

Newcastle Fostering Service

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

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About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to assure children and young people, parents, the public, local authorities and government of the quality and standard of the service provided. The inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000.

This report details the main strengths and any areas for improvement identified during the inspection. The judgements included in the report are made in relation to the outcomes for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and the relevant National Minimum Standards for the service.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding:	this aspect of the provision is of exceptionally high quality
Good:	this aspect of the provision is strong
Satisfactory:	this aspect of the provision is sound
Inadequate:	this aspect of the provision is not good enough

Service information

Brief description of the service

Newcastle Fostering Service is based at the Shieldfield Centre in Newcastle upon Tyne. The service recruits, assesses and supports foster carers to provide placements to children and young people with a wide range of needs, including long term foster care and short-term placements. The service also provides foster carers for young people with disabilities within a shared care scheme and supports a growing number of family and friends foster carers. At the time of the inspection the service was supporting approximately 180 foster carers with around 265 children in placements. The service has a staff team comprising social workers responsible for assessing new foster carers and those who supervise carers once they are approved as well as administrative staff. The manager is supported by two deputy managers.

Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

This inspection took place over six days with three inspectors spending a total of 13 inspector days with the service. Information was gathered by:

talking individually with children and foster carers,
visiting foster carers' homes,
group discussions with children, foster carers, fostering and children's social workers and other professionals,
individual discussions with the placements manager, commissioning manager and the fostering manager,
reading records and children's, carers' and staff files,
studying the surveys and other information sent back to us and
attending a meeting of the fostering panel.

The fostering service has worked hard to improve its service since the last inspection. The service is good at promoting and caring for the health and education of fostered children and has plans to improve its work in this area further. A carer said, 'There is good liaison with schools regarding educational progress. Good health care and promotion of healthy lifestyles.' The service is also good at seeking children's views. Recent work with the newly formed fostered children's group is particularly positive.

The fostering service has done a lot of work to improve the arrangements it makes to match and place children with foster carers and to ensure that carers get good information about the child they are going to foster. There is more to do in this area but work to reduce the number of emergency foster placements made, the development of a placement panel to support this process and the development of an 'Invest to Save' strategy is already having a positive effect. One carer said,

'Information provided about children has been a lot better over recent months – I would say it was very good on the last occasion.'

The service has improved the robustness of its foster carer review process, though still does not consult children well enough in this process. Fostering panel is robust in feeding back quality assurance issues to the service and this is helping improve the quality of work carried out by the service further. Foster carers are provided with good training and the service is working hard to encourage the uptake of this training. Not enough foster carers have completed training in behaviour management and ethnicity and diversity however.

The authority's use of both paper based and electronic recording systems is leading to difficulties in accessing full information about children and carers as information is not consistently stored between the two systems.

Although some foster carers and children reported some difficulties and it is clear that some further work to develop the fostering service is still needed, most carers spoke positively about their experience of fostering. A carer said, 'We have not come across a situation which has not been handled well. Overall a very good service is offered' and another said, 'The directorate continue to offer an excellent service to both the children in their care and the carers that support them.' Children said good things about their foster carers, including 'They are good at looking after me and loving and being a parent.' Children, also, generally said positive things about the fostering service like, 'They are good at keeping me healthy and happy,' 'They are good at helping you' and 'They sort out bullying and personal things.' One young person, when asked what the fostering service could do to improve said, 'Nothing because (my foster carers) are perfect and really nice to me.'

Improvements since the last inspection

The service has carried out a lot of work to improve its arrangements for matching children with suitable carers. The quality of the Looked After Children (LAC) system paperwork has improved and foster carers now receive much better information about children to be placed with them. A much lower proportion of placements are made in an emergency and planning around the commissioning and making of placements has improved significantly.

The authority has also taken action to stabilise staffing levels and staff turnover in children's social work teams. All parties consulted said that this situation is much improved and this has improved the support for children in foster carer.

The fostering service has developed a fostered children group and is placing great importance on the views of children in the group. This group is being supported to influence the way the service operates.

The service has become more effective at managing foster carers' reviews. Reviews are now more robust and include the views of children's social workers. Panel considers reviews presented to it more promptly than was the case at the last

inspection and is more robust at performing a quality assurance function by providing the service with feedback about the quality of information presented to it.

The service has also worked hard to ensure that foster carers receive training in first aid and safe caring, which are important for safeguarding children's welfare. Many carers have also undertaken training in bullying and the service has improved at encouraging carers to take up training and recording the training carried out.

The authority has also taken great steps to improve the levels of foster carer allowances as part of its 'Invest to Save' strategy. Although not implemented yet, a great deal of work has been done in this area and carers spoken to were very positive about the impact the new allowance levels will have.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

There are generally good links between children's services and health services working with children in the area. The authority is working hard to promote the health of looked after children; over 86% of children have received annual LAC medical checks with flexible arrangements and consultations being used with children who are reluctant to have these checks.

Children have good access to the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) where needed and access to other services is also available where necessary.

Good health support for children is, currently, provided to looked after children through the Education and Health Action Team. The authority is working to develop this support further by creating a team called ASPIRE, made up of social care, education and health professionals to ensure that all support is coordinated around the needs of the individual child. CAMHS, and other health and therapeutic support will be accessed through this team. This team, as it develops, will be of real benefit in supporting the health needs of fostered children. Case tracking provided examples of support for individual children including specific training for foster carers to meet children's health needs, work to encourage a child to have an annual health check and support to register children with doctors, dentists and opticians.

Foster carers are provided with training in a range of health related issues including, first aid, aids, drug awareness, caring for drug dependent babies and Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD) as well as training based on the individual needs of children. The authority regards first aid training as mandatory for foster carers and the majority have completed this training. The authority is continuing to work to ensure all carer have this qualification.

All children consulted said that they get enough food and drink and the great majority said that they are encouraged to help with choosing, buying and cooking food. They said things like, '(Foster carer) cooks us lovely food' and 'I like to choose

what I eat.' All children consulted said they are able to see a doctor or other health professional when necessary and gave examples of the care provided if they feel unwell including 'My carer takes me to the doctors if it's really bad but if I just have a headache I get some paracetamol' and 'My carer sees to all my needs.'

Foster carers gave examples of the support they get from the fostering service to meet children's health needs. They said things like, 'First aid training is offered every three years. Checks are regularly discussed as to where medication is kept within the home. Children are offered medical checkups on a yearly basis,' 'They provide lockable first aid cabinets and appropriate car seats' and 'The health visitor ensures that immunisations are up to date. The child attends once monthly sessions with an educational psychologist to address her emotional needs. Regular care team meetings keep everyone informed.'

Recording in children's and foster carers' files is not, in some instances, good enough to demonstrate fully the work done to help children to be healthy. For example, in one file, a LAC medical check that had taken place was not recorded as taking place or being discussed in the minutes of the young person's LAC review. Similarly, foster carers training records do not always record first aid training that carers have undertaken and the health section of a file audit checklist on a young person's file did not show whether the records of health matters in the file had been audited.

The fostering service has a process for foster carers to notify the service of any accidents to children and the agency retains a record of these as part of the monitoring carried out by the manager. Records viewed showed that this system of notifications and monitoring generally works well but, in one incident a serious accident to a young child was not recorded in the records held by the service.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is satisfactory.

All foster carers visited as part of the inspection process made the inspectors welcome and cooperated fully with the inspection process. The homes visited are comfortable and suitable environments in which to bring up children. Children consulted said that they are very pleased with their home. Although files seen showed that health and safety checks have not always been carried out and updated appropriately in the past, the agency has now addressed this situation. Good health and safety checklists are in place in all the files examined; these contain thorough checks of home safety and include checks on car MOT and registration documents as well as driving licence and insurance details. One file examined did not contain a dog safety checklist about the foster carer's dog despite the health and safety questionnaire noting that the family have a dog. Carers told inspectors that they receive health and safety information from their supervising social worker and discuss such matters in supervision and at the social workers' visits. A carer said, 'Our link worker checks our homes to see that medicines and cleaning materials are safely stored away and that stair gates and socket covers etc are used.'

Since the last inspection of the fostering service, the authority has worked hard to develop its arrangements to match children with carers who are suitable for them. Even though the number of carers fostering for the service has decreased slightly since the last inspection and the number of children needing foster places has gone up all people consulted said that the service is better at the arrangements it makes to place children with foster carers.

The agency is working to re-shape its entire children's social work provision to ensure that children who are looked after have a social worker who can devote time to their carer and is able to work closely with the fostering service. Recruitment of more social workers has taken place and this has resulted in more stability of staff in the social work teams which has benefited children. Communication between social workers and the fostering service is now, generally, good and the quality of information about children that is made available to the fostering service is good. The agency uses a new referral form which ensures that more detailed information is sought about children. The service has developed its own foster placement agreement form to ensure that detailed information about children is collected at the time of the placement agreement meeting and these are generally well completed.

Foster carers said, generally, that the information they receive about children before they are placed has improved. Although some carers said that information given to them still needs to be better, other carers said things like, 'Information provided about children has been a lot better over recent months – I would say it was very good on the last occasion' and 'The referral form we get a copy of has got good information in it – if the social worker knows it.' Carers said that they are never placed under pressure to take a placement if they feel it would not be in the best interest of the child or other children already placed. The quality of information contained in children's LAC documentation is generally good and detailed though some documents are not completed fully in terms of people present at meetings, dates and so on.

The authority operates a multi-agency placement panel which monitors children potentially in need of foster placements and keeps the fostering service informed of children for who placements might be needed. The panel also monitors current placements including those that are in difficulty and identifies any resources or support necessary to maintain these. This panel has had a significant effect in reducing the proportion of emergency placements made by the authority.

The fostering service continues to use a high proportion of placements with independent fostering agencies but has systems in place to monitor these placements to ensure they happen for the benefit of the child concerned. Social workers said that they are satisfied that the needs of the individual child prevail when placements are made. They said that the authority will support expensive placements if they are right for the child. This view was confirmed by the independent reviewing officers consulted.

The service works hard to manage its use of exemptions, the process by which children can be placed with foster carers outside the terms of their approval or over

the usual fostering limit of three children. All exemptions are considered by fostering panel, although in an emergency this consideration may take place after the event. Few foster carers have exemptions in place to care for more than three children who are not siblings and, where these exemptions are in place, the service and the fostering panel monitor the situation closely. In one instance, where a carer is caring for more than three young people, some on a longer term basis and others for respite care, the service has carefully considered the children in its decisions about how to manage the situation.

All parties consulted said that the service is good at promoting placement stability. Although foster carers reported some difficulties at times, the majority said that support for children is good. One said, 'We have had a lot of support to help the placement stay stable, the young person would have moved ages ago, as he has many times in the past, without this support.' Carers consulted were particularly positive about the support they receive from CAMHS and health and education support workers. The development of the ASPIRE team is likely to improve this support further.

The authority has developed an 'Invest to Save' strategy and has secured a significant increase in funding to use to develop its own in house fostering provision. This strategy will include significantly increased foster carer allowances and the development of a more professional fostering 'workforce.' This strategy is likely to improve the authority's ability to match children with suitable foster carers further.

The records kept by the local authority and the fostering service do not, always, clearly show the work done with children and their carers as there are inconsistencies in where records are made and kept. For example, a situation to move a young person was made on the basis of a decision of a strategy meeting but the minutes of this meeting were not on the young person's file and files do not all contain the reports from every LAC review of the child. The manager and the commissioning manager who line manages the fostering service explained that a lot of information is retained electronically using the authority's computer system but that some is held in paper form. The consequence of this is that information is not consistently available for use within paper files. It is evident, for example that records of all exemptions for example are retained in the computerised system but the arrangements for copies to be placed within foster carers files are not consistent. This situation is also the case for children's LAC review reports.

Information about how to keep children safe, including child protection, unauthorised absence and behaviour management arrangements, is provided for carers in the foster carer handbook. Foster carers receive child protection training during their initial assessment training and in regular safe caring training updated over time. A range of other training in safety issues is provided to carers including, bullying and strategies for managing children's behaviour and dealing with children's problems such as ADHD. All foster carers need to have training in managing children's behaviour and the service is working towards this with over a quarter of foster carers receiving this training over the last year.

All of the foster carers' files examined contained safe caring policies that are agreed with the placing social worker at the time of the placement agreement meeting. Not all safe caring policies are sufficiently detailed or specific however and some were undated and unsigned.

The fostering service has an effective system for investigating any concerns or allegations about carers and the manager's system for monitoring complaints and allegations is generally effective. The service has received two complaints in the last year, one from a foster carer which was later withdrawn and another from the parent of a foster child. This complaint was partly upheld and appropriate action taken. The service monitors incidents of restraint occurring to children in foster home and records show that only one incident has taken place since the last inspection. This incident was followed up effectively.

The service's system for recording and monitoring issues relating to child safety are generally effective but, in one incident, referred to in the 'Being Healthy' section of this report, this system failed leaving a child at potential risk. The circumstances surrounding this situation are unclear with conflicting information being received and a lack of recordings to clarify the situation. The outcome, however, was that, following a serious accident to a young child, the child's social worker did not visit the child and placement immediately and the fostering service did not address the ongoing safety of the placement with the foster carers until several months after the accident. This left children in a potentially unsafe situation.

The service has an effective system for undertaking Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) Disclosures on all foster carers before they are approved and then updates these on a three-yearly basis. The fostering panel is robust in checking that checks are up-to-date when it considers foster carers reviews. The records of these checks are not held consistently within foster carers' files though, some are referred to in the record of events, but in other cases only the date the checks were sent for are recorded and not the date returned. A central record is maintained of these, however.

Records are not always retained clearly enough to evidence the work done by the service to ensure that carers are suitable. For example, information came to light during the assessment of one carer that needed to be investigated to ensure the person's suitability to foster a child. The record showed that some work had been done to investigate the matter but the assessment contained no information about the outcome of the investigation or the findings. Records of the discussion of the assessment by the fostering panel, however, showed that the information had been considered carefully by panel in reaching its recommendation. Other checks on prospective foster carers including checks with the National Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) and other local authorities are effective.

Foster carers said they are well supported and supervised to keep children safe. One said 'There's a requirement for carers to update awareness through "Safe Caring" course every five years. There's an agreement and review of care plans during annual LAC reviews.'

Young people consulted are very pleased with their foster carers and their homes. One young person, said, '(Foster carers) are the best.' Children also said that the fostering service is good at keeping them safe. When asked what the service does well, children said things like, 'Sorting out bullying and personal things' and 'Keeping me healthy and happy.' Children who answered the question said that they have not experienced bullying in their foster home. Two children said that they have been bullied at school but the service or their foster carer sorted it out for them.

The overwhelming majority of children who responded said that the rules, where they live, are fair and children only reported appropriate sanctions such as grounding, loss of activity or privilege, taking place. All children who responded to the question said that they know who to speak to if they are worried or have a problem and children spoken to know how to make a complaint if necessary. The great majority of children said that the service helps them to learn how to keep themselves safe. One said, 'They send us leaflets' and another said 'We talk about safe caring and being careful on my bike.'

The local authority operates a thorough and careful recruitment procedure for the staff of the fostering service. A full employment history, including an explanation of any gaps and the reasons for leaving previous posts, is sought from applicants. The manager follows up all written references with a telephone call to verify them. In the files examined this telephone verification had taken place for staff members appointed to the fostering service from other social work posts in the authority. CRB checks are undertaken before employment commences and the authority ensures that these checks are updated every three years.

Newcastle City Council fostering service operates an effective panel that employs structured processes and keeps good records of its decisions and how it reaches them. Decisions and recommendations made are clear and the agency decision maker makes a decision promptly bearing in mind the panel recommendation. Good records of these decisions and panel minutes are maintained on foster carers' files. Panel is correctly constituted in line with the regulations and national minimum standards and the composition of the panel membership provides it with a very good balance of experience and background. All long-term fostering arrangements either with the authority's own foster carers or with foster carers from an independent agency are carefully matched by this panel and the panel considers any requests for exemptions and all foster carer reviews. The panel also performs a quality assurance function in monitoring the quality of work being presented to it and has a structured system in place to feed this back to the relevant people to be addressed. Although, previously, foster carers' reviews were sometimes slow to come to panel after they had taken place the service has addressed this and reviews are now considered much more promptly by panel.

Panel is careful in its discussion of cases presented to and is robust in requiring further work to be done if necessary. Panel is robust in requiring further work, where necessary, to ensure that situations will be of benefit to the children concerned. In one situation observed, during the panel meeting attended by the inspector, the panel decided to delay a decision until it was sure that the records of the work done

with the child about the foster placement would make clear to the young person why decisions were being proposed. Panel is considerate of the feelings of foster carers and children regarding the decisions it makes and careful to ensure that feedback is presented in a sensitive manner to help them understand the reasons for the decision.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The service provides foster carers with good information about promoting equality and diversity within the foster carer handbook and issues surrounding this are covered in foster carers' approval training. Staff members receive training in diversity issues to help them deliver this training effectively and training is available for staff and foster carers. Staff members said that this training is very beneficial but that not many foster carers have attended this training. The fostering service employs a supervising social worker to work specifically to recruit and support carers from black and ethnic minority backgrounds. It also has a contracted relationship with an organisation providing support, advice, training and specific services to assist in the recruitment and support of carers from black and ethnic minority cultures. The service operates a scheme that uses carers from black and minority ethnic backgrounds to support white carers who are looking after children from a different ethnic background. A carer told inspectors that, 'Recently a cultural adviser has been appointed to us which has enabled us, at last, to help the two Nigerian children in our care to recognise and enjoy their heritage and learn about their roots.' Carers spoken to said that support for carers and children from ethnic minority backgrounds has improved recently and is now good. The service is continuing to increase the proportion of carers it has from minority ethnic communities. The service has approximately 7% of carers from ethnic minority backgrounds. Although this shows good work in this area, this proportion does not reflect the figure of around 12% for the city as a whole.

The local authority provides good support for children with disabilities. Foster carers are provided for such children within the mainstream fostering service and also within the separate shared care foster care scheme operated as part of an integrated range of support provided to children with disabilities living with their families. Carers are supported well and receive training based on the specific needs of the children they care for. Access to any equipment or resources needed for children's care is good. Arrangements within the service providing short-break care for children with disabilities are suitable to ensure that responsibility for decisions regarding these children remains with their parents.

The local authority is working effectively to ensure that fostered children are supported to receive a good education. The service has a health and education action team that brings together professionals from different fields to support children and carers and professionals spoken to said that this team provides very good support for children's education. The service is developing this service further by creating the ASPIRE team which will provide one point of access to educational

support for fostered children based on their individual needs.

The authority is good at supporting fostered children to remain in school and support for children to achieve qualifications is good. The level of fixed term school exclusions among children fostered by the service is low and achievement at GCSE level is monitored and promoted. In 2006 nearly three quarters of fostered children in Year 11 achieved at least one GCSE at Grade A* - E or a GNVQ and nearly one sixth achieved at least 5 GCSEs at Grades A* - C. The percentage of fostered children with an up-to-date Personal Education Plan (PEP) is high at 95% and children have Statements of Special Educational Need where necessary. Nearly three quarters of young people aged fifteen and over have Pathway Plans in place. Some carers told inspectors that they think children's education can be disrupted if they have to move school because of a change of foster placement. The fostering service tries to ensure that if they have to move foster placement children are able to remain at their own school until decisions are made regarding whether the move is permanent or not. Generally foster carers and children told inspectors very positive things about the authority's support for children's education. One said, 'I'm never kept updated with progress or plans' and another said that the expense of hobbies and activities for children 'falls on foster carers' but the great majority of carers are very pleased with the educational and leisure support given to children. They said things like, 'Educational needs are set out in PEP paperwork and actively followed. Carers are encouraged to support the children in their care to have hobbies' and 'I attend all meetings regarding education and any other meetings regarding the children. The children are encouraged to attend any out-of-school clubs they show an interest in, I would take and collect the children if necessary.'

Children consulted are happy with the support they get to achieve well and enjoy what they do. The overwhelming majority of children consulted said they are given enough help with school and college work and have enough space and equipment to do their work. Although one young person said, 'I feel very let down by social services. If it were not for my carers I would have had a lot of problems with travel to get to college' others said things like, 'I have all the help I need from my carers and a special worker who helps me at school and with homework.' Children also say they have opportunities to take part in activities and have hobbies. Children said things like, 'Yes I do have hobbies and I'm allowed to do them when I want' and 'I go to trampoline, swimming, football and basketball.'

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Work to help children maintain or develop contact with their birth families or friends whilst in foster care is, generally, good. The service's foster placement agreement contains information about contact arrangements and arrangements for contact are set out in LAC paperwork. The referral form completed by placing social workers looking for foster placements for children requests information about children's contact arrangements and preferences so that this information can be used to help match children with suitable foster carers. Documents read and people spoken to

provided examples of some good work to support contact. In some situations foster carers are directly supporting contact themselves and, in others, staff employed by the authority carry out this work. Carers are aware of the contact arrangements for the children placed with them and any restrictions on these arrangements. One carer said, 'We took over supporting contact from the social work assistant so it felt more normal for the child.' Foster carers' daily records include information about contact arrangements and how children feel and behave before and after contact. Any key issues and incidents during contact are recorded and staff members supervising contact sessions make records of events to be retained on children's files. Reports about how contact with family is going are considered in children's reviews. Generally carers reported that children have good contacts with families and friends.

Children's views and wishes about contact are listened to and supported where possible. One file examined showed that contact was suspended because of the wishes of the child but arrangements made so it could be re-started at a later date if necessary. One young person consulted was unhappy about that contact with family had to take place under supervision but the reason for the need of this supervision was clear.

People consulted told inspectors of the range of networks that children have with friends and the community and the range of activities they are able to undertake. It is clear that children receive support in this area in a way that is specific to their individual need. Children said that are able to meet up with friends and have them come to visit at their foster home. Children said things like, 'I have not lived here long but have made friends, my friends can visit' and '(Friend's name) stays for her tea and plays with me every night.'

The local authority has developed, and is implementing, a participation plan for young people and carers and has developed a fostered young people's group. This group has met on a number of occasions and produced a report setting out some of its concerns and the issues it has raised. The organisation is taking this group seriously and has established structured methods of ensuring that issues raised by the group get to the correct people in the organisation and are dealt with effectively. Members of this group have been involved in interviews for senior posts within the authority. The authority is planning the development of bigger participation events for children and runs outings and events for fostered children during the summer and at Christmas. The authority is providing staff with training in participation to ensure that each team has a trained member of staff and the authority is planning to apply for 'Investors in Children' status.

Children are visited regularly by their social workers and are seen alone as appropriate during these visits. The authority uses the 'Viewpoint' computerised system for seeking children's views with workers spending time with children twice a year before their LAC reviews to seek their views. The authority also ensures that it uses children's views effectively to identify key issues facing children generally. Children are encouraged to express their views about the care they receive. One young person, for example, chose not to attend his review but was helped to express

his opinion using Viewpoint.

Foster carers consider that children are listened to and consulted about their care. Although one carer said that matters tend to be passed on to other people and not always resolved, others were more positive. One said, 'Children are given verbal and written information about how to raise their concerns and make complaints. Views are solicited during LAC/PEP reviews and at other opportune times. Links with relevant professionals and others are monitored at reviews.'

Children generally feel involved in decisions about matters happening in their foster homes including being involved in choosing décor and activities and are able to shop for personal items. One young person said, 'I've got lots of Newcastle stuff in my room.' Children feel they are involved in meetings about their future plans. 'We have family meetings and talk about things' and 'I go to my reviews.' Most feel that they have a say in what happens in the fostering service. Children receive a young person's guide to the fostering service which is easy to understand. This gives information about who to speak to if they are worried or want to complain and children consulted said they know who they can go to if they have a problem.

Children's views of their foster carers are not reflected robustly enough within foster carer's annual reviews.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is satisfactory.

Newcastle City Council fostering service has a structured payment scheme in place for foster carers. The authority is in the final stages of implementing a new scheme of placements that will include enhanced payments to reward training and the complexity of the work carried out by foster carers and pay carers at a level that is well above the national minimum allowance set out by the government. The development of this new allowance structure has included consultation with foster carers and final work is being carried out to ensure that any benefits claimed by foster carers are not negatively affected.

At the last inspection carers expressed dissatisfaction with the level of foster carer allowances. Some carers still reflected this view and said that, under the current level of allowances, activities and outcomes for children can be negatively affected. One carer said, 'If money is not improved many carers are moving to agencies. Generally however, foster carers are aware of the changes to come and the great majority are more positive. One said, 'The new scheme, when it happens, will pay us properly for what we do and allow us to support the children we foster like we, and social services, want to.' The increase in allowance levels and the new payments structure is being implemented as part of the authority's 'Invest to Save' strategy in order to assist in the recruitment, retention and support of its foster carers. Once implemented the scheme is likely to promote good outcomes for children in this area.

Children in foster care are given 'pocket money' at a level based on their age and the

fostering service and foster carers encourage children to save. One carer said, 'We constantly teach them living skills, budgeting and looking for bargains, how to save and how to put money in the bank'.

Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

The fostering service has clear lines of accountability and procedures for decision making. The service has systems in place to ensure that work relating to the assessment, approval, management, support, supervision and review of foster carers takes place effectively. The manager effectively supervises and manages the team of staff. Supervising social workers said that their case loads and the work within the team is very busy but, with the recent appointment of another deputy manager post and additional supervising social workers, is now manageable. Supervising social workers have specific responsibilities within the team and take a lead on developing the service in these areas. The team has access to effective clerical and administrative support.

Generally, people consulted said that communication is good between placing social workers, supervising social workers and foster carers. Carers said that this has improved over the last year. Foster carers think that there are still too many changes of children's social workers but said that this is also improving. One said, 'Last year I don't think it was very good in fairness but I've not had a bad experience since then – in fact I've been surprised how well some things have been done.' Although most people said that communication is good, the incident referred to earlier in this report in which a young child suffered an accident in a foster home shows that communication between social workers, foster carers and children's social workers can go wrong and can potentially place children at risk.

The fostering service has a duty system so that foster carers can contact the service for advice and support. This duty system also provides support for carers if their own supervising social worker is off work ill or on holiday. The manager said that carers are allocated another worker if their own social worker is off work for a long period. Some foster carers said that this duty system does not support them as well as it should and they feel that they remain 'unallocated and unsupported' for long periods if their social worker is off for a long time.

The fostering service is generally good at assessing prospective foster carers. It operates a clear assessment process including visits, suitability checks, references and an exploration of applicants' experiences, background and competence to foster children. Foster carers' assessments seen were thorough and robust with evidence of very detailed and careful checks on applicants' suitability and competence to foster. Thorough checks on foster carers' backgrounds take place and referees are visited by the social worker undertaking the assessment as well as supplying a written reference. Referees are asked to check the records of these visits and sign to confirm their accuracy, which is good practice. People being assessed as foster carers are provided with 'Preparation to Foster' training and information about the applicants'

participation in this training is included in the assessment process. This training has been adapted recently and all parties consulted said that it is of high quality.

The fostering service's recording is not always robust enough to show the work it carries out. For example, in one situation noted, information gained during the assessment of one foster carer raised a possible concern about the applicant's suitability. This information was followed up but there was no record of the outcome of the additional work done. Records of discussion of the fostering panel did, however show, the work done and panel's discussion of the situation.

In other files looked at information was not always retained consistently in the files. Records of CRB and medical checks, for example, were not always clearly retained in foster carers' files. This reflects other difficulties with recording because, as stated earlier, the organisation is using both electronic and paper based recording systems at the same time and it is not always clear which information is stored in which system.

The fostering service is working hard to manage, support and supervise its foster carers and, although some carers still report some problems, the majority of people said that the service is doing better in this area than previously. The authority ensures that foster carers reviews take place on time and works hard to ensure that placing social workers' views are sought and reflected in foster carers' reviews. Fostering panel is robust in ensuring that all necessary checks on foster carers are updated as necessary. All reviews are taken to fostering panel for their consideration and recommendation to the decision maker. Some reviews still take too long to get to panel after they have taken place but the authority has worked hard in this area and most reviews are now taken to panel within two or three months of taking place.

Social workers reflect their views about children's opinions of their carers in the forms they complete for foster carers' reviews. Relevant views from children expressed in their 'Viewpoint' consultation are reported to the fostering panel when the independent reviewing officer takes a foster carer's review to panel as are any views from young people expressed at meetings held when foster placements end. There is, however, no separate section for children's views to be sought and presented, within the review and this prevents appropriate weight to be given to children's views of their carers.

Generally the support and supervision of foster carers is good with carers being visited regularly by both their own supervising social worker and the social worker of the child in placement. A number of foster carers said that they feel support is lacking if their supervising social workers is off work for a long time though. The supervision forms used by the fostering service are very comprehensive documents that support and record the supervision process well. These forms ensure that discussion takes place about the needs of the children and how they are being met though records do not always show that the needs of any children placed for respite care are discussed. In one instance noted, panel had requested that further work should take place with a newly approved foster carer but there was no evidence in supervision records or the foster carer's first review to show whether this further

work had been carried out. Supervision records retained in foster carers' files do not always confirm the frequency of supervision reported by the social worker and the foster carer. Similarly the foster carer 'Monthly Interview' forms, completed by the child's social worker at each visit to the child in placement, are not always consistently retained in children's files. Foster carer's files do not contain an easily accessible summary of the carer's history including initial approval date and terms, review dates, changes to approval and any exemptions necessary.

The service has a clear process in place by which carers can request a change of supervising social worker if they are having difficulty working together. Two carers consulted, however, said that have experienced problems but were unaware of how to negotiate such a change.

Foster carer agreements are in place but are not updated consistently as carers' terms of approval change. Two agreements seen were dated well before the latest fostering regulations so did not include all the matters required by the current regulations and a number did not set out the carer's current terms of approval.

The service provides foster carers with very good pre-approval training and works hard to ensure that carers receive suitable training for their needs. Regular safe caring training is provided as is training in first aid and the majority of carers have completed this training. Training in a wide range of other topics is provided including bullying and behaviour management. A significant number of carers have completed the bullying training though only just over a quarter of carers have done the behaviour management training. Records held by the service do not consistently record all the training undertaken by foster carers. This is caused by the use of both electronic and paper based recording systems.

The quality of recording in children's LAC documentation has improved significantly since the last inspection although some documentation is not completed well enough. In a number of documents seen lists of attendees at review meetings were not completed and in some cases 'check boxes' had not been completed. The Care Plan for one child showed the plan as being both reunification with family and permanent foster care in different places in the same document and was also unclear about the child's legal status and who held parental rights. Confidentiality of information held was breached in two young people's files. One file contained private information about completely different children and the other file contained similar information about some other foster carers. In neither case was there any connection to the child fostered. Children's documentation as is the case with that relating to foster carers, also suffers from being held in both electronic and paper form and the inconsistencies of recording resulting from this.

The authority is effective in its work to place children with family members where appropriate. The possibility of 'kinship care' placements is considered for all children as a positive option where possible. Arrangements to assess prospective 'kinship' carers are prompt and well managed and carers receive the same level of support, supervision and opportunities for training as mainstream carers.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

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.

Std.	Action	Due date
9	ensure that all accidents occurring to children in foster carer are notified to the fostering service and investigated promptly to ensure that children remain safe in their placement. (Regulation 12)	31/08/2007
9	ensure that assessments of foster carers contain full details of the outcome of any additional work done to assess the applicant's suitability to foster children. (Regulation 27)	31/08/2007
9	ensure that all foster carers receive training in managing children's behaviour. (Regulation 13)	21/12/2007
17	ensure that work undertaken during foster carers' assessments is fully recorded and evidenced in their files. (Regulation 27)	31/08/2007
21	ensure that foster carer's reviews fully take into account the views of children placed with the foster carers. (Regulation 29)	28/09/2007
21	ensure that foster carers' first reviews identify and address any actions required by fostering panel at the carer's approval. (Regulation 29)	28/09/2007
22	ensure that foster carer agreements comply with the requirements of the Fostering Services Regulations 2002 and are updated as foster carers' terms of approval change. (Regulation 29)	28/09/2007
24	ensure that children's LAC documentation is completed accurately and in full detail. (Regulation 17)	28/09/2007
24	ensure that confidential information about one person is not retained within the files of another person. (Regulation 30)	31/08/2007

Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further the registered person should take account of the following recommendation(s):

- continue to work to ensure that all carers have an up-to-date qualification in emergency first aid for children.
- complete dog safety checklists where appropriate for foster carers' homes.
- develop and implement a system to ensure consistency of recording using the computerised and paper systems with a cross-referencing between them to

ensure that information about children and carers is readily accessible on their files.

- work with carers to improve the detail of their safe caring policies and their relevance to the children fostered and ensure that they are dated and signed by the parties agreeing to them.
- ensure that all carers receive training in equality and diversity and working with children from black and minority ethnic backgrounds.
- continue to work to increase the proportion of carers from black and minority ethnic cultures.
- implement the new tiered structure of foster carer allowances as soon as possible.
- liaise with carers to make clear the arrangements for support when their own social worker is off work.
- make sure that the needs of children receiving respite care with a foster carer are discussed in the carer's supervision sessions as well as those of the longer term children placed.
- remind carers of the process for negotiating a change of supervising social worker.
- make sure that foster carers' files contain easily accessible information about the carer's approval history including date and terms of the carer's initial approval, any subsequent reviews and changes of approval and any exemptions needed.