internal structure for carers and other service users and the structure must evidence clear lines of accountability.
5	FS32	The Fostering Service should regularly review the staffing complement of the Kinship Team to ensure its capacity to provide appropriate support to its carers.
6	FS11	At the point of a carer's annual review the Fostering Service should provide the opportunity for young people in placement and carers' own children to express their own views.
7	FS13	The Carers' Handbook should detail the support systems available when young people are excluded from school and Link Workers should also be fully aware of these in order to appropriately inform/advise carers.
8	FS22 FS15	Staff involved in the assessment and approval of foster carers should be qualified social workers (Standard 15.6) Staff providing supervision to foster carers should be similarly qualified (Standard 22.3).

9	FS30	The Fostering Panel Chair should ensure where a recommendation is made to approve a carer prior to receipt of Criminal Records Bureau clearance that this is 'subject to satisfactory CRB clearance', and that this is recorded in the Fostering Panel minutes.
10	FS8	When the Fostering Service places a young person with a carer and that young person falls outside the carer's approval status this should be clearly recorded as a Variation of Approval.
11	FS30	The minutes of Fostering Panel Meetings should detail the Fostering Panel membership and should be fully reflective of discussions held.
12	FS30	Written guidelines should be supplied to Fostering Panel members and should specifically detail requirements in relation to this Fostering Panel and should cover the decision making process where there is disagreement.
13	FS29	The Fostering Service should better clarify for its carers, financial responsibility in respect of transporting young people for contact arrangements.
14	FS12	The fostering service should ensure that its staff have a full awareness of the role of the Centre for Health, what services are available and how these may be accessed.

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