



*Making Social Care
Better for People*

inspection report

FOSTERING SERVICE

Gateshead Council Fostering Service

**Council Offices
Prince Consort Road
Gateshead
Tyne and Wear
NE8 4HJ**

Lead Inspector
Stephen Graham

Announced Inspection
31st October 2005 9:45

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 Gateshead Council Fostering Service

Address Council Offices
Prince Consort Road
Gateshead
Tyne and Wear
NE8 4HJ

Telephone number 0191 4338333

Fax number 0191 4776645

Email address

Provider Web address

Name of registered provider(s)/company (if applicable) Gateshead Council

Name of registered manager (if applicable) Christine Pearce

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 10th December 2004

Brief Description of the Service:

The Fostering Service is part of the Community Based Services of Gateshead Metropolitan Borough Council. The service continues to provide a number of different types of placements to meet the assessed needs of the young people requiring care and accommodation.

Mainstream carers provide care to:

- Pre-adoption children mainly infants
- Emergency placements for younger children
- Short, medium and long term placements.

The service also have a number of carer's who are paid a fee and are known as contract carers. Contract carers provide care to:

- Emergency placements
- Remand placements
- Task focused placements that aim to return the young person home or prepare them for independent living
- Mother and baby placements
- Long term and shared care for disabled children

The service also provides respite care with Respite and Home from Home carers. The council have obtained funding to develop Treatment Foster Care, which will improve placement choice for young people.

SUMMARY

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

The Inspector would like to thank the children, carers and staff at Gateshead Fostering for their warm welcome and the important part they played in the inspection. Information and evidence in this report was gathered over a 10 day period through:

- Talking individually with children, carers and staff
- Visiting foster carers' homes
- Group discussions with staff
- Talking with the managers of the service
- Reading childrens, carers and staff files
- Reading polices, procedures and records
- Children's questionnaires
- Carers questionnaires
- Children's social workers questionnaires
- Observing the fostering panel
- Talking with the Chair of the fostering panel

Gateshead Fostering is a good fostering agency, which supports its foster carers well to make sure that children are safe and well looked after whilst living away from home. Some examples of the things children said included, 'I get treated like family, with support, love and care'. "They look after you well" and "I do more, new friends and school"

The agency's staff and foster carers are carefully chosen and checks are made to make sure that they are suitable and able to work safely with children. The support provided to carers by their supervising social workers and the training offered to foster carers is good and assists them to help children with the variety of problems that they may have. The children's own social workers confirmed that they were 'very satisfied' with how the children they had placed were being looked after.

What the service does well:

All placing social workers responding to our questionnaire stated that they would use Gateshead's Fostering service again. Almost all of the children placed were described by their social workers as being cared for very well or quite well. Children were also described as being safe in their placements. Specific views and observations of the service and carers were made by placing social workers and included: The carers provide "warm, stable and consistent care, the children's needs are prioritised and they are well cared for physically and emotionally". "The carers are warm, welcoming, have high standards and have been helpful and involved in contact". "Carers are enthusiastic regarding their role and providing the best possible care". These are "reliable carers who have an understanding of the strengths and

weaknesses of the child". Carers are "committed to providing a good level of care". Carers provide a "warm, friendly environment where a happy family atmosphere prevails"

Of the carers themselves, over half of those responding by questionnaire or interviewed were "very satisfied" with the support they received from the fostering service. No one was dissatisfied with the support received with other carers who responded either "quite well supported" or stating that the support received was "ok most of the time". One carer stated that they were "proud to work for the service. I've always had good advice and support from link workers, social workers and team leaders". Another carer highlighted the best thing as being "the efficient caring way things are dealt with". A number of others highlighted the level of support from their link workers, excellent communication and helpful staff as the best things about the service.

Gateshead Fostering give their foster carers lots of support and try to ensure that the children they place with them also receive the support they need. Carers are visited regularly by staff who are always available for carers to talk to. The agency chooses its staff and foster carers carefully to make sure that they are safe to work with children. Carers are given initial training and opportunities for further training so that they understand the needs of the children living in foster care. Children are supported well by their carers with their education, contact with friends & family, health and activities. Staff working at Gateshead Fostering have a lot of experience and childcare qualifications and know a lot about keeping children safe and protected. The service has lots of helpful information, which can be easily understood by children. The vast majority of young people responding by questionnaire or interviewed during the inspection could identify no "worst things" about the service. Examples of children's views of the best things included, the individual support they received from their carers, trips out, hobbies, school and feeling part of a family. One young person stated: "I think the fostering service is excellent"

What has improved since the last inspection?

The arrangements to monitor and review how foster carers have worked with the children placed with them have been improved. These arrangements now ensure (with some exceptions) that these reviews occur at least once each year. Photographs of staff members employed by the service have now been added to their employment files, this gives better evidence of their identity and adds to the proof of their suitability to work with children. The written guide to the service, provided for the benefit of the children using it, has been further improved to help younger children to understand it better. The service is trying to improve placement choice for children by working with organisations and projects that encourage people from different ethnic backgrounds to become foster carers.

What they could do better:

The service could improve their arrangements to consult with children and their carers. Although written information about the service is prepared to a high standard, not all of those that would benefit from it are receiving it. The work undertaken to make sure that all children have a 'children's guide' and that they, their carers and placing social workers know how to complain, and how to contact the Commission must continue. The service should continue to work to make sure that their 'Statement of Purpose' and previous inspection reports are available to all that should read it. Although the service provides good training opportunities for its carers, they need to find ways to encourage more carers to attend and ensure that they have all the skills and knowledge needed to care for children successfully. The service should continue to work closely with placing social workers to ensure that all the written information needed to match children with carers is obtained. Carers should be given all the written information they need to care for children successfully and safely. Social workers placing children with the service should visit the children regularly and ask for their opinion about the care they receive. Social workers supervising the foster carers should visit them un-announced, at least once each year. The plan to increase the independence of the Chair of the fostering panel should be implemented. The service should continue to work to ensure that sufficient placement choice exists and that children are placed within the normal fostering limits agreed for each carer. The service should continue to recruit more carers from a range of ethnic communities and backgrounds. The Manager of the service should complete their work to obtain their required management qualifications. Over half of carers responding and interviewed felt that although staff did a good job there were not enough of them. Therefore, the service should continue to work to fill their current staff vacancies and improve the arrangements to provide cover for staff who may be absent. Arrangements to manage the administrative support available within the service should be reviewed to ensure that this support is provided as effectively as possible. The arrangements to store and archive carer records should be reviewed to ensure that this is efficient.

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

12

Gateshead Fostering effectively monitors and promotes the health of children placed with their carers.

EVIDENCE:

An examination of both children's and carers' records confirmed that the agency promotes children's health. Supervising social workers make regular checks of carers' records; and any issues relating to children's health, accidents and incidents are recorded by the service; and are monitored by the manager as part of their Schedule 7 monitoring. Additional training opportunities in health, hygiene and first aid are included in the annual programme of training offered to carers. There was evidence of carers working to ensure that children cared for are registered with doctors, dentists and opticians and attend all necessary appointments. There was also good evidence that carers contribute directly to statutory reviews of children's care needs and provide good information on how their immediate health needs are being met. One carer, looking after a child with profound special needs, placed initially as an emergency, outlined positively the steps taken by themselves, their supporting social worker and health professionals to ensure that the health needs of that child continued to be met. However, this carer also highlighted the lack of initial support from the placing social worker and their subsequent extended absence (due to illness), which had caused both concern and difficulties for them when liaising with social services regarding the care needs of the child. The carer reported that no alternative social worker had been provided for the child during the absence. The same carer was very positive regarding the support received from the fostering service during that difficult time.

Children in placement who were interviewed or responded by questionnaire confirmed that their carers gave good support and advice to ensure that their health needs were met. Responses commented positively on this aspect of

their care, examples given of help with their diet, personal hygiene, exercise and staying safe. It was noted that not all children's files contained all of the required Looked After Children's (LAC) documentation. However, there was evidence within case files, which confirmed that the managers of placing social workers were monitoring these files and instructing social workers to update and complete outstanding documentation. There was also evidence that the fostering service had supported carers in requesting this information from children's social workers, although in some cases this was still outstanding. With one example, file evidence and discussion with the carer and young person confirmed that their last LAC annual health examination had taken place in January 2004. This had been noted by an independent reviewing officer, with a request made to the placing social worker for this to be arranged. Positively, there was good evidence from the carer and the child that their immediate health needs were being met, with supporting documentary evidence of this within the care files.

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

3,6,8,9,15,30

Staff and carers have a good understanding of child protection procedures and actively seek to make safe, caring and secure placements where children's welfare is safeguarded. Although complaints procedures are in place these are not known to all children, carers and placing social workers. Procedures for the recruitment, selection and vetting of staff and carers are thorough. The agency's fostering panel monitors placements and the outcomes for children. Although the service is working to fulfil its plan to increase the independence of the panel Chair, the steps planned to complete this have not yet been concluded.

EVIDENCE:

The agency has good systems in place to recruit staff and carers who have the qualities and experience necessary to work directly and safely with children. An examination of staff and carers files showed that the service takes up all of the necessary safeguarding checks including enhanced Criminal Record Bureau (CRB) disclosures. As recommended at the previous inspection, staff files examined now include a recent photograph of the individual staff member. As with previous inspections, those carers interviewed or responding by questionnaire were very positive regarding the skills and knowledge of staff and how these were used to support carers in their work with children and young people.

Each carer's home visited as part of the inspection presented a pleasant homely environment, made safe from identifiable hazards. One placing social worker described the environment for the child they had placed as follows: the "foster home is well presented with comfortable furnishings". Risk assessments are completed by the service as part of the initial assessment of new carers and are subsequently updated at each annual review. There was evidence that individual risk assessments are completed in respect of each child placed by the agency in partnership with the child's social worker. With one example, file evidence and discussion with their carer confirmed that there had been a delay in the completion of the assessment. However, there was evidence that the reasons for this delay had been subsequently acted upon by the service itself. An on-going recruitment programme aimed at increasing both the number of carers and improving placement choice is continuing.

A number of carers commented positively on the arrangements in place to 'match' children successfully with carers. One carer described how their supervising social worker would talk through the proposed arrangements to care for a new child and give them information regarding the child's care needs. This carer stated that they never felt under any pressure to accept children if she herself had any doubts that she could care for them successfully. Other carers described how introductory visits had taken place with some children and how this had helped both them and the children to get to know each other better.

Discussion with other carers provided examples of limited information being provided to them, particularly in emergency situations, which had implications for matching. In each of these situations there was evidence that issues around lack of initial information and LAC documentation were being raised by carers and fostering staff with the social workers placing the child. The service is working to improve the overall arrangements for initial matching and ongoing placement stability for children. The senior manager for the service outlined ongoing work with the Barnardo's 'AIM' project, which could help improve matching, the quality of risk assessments undertaken when children are placed and contribute positively to the stability of their placement.

Limited placement choice due to the overall number of available carers has meant that exemptions to normal fostering limits have had to continue. The arrangements in place to agree and record these were reviewed and clarified. Managers confirmed the role played by the fostering panel in monitoring and reviewing the success of these placements. Placing social workers commented positively on the skills of carers in settling children into their placement, one stated: "The foster carer spends a lot of individual time with the child, helping them to understand their situation"

All carers receive training and are provided with written guidance regarding child protection procedures. Social workers and managers employed by the service are experienced practitioners. Notifications previously received by the

commission regarding child protection concerns have demonstrated that the agency reacts promptly and effectively when any such concerns arise. Staff and carers during interview demonstrated a good understanding of child protection procedures and symptoms of abuse. Carers receive training in safe care; this is supplemented by written guidelines and agreements. Observation of the panel provided evidence of their effectiveness in monitoring the protection of children in placement. Panel members were seen to identify possible protection issues arising from annual carer reviews and to respond to them effectively. With one example panel members requested further information and confirmation of circumstances within the care of a young person prior to the re-approval of the carer.

A detailed anti-bullying policy is in place and is provided and explained to carers. Children are also provided with details of this. One example of the possible restraint of a child, highlighted by that young person through their questionnaire, was fed back to the managers of the service at their request for review.

Although the service itself works effectively to protect children and young people from abuse and neglect, the response from young people interviewed and by questionnaire highlighted a lack of contact for many of them with their placing social worker. Nearly all children responding stated that they see their own social worker only sometimes. One carer highlighted his or her concern that the child's own social worker had not been available for a period of 6 to 7 weeks and that no alternative worker had been provided for the child. Examination of records provided examples of children placed not having an allocated social worker at all. With each of these examples there was evidence of carers and the service reacting appropriately and highlighting these concerns to social work managers for their action.

Those placing social workers responding by questionnaire provided many positive statements regarding the qualities of carers in both protecting children and dealing with any behavioural difficulties. One stated that: the child "has boundaries that he complies with, he has a strong attachment to his carers and responds well to the care they provide". Another commented that: "boundaries and structures are in place, these are needed to allow this young person to develop and manage on a day to day basis". Another stated that: "the carer ensures that the children are well supervised and have clear boundaries". Another said that: the "carers provide an excellent balance of care and control. They are not overindulgent and give the child clear and consistent messages about which behaviours are acceptable and which are not".

All of the young people responding by questionnaire or interviewed were clear with regard to what sanctions were allowed, gave examples of how and why they were used by their carers and had no issues with them.

Although there is good evidence that carers and their supervising social workers work effectively to protect children and young people from abuse and neglect, it is concerning that over half of the children responding by questionnaire or interviewed stated that they did not have written information telling them how to make a complaint. Only a small number of children responding had details of how to contact the Commission directly. Approximately one third of placing social workers also stated that they were not aware of the complaints procedure provided by the service.

A meeting of the fostering panel was attended as part of the inspection. The previous recommendation that plans should be put in place to increase the independence of the Chair of the panel have not yet been implemented, although assurance was given by the Chair themselves that this will take place. As in previous inspections, panel members appeared comfortable in their roles and the presentation of written reports for their information was generally good. Discussion was thorough with members able to raise and challenge any issues regarding the potential suitability of proposed foster carers. The panel was also seen to fulfil its quality monitoring responsibilities, raising and challenging issues that may have an impact on the safe care of children already placed. Training sessions for panel members has been highlighted as a need by the service; panel members have contributed their ideas for this with agreed training in the process of being arranged. The panel Chair highlighted changes and improvements made to the administrative support available to the panel. They also confirmed that the quality and experience of the overall panel membership has been further strengthened through the recruitment of a member with direct experience of being fostered themselves.

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

7,13 and 31

Gateshead Fostering through its foster carers works to provide placements, which value diversity and promote equality. Children placed with the agency's carers are provided with good support, which actively promotes educational achievement.

EVIDENCE:

Staff and carers interviewed demonstrated an understanding of diversity, equality and anti-discriminatory practice. Carers receive training in this respect as part of their pre-approval training and written guidance is provided to them by the service. Additional training opportunities are also provided to carers through the well-organised training programme. Unfortunately one recent training event dealing with issues of equality and diversity was cancelled due to low take up from the carers themselves. The service works closely with the Sahara Project to promote the recruitment of carers from a broader range of ethnic minorities and backgrounds. Staff members from the fostering service have attended training provided by this project, with additional training events planned to take place in the immediate future to support this initiative. In addition to this, the service continues to work actively with members of the local Orthodox Jewish community in developing a service for Jewish children.

Many positive examples of the specific support and additional services provided to children with a disability, supporting them to maximise their potential and lead as full a life as possible, were evident. Examples of good multi-

disciplinary support and joint working were evident through one home visit to a carer looking after a child with profound special needs.

Some questionnaire responses from placing social workers highlighted the good work of carers working with children with disabilities and other special needs. One highlighted: "the nurturing nature of the carers, the longevity of the placement, the carers understanding of his needs, including those specific to his autism". Another commented on the carers "warm, nurturing environment. When the child was first placed they showed developmental delay. They are now meeting their developmental milestones normally. It is felt that they have made up ground as they have developed a strong secure attachment with their carer". Another social worker commented that the child was placed with a "carer (who) has previous experience of working with children with a wide range of disabilities and has acquired a good knowledge base".

Nearly all of the children and young people interviewed or responding by questionnaire were able to give examples of the help and support provided to them by carers in meeting their educational needs and in supporting their personal hobbies and interests. One young person commented that with their foster carers: "I do more, new friends and school". During discussion with one carer it became evident that the choice of school made for their own child (who had recently started full-time education) had been made so as not to disrupt the existing travel arrangements put in place to maintain the foster child in their original school.

The manager of the service was able to confirm that all school age children currently placed are receiving a regular education and benefit from personal education plans. Children are also provided with a computer for home use by the service to support their education. The carer for one child, whose written plan had not been completed confirmed the steps taken and joint work with the child's school to put this in place. Carers and children benefit from a dedicated REALAC education service whose manager is also a member of the fostering panel. Supporting social workers monitor the educational needs of each child through their regular visits and annual review reports. The fostering panel also monitors children's education through the annual review reports of carers presented to them. The service continues to support the 'Celebrating Achievement' event for looked after children and also uses this to promote and encourage educational involvement.

In their pre-inspection questionnaires placing social workers commented positively on the educational support provided to children by their carers. One wrote that the child: "was in a special needs school and due to his own efforts and the support of his carers is now in mainstream education". Another described the carers as: "very caring, nurturing, they offer a wide range of outings and activities". Another stated that the carers were: "good at building self-esteem (in children) and identifying activities to enable this"

Another said of the carers that: "the children are kept well occupied with activities which help build their self esteem"

The service continues to offer short-term breaks through their 'Home from Home' carers and respite care. There are appropriate policies and procedures in place and the service is working to further expand these schemes, particularly for older children with disabilities. The service provides a respite care service to support children and help prevent family breakdown. Respite is also provided to support carers working with children, particularly those who have challenging behaviour. A number of carers interviewed confirmed that they had used respite and spoke positively about the benefits of this.

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

10 and 11

The agency makes actively promotes and supports contact between children and their families and friends where this is appropriate. The arrangements put in place to seek children's views about their lives and the care they receive are not always effective.

EVIDENCE:

Contact arrangements for children are recorded and include any restrictions placed on them. The carers interviewed were aware of contact arrangements for the children in their care; a number of whom were involved in facilitating and/or supervising contact. Children interviewed were also aware of the contact arrangements and of any restrictions placed on their contact with relatives and friends. Those carers responding by questionnaire and interviewed were positive about contact arrangements and their involvement in them. There was also evidence of good support and advice from their supervising social workers. Some of the carers interviewed, described concerns they held regarding the more negative aspects of contact, particularly when parents did not attend arranged contact sessions, leading to disappointment for the children concerned. Positively, carers felt able to raise and discuss these concerns where they occurred, with both the child's and their own supervising social worker.

Placing social workers responding by questionnaire had positive views regarding the work of carers in supporting and promoting contact. One highlighted the: "carers positive work with mother when supervising contacts". Another, described: "the positive approach and outlook of the carers- that they are prepared to supervise contact". Another commended the "carers commitment to ensuring that the child has direct face to face contact with their

birth family". Another commended the carers "flexibility with regard to contact". One social worker highlighted that: "there is no contact with the parents of the child, however the carers make the siblings of the child placed welcome in their home."

The agency has very good policies in place regarding consultation and has agreed systems for seeking the views of children placed. It provides children with information in an accessible and age appropriate format through its Children's guides, which are revised annually and distributed to all children placed with carers. The manager described how young people are visited by the Children's Rights Officer or their deputy after coming into placement and are provided with written information, including the Children's Guide as well as contact cards to enhance communication. Despite the positive steps taken by the service, nearly half of the children responding by questionnaire or interviewed said that they had not received a copy of the Children's Guide or were unsure if they had received it. This was raised as a matter of ongoing concern with the managers of the service who agreed to further review the system put in place to ensure children receive and benefit from it. A 'Parents Guide' to the service has been developed and put in place. The manager described how this is distributed to the parents of children by their placing social worker.

There was evidence within children's files and in discussion with children themselves, that their views are both promoted and presented at their own care review meetings. Unfortunately, not all of the children interviewed or responding by questionnaire felt that they were well consulted by the agency about the service overall. Nearly half of the children responding by questionnaire and some of those interviewed said that they had not been asked about the service. Also of concern was the confirmation of approximately a quarter of the children responding that they had not been asked for their opinion about their carers by the fostering service. Reassuringly, almost all children interviewed or responding by questionnaire were able to confirm that their carers asked for their opinion either often or sometimes, with over half of them able to identify positive changes that had occurred as a result of this consultation. Some children gave examples of changes to diet and recreation, whilst others highlighted simply the "re-assurance" they felt, knowing that their carers would ask and were interested in their opinion.

All carers interviewed or responding by questionnaire confirmed that they had regular contact with their supervising social worker and were very positive regarding the quality of this support. However, almost all of them felt that they had not been asked for their opinion regarding the service overall. This was also fed back to managers for review.

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

29

The agency makes appropriate and prompt payments in accordance with its policies and procedures.

EVIDENCE:

During interviews carers confirmed that they receive prompt payments of allowances. There are policies and procedures available to staff and carers in respect of fostering allowances and payments to carers. In discussion, one carer queried the level of expenses provided to meet the clothing needs of a child, placed with them as an emergency. This was reviewed with the manager who was able to satisfactorily clarify the level of payment and the reasons for this.

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

1,2,4,5,16,17,18,19,20,21,22,23,24,25,26,27,28 and 32

The agency, which is held in high regard by its carers, is an effectively managed fostering service. It offers good quality supervision and support to its carers' through a team of dedicated, well experienced, qualified and skilled social work practitioners. Systems and records are generally robust, however, some LAC documentation for children was acknowledged as not being in place. Minor omissions in the completion of the services own documentation with regard to carer visits and reviews were also shared and acknowledged.

EVIDENCE:

The management team at Gateshead Fostering has reacted positively to the good practice recommendations made at the last inspection and has worked to improve those aspects of the service. However, issues continue with regard to some aspects of consultation with children and the provision of written material to them, particularly complaints information and the Children's Guide. Staff files have been reviewed and updated to include all required information. The service continues in its positive attempts to improve placement choice through their ongoing recruitment drive, particularly the recruitment of carers from a broader range of ethnic communities. This will continue to impact positively on the need for carers to work outside their normal fostering limits and agreed terms of approval, which has continued to be necessary on occasions. In contrast to the previous visit, reports from carer reviews were in place in the files examined. Although the plans put in place to increase the independence of the panel chair are not complete, the service is continuing to work to implement this.

The agency, which continues to be held in high regard by its carers, provides good quality support and supervision to staff and carers alike. Comments made by carers included: "I am proud to work for the service. I've always had good advice and support from link workers, social workers and team leaders". Another carer highlighted the best thing as being "the efficient caring way things are dealt with". A number of others highlighted the level of support from their link workers, excellent communication and helpful staff as the best things about the service.

An examination of staff and carers files found that the agency operates a good system for supervising staff and carers, with information normally well recorded and presented. The manager uses information gathered to monitor the service against its Statement of Purpose and Schedule 7 of the Fostering Services Regulations 2002. The policies and procedures used by the service are based firmly on the National Minimum Standards and associated regulations for Fostering Services.

The manager confirmed that the current Statement of Purpose (SoP) describing the service is being updated following consultation on it. They also confirmed that this, along with previous inspection reports are distributed for the benefit and information of placing social workers through their own district offices. Disappointingly, only one third of placing social workers responding through their questionnaires confirmed that they had seen the SoP. Equally, only one third confirmed that they had seen the previous inspection report. The service has further improved the quality of the Children's Guides in use, but there continues to be concerns regarding its distribution and availability to some young people and their awareness of its purpose.

The previous inspection had confirmed that the manager had commenced their training leading to the required management qualification. Unfortunately, due to their long-term absence from the service following serious personal injury, this training, although planned to continue, has not yet been completed.

An overall examination of records, discussion with staff, carers, children, questionnaire responses and direct discussion with the deputy manager all confirmed that the service has been managed and monitored efficiently and effectively by the deputy during the prolonged absence of the manager. Carers have continued to benefit from an efficient duty system. The external placements of children continue to be closely monitored. Notifications of significant events occurring within the service continue to be provided. Following previous improvements in the information provided to carers regarding personal taxation, only one carer raised this as an issue during this inspection. Issues relating to conflicts of interest continue to be detailed within staff guidance. Discussion with the panel Chair successfully clarified the role of one panel member in providing advice and support in the processing of an application.

During the long-term absence of the manager, the deputy has monitored the workload of each supervising social worker. The service has some posts, which are currently vacant. To provide cover for these posts, the extended absence of the manager, maternity leave and some staff sickness, staffing levels have been maintained mainly through existing part-time staff taking on additional hours and responsibilities. Agency staff had been requested to help cover these gaps, however reported budget issues meant that this had not been possible. An examination of staff personnel files identified that the agency's social work staff are experienced, well-qualified and skilled social work practitioners in working with looked after children. The views and comments of carers and managers indicated that staff have worked with flexibility and commitment to ensure that the service has been provided to a good standard, despite the potential problems caused by staff shortages.

Those carers responding by questionnaire or interviewed during the inspection gave very positive responses regarding the supportive qualities of their supervising social workers. However, over half the carers responding felt that although staff did a good job there were not enough of them. Discussion with carers and examination of their files, confirmed that they receive regular support and supervision both through visits and regular telephone contact. Problems with the completion of annual statutory un-announced visits to all carers were evident, mainly due to the carers and children not being at home when these visits occurred. Staffing resources and demands on individual time also impact on the ability of supervising social workers to make further un-announced calls on carers. However, there was evidence of staff working flexibly outside normal office hours and visiting at times when children were more likely to be present, e.g. Saturday mornings. Some examples of annual review forms not indicating whether an un-announced visit had occurred were

raised with the manager for their review. Occasional examples of the record of visit sheets not being signed off by the supervising social worker were also highlighted to the manager.

Although there is an appropriate level of clerical and administrative support, line management of these staff is currently based outside the service itself. Discussion with managers and staff highlighted their belief that the quality of the support provided to supervising social workers, carers and the service overall could be further improved through the introduction of an 'in-house' management arrangement. In discussions it was evident that the administrative staff team had also worked flexibly to cover any absences arising from staff illness.

The retention of experienced staff and carers by the service is good. The service maintains detailed information in respect of its carers. The overall recruitment drive to increase the number of carers is continuing. Procedures by which carers are assessed are sound and are regularly reviewed. An example of positive change to the protocol for assessing any changes in health of carers being introduced following discussion at the panel was noted. There was one example of conflicting written documentation, regarding the agreed maximum numbers of children to be placed with one carer. This was raised with the manager for review.

As previously highlighted, carers felt that the individual support provided to them by the service is good. None of the carers had any concerns regarding the out of hours support available to them. For the further benefit of carers, the service has an established 'peer contact and telephone tree' system. Carers also spoke positively regarding the established 'peer support groups' with the service providing direct financial support with the cost of venues to help facilitate these. The service has clear policies and procedures which outline how carers will be supported. This covers all the points outlined in National Minimum Standard 21.2. . Since the previous inspection, the arrangements by which the continued approval of carers is reviewed annually have been further improved. Only one example of a delay in this process was evident, with managers acknowledging the reasons for this and outlining the steps taken to avoid its repeat. There was good evidence of independent reviewing officers bringing reviews forward where this was seen to be necessary. Discussion with carers also provided good examples of the direct support provided by the fostering service social workers in assisting them both to access and gain advice from the child's social worker.

The agency has an established training sub-group, which works to review and further improve the training available to carers. The overall programme in place is comprehensive, with the service positively promoting the attendance of carers. The training manual itself provides details of the child-care support available to them to allow their attendance. Despite this, although carers were positive about the training programme in place, a number of them highlighted

their problems with the accessibility and timing of courses, particularly their potential impact on their existing childcare commitments. This was fed back to the manager for further review. The programme provides some joint training opportunities for carers and their supervising social workers. There were also examples of the training of carers being presented by the social workers themselves. The individual training needs of carers as well as their participation in training is monitored both by their supervising social workers and through their annual review meetings. There were some positive examples of carers benefiting from distance learning training resources, allowing them to study at home. Evidence was also seen of carers researching information independently to add to their knowledge and skills and improving the quality of care given to children placed with them. Staff members employed by the service who were interviewed during the inspection were positive about the training opportunities provided to them to support their skills and professional development. However some staff and carers reported their frustration at the cancellation of some arranged courses due to reported limited interest. Some staff also felt that opportunities to attend external training events were currently limited.

The service provides detailed policies, procedures and guidance to staff to support them in their work with carers and children. The policy regarding payments to carers subject to allegation or complaint had recently been reviewed with staff confirming that their opinions had been sought and incorporated into the changes. Positive comments were also received regarding the levels of personal support and professional supervision provided to staff by the managers at the service. The deputy manager had acknowledged that the system of annual appraisal for staff had been disrupted by the unfortunate long-term absence of the manager. Despite these (now addressed) delays, staff members were positive regarding the personal appraisal received and the personal developmental opportunities arising from this. Positive views were also received regarding the support provided through their participation in regular team meetings. Agendas for these meetings are provided and minutes taken to the benefit of any staff unable to attend in person.

Foster Care Agreements reviewed by the inspectors were found to be compliant with Regulation 28 (Schedule 5 checklist). The forms currently used by the service to confirm emergency consent to exceed the usual number of children cared for do not include the date of their completion and would benefit from its inclusion. Foster carers receive a comprehensive handbook and supplementary written guidance regarding the service overall and their role within it. Carers confirmed this through their pre-inspection questionnaire responses and individual interviews. Comprehensive practical support is provided to carers with a number of examples of this highlighted within this report. Not all carers responding by questionnaire could confirm that they had received complaints information; this was highlighted to the manager for review. Positively, although two separate carers indicated that they had raised

issues with the service, each indicated their satisfaction with how these issues had been dealt with by staff.

Although some gaps were evident in the LAC documentation needed to ensure that the care needs of each child are identified and met, there was extensive evidence that carers, their supervising social workers, managers and reviewing officers are pro-active in monitoring the provision of this required documentation by placing social workers and are requesting that any documents outstanding be provided. Positively, there was also evidence that records maintained by the service itself have been used to supplement the essential information regarding the care needs of each child. The children's files examined contained good evidence of regular monitoring of recorded information by the managers of the placing social workers. A number of files contained further confirmation of the irregular visits to children placed by their own social worker, an issue highlighted earlier in this report.

Administrative records were found to contain all significant information relevant to the operation of the service required by the regulations. There was good evidence of these being used by the manager to assist in the monitoring of the service overall. Carer files contain a summary record of the dates children are placed with them or move on. These are used as a supplement to the main register maintained by the service. Some examples of the summary document not being accurately maintained were highlighted to the manager for review and action.

The fostering service is based within dedicated office accommodation in a council owned property with good access by public and private transport. The current office accommodation houses administrative, managerial, finance and social work staff. Separate, satisfactory arrangements are in place to host panel and training events. There are no issues with the overall suitability and security of the building. However the capacity for the suitable storage of carer records on site was acknowledged to be limited with arrangements requiring an immediate review.

The Agency has clear arrangements for control and supervision of its financial affairs. It benefits from well-established local authority procedures, which are used to ensure sound financial practice. Accounts are audited. The manager highlighted the introduction of improved in house monitoring through the use of monthly spreadsheets. These were reported to provide a better awareness of ongoing costs and spending throughout the course of the financial year.

Appropriate policies and procedures are in place to assess, encourage and support the care of children and young people by family members and friends. The manager confirmed that a training element has been recently introduced to the family and friends support group meetings by the facilitating social worker.

SCORING OF OUTCOMES

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

MANAGEMENT	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
1	2
2	3
4	3
5	3
16	3
17	3
18	3
19	3
20	3
21	2
22	3
23	3
24	3
25	3
26	3
27	3
28	3
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	FS1	3	Ensure that each child and their foster parents are provided with a copy of the Children’s Guide.	01/03/06
2	FS21	35	Children placed with the service should be visited regularly by their own social worker and asked for their opinion about the care they receive.	01/03/06

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	FS1	Ensure that the Statement of Purpose and previous inspection reports are promoted and made available upon request to each social worker seeking to place children with the service.
2	FS2	The manager of the service should obtain their required management qualifications
3	FS7	The agency should continue to improve the recruitment of carers from a broader range of ethnic communities.
4	FS8	Ensure that placing social workers provide the service with the information needed both to `match` children

		successfully and inform carers of children's ongoing care needs.
5	FS8	Children should be placed within normal fostering limits and the agreed terms of approval of foster carers.
6	FS11	Ensure that children, their carers and their placing social workers are provided with written guidance to the complaints procedure for the service
7	FS11	Ensure that the processes to consult with children and young people are effective.
8	FS16	The service should review current arrangements to manage the administrative support provided to the service
9	FS17	The service should work to fill their current staff vacancies and improve the arrangements to provide cover to staff who may be absent
10	FS23	The service should review the current levels of participation in the training programme provided. The service should work to further encourage the attendance of carers at training events provided to improve their skills and knowledge.
11	FS22	Ensure that all carers are visited unannounced, at least once each year.
12	FS25	The current arrangements to store and archive carer records should be reviewed to ensure that this is efficient.
13	FS30	Plans in place to increase the independence of the Chair of the fostering panel should be progressed.

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