



*Making Social Care
Better for People*

inspection report

FOSTERING SERVICE

**Buckinghamshire County Council Fostering
service**

**Buckinghamshire County Council
Walton Street
AYLESBURY
Bucks
HP20 1YU**

Lead Inspector
Mr Rob Smith

Announced Inspection
11th - 15th December 2006 09:30

The Commission for Social Care Inspection aims to:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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SERVICE INFORMATION

Name of service	Buckinghamshire County Council Fostering service
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Provider Web address	
Name of registered provider(s)/company (if applicable)	Buckinghamshire County Council
Name of registered manager (if applicable)	Mr Graham Smith
Type of registration	Local Auth Fostering Service

SERVICE INFORMATION

Conditions of registration:

Date of last inspection 27th February 2006

Brief Description of the Service:

This was an annual announced inspection of the fostering service provided by Buckinghamshire County Council. The service provided emergency, short term and permanent fostering placements and respite care to children with disabilities. The service was primarily subdivided into a fostering team (which covered support of emergency, short-term and long term mainstream fostering placements), a recruitment team (covering recruitment and assessment of new carers), and a Take a Break team (which ran a range of support services for children with disabilities including overnight respite foster care). Within the mainstream fostering operation sub teams were also focusing on assessment and support of family and friends placements, private fostering and special guardianship arrangements and the setting up of a new scheme, Fostering XTRA, aimed at providing placements for more difficult to place young people. Additional support and developmental staff, for example the fostering panel adviser and the training co-ordinator, were located centrally.

Each of the three main teams had its own manager reporting to an overall fostering manager based in the Aylesbury area. The teams were located in various offices in Aylesbury, Wycombe, Amersham and Buckingham.

As this is a local authority service it was not relevant to provide information on placement fees.

SUMMARY

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

This was an announced inspection conducted by two inspectors, Rob Smith and Alyson Johnson over a period of five days.

The inspection comprised:

- consideration of pre-inspection data and self-assessment information submitted by the service manager;
- consideration of questionnaires submitted by foster carers and children in placement;
- observation of the fostering panel;
- meetings with senior departmental and management staff within the local authority and the fostering service;
- meetings with fostering service frontline staff across the range of services provided;
- meeting with group of young people in foster care;
- visits to a random selection of seven foster carer households to meet with foster carers and children in placement; and
- scrutiny of a selection of foster carer, children's and central service records.

Verbal feedback was given to senior and team managers at the end of the inspection fieldwork.

What the service does well:

The service provides good support for children's health care needs and promotion of healthy lifestyles.

Carers receive overall good levels of support, guidance and training from fostering staff to ensure they provide good quality placements for young people.

The service supports carers well in working in partnership with birth parents to ensure their role is appropriately respected and that relationships between parents and children are constructively sustained.

The service has a very positive and well-developed approach to consideration of family and friends as placement choices for young people that can offer better continuity of family relationships and minimisation of the impact of coming into local authority care.

The day-to-day running of the service is well managed with a consistent focus on achieving positive outcomes for young people in placement.

What has improved since the last inspection?

The service had significantly revised and improved the arrangements for, and management of, placement planning systems to try to ensure placements were appropriately matched to the needs of young people and carers received adequate information and preparation.

Systems for safeguarding young people had improved with revised and tighter guidance around investigation of allegations and concerns, more considered approaches to bedroom sharing and improved levels of unannounced visits to carers.

Consultation with young people about their views of the service had improved with the setting up of a specific group of young children in foster care to consult with on key issues.

Systems for effectively monitoring the quality of various key aspects of the service and related child care practice in the local authority had been further developed.

What they could do better:

The service needed to address shortfalls in the way it managed and recorded lower level concerns about carer practice to ensure young people received a consistently high quality of care. A good practice recommendation has been made in relation to this issue.

Good practice recommendations have also been made in relation to:

- more consistent use of the Health Fax record for young people to ensure more continuity in the recording and passing on of key health information;
- making assessments in relation to the skills and competencies required for the for Fostering Xtra scheme more explicit to ensure carers are properly equipped for the task;

- further clarifying for staff the minimum statutory requirements in relation to assessments of respite care situations to ensure safe and appropriate placements are made;
- improving the access of young people in foster care to IT resources to maximise their likelihood of educational achievement;
- ensuring carers are better informed about changes in contact arrangements and responded to promptly when concerns arise;
- reviewing systems for reimbursement of expenditure for carers to ensure they are repaid promptly;
- consideration of the establishment of a separate 'family and friends' team to support the growing volume of work in this area effectively; and
- introduction of more regular file auditing to ensure carer records are kept up to the required standard.

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

The report of this inspection is available from enquiries@csci.gsi.gov.uk or by contacting your local CSCI office. The summary of this inspection report can be made available in other formats on request.

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Being Healthy

The intended outcome for this Standard is:

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

The Commission considers Standard 12 the key standard to be inspected.

JUDGEMENT – we looked at the outcome for Standard:

12

Quality in this outcome area is good.

The fostering service supported carers and placements well in ensuring children's health care needs were identified and met.

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

EVIDENCE:

Examination of a sample of carer and young people's files provided consistent evidence of carers working hard to ensure health care needs for placed young people were both identified and met. Carers ensured prompt registration with local health and dental services and reviews indicated overall good attention was paid to regular dental and eyesight checks. Statistical evidence provided by the local authority indicated overall good attention to annual medicals for placed young people, although the persuading of older children to partake continued to be challenge for carers. Additional general monitoring was offered via the school nurse and medical system for those children in education placements in the authority. Feedback in children's surveys seen confirmed carers actively promoted healthy eating and lifestyles.

Good overall monitoring and support of health care needs was provided via the Looked After Children (LAC) nurse post and it was good to note the recent appointment of a LAC doctor to add a further level of expertise and weight to this area of support. Positive feedback was received from staff and carers on the LAC nurse input.

Feedback from a number of families using the Take a Break service for children with disabilities indicated high levels of satisfaction with how their health care needs were assessed and met in placements. This was confirmed by sight of

initial matching assessments on the relevant files. One longer-term placement for a child with significant disabilities was visited and provided evidence of excellent support for his health care needs by the carers concerned.

Feedback from more mainstream carers, particularly those managing short term and emergency placements, was of continuing patchiness in the quality of health information provided to them at the point of placement even where children were already well known to the local authority. This was also confirmed by the authority's own recent audit of information supplied at the point of placement but will hopefully be addressed by the authority's ongoing plans for improvement of placement planning procedures.

Young people in placement were in theory also provided with a Health Fax document that was meant to provide an historical record of their health status and treatment record. However this potentially useful document did not appear to be widely or consistently known or used by young people in placement or their carers. The service should consider how to promote more active and constructive use of this potentially useful record by carers and young people.

Relevant training was provided for carers in first aid and health and safety matters and the training co-ordinator was now ensuring updated information on these subjects was sent out to carers. More specialist training to meet the needs of disabled children was provided satisfactorily by the Take a Break team, in liaison with local health authority professionals. Staff were optimistic that previous problems in accessing training in this area should be eased by the appointment of the new LAC doctor. Mental health care needs for placed children were met via referral to the local child and adolescent mental health services.

Staying Safe

The intended outcomes for these Standards are:

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

The Commission considers Standards 3, 6, 8, 9, 15 and 30 the key standards to be inspected.

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

3, 6, 8, 9, 15 & 30

Quality in this outcome area is good.

The persons carrying on and managing the service were suitable and committed to ensuring high standards of service to carers and young people.

Appropriate systems and supports were in place to help ensure carer households were safe places for children to live.

The service worked hard to ensure appropriate matching for longer-term and Take a Break placements, although matching processes for short term and emergency placements still needed improvement to ensure as far as possible children's needs would be satisfactorily met in placement.

Appropriate systems were in place and operated to ensure serious concerns about children's welfare were promptly addressed and they were kept safe. Systems for managing less serious concerns needed further attention to ensure carer quality was rigorously promoted.

Recruitment processes for staff and carers were thorough ensuring only appropriate people were selected to work with and care for placed children.

The fostering panel was well run and supported in helping to ensure foster placements were safe and appropriate for placed young people.

These judgements have been made using available evidence including a visit to this service.

EVIDENCE:

The persons carrying on the service, (i.e. the local authority), and the nominated fostering manager, were unchanged since the last inspection, at which time they had been found to be suitable people for these roles. No significant concerns about their conduct of the service had arisen since that inspection. Inspectors were also impressed with the commitment to improving service quality as evidenced in the amount of work put into addressing the issues emerging at the last inspection in relation to both the fostering service and children's more general social work support.

Appropriately thorough systems were in place to assess the physical safety and suitability of carer households as part of initial assessments and subsequent household reviews. Unannounced visits conducted by fostering service staff offered further opportunities to check on this. Carers were given guidance and updates on relevant health and safety issues.

Scrutiny of carer and child files showed that planned longer term matching of young people for permanency, and/or as part of court proceedings, was carried out in a thorough and considered manner, with detailed matching reports drawn up to help ensure placements would be able to meet needs well. Good matching processes and introductions were also noted in respect of Take a Break placements, which were also usually of a planned, rather than emergency, nature. This was confirmed in feedback from carers and parents of children using the service.

Unsurprisingly ensuring appropriate matching for shorter term or emergency placements was less easy to achieve, particularly in the current context of a shortage of available carers and a corresponding limitation on specific matching and choice. Carer feedback was nonetheless generally of good support and 'protection' from the fostering team to help ensure children were appropriately placed with them and that they were not inappropriately expected to take children outside of their approval range. Formal systems were in place to approve and monitor any agreed exemptions in terms of number or departures from normal approvals range; extended exemptions were subject to fostering panel consideration and recommendation as an additional monitoring safeguard.

Following serious concerns raised at the last inspection the local authority had put considerable effort into auditing and revising shorter-term placement planning processes in part to help ensure better matching wherever feasible.

The local authority's own recent audit of files and placement planning processes had largely confirmed the broad findings of the last CSCI inspection in respect of placement planning shortfalls and the lack of clarity about evidence of matching considerations.

More comprehensive guidance and expectations of all parties around the process had now been put in place and further auditing of the system and its effectiveness was in train. The fostering team, in the context of continuing shortfalls in children's social work team resources, had also taken on responsibility for chairing initial placement planning meetings both to ensure they took place and to provide better exchange of information and clarification of placement expectations. Inspectors recognised the need for this measure in the short-term, but advised that when children's social work team resources improve this responsibility needed to be more correctly reassumed by the placing social work team.

Given the relatively short time since the last inspection it was too early to properly judge the impact of these changes on improving placement planning but the authority is to be commended on the concerted effort put into establishing more coherent, better documented and monitored systems for this crucial aspect of placement management. Anecdotal feedback from carers was that the reintroduction of proper placement planning meetings was a good step forward.

The service had a number of children placed in transracial placements, largely as a result of an historical shortfall in the number and range of carers from minority ethnic backgrounds. Evidence from the fostering recruitment team indicated that more carers from such backgrounds were in the process of recruitment/approval, which should provide more appropriate matching choices in the near future. A range of resource packs were now also available for different age groups with ethnically appropriate toys, games and other materials to support carers in transracial placement situations. Specific additional guidance had recently been drawn up to guide carers on meeting the needs of young people from minority ethnic and diverse cultural backgrounds.

The local authority had put in place recently revised and strengthened procedures for identifying and managing fostering related child protection investigations and other concerns about carers. Examination of a sample of files and ongoing contact since the last inspection with CSCI confirmed that the service acted promptly and appropriately to safeguard children, and support the needs of carers, when explicit child protection concerns arose.

There was less clarity about the management and follow-up of less urgent issues raised about carer quality. On a small number of files looked at, although there was evidence of concerns being raised, there was insufficient evidence of how these concerns were subsequently followed up and resolved. Such lower level concerns also did not appear to be consistently noted on the

carer file section covering concerns and allegations, as this appeared to be reserved for more immediately serious issues such as child protection investigations.

Inspectors recommended that a broader view of 'concerns' be adopted to allow consistent tracking of lower level but possibly significant or recurrent themes in individual carer households. Inspectors further advised that more explicit identification of the nature of any concerns, final outcome findings and cross-referencing to more detailed records be adopted. It was also noted that on some carer files the previous carer concerns 'history' was not being brought forward onto the current file, which meant that a true perspective of any patterns of past concerns might not be obtained without reference to past volumes. Additionally in relation to one set of carers, where a considered decision had been made to continue to place children in the context of a range of expressed concerns about aspects of their practice, inspectors felt this should have been supported by a clearer specific record of the rationale and subsequent management decision-making.

Carers and staff had access to regular training on child protection matters and child protection and safe caring formed part of basic carer preparation training for new carers. Individual household safe caring guidelines were noted to be in place on the sample of carer files seen, although inspectors would support the view of the local authority's own audit team that these needed to be more consistently updated and 'fine tuned' in respect of the individual children who might be placed.

New more rigorous procedures had also recently been introduced to tighten the systems for approval of bedroom sharing arrangements. This had largely been in response to feedback from young people about their dislike of sharing, but also added an additional safeguard to ensure such arrangements were properly considered from a child protection standpoint.

The sample of carer files seen across all aspects of the service confirmed a much more consistent approach to the carrying out of unannounced visits by supervising staff to carer households, even where this was more difficult to plan, for example with Take a Break carers. The level of unannounced visiting was also being monitored as part of annual review processes. The value of such visits was confirmed on one carer file seen, where a visit highlighted possible concerns about carer practice.

A sample of staff recruitment files were seen and confirmed that recruitment procedures were thorough and fully in line with regulatory expectations. Staff appointed to work had the relevant skills, experience and qualifications required.

Carer assessments seen on files and in the course of fostering panel observations confirmed that the assessment process was again generally

thorough and challenging and covered all the areas required under standards and regulations. Feedback from panel members was that under the new recruitment team they had noted an improvement in the quality and consistency of new carer assessments.

The one area of inspector comment related to Fostering Xtra assessments. The service was developing a new Fostering Xtra scheme for recruiting and full time carers to work with more challenging young people. The first such recruitment assessment was observed presented to panel during this inspection. Inspectors would support the views expressed by panel in relation to this assessment that it lacked adequate cross-referencing to, and evidencing of, the particular skills and experience needed by carers to work within this scheme. Inspectors would therefore advise the development of a specific additional element to the assessment for Fostering Xtra applicants that address these shortfalls. A recommendation has been made to address this.

Inspectors looked at a small number of assessments for carers offering respite breaks to specific existing carers, typically, but not exclusively, in family and friends situations. Inspectors recognised that sometimes these respite break assessments were presented at very short notice, but were initially concerned that not all statutorily required aspects of assessment and vetting were being consistently carried out. Further exploration confirmed that, while not all aspects of a full planned assessment could always feasibly be carried out at short notice, the key statutory elements were. However inspectors felt staff would benefit from having those key minimum statutory elements, as outlined under Schedule 3, more clearly defined to ensure ongoing consistency of practice. A recommendation has been made to address this.

Appropriate formal complaints procedures were in place for carers, young people and other relevant parties. Scrutiny of some examples of recent formal complaints investigations confirmed these were investigated fairly and thoroughly. Please note however the previous reference to management of less formal, lower levels concerns about carers. On the basis of figures provided by the fostering service in the period 01/09/05-01/01/06 the service had received a total of seven formal complaints; one from young people, two from carers and four from birth parents. Of the six complaints that had been resolved as of that latter date five were found to be partly upheld.

Observation of the fostering panel and scrutiny of recent minutes and panel reports confirmed it was operating in an effective and well-managed way. Panel membership, which was largely unchanged since the last inspection, was in line with statutory expectations and the panel chair and vice chair were suitably experienced.

With the increase in recruitment and assessments, particularly in the family and friends area, the panel was very busy and had had to schedule recent additional meetings to cope with the increased workload. However this had

been managed well and the panel continued to receive good quality administrative support. The location for panel meetings, though not ideal, was adequate with provision of an adjacent waiting area for carers and fostering staff attending panel.

It was positive to note the developing and more influential quality assurance roles of the panel and the panel advisor, which were highlighting and addressing key areas for improvement and development in panel operations and more general fostering and fieldwork practice issues. The work in this area is to be commended.

Enjoying and Achieving

The intended outcomes for these Standards are:

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

The Commission considers Standards 7, 13 and 31 the key standards to be inspected.

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

7, 13 & 31

Quality in this outcome area is good.

The service provided appropriate support and guidance to ensure the diverse needs of place children were met consistently.

The service and carers were supportive of young people's educational achievement.

Where parents were in receipt of short break respite support, or were actively involved in the ongoing care of their children, there was evidence of good partnership working to support their key caring role.

These judgements have been made using available evidence including a visit to this service.

EVIDENCE:

The service provided appropriate input for and consideration of diversity issues as part of carer preparation, assessment and subsequent ongoing training. As already noted practical support and guidance was in place for assisting carers managing transracial or transcultural placements. As also noted the service was in the process of hopefully approving new carers from a wider range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. The meeting of children's diversity needs was monitored via individual childcare reviews and as part of annual carer household reviews. The fostering panel also monitored the adequacy with

which diversity issues were being addressed in initial assessments and in the household reviews that it saw.

With regard to disabilities issues, the Take a Break service worked hard to provide appropriate resources and placements to support carers working with children with these needs. One longer-term placement for a disabled child was also visited during this inspection and inspectors were impressed with the efforts put in by the carers and the fostering service to ensure his needs were met fully and consistently.

Feedback from young people in surveys confirmed that they felt well supported by their carers to achieve educationally. Young people's and carers' files showed consistent evidence of carers liaising well with schools and, on occasion, acting as staunch advocates on behalf of young people. Overall monitoring and support of looked after children's education was provided in the local authority by the Education of Children in Public Care (ECPC) team. Carers and young people were positive about the additional guidance and support offered by this team. The samples of children's files seen showed consistent evidence of up to date Personal Education Plans (PEPs). It was also positive to note the training being offered by the fostering training co-ordinator to support carers in understanding modern teaching methods and learning approaches used in schools.

Figures supplied by the fostering services indicated an overall good level of children attending fulltime education or being supported by more specialist input.

The one area of concern identified by inspectors that required attention by the local authority as a whole, rather than just the fostering service, was the shortfall in adequate supply of computer resources for looked after young people. Direct feedback from fostered young people indicated past provision of laptops had now ceased and that such equipment was, anyway, now significantly out of date and unable to run more recent software. Young people were therefore largely reliant on whatever computer equipment carers might have. One young person spoken with had no access to any form of computer at home and confirmed how disadvantaged he was in relation to his classmates. Carers themselves indicated that guidelines around provision of, and access to computers and the supply of 'consumables' (paper, ink etc) also needed greater clarification. The local authority had carried out its own recent survey around these issues, which evidently highlighted many of the same concerns. Inspectors advised attention to the identified shortfalls to avoid further disadvantaging looked after children. A recommendation has been made to address this issue.

The primary service offering short-term respite breaks for parents was the Take a Break service. The feedback received from parents using this service, supported by evidence from carer and household reviews and from records of

placement planning, confirmed the ongoing central caring role of birth parents was clearly recognised and supported in such situations.

Making a Positive Contribution

The intended outcomes for these Standards are:

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

The Commission considers Standards 10 and 11 the key standards to be inspected.

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

10 & 11

Quality in this outcome area is good.

The service provided good support for children to keep up their previous family and other relationships, where this was seen to be in their best interest.

Young people were provided with a range of methods to make sure they were able to express their views.

These judgements have been made using available evidence including a visit to this service.

EVIDENCE:

Evidence from scrutiny of files and discussions with carers and young people confirmed there were generally good structures in place to support young people's agreed contact arrangements. Contact and issues around working in partnership with birth parents were clearly addressed as part of carer assessment processes and training, and particular attention paid in family and friends situations to supporting carers in these potentially complex positions.

A number of longer-term situations were seen in which carers had developed very good partnership working relationship with birth families that successfully sustained meaningful relationships between children and their parents.

In many situations contact within the foster home was not appropriate and the local authority arranged independent venues and, where necessary, formal supervision. Feedback from some carers was that they still experienced

inconsistency in some of these arrangements with late cancellations or rearrangements that took limited account of the impact upon their other commitments and the children concerned. A recommendation has been made to address this issue. One set of carers had experienced particular problems with the quality of supervisors and delays in relocating contact and these were brought to the attention of the fostering manager for prompt resolution.

Young people had various routes through which they could make their views known about their care and about more general issues to do with fostering and being looked after.

At an immediate level it was reassuring to see in young people's surveys that the vast majority felt well listened to and consulted with in their individual foster homes. Young people were also invited to attend and contribute to their care reviews and to include their comments for carer household reviews. The local authority was looking to relaunch its Viewpoint interactive system designed to encourage young people to contribute more readily to their reviewing processes.

Young people also had access to an advocacy service contracted by the local authority to act as independent advocates for looked after children in Bucks. Feedback from young people was however that they did not regard this service particularly highly; senior managers were made aware of this in verbal feedback as a separate issue for them to follow up on. At a more formal level young people were represented at various points within the children's services strategic planning and corporate parenting forums.

Of particular note however was the recent time-limited young person's group set up by fostering staff to specifically look at issues relating to fostering. Inspectors had the opportunity to meet with some of this group and look at the work they had done. The group had clearly been successful and identified a number of key issues, for example better mobile phone allowances and better planned room sharing, that the fostering services had already begun to tackle. This was a commendable initiative that the fostering manager indicated would be used as a model for more specific future feedback on fostering issues than was obtained through current structures. Inspectors would strongly support this intent.

The group had also raised some useful general points about their experience of the care review process, in particular around the apparently continuing inappropriate practice of holding these reviews in schools. While this did not fall within the strict remit of the fostering service inspection inspectors did raise the issue for the local authority to explore further.

Achieving Economic Wellbeing

The intended outcomes for these Standards are:

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

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

29

Quality in this outcome area is good.

Allowances were subject to regular review and updating to ensure carers were provided with adequate ongoing resources to meet the needs of placed young people, however systems for irregular payments were not satisfactorily managed.

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

EVIDENCE:

The local authority was in the process of a thorough review of fostering allowances and payments systems to ensure they were not only of a satisfactory, competitive and comparable level across sectors, but were also simpler to understand and easier to access.

Over and above the basic allowances the new Fostering Xtra scheme offered a significantly enhanced level of payment. Plans were also in hand for a payment for skills scheme by which carers with demonstrable and evidenced higher levels of skills and experience would be paid enhanced rates.

Feedback from carers on financial matters was that, while basic allowances were paid regularly, some of them were experiencing frustration with the delays in payments for more one-off irregular expenditure, typically paid out at the beginning of placements, for new equipment, clothing, car seats etc. Examples were given by carers of waiting for three to five months for such items to be reimbursed, or even of promises to pay for certain items being subsequently reneged upon in the light of increasing financial constraints.

Discussions with fostering staff indicated that the process for approval of payments now took considerably longer, as more senior staff had to give approval. Whatever ever the reason for the current situation, clearly carers do need to be reimbursed much more promptly for monies paid put and commitments given at placement commencement need to be consistently honoured. A recommendation has been made to address this issue.

A significant number of carers were also concerned at what they saw as inadequate sums provided for supporting children's recreational and leisure activities. Senior managers were already in the process of addressing this issue in terms of easier and discounted access for looked after children to a range of recreational services in the authority, and via the review of fostering allowances already mentioned.

The standard covering preparation for adulthood under this outcome area was not fully inspected on this occasion and therefore has not been scored. However in the course of the inspection inspectors were pleased to note the more consistent evidence of pathway plans being in place for older young people and there was positive feedback from a number of carers and young people about the quality of input and support offered by the Leaving Care team, in contrast to the more critical comments received about this team in previous inspections.

Management

The intended outcomes for these Standards are:

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

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

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

1, 16, 17, 21, 24, 25 & 32

Quality in this outcome area is good.

The service had an appropriate statement of purpose and other related information that provided clear accurate information on the range of services offered to all interested parties.

Staff were organised and managed effectively to ensure as far as possible carers and young people in placement received the support they needed.

Due to the current demands on the service both staffing and carer resources were under significant pressure and were not always able to meet expectations of placement range and choice.

The service had a clear and largely effective strategy for working with carers that provided them with good support and guidance.

Children's case records were inconsistently maintained and sometimes lacked the key information to ensure placement planning could be carried out effectively.

General administrative and service records were satisfactorily maintained providing a good overview and monitoring of service operations, although there were some continuing inconsistencies in carer files.

The role of friends and family as carers continued to constructively develop as a key aspect of the authority's strategy for providing an appropriate range of placement choices for young people.

These judgements have been made using available evidence including a visit to this service.

EVIDENCE:

The service had an appropriate and up to date statement of purpose in place that fully met the expectations of the standards and regulations. There was a range of additional information for young people in different formats relating both to the specifics of fostering, and to being looked after in general, that gave them a good picture of life as a foster child in Bucks.

Inspectors were made aware of significant planned structural changes in the local authority services for children. While these changes mostly did not impact directly upon any aspect of the fostering service, proposals included a possible merger of the recruitment and Take a Break teams. While clearly the local authority must come to its own conclusions on how best to reorganise, particularly in a challenging financial context, inspectors highlighted the risks that such a merger would potentially weaken the focus and current positive, but distinctly different, work of the two teams and took the opportunity to raise this point with the senior director concerned.

On the basis of discussions with staff and team managers inspectors judged that staffing resources were currently being managed well and flexibly in response to both growing and shifting work demands. There was evident

effective clear leadership provided by the fostering service manager and intermediate managers and good attention paid to planned development of the service alongside more rigorous monitoring of service quality and outcomes. Fostering staff spoken with confirmed regular receipt of supervision and access to good support and guidance from senior staff.

The range of responsibilities of the specific fostering team manager were however considerable in comparison to other team leader posts within the service and inspectors would support the stated intention to review and rationalise the management workloads.

The family and friends sub team, very effectively managed at present by a senior practitioner, was under significant work pressure, given that it covered not just family and friends placement assessments and support but also private fostering and special guardianship work. All these areas of work are liable to expand significantly in the context of current practice developments and serious consideration should be given to establishing this as a distinct separate team. This would also have the benefit of relieving some of the management demands placed on the fostering team leader, who currently oversees this sub team.

The Take a Break service appeared to have managed a staffing budget reduction in the past year without serious impact on its operations or quality of work, although again as respite care for disabled children continues to be in high demand in the authority, the adequacy of staffing within this team will need to be kept under close review.

The recruitment team was still relying to some degree on agency and independent assessor input but appeared to be managing the process of advertising, recruitment and assessment generally well with a number of new carers currently going through the various processes.

The Fostering Xtra scheme had been somewhat held back by the continuing difficulty in attracting staff to the senior practitioner role and the sudden departure of an agency staff member who had been covering the role. A permanent appointment had however been made just prior to this inspection and it is clearly to be hoped that this scheme will get fully underway.

The overall position on carer numbers and therefore placement range and choice, appeared not to have noticeably improved since the last inspection, due to carer recruitment being balanced out by the loss of a number of carers, mainly in the family and friends sector. However the work of the recruitment team appeared to be generating a good number of potential new carers which, allied with the hopefully more consistent development of the Fostering Xtra scheme under its new senior practitioner, should bear fruit in terms of increased carer resources in the coming year. Some fostering staff felt the type of carers currently being approved were not appropriately targeted to current

placement needs so continuing dialogue between recruitment and fostering teams will be needed to minimise this likelihood.

A number of the teams still appeared short of adequate administrative support however the fostering service manager confirmed that formal agreement had now been reached for an increase in administrative support to address some of these shortfalls. Given the potential further growth of demand on the various fostering services admin support levels will however need to be kept under continuing review to ensure they are adequate to support what is, unavoidably, an admin 'heavy' area of practice.

The service had a good overall structure of support for carers in place covering, for example:

- generally regular formal supervision and regular telephone contact;
- access to good fostering duty and out-of hours advice and support;
- good and varied training and development opportunities;
- good written guidance in updated foster carer handbooks;
- input from the ECPC team and LAC nurse;
- Fostering Network membership; and
- regular foster carer forums.

Additional specific psychological and psychotherapeutic input was planned to support the Fostering Xtra scheme carers, given the more challenging placements that they would be expected to take. Inspectors did point out the value of having this more broadly available to all carers at some point given the problems that all placements potentially posed from time to time.

Overall feedback from carers was of satisfaction with the level and range of support offered by the fostering and Take a Break teams team. There were occasional examples of inconsistent formal supervision and inconsistencies in communication cited by carers and confirmed by some of the files looked at, but these did appear to be in the minority.

Particular note should be made of the excellent work undertaken by the training co-ordinator who continued to provide a good range of flexibly delivered training and development opportunities for carers and worked hard, and successfully, to engage more reluctant carers.

The foster carer forum, despite its potential value for all parties concerned, did not appear to be particularly well attended and the service might usefully

consider the development of more local forums or support groups to overcome the problems posed by the difficult geography of the county which some carers indicated inhibited attendance.

The last inspection had highlighted significant criticism of children's social work teams by carers, which although outside the strict remit of the inspection, had significant impact on carers' perception of the overall support they received and on the quality of service provided for young people by the local authority. At this inspection a similar range of concerns were raised by carers and young people, typically identifying high turnover of allocated social workers, inconsistencies in communication and information and poor recognition of the value and contribution made by carers. However on this occasion it was also reassuring to note, in balance, some very positive comments about the high quality of social worker input and support to both carers and young people and the quality of working partnerships.

Discussion with senior departmental staff confirmed the local authority, as part of planned major reorganisation noted previously, was seeking to address the inconsistencies in the quality of support offered to looked after children and also to increase the overall numbers of children's social workers, which were seen to be significantly below comparator authorities.

Working relationships between fostering and children's social work staff appeared somewhat improved since the last inspection, aided in part by the co-location of staff based in Aylesbury. Relationships were seen by fostering staff as less well developed with children's social workers based in other offices but genuine efforts had been made to address this by the fostering team manager via regular meetings and 'surgeries' at these offices.

Children's case records, which were maintained by the children's social work staff, continued to show some inconsistencies in the range of information held, as was highlighted by the authority's own recent audit. There were particular gaps in LAC documentation with sections either missing or inadequately completed, which supported carer views that information available at placement was still at times patchy. The local authority was aware of these shortfalls and had plans in place to address them.

Central service records and the foster carer register were appropriately maintained and there were good systems in place for central monitoring of children protection issues, complaints, serious incidents etc.

Carer files were generally in good order, although some occasional inconsistencies were noted in the recording of supervision sessions, the upkeep of the records of children placed and, as noted previously, the records of concerns relating to carers. Regular auditing of these files appeared somewhat limited and consideration should be given to providing this on a more regular basis to ensure files are kept to the required standard.

The service continued to significantly extend and develop its practice in family and friend placements, (both planned and those arising as emergencies under Regulation 38 situations), primarily through the work of the family and friends sub-team. As noted earlier there had been significant increases in assessments and approvals for such placements since the last inspection, generated both through the authority's own approach to placement planning and in the context of court proceedings. The authority had also further developed its practice and procedures around such placements to ensure a more effective and considered initial assessment of the benefits and risks involved for young people for which it should be commended.

Given the often additional complexities of assessing the appropriateness such placements, inspectors advised it would be useful to consider some specific further training for panel members on these sort of approvals. A recommendation has been made to address this issue.

SCORING OF OUTCOMES

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

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

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

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

STAYING SAFE	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
3	3
6	3
8	3
9	2
15	3
30	4

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

MAKING A POSITIVE CONTRIBUTION	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
10	3
11	4

ACHIEVING ECONOMIC WELLBEING	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
14	X
29	2

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

Are there any outstanding requirements from the last inspection? No

STATUTORY REQUIREMENTS

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

No.	Standard	Regulation	Requirement	Timescale for action

RECOMMENDATIONS

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

No.	Refer to Standard	Good Practice Recommendations
1	FS9	That the fostering service reviews its systems, procedures and related record-keeping for dealing with lower level concerns raised about carer practice.
2	FS12	That the local authority considers how to more effectively and consistently use the Health Fax health care document for looked after young people.
3	FS17	That the fostering service ensures assessments relating to the Fostering Xtra scheme provide clearer evidence of carers' abilities to meet the more demanding expectations of this scheme.
4	FS17	That the fostering service makes explicit to staff the minimum statutory requirements that need to be addressed under Schedule 3 when carrying out short-notice assessments of respite care situations.
5	FS13	That the local authority helps ensure that looked after children in foster placements have adequate access to IT resources to support their learning and achievement.

6	FS10	That the fostering service helps ensure carers are kept promptly and well informed of any changes in contact arrangements and that appropriate requests for changes in venue are dealt with promptly.
7	FS29	That the fostering service reviews the current efficiency of systems for reimbursement of one-off irregular items of expenditure by carers.
8	FS17	That the fostering service considers the establishment of a separate team to more effectively cover the 'family and friends' and associated work.
9	FS25	That the fostering service undertakes more regular audits of carer files to ensure they are maintained consistently to the required standards.

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