



*Making Social Care
Better for People*

inspection report

FOSTERING SERVICE

Lambeth LA Fostering

**Mary Seacole House
91 Clapham High Street
London
SW4 7TF**

Lead Inspector
Maggie Edwards

Announced Inspection
20th February 2006 10:00

The Commission for Social Care Inspection aims to:

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

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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	Lambeth LA Fostering
Address	Mary Seacole House 91 Clapham High Street London SW4 7TF
Telephone number	020 7926 8543
Fax number	
Email address	
Provider Web address	
Name of registered provider(s)/company (if applicable)	London Borough of Lambeth
Name of registered manager (if applicable)	
Type of registration	Local Auth Fostering Service
Category(ies) of registration, with number of places	

SERVICE INFORMATION

Conditions of registration:

Date of last inspection 14th March 2005

Brief Description of the Service:

A local authority fostering service covering an inner city area with a high demand for placements. The service is part of the Children and Young People's Service which had been newly created to ensure delivery of the national 'Every Child Matters' strategy. This requires the working together of children's social services and education departments in order to provide co-ordinated care for Looked After Children.

The fostering service consists of a Long-Term Fostering, Recruitment and Kinship Team and a Short-Term Recruitment and Assessment and Task-Centred Fostering Team. The Brokerage Team deal with all referrals by first seeking in-house placements before approaching Independent Fostering Agencies. At the time of this inspection the service had 86 young people in placement.

SUMMARY

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

The inspection took place over a period of 5 days during which the inspector met with the Divisional Director for Children's Social Care; the Service Managers for the Fostering, Children Looked After and Leaving Care Teams; the Social Work Team Managers for the Fostering Teams; the Brokerage Manager; the Head of Policy and Development and an accountant from the Children and Young People's Service. The inspector also attended meetings of the two fostering teams, a training session for new applicants to foster, a meeting of the short-term panel and a meeting held to demonstrate the support provided by the local authority to enable the educational achievements of Looked After Children. The panel chair was interviewed by telephone. Five carer homes were visited. Fifteen carers and twelve young people responded to questionnaires provided by the Commission.

What the service does well:

Staff at all levels were committed to providing good training, support and supervision for carers in order to ensure close attention to the welfare of the young people in placement. The service takes positive steps to recruit and retain an appropriate number of carers with a range of backgrounds which will reflect the diversity of placed children. There are specialist services which ensure close attention to the health and educational needs of Looked After Children.

There is a stable group of staff who are well supported by management and are provided with training opportunities relevant to their roles and responsibilities in the fostering teams.

Attention is given to the need to ensure that social workers responsible for assessing prospective carers are competent. Observation of the short-term panel showed that membership was appropriate and stable. Members demonstrated relevant attention to the matters presented in a manner which aimed to ensure the safety and welfare of placed children.

Carers' and children's files were well maintained and showed evidence of regular monitoring by management.

What has improved since the last inspection?

The service has further improved the stability of the staff group by recruiting five new permanent social workers thus reducing dependency on agency staff. A robust recruitment campaign has substantially increased the number of people applying to become foster carers.

The Brokerage Manager has produced an improved referral form designed to ensure that information gathered will improve the process of matching a young

person with a carer appropriate to their individual needs. The Brokerage Team has also assessed all independent Fostering Agencies which were originally used by the service and reduced the numbers to produce a 'Preferred Providers' list of agencies which are considered most able to provide carers suitable for the needs of local Looked After Children.

Increased liaison between the managers of the Fostering Service and those of the Children Looked After and Leaving Care Teams has resulted in Children Looked After and Leaving Care social workers having a better understanding of the complex nature of fostering and of the level of duties and responsibilities undertaken by carers. Carers expressed a much greater satisfaction with their work with workers from these teams than that reported at the last inspection.

What they could do better:

There is a need to ensure that all staff and panel members' files contain proof of identity including a clear photograph.

Although the inspection indicated an improvement in the mutual understanding between carers and Leaving Care team workers there is still a need for the Leaving Care Team to demonstrate a fuller understanding of the fact that Looked After young people, their carers and the carers' families naturally experience anxieties about separation in a similar but more complex manner than non-carer families.

There is a need to reduce the rapid turnover of secretarial support for the panel and to reduce frequent changes in personnel undertaking the role of panel advisor. The service should ensure that panel membership includes a person who was Looked After as a child.

The service should ensure that it continues to take steps to implement the provision, where needed, of short-term breaks for children and their families.

The service should continue to urgently address the need to ensure that all social work staff have access to the Framework IT system in order to further improve communication between staff and the clarity of case records.

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

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

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Being Healthy

The intended outcome for this Standard is:

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

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

JUDGEMENT – we looked at the outcome for Standard:

The inspection looked at the outcome for standard 12.

The service ensures that each young person receives health care appropriate to their individual physical, emotional and psychological needs.

EVIDENCE:

Children's files contained records which showed that the service ensures that each young person undergoes a medical assessment carried out by the Community Paediatrician soon after placement; that they are registered with a G.P. and that they receive dental and optical checks. Files also contained records of regular checks throughout a young person's placement and of discussion of health issues during supervising social workers visits and at reviews.

There was evidence of appropriate referrals to specialist health services. The Children Looked After Mental Health Service (CLAMHS) provides a specialist mental health service for Children Looked After and a visit to carers confirmed records in files of referral to this service for children who were trying to cope with issues arising from bereavement.

The file for one child, born to drug dependent parents showed that they had been placed with experienced carers at birth and received an initial health assessment with two weeks. This appeared to indicate that the child may have a hearing problem and a referral had been made to the hospital audiology department. Test also revealed a slight heart murmur and, on the day that the inspector visited the home, the carer was to take the child to see the specialist at the hospital .The child was also to be tested for HIV and for Hepatitis B and C.

The Pre- Approval Training Programme for applicants to foster introduces potential carers to the Local Authority's Health Planning and Assessment procedures and explains the necessity of young people receiving medical, dental and optical checks as well advice on sexual health. Training for approved carers is designed to ensure that they focus on placed children's health needs including nutritional requirements. Questionnaire responses from young people contained positive comments about the encouragement which they received from their carers about staying healthy e.g. 'My foster mum encourages me to eat healthy food and exercise' and 'I eat proper food and eat vegetables regularly '.

Staying Safe

The intended outcomes for these Standards are:

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

The Commission considers Standards 3, 6, 8, 9, 15 and 30 the key standards to be inspected at least once during a 12 month period.

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

The inspection considered outcomes for standards 3,6,8,9,15 &30

The service follows policies and procedures which ensure that young people are safe and protected from abuse and neglect.

EVIDENCE:

It was not possible to view the personnel files for permanent staff during this inspection as they are stored electronically at a location which is at some distance from that at which the inspection took place. There has been little change in the staff group since the last inspection when the inspector viewed staff records in paper files which contained clear evidence of up to date Criminal Record Bureau checks, qualifications, identity and appropriate references. The inspector did view the paper files of two agency social workers which were satisfactory except for the lack of clear identification documents. The majority of panel members' were found to contain all the required information except for two which again did not contain proof of identity. Carers' files contained enhanced Criminal Record Bureau checks for carers, adult household members and frequent visitors.

Visits to carers showed that all provided comfortable, safe home environments. File records and conversations with carers confirmed that supervising social workers visit regularly, that unannounced visits are carried out annually and that detailed health and safety checks are carried out during the carers' initial

assessment and then at regular periods through out the carers' involvement with the service. Carers receive training on Health and Safety issues.

All children seen were placed with carers whose assessment and approval demonstrated that they could provide appropriate care which would fulfil each individual child's needs. Children were placed with carers whose ethnic/cultural background was as close as possible to their own. Files contained documents which showed that the service takes positive steps to try to ensure that all relevant information about a young person's is obtained at the time of referral or very shortly after. The Brokerage Manager informed the inspector that a revised checklist used to gather information about the young person has contributed to greater stability of placements. The use of the computerised record system, 'Framework' means that the Brokerage Team can also gain direct access to information held by the Looked After Children Team and young peoples' Looked After Children social workers are encouraged to visit carers before proposed placements are confirmed.

Management acknowledged that the service has to cope with particular difficulties in recruiting a suitable group of carers appropriate to the needs of local Looked After Children. Because of its location the area is 'targeted' for recruitment by a large number of other fostering services. The service also has a higher than average demand for placements for babies born to mothers with mental health and /or drug and alcohol dependency problems. In common with a number of other services across London there is difficulty in recruiting a sufficient number of white carers and the director expressed the view that this issue now requires some form of official investigation.

Because of the difficulty of recruiting sufficient numbers of 'in-house' carers the service has a history of using a wide range of Independent Fostering Agencies In order to ensure consistency in the provision of suitable carers for local Looked after Children, the Brokerage Team have visited and assessed all such agencies since the last inspection and have reduced the numbers to a 'Preferred Provider' list.

The service has appropriate policies with regard to child protection, bullying and unauthorised absences of young people from their carer's home. These are included in the Foster Carer's Handbook which also makes it clear to carers that any form of corporal punishment is unacceptable. In response to questionnaires sent out by the Commission carers confirmed that they understood and agreed with the service's policies on punishment. In their questionnaire responses young people said that they accepted the methods used which included 'No TV, sent to my room ' and ' they will not let me play out '.

Carers confirmed that Child Protection issues are included at an early stage in the Pre-Approval training for applicants to foster and are given a high level of importance in training after approval. Records showed that the service had

taken appropriate action when placed children had made allegations of neglect against carers or members of carers families none of which involved the service's own carers.

The service has separate short term and permanency panels. Administrative duties relating to the panels are carried out by staff from the local authority's secretariat. All panel members have appropriate experience which complies with the requirements of the Fostering Services Regulations 2002. The panels have access to legal and medical advisors.

The inspector observed a meeting of the short-term panel. The chair ensured that there was a thorough discussion of any documents presented to panel during which members showed a sensitive and professional awareness of issues relevant to the welfare and safety of Looked After Children. The chair then ensured that assessing social workers were questioned in a relaxed but rigorous manner to clarify any issues of concern. Social workers were well-prepared and professionally objective in their responses. Carers are encouraged to attend panel. One, who was applying to increase the number of children placed, was questioned in a friendly manner but was informed that the panel would not recommend the change in approval because of the lack of sufficient bedroom space.

Social workers receive training in the preparation of form F assessments. Those seen were of a good quality. The panel chair stated that most documents presented to panel were of a high quality which they felt was ensured by the skilled checking of the current panel advisor who is an experienced member of the staff of the fostering service. The chair also commented that a new induction process, which ensures that new workers observe panel proceedings, helps staff to more fully understand the importance of the assessment and panel processes in ensuring the safety and welfare of placed children.

The Panel Chair reported an overall continuing improvement in the panel process but expressed some concern with regard to the rapid turnover of secretariat staff, panel advisors and social work staff. They also expressed some concern that panel membership does not include a person who has experienced being Looked After.

The Divisional Director of Social Care for Children is the panel decision maker. There was evidence in files that they paid close attention to the recommendations presented and, where necessary, required clarification of important issues. The Director plans to meet with the panel chair every 3 months, ensure training for minute takers, ensure that Team Managers further improve the monitoring of assessment documents and arrange for the completion of a quality assurance form after each panel meeting.

Enjoying and Achieving

The intended outcomes for these Standards are:

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

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

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

The inspection considered outcomes for standards 7,13 & 31

The service takes steps to try to ensure that each young person is provided with care which is appropriate to their gender, religion, ethnic origin and to any disability. High priority is given to meeting each young person's individual educational needs. The service intends to create a short-term breaks service in the near future.

EVIDENCE:

The information about matching provided in the previous section of this report shows that the service is dedicated to trying to ensure that each young person is placed with a carer who can understand and fulfil any needs resulting from the young person's gender, religion, ethnic origin and disability. Carers' training places emphasis on these issues and there is written guidance in documents provided to both staff and carers.

The local authority has a specialist Looked After Children Education Team. This provides a support service to social workers which helps to ensure that young peoples' Personal Education Plans (PEPS) are fully implemented. There were plans to provide training on PEPS for carers, social workers and education staff. Looked After Children have priority for admission to Lambeth schools. Staff from the Connexions service are based in the Children Looked After service where they provide support to children aged 13+ who have specific needs.

Files contained written records and other documents which showed that supervising social worker visits included attention to the educational needs and

progress of Looked After Children and that these issues received focused attention at planning and review meetings. Visits to carers' homes showed clearly that they acted in the manner of responsible parents with respect to the education of the young people in their care. A visit to the home of experienced carers confirmed the information in files which showed that the two young people currently in their care had been very traumatised when first placed and appeared to have a low level of educational ability. The circumstances in which they had become Looked After had resulted in very little information being available although one child's previous school report had indicated that they were disruptive and difficult. This had meant that the local secondary school was initially reluctant to accept them. The carers had ensured that the children learnt to read and write, had arranged home tuition and, after 'fighting hard' and with the support of Connexions, had ensured that both children received appropriate school places. Both young people are now functioning at an appropriate level for their ages and had received awards through the local authority's Education Awards Ceremonies which take place twice a year. The inspector visited one of these ceremonies at which local councillors and the Director of Children's Social Care gave speeches. There was also an excellent address by a Looked After young person who acknowledged the positive role of their foster carers in helping to achieve their educational goals. The event the inspector attended was one launching "Supporting the educational achievement of Looked After Children"

The service currently supports 28 young people at university 5 of whom had recently graduated. During one carer visit a young person showed a very positive attitude to their education and became involved in conversation with the inspector about the university course which they intended to follow.

At the time of the inspection there was no specific short-term breaks service Preparation work for such a service was being undertaken by a policy manager.

Making a Positive Contribution

The intended outcomes for these Standards are:

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

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

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

The inspection considered outcomes for standards 10 & 11.

The service places emphasis on helping children and young people maintain contact with family and friends as set out in care plans and foster care agreements. Young people are consulted about issues which may affect their daily life and their future.

EVIDENCE:

The Children's Guide provides information, written in a manner appropriate to young people, which tells them how they will be helped to stay in contact with family and friends during their period of being Looked After.

Children's files contained documents which showed that appropriate contact arrangements including risk assessments are considered at the time of placement and details included in the placement agreement. Contact arrangements are addressed and recorded during care planning and review meetings. Records of supervising social workers' visits in carers' files include a section for consideration of contact issues.

The training for applicants who wish to foster places emphasis on the importance of Looked After Children being helped to maintain contact with family and friends and the role of carers in ensuring that legally required and other official contact arrangements are implemented. Carers visited spoke of their efforts to maintain contact through attempting to build good relationships with birth parents and encourage their visits to the carers homes and, where this was problematical, being prepared to travel considerable distances to alternative venues. Management spoke of their awareness that the courts are now granting high levels of contact for birth parents especially for babies and

of the resulting increase of pressure on carers both practically and emotionally. Carers confirmed that the service is will provide extra support in such situations.

During one visit to a carer the brother of one of the placed young people was present. It was clear that he was a regular visitor to the carer's home and had a relaxed and comfortable relationship with the carer. Another young person saw their mother regularly, went on holiday with her and also had contact with her sister.

Documents in children's files showed that young people and, where appropriate, their parents were encouraged to take part in the formal review meetings. Records in carers' files included information which showed that supervising social workers try to make sure that they have regular contact with placed children. The majority of young people who responded to a questionnaire from the Commission reported that they had good contact with their Children Looked After Social Worker. Although there was some variation in the consistency and clarity of the recording most children's files contained good evidence of the Children Looked After social workers' contact with the young people.

All young people who responded to the questionnaire from the Commission stated that their carers asked for their opinions and ideas. One stated that they were asked 'what I want, what I want them to do for me and that ' the food I eat' had been changed as a result of what they told the carer. Another wrote that they were asked about 'food shopping, what I think of the new furniture ' and that 'the carpet of my room was changed after I said it wasn't good.'

Six Looked After young people are represented on the local authority's Corporate Parenting Board. The Corporate Parenting Team also facilitates a fortnightly consultation group for Looked After young people.

The fostering service will arrange for the use of an interpreter in situations where this will improve the ability of a young person or their family to express their opinions.

Achieving Economic Wellbeing

The intended outcomes for these Standards are:

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

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

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

The inspection looked at outcomes for standards 14 & 29.

There service places emphasis on the need to ensure that young people develop skills and knowledge which will help them to lead a successful adult independent life. Carers receive prompt payment of allowances and expenses.

EVIDENCE:

The Local Authority has a specialist 16+ Leaving Care Team to which the Looked After Children's team passes relevant information about a young person 6 months before their 16th birthday. Each young person is then allocated a Personal Advisor who helps them to make links in the community, access appropriate education and/or training and attend to issues which will help them to lead a healthy lifestyle when they become independent. Employment advice and guidance is available from a Connexions worker in the Leaving Care Team. The young person is helped in their movement towards independence by the use of a standard Pathway Plan which is then regularly reviewed by the Leaving Care Team and the 'Aim- Hi' organisation which has been contracted by the Local Authority to ensure the effective functioning of the independent living process. The Leaving Care Team Manager said that, in response to the service becoming aware that young people were quite daunted by the 'Pathway Plan' which some referred to as 'that big document, the service has responded by introducing workshops to help young people feel more confident about this process.

Personal advisor support is available for care leavers in higher education.

The service has also commissioned a project 'Touch One' in which care leavers offer mentoring support to Looked After Children aged 9 – 17.

Personal Advisors are expected to make statutory visits to young people every 6 weeks. At the initial visit they are expected to clarify with the carer the skills which the young person has already acquired which will help them to lead an independent life and to then make clear to the carers the purpose of each visit. There was evidence of this process in children's and carers' files which also demonstrated that Personal Advisors attended formal reviews.

The Director of Children's Social Care expressed their awareness of the need to respond to feedback from young people, through the Corporate Parenting Body, that the move to independence was not 'a tick-box event'. The Leaving Care Team Manager said that the service tries to be alert to the anxieties which young people and their carers will experience with the approach of independence. There is the possibility that carers can be included in the independence plans e.g. in helping the young person to set up home and, where appropriate, the foster placement can be converted to 'Supported Lodgings' so that the young person can remain with their carers. The Fostering Service Manager spoke of recognising that Looked After Children mature at different rates. One carer spoke of their concern for a young person in their care who, although officially old enough to have moved into independent living has a level of learning disability which the carer felt, whilst not severe, results in the young person not having sufficient skills to safely live independently e.g. they will forget food which they have left on the cooker thus posing a fire risk. The Community Paediatrician had also expressed concern with respect to the young person's vulnerability and the service had ensured that a full cognitive assessment was carried out. The carer confirmed file records which showed that the young person had been granted a 6 month extension to remain with the carer and that a meeting had been held at which social work staff had reassured the young person about the support which would be available from the Leaving Care Team

The Leaving Care Team provides training for carers at both the Pre and Post Approval stages and the Foster Carers Handbook provides written guidance on the Leaving Care process and the Local Authority's procedures.

Carers receive clear information about allowances and expenses. There is a system which ensures that allowances are paid automatically on the first day of each month. The service had recently introduced a bi-annual retention bonus of £200 for all carers who had been worked for the service for 2 or more years and an extra payment of £500 per year for carers who have successfully completed NVQ training.

Management

The intended outcomes for these Standards are:

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

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

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

The inspection considered outcomes for standards 2,4,5,16,17,18,19,20,21,22, 23,24,25,27,28 & 32.

The service is managed effectively by staff with appropriate experience and qualifications. There is an adequate number of experienced and qualified staff who are well-supported and supervised. The service takes steps to ensure that it provides an adequate number of carers who are provided with effective training, supervision and support. Children's and carers' files are well

maintained with evidence of the use of effective monitoring procedures. Financial processes are sound.

EVIDENCE:

The fostering service manager has a Certificate of Qualification in Social Work and a Diploma in Health and Social Services Management. They have managed the fostering service since June 2003 and previously held managerial posts in Referral and Assessment, Children in Need and Children Looked After teams.

The service consists of a Long-Term Fostering, Recruitment and Kinship Team and a Short-Term Recruitment and Assessment and Task-Centred Fostering Team. The Social Work Team Managers of both teams each had many years relevant social work experience with the Local Authority, including management posts, before taking up their current role. One is currently studying for NVQ Level 4 in Management and the other is to undertake a Diploma in Management course. In the absence of the service manager they can access support from the Service Manager for Children Looked After and/or the Divisional Director for Children's Social Care.

There is written documentation available to staff and carers which clearly defines the roles of all staff and managers and the lines of accountability and communication between managers, staff and carers. Staff and carers seen during the inspection were clear about these issues.

Managers hold regular meetings to monitor and review the service. They meet regularly with the managers of the Children Looked After and Leaving Care teams. Communication between the teams and mutual understanding of each other's roles and that of the carers has improved since the last inspection. Carers and children reported good relationships with Children Looked After social workers and Leaving Care Team staff although there was still some concern that the latter did not fully understand the emotional and psychological issues involved for young people and their carers as the young people moved into independence. The Divisional Director for Children's Social Care stated that all new social workers employed in children's services will now have an induction period during which they spend time working in each team and will also have the opportunity to observe the panel. It is hoped that this will continue to develop all social workers understanding of complex nature of the carers' role and need for good communication between all social workers in the Children's and Young Peoples Services

There is a stable staff team the majority of who have been employed by the fostering service for 2 years or longer. Since the last inspection the service has substantially reduced its dependency on agency staff.

The inspector attended a meeting of each of the fostering teams. Managers conducted these in a manner which ensured open and constructive discussion of a wide range of issues including social work practice, service development and working conditions. Staff were relaxed and confident. It was very clear that everyone present was committed to ensuring a high level of support to carers and close attention to the welfare of Children Looked After.

Staff receive regular planned supervision from managers and regular appraisals establish future professional objectives for each worker. New staff with no previous experience of fostering work are provided with training in the completion of Form F assessments. Staff are encouraged and helped to undertake post-qualifying awards. Staff receive a handbook detailing their employment rights and posters providing details of a Whistle Blowing Policy were clearly displayed.

Carers' files each contained a signed foster care agreement designed to ensure the welfare of Children Looked After by clearly defining the roles and responsibilities of the carer and of the Local Authority. Carers visited were able to show that they had been provided with a copy of a handbook which contained details of the service's policies, procedures, guidance and legal information.

Each carer is supervised by a named, appropriately qualified social worker. Carers' files contained records which showed that there are management monitoring systems in place which ensure that supervising social workers make telephone contact at least weekly and visit at a minimum of monthly intervals as well as carrying out unannounced visits. There was a clear system of recording which ensured that supervising social workers visits to carers provided support, addressed key areas relating to children's welfare and monitored the carers' work and development and training. Carer reviews are carried out annually.

Carers spoke positively of the support which they received from their supervising social workers, the service in general and carers' support groups. Responses to questionnaires from the Commission included 'I can ask my supervising social worker about any issues which I find difficult. I can share foster carers' experiences, skills and knowledge at Foster Carers' Meetings' and 'when I had a bereavement, respite was arranged for me to be able to go to the funeral'. Two carers who had worked for the service for many years expressed their appreciation of the increased training and more constructive support and supervision offered by the service since a restructuring in the summer of 2004. Carers have access to an out-of-hours duty service.

All applicants to foster must complete a relevant training programme which clarifies the full range of issues which carers need to know in order to ensure safe care for Looked After Children. This includes emotional and psychological factors affecting Looked After Children and the need for the carer to

understand and work in partnership with the fostering service and other professional bodies by accepting structured visits attending children's planning meetings and reviews and school parents evenings. The inspector attended part of an introductory session of this programme which used material from The Fostering Network's 'Skills To Foster' programme and was skilfully facilitated by social workers from the service who had themselves attended a 'Training the Trainers' programme. The group were relaxed and a core number had obviously become involved and stimulated by the course content which included such issues as discrimination, sexuality and bullying.

The trainers made it clear that the training contributed to the assessment process and, that if approved carers' training would continue to be important and would be considered during annual reviews. Recent topics included in the post-approval training programme included 'Safeguarding and Child Protection' and 'Sexual Health Awareness with Foster Children'. Five carers had successfully undertaken an NVQ programme. Carers responses to a questionnaire from the Commission confirmed that they had received training in a wide range of appropriate subjects e.g., 'First Aid', 'Safe Caring' and 'Education Support for Fostered Children'.

The service has a dedicated group of staff who concentrate on the assessment of family and friends as carers using a form produced by the British Association of Adoption and Fostering specifically for this group of carers. In recognition of the particular issues which arise for family and kinship cares the service has ensured the development of relevant support groups.

Children's and carers' files were well organised. Each contained a front sheet which clearly indicated the location of various categories of information and provided detailed guidance about the keeping of files. All were well-maintained with good records and evidence of monitoring by management. The service was experiencing some difficulty with finalising the full implementation of the electronic care record system 'Framework'. Once completed this, and a proposed Integrated Children's It system, will substantially reduce the need for handwritten records which will reduce any current confusion which can arise from indistinct handwritten records.

The service is financially secure. The council has ensured that when the current Choice Protects grant ends appropriate financial support will be provided from Every Child Matters funds. External auditors from the Audit Commission review the work of the local authority's own audit team.

The inspection was carried out during a period when the service was being re-located. It was not possible to visit the new premises during this inspection but the inspector had done so during the last inspection and was aware that they would provide adequate space and facilities. Despite the disruption of the move staff at all levels spoke very positively about the relocation expressing particular appreciation of the fact that it will result in teams throughout the

Children and Young Peoples Services including Education being accommodated within the same building.

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	3
15	3
30	2

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

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

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

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

No

Are there any outstanding requirements from the last inspection?

STATUTORY REQUIREMENTS

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

No.	Standard	Regulation	Requirement	Timescale for action
1	FS30	FS2002 20, Schedule 1	The provider must ensure that all staff and panel members' files contain clear evidence of identity including a recent photograph.	30/04/06

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	FS14	That the provider continues to take steps to ensure that all Leaving Care Team staff understand the emotional and psychological issues arising from the move towards independence for Looked After young people, their carers and the carers' families.
2	FS24	That the provider continues to take steps to ensure that all social work staff have access to the Framework IT system.
3	FS30	That the provider takes steps to ensure that the panel membership includes a person who has themselves been Looked After.
4	FS30	That the provider takes steps to ensure reduction in the change of personnel occupying the panel minute taker's role.
5	FS30	That the provider takes steps to ensure reduction in the

		change of personnel occupying the panel advisor's role.
6	FS31	That the provider continues to ensure the development and implementation of a service providing short term breaks for children and their families.

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