



*Making Social Care  
Better for People*

# inspection report

## FOSTERING SERVICE

### **Middlesbrough Council Fostering**

**Sandringham House  
170A Overdale Road  
Parkend  
Middlesbrough  
TS3 7EA**

*Lead Inspector*  
Stephen Smith

*Announced Inspection*  
5th December 2005      09:30

The Commission for Social Care Inspection aims to:

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

<b>Reader Information</b>	
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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](http://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](http://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** Middlesbrough Council Fostering

**Address** Sandringham House  
170A Overdale Road  
Parkend  
Middlesbrough  
TS3 7EA

**Telephone number** 01642 300870

**Fax number** 01642 300842

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**Provider Web address**

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

**Name of registered manager (if applicable)** Jane Wilson

**Type of registration** Local Auth Fostering Service

**No. of places registered (if applicable)** 0

**Category(ies) of registration, with number of places**

# **SERVICE INFORMATION**

## **Conditions of registration:**

**Date of last inspection**      21st February 2005

## **Brief Description of the Service:**

The Middlesbrough Borough Council Fostering Service is managed within the council's Children, Families and Learning division. At the time of the inspection the service was based at Sandringham House in Middlesbrough but plans were in place to move to new premises in early 2006. The service currently provides support to approximately 150 children in foster placements with around 105 foster carers. The service provides and supports long and short term placements as well as respite placements and those where children are fostered by family or friends. The council also provides a shared care fostering service for children with disabilities in conjunction with Redcar and Cleveland Borough Council; at the time of the inspection the management of this service did not lay with the fostering team. The fostering service staff team comprises the manager, senior practitioner, five supervising social workers, two support workers and clerical and administrative support.

# SUMMARY

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

The inspectors would like to thank all the children, carers, staff and children's social workers consulted about Middlesbrough Borough Council Fostering Service for their warm welcome and the way they worked hard to help the inspectors do their job and find out what the fostering service is like. All staff in the fostering team, carers and children spoken to were very helpful and many people spent time filling in questionnaires and sending them to the inspectors before the visit to the service. Information and evidence in this report comes from questionnaires sent to foster carers, fostered children and placing social workers before the inspection and from written information supplied by the manager as well as from the things the inspectors saw and the people they spoke to when they visited. Questionnaires were returned from 14 foster children and 20 foster carers. 88 questionnaires were returned from placing social workers, many of whom had filled in several questionnaires because they had a number of children placed with different foster carers. The inspectors want to say a special thank you to these social workers who made the time to fill in and send these forms to us; the information was very valuable. All this information was used when this report was written.

A team of two inspectors spent four days with the fostering team and gathered information by:

- Talking individually with children, carers and fostering staff;
- Visiting foster carers homes;
- Group discussion with carers;
- Group discussion with children;
- Group discussion with staff;
- Interviews with children's social workers;
- Reading children's, carers and staff files;
- Reading records;
- Studying the questionnaires sent back to us;
- Watching the fostering panel and reading records of its meetings.

One young person asked, in the questionnaire returned, for the inspector to include the following greeting to fostered children in the report, "Good luck to all in foster care!"

The fostering service does a good job at helping children live good lives with foster carers and is run well. Problems with how the shared care foster service (children with disabilities having breaks from their families with foster carers) is run means that the service does not look as good from this inspection as it should. If the shared care service was sorted out the rest of the service would look good in this report.

## **What the service does well:**

The fostering service does lots of things well.

It is very good at checking out and training new foster carers and making sure that they provide good homes to the children they foster. The work they do to find out all about foster carers to make sure that they are the right sort of people to foster children is very good and they write very detailed reports to the panel (the people who help decide whether people should foster or not.) The panel thinks about foster carers very carefully and makes good recommendations to the person who makes the decisions about foster carers.

The fostering service is also very good at making sure that, when children need foster care for a long time, foster carers are found specially for them who will be able to meet their needs properly and will enjoy the same sorts of things.

The fostering service is good at helping foster carers to work with children and giving them the support they need. One foster carer said, "I would just like to say that I am well looked after and so is (foster child) by the fostering service" and another said, "Our link worker is always supportive and positive and prepared to give us time to discuss the fostering we do. She is always available or returns calls as soon as possible." The training that foster carers get to help them care for children is good as well. New foster carers get help and support from more experienced carers called mentors. Foster carers think that this helps them and is a good idea.

The mainstream fostering service is good at keeping children safe. Children see their social workers alone often so can tell them any worries they have and nearly all children said that they know how to complain and that their foster carers and the fostering service asks them what they think about the important things in their lives. Children told inspectors things like, "I'm treated as a member of the family" and "I'm really happy, I feel safe and wanted."

Most of the time foster carers get to know all that they need to know about a child who is going to live with them and this helps them look after the child properly. Foster carers, fostering social workers and children's social workers are good at talking to each other to make sure that everyone knows what they need to know so they can help the child well.

The fostering service is good at helping children to be healthy and get a good education. It does good work with foster carers to make sure that children get all the help at school or with their health that they need. The fostering service also helps foster carers to be good at helping children keep contact with their own families and friends.

The manager of the fostering service is good at making sure that she knows all the important things about what is going on in the fostering team, what is

happening to foster carers and children. She is good at making sure that the right things happen to sort out any problems or to make things better.

## **What has improved since the last inspection?**

Since the last inspection the fostering service has made a lot of things better and done nearly all the things that the inspectors said needed to be done.

Foster carers now get better written information about the children who stay with them. Social work forms with information about the foster children are kept in the foster carers' files and carers said they get copies of these forms.

The fostering service has got new foster placement agreement forms. The service has not started to use these forms yet but, when it does, these will help make sure that foster carers get to know more about the children who come to stay with them.

All foster carers have written or are writing house rules that tell children and other people how they will look after children in a way that keeps them safe.

The fostering service now keeps registers of all foster carers and children that meet the fostering rules.

Guidance for foster carers about how to help children learn to be independent and prepare for becoming an adult is now written in the handbook that foster carers get giving them advice about how to look after children.

A staff member has been given the job of being in charge of the fostering staff when the manager is away.

## **What they could do better:**

The main thing that the fostering service needs to do better is to sort out how the fostering for children with disabilities who live with their families but have breaks with foster carers is run. This service is not following the fostering rules and is not making sure that things are safe for children as foster carers have not been getting the help they need and staff have not been keeping an eye on them properly. A new staff member is making things better already but Middlesbrough Borough Council must decide whether this is a separate fostering service that has to follow all the rules about fostering or whether it needs to be part of the main fostering team.

The council must also make sure that children's social workers visit children often enough in their placements to make sure that they are safe and make sure that all information and plans for children are up to date.

The service needs to get better at making sure all foster carers get to know everything they need to know about the children who go to live with them. The paper forms used as foster placement agreements now are not always filled in properly and a new form is going to be used. This will need to be filled in properly to make things better.

Foster carers need to have training in child protection so that they know how to help children who have been harmed or who tell them that something bad is happening to them. They should also get training in dealing with bullying and how to work with children from different backgrounds and cultures. The service needs to keep better records of what training foster carers have had so that it knows that people are getting all the right training they need.

The foster service needs to get better still at making sure that new staff members get properly checked to make sure they are the right sort of people to work with children and that they have proof that staff are who they say they are. The team also need to make sure that all foster carers have had this check done as well and should make sure that checks on staff and foster carers are done every three years.

The last main thing that the inspectors found that the service needs to do better is to make sure that the person who decides which people can be foster carers (called the decision maker) gives permission every time foster carers are asked to take more than three children. This is important because it is an extra check to make sure that children only go to homes where they can be looked after properly.

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](mailto:enquiries@csci.gsi.gov.uk) or by contacting your local CSCI office.

# **DETAILS OF INSPECTOR FINDINGS**

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# Being Healthy

## **The intended outcomes these Standards are:**

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

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

## **JUDGEMENT – The intended outcomes for these Standards are**

As above. We looked at outcomes for standard 12

Middlesbrough Borough Council Fostering Service works well with foster carers to ensure that children's health needs are met and their health and development is promoted. On some occasions when placements are made better information is needed in order to improve this further.

## **EVIDENCE:**

Foster carer's files examined contained placement agreements that generally contained suitable information about children's health needs and the carers visited during the inspection showed that they know the health needs of their foster children well. Foster carer agreements require foster carers to meet children's health needs and training is provided in a range of topics related to children's physical, emotional and mental health.

Examples of foster carers working to seek additional health support for children were noted during the inspection; foster carers had sought the input of the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) and others had taken a lead in getting health assessment or treatment for the young person placed with them. One foster carer described the efforts she had made to ensure that a foster child could be registered with suitable GP and dental services locally. Foster carers' recording contained information about the children's health and any treatment received and placement agreements generally specified the arrangements to be made to meet children's health needs and any consent issues arising from this.

The majority of foster carers spoken to said that they usually receive sufficient information about a child at the time a placement is made and that problems in this situation are isolated incidents only. This view was confirmed by responses in questionnaires returned from foster carers. 95% of carers who responded said that they get enough information, only one respondent said

that insufficient information had been received. One foster carer stated in the questionnaire, "Generally there is enough information (at placement) and if not it is received shortly afterwards in my experience."

One foster carer visited said that at the time of placement medical and health information about the young people being fostered was extremely limited and she described the difficulties this had caused because she was not made aware of a health condition and had problems getting treatment for another issue as it was not known whether previous treatment had been given. The foster placement agreements relating to these children contained only basic information with the front page only being completed. This issue was raised with the manager of the fostering team during the visit; she told inspectors that the appointment of a Looked After Children's Nurse has taken place to ensure that health plans are in place to address shortfalls like this. In another situation involving a shared care foster carer there was no foster placement agreement in the foster carer or child's file.

Where matching reports had been carried out for long term foster placements the health and medical information in these was appropriately detailed and comprehensive. Observation of panel during a discussion confirmed this and showed that a great deal of consideration was given to children's health and the carers' ability to meet these needs; this was confirmed by reading minutes of other panel discussions.

Records in children's files showed that Looked After Children (LAC) medical checks take place annually as required.

Young people spoken to who were able to express an opinion said that their health needs are met. One said, "My foster carer has arranged for me to have a check up" another said "I've got to go to the dentist tomorrow but (foster carer) will go with me to support me." Others stated in the questionnaires they returned, "We talk about what is healthy", "Eating a variety of fruit and veg, regular exercise" and "I go to the doctors and dentist regularly."

# Staying Safe

## The intended outcomes these Standards are:

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

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

## **JUDGEMENT – The intended outcomes for these Standards are**

As above. We looked at outcomes for standards 3, 6, 8, 9, 15 and 30

Middlesbrough Borough Council Fostering Service provides competent, well trained and well supported foster carers who meet children's needs very well and works hard to ensure that children are safe. Management arrangements for the shared care foster service, however, have not been effective enough in these areas and this potentially places children at risk. The service is very thorough in its assessment and approval process to ensure that carers are suitable to work with children. The fostering panel is effective and makes good quality decisions about the approval of foster carers to promote and safeguard children's welfare. The organisation's recruitment procedure is generally robust enough to check on the background and suitability of the service's staff members.

## **EVIDENCE:**

The manager of the fostering service is appropriately qualified and competent to run the service and previous inspections have shown that full information as required by the Fostering Services Regulations 2002 is in place to demonstrate her suitability to work with children.

Two staff members had commenced employment with the fostering service since the last inspection in February 2005. The recruitment files of these people were examined. All information required by the Fostering Services

Regulations 2002 and the Fostering Services National Minimum Standards was in place in the files examined apart from evidence of the staff members' proof of identity and photograph. The checklist on one file stated that this information was retained on the file, the other file stated that the information was not in place. Additionally, one file contained an employment history that only contained the years of previous posts so it was not possible to be certain whether there were any gaps between posts. One file examined contained evidence that a Criminal Records Bureau Disclosure had been obtained for the person at Enhanced Level relating to work with children, the other did not have this detail recorded so it was not possible to be sure that the correct check had been carried out. The fostering service must ensure that all checks are carried out in line with the requirements of Regulation 20 of the Fostering Services Regulations 2002. It was also noted that one file did not contain evidence that written references had been verified by telephone and that another staff member's Criminal Records Bureau check had not been updated after three years as recommended in Standard 12 of the Fostering Services National Minimum Standards.

Case tracking visits to foster carers showed that those visited provide a safe and nurturing environment. All foster carers visited welcomed the inspectors to their homes and the inspectors would like to express their thanks for this hospitality and the openness with which they discussed matters. All foster carers files contained Health and Safety checklists and all except one contained a safe caring policy relating to the foster home.

Children spoken to on these visits spoke very highly of their foster carers. One said, "I'm treated as a member of the family" another said, "I'm really happy, I feel safe and wanted." Other comments made or written in questionnaires included "Things are going well for me now," "I just feel at home" and "I'm going to stay as long as." One young person said the best thing about foster care was "Stability, being cared for, knowing where I am."

Over 90% of children said, in their questionnaires, that they know how to complain including how to complain to an inspector. It is commendable that such a high proportion of children have this information.

Questionnaires from social workers relating to 82 children (all those whose social workers answered the question) said that all those children are safe in their placement.

The assessment and approval process for foster carers is thorough with commendably detailed 'Form F' (foster carer assessment) reports being completed. This assessment includes comprehensive consideration of the foster carers and their home including an examination of their caring ability and the physical safety of the home. Regular supervision of foster carers takes place and health and safety assessments are updated regularly and annually foster carers' reviews all of which are taken back to panel for oversight. All

foster carers files contained a safe caring policy relating to the foster home developed by the foster parents and children. In the case of the file that did not contain this policy it has been noted previously as a task for the foster carer and supervising social worker to complete.

A shared care foster carer case tracked as part of the inspection had not undertaken any training despite being fostering for a number of years and had not received supervision for 15 months. The foster carer raised concerns with the inspectors about the lack of support provided to him commenting that, "I think I've had a bad deal from social services over the years." A new fostering worker and the manager explained that this work was not managed within the fostering service and the worker told inspectors of the action she is taking to remedy the lack of supervision and support. The foster carer told an inspector that he thought things would improve now the new fostering worker is in place. It was also noted that the file of one of the children placed for shared care with this foster carer held very little up to date Looked After Children documentation and showed that the social worker concerned had not visited the child in placement for 10 months. The inspectors accept that this visiting is the responsibility of the child's social worker not the fostering team but believe that clear and robust management of the shared care fostering service would have identified this issue and ensured that shortfalls were addressed. The new foster worker spoke highly of the work done by the foster carer with the children cared for and the parents of a child who stays with this foster carer spoke very highly of the extremely good care provided and the excellent relationship they have with the foster carer.

Detailed matching reports were in place in situations where young people were being matched with long term foster carers and these contained evidence of the thorough work undertaken to ensure that suitable foster carers are found to meet the needs of young people. Observation at a meeting of the service's panel showed that detailed and close consideration was given to a long term fostering match. Foster carers, fostering service staff and placing social workers agreed that matching for long term placements is very good but said that, with regard to mainstream foster carers, the demand for placements is such that matching is not always possible as sufficient carers are not always available. One carer said, "Sometimes it's just where they can get a place – I don't see what else they can do, children need to go somewhere." Some carers expressed the view that not enough foster carers are being recruited, they said that payments levels are not high enough. The manager confirmed that the authority is experiencing difficulty in recruiting enough foster carers, the manager said that this is being addressed including the discussion about changing the level of payment offered.

The foster placement agreements observed did not set out clearly the elements of matching considered or the action to be taken to address any matching shortfall. It was noted that one foster family had taken two emergency placements which had taken the number of children fostered by them to over

the usual fostering limit of three children. There were no exemptions statements signed by the agency decision maker in place in the foster carer's file to cover these situations.

The fostering service is trying to encourage recruitment from ethnic minority communities to broaden the range of foster placements it can offer. A foster carer described the support she received when caring for a Nigerian child but no training for foster carers in working with children from different ethnic backgrounds was noted.

The great majority of foster carers consulted during the inspection commented very highly about the level of support offered to foster carers by the fostering team and it was evident that carers receive good levels of useful training. Foster carers also said that they generally get good information about the children they take and that information is made available to them as soon as it is known. The inspectors consider that these strengths contribute to social worker's high level of satisfaction with the suitability of the foster placement their young person is living in. In response to the question, "How well do you think the foster carer is looking after this child?" 84% stated "Very well indeed." And a further 10% said "Quite Well". No social worker expressed the view that the carer was looking after the child "Quite badly" or "Badly." This level of satisfaction with the quality of foster placements extremely positive.

Foster carers receive clear guidance in their preparation training and in the foster carer handbook about protecting children. This includes information about managing children's behaviour, permitted and prohibited sanctions and working with children who may have been abused. All 19 foster carers who answered the question said that they understood permissible and prohibited punishment and foster children only reported permissible sanctions such as "grounding" and "loss of TV or activity". Information about bullying, child protection and unauthorised absence is available in the foster carer handbook. Foster carers consulted had not received training in child protection since their approval training, however, and it is important that this is provided. It was also noted that foster carers have not been provided training in identifying, preventing and responding to bullying and it is recommended that this is provided.

Observation of minutes of the fostering panel and attendance at a panel meeting showed that panel is thorough and robust in its consideration of prospective foster carers. An in depth consideration of the merits of the application was considered and insightful questions and comments raised. The panel chair ensured that the discussions were well structured and panel's recommendation to the agency decision maker was very clear and specific. It was noted however that the panel minutes, in respect of one fostering couple case tracked, did not contain full information about their terms of approval and the fostering service needs to make sure that minutes carry the full information. The notice of approval for these foster carers, signed by the

agency decision maker recorded their approval as foster carers but contained no more detail. The correct detail was recorded in their foster carer agreement.

The make up of panel meets the requirements of Regulation 24 of the Fostering Services Regulations 2002 and contains people with appropriate expertise. The manager said that panel membership is to be adjusted including the appointment of a new independent chair to ensure it continues to meet the requirements of regulations relating to both fostering and adoption.

# Enjoying and Achieving

## **The intended outcomes these Standards are:**

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

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

## **JUDGEMENT – The intended outcomes for these Standards are**

As above. We looked at outcomes for standards 7, 13 and 31

The fostering service and foster carers do a good job of providing children with positive educational and leisure opportunities. The service promotes care that values diversity and equality though provision training for foster carers would improve things further. Shared care fostering is not sufficiently well managed and monitored and this potentially places children at risk.

## **EVIDENCE:**

The local authority responsible for the fostering service part of a regional project, called Sahara, to attempt to involve ethnic minority communities more in fostering and to encourage the recruitment of foster carers from these communities. Observation and discussions during the inspection showed that foster placements examined were doing a good job of meeting the specific needs of the children in placement. One white carer described the advice, support and information she was given about how to meet the needs of a black young person and information is contained within the foster carers' handbook about promoting diversity and equality. Children with special needs are generally provided for well but one instance of a child receiving shared care foster care having an excessively long wait for some specialised equipment was reported to the inspectors and confirmed in the young person's file. This issue showed some of the problems with the management of the shared care fostering service mentioned below and in the Being Safe section of this report.

Visits to foster carers and examination of their files and those of the children they care for demonstrated some very effective work to encourage and support

young people with their education. Short term foster carers visited had advocated strongly on behalf of a young person to secure a place at a school with a good reputation and with a catchment area that will allow the child to remain there when she moves from their care. In another situation foster carers had been working hard to get a child extra support at school and had obtained this although the child was not deemed to require a Statement of Special Educational Need (SEN). Files and discussion showed that foster carers had developed good relationships with schools and were taking a keen interest in encouraging education and showed that a high proportion of the young people the inspectors had contact with were doing well at school. A young person said, "I'm really enjoying school now, I never liked it before," another said "I really like my teacher, (foster carer) telephones her everyday to make sure everything is all right.) Others commented in questionnaires about the help they get with their schooling including, "I get help with my homework," "help with homework, encouragement with revision" and "I go to school, I don't have any time off, I like my school."

Foster carer agreements set out requirements of foster carers to promote educational achievement and arrangements for doing this are in the placement agreement where these were fully completed. The majority of young people's files examined had Personal Education Plans (PEP) in place and those that did not related to children who had just moved schools and were having new PEPs developed. A SEN was in place in the file of one of the children with disabilities placed with shared care foster carers, the SEN of the other child was over two and a half years old and as such completely outdated. This file is the responsibility of the placing social worker and not the fostering service, however it is important that this information is in place to enable children's education to be promoted as effectively as possible and this reflects the issues set out below regarding the management of the shared care fostering service.

The shared care foster carers provided by the authority have been supervised, for a number of years, by a worker based within the children with disabilities team rather than the fostering team. The manager of the fostering service had offered the worker supervision on the assessment, review and supervision of foster carers processes on a three monthly basis but this had not been taken up by the worker. A shared care foster carer case tracked as part of the inspection had not undertaken any training despite being fostering for a number of years and had not received supervision for 15 months. The foster carer raised concerns with the inspectors about the lack of support provided to him. A new fostering worker has been employed to work with the children with disabilities team and explained to inspectors the steps she is taking to remedy this situation. It was also noted that the file of one of the children placed for shared care with this foster carer held very little up to date Looked After Children documentation and showed that the social worker concerned had not visited the child in placement for 10 months and with a gap of 6 months before that visit. The inspectors accept that this visiting is the responsibility of the child's social worker not the fostering team but believe that clear and robust

management of the shared care fostering service would have identified this issue and ensured that shortfalls were addressed.

The inspectors noted the very positive comments made by the parents of a child who stays with this foster carer about the extremely good care provided and the excellent relationship they have with the foster carer and this was confirmed by the new fostering social worker appointed to work with the shared care foster carers.

In order to safeguard the young people fostered through the shared care service and to comply with the Care Standards Act 2000 and the Fostering Services Regulations 2002 the shared care fostering service operated by the children with disabilities team must be brought within the fostering team and managed by the Fostering Team Manager or regarded as a separate service to be regulated in its own right

# **Making a Positive Contribution**

## **The intended outcomes these Standards are:**

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

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

## **JUDGEMENT – The intended outcomes for these Standards are**

As above. We looked at outcomes for standards 10 and 11

Children's contact with their families is well promoted by the fostering service. The fostering service is good at consulting with young people, their families and with foster carers.

## **EVIDENCE:**

The importance of promoting appropriate contact between young people and their families is set out in the foster care agreement and information is included in the foster carers' handbook. Nearly all foster carers spoken to during the inspection told inspectors about the actions they take to support contact and, although contact might be difficult at times, told of the support they receive from the fostering team and children's social workers. One foster carer raised some individual problems with the inspectors and, as they related to her specific situation, these were referred to the fostering team manager. Foster placement agreements contain sections for information about the arrangements and responsibilities for contact but these were not always fully completed and more specific agreements are needed.

With regard to how foster parents work with children's families, questionnaires were returned from social workers in respect of 79 children. Of these 68% said the foster carer worked with the child's family "Very well" and 19% rated this as "Fairly Well". 9% of questionnaires rated the work as "Average" with only 4% rating it as "A little disappointing." No questionnaire rated the quality of the foster carer's work with the child's family as having a "Poor record." One of the questionnaires that rated the work as "A little disappointing" said that the reason was that "sibling contact is hit and miss."

Children interviewed as part of the inspection process told the inspectors of things that they had been asked about and about the choices they have in their lives. Over 95% of children who returned questionnaires said that their foster carers consult them about their care and the things that they do. Examples of the things they are consulted about include, punishments, school, holidays, food, clothes and activities. One said, "Everything from food to clothes and feelings." Over two thirds of children said that they had been asked their opinions about their foster carers. Records of information gained for foster carers' reviews contained evidence of children being consulted about their carers as part of the review process. Ten of the twelve young people who answered the question in the questionnaire said that they see their social worker alone and the same percentage said that they know how to make a complaint.

Foster carers also commented positively on the fact that they are consulted about their views for the care of children. All eighteen foster carers who answered the question in the questionnaire said that they are consulted about the care of their foster children and listened to. All said that they attend reviews and that their opinions are treated seriously. One kinship foster carers was critical of the level of consultation and information provided by the fostering service but this was an isolated view.

People consulted commented positively about the effectiveness of the working arrangements between foster carers, children's social workers and supervising social workers saying that information is communicated very well. 94% of children's social workers said that they are kept well informed about events affecting the child in placement.

# Achieving Economic Wellbeing

## The intended outcomes these Standards are:

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

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

## **JUDGEMENT – The intended outcomes for these Standards are**

As above. We looked at outcomes for standards 29

The fostering service has an effective system for making foster carer payments. The arrangements for shared care foster carers needs to be improved.

## **EVIDENCE:**

Middlesbrough Borough Council Fostering Service has a structured policy in place regarding fostering allowances that is divided into banding levels that are reviewed annually and based on foster carers' assessed competencies. This policy allows foster carers' progress, experience and development to be rewarded. Foster carer reviews consider the banding level to be recommended based on work, training and experience. Foster carers receive information about payments appropriately and clear information is set out in the foster carer agreement. Most foster carers said that they receive their payments on time. Carers spoken to told the inspectors that they can claim expenses for additional costs of supporting the child.

A large number of foster carers said that fostering allowances are not high enough and that this is causing problems recruiting new foster carers. One carer wrote in the questionnaire, "Allowances need to be brought into line with IFAs (independent fostering agencies) and surrounding local authorities. Middlesbrough borough Council are falling behind and it needs looking at." The fostering manager said that work is being undertaken to review foster carer payments.

It was noted that shared care foster carers had not had their allowances reviewed for at least three years. This situation reflects the findings about the management of the shared care fostering service set out earlier in this report.

# Management

## **The intended outcomes these Standards are:**

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

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

## **JUDGEMENT – The intended outcomes for these Standards are**

As above. We looked at outcomes for standards 17, 21, 22, 23 and 24

Children generally receive care from well supervised foster carers who are very well trained and receive a high level of support from the fostering team but those being fostered on a shared care basis do not benefit from such good management and support. Record keeping is generally good but some children's records need to be more complete and up-to-date.

## **EVIDENCE:**

The fostering service comprises the manager, a senior practitioner, five supervising social workers, two support workers and clerical and administrative support. All staff undertaking 'Form F' assessments and approval reports and those supervising and contributing to the foster carer review process are qualified social workers and have undertaken on going training. Foster carers consulted said that the fostering staff are busy and many said that there were not enough staff. Two carers rated this, in their questionnaire as the worst thing about the fostering service. When asked about the work undertaken by the team, however, respondents spoke very positively about the fostering team's support and availability; none cited instances that suggested insufficient staffing levels. One said that the "link worker is excellent but if I need to speak to another member of the team they are always eager to help." A number of responses stated that children's social workers have high workloads and this sometimes affects the outcomes for children. One foster carer stated in a questionnaire, "Social workers can be overloaded so they cannot give as much time as they would like with the children."

The service has a recruitment procedure in place but people spoken to stated the service is having difficulty in recruiting sufficient new foster carers. Some carers expressed the view that this was because foster carer payment levels are lower than those of other foster services.

The quality of recent foster care 'Form F' assessments and approval reports inspected is very high. Discussion with supervising social workers and foster carers showed that a thorough and rigorous process is followed that takes into account the circumstances of the applicants. One foster couple spoke to described how the process of assessment and approval was paused for them because of personal circumstances but continued again when they were ready. They said, " It seemed to go on for ever but looking back it was the right thing to do, when we re-started we were more ready for what fostering is about." A foster carer stated that the best thing about the fostering service was "The time invested in getting to know us as a family." Foster carers interviewed spoke highly of the service's mentoring arrangements by which specially trained foster carers are linked with prospective and new carers to support them. These mentors also have a role to play in the assessment and approval process. One foster couple said, "Mentoring was really helpful, a couple mentored us and we got support and advice from them, they are a lovely couple and we often see them."

The comments below relate to the mainstream fostering service. As stated earlier in this report shared care fostering has been managed outside the main fostering team and this inspection has noted problems with infrequent foster carer supervision and insufficient training and support as well as a lack of supervision from a children's social worker. A new supervising social worker

appointed to this service confirmed some of the inspectors' findings and explained the action she has taken and has planned to deal with these problems. A requirement has been made regarding this situation at the end of this report.

All foster carers from the mainstream fostering service visited as part of the inspection process and all who attended the meeting with inspectors said that they receive very good support from the fostering service. All questionnaires returned said that they are well or quite well supported by the fostering team. In interviews and questionnaires foster carers cited the high level of support received from the fostering team. Twelve foster carers' questionnaires rated support as one of the fostering service's best features. Comments about support for foster carers included, "I would just like to say that I am well looked after and so is (foster child) by the fostering service" and "Our link worker is always supportive and positive and prepared to give us time to discuss the fostering we do. She is always available or returns calls as soon as possible." A foster carer said about a supervising social worker, "(Name) would never ask us to do something that we couldn't do."

All parties spoken to about the mainstream fostering service reported good communication between foster carers, supervising social workers and the children's social workers. Although some carers said that support from children's social workers was not always as good as it could be they recognised the pressures faced by these professionals and said that difficulties are much less frequent than in the past and now tend to be isolated incidents.

Interviews with foster carers and supervising social workers and examination of foster carers' files showed that an effective supervision system is in place for mainstream and kinship foster carers. It is evident that regular visits take place to foster carers including unannounced visits. Foster carers' annual reviews take place appropriately and review reports were in place in the files examined. Commendably, all foster carer reviews are taken to panel for agreement, though some delays taking these to panel were noted. Foster care agreements set out the expectation that foster carers undertake training and receive supervision and also makes sure that foster carers understand the support and services they are entitled to from the fostering team. All carers spoken to had received and were aware of the contents of the foster carer handbook. One said, "Its good to refer to, it usually answers what you need to know." Foster carers consulted said that they know how to make a complaint about the fostering service and all spoken to said that they are very confident that the service will address any concerns that they have. Two carers who said in their questionnaire that they had made a complaint said that it was satisfactorily resolved.

Mainstream foster carers receive good levels of training covering a range of topics appropriate to their role. Pre-approval training is comprehensive and good analysis of the effectiveness of the training is retained on foster carers'

files. The service runs four set training sessions a year with topics based on consultation with foster carers about their needs or identified as necessary by the service. Additional training is organised based on individual requests or issues noted at supervision and reviews though a need for child protection, bullying and equality and diversity training was noted.

Carers were generally very positive about the training provided and expressed the view that it met their individual needs. A few carers commented that the availability of training in terms of the dates and times it is provided makes it difficult to attend. The manager explained how training was run during the day then repeated on an evening to enable people to attend. The foster carers spoken to confirmed this. Some foster carers said that childcare support is available to enable them to attend this training, others had not received this support. The service maintains a database containing records of all training undertaken by foster carers although this information was not always maintained on foster carers' files.

A number of foster carers have completed NVQ 3 in childcare and another 21 are registered to undertake this training. The manager said that, after a delay resulting from the lack of availability of verifiers, a high priority is being placed on helping carers complete this training.

Children's social worker files examined did not all contain full, up-to-date LAC documentation in respect of the child concerned. Some files examined were very comprehensive, well maintained and contained all the necessary documentations. Three young people's files examined contained Placement Plan Part 1 and 2 documents (the foster placement agreement) that only had the front pages completed and had therefore not provided the foster carer with enough information about the young people. Difficulties with health provision and consent for activities had resulted from this lack of information. The file of one young child placed with foster carers for shared care on a monthly basis was extremely poor. There was no placement agreement in place, the Care Plan was over five years old, the Essential Information Record was seven years old and the last review was recorded as taking place in September 2004. The file was badly structured and difficult to follow. A separate letter has been sent to the fostering provider about this issue.

As the fostering service is provided by a local authority, the children's files examined were the responsibility of their social workers and not the fostering team. It is important however that these files contain full, accurate and up-to-date information to ensure that children's welfare is promoted and the nature and quality of care provided is recorded and supported. Foster carers told inspectors that they generally get sufficient written information about the child at the point of admission and all acknowledged that in some situations there is little information known to give them.

# 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

<b>BEING HEALTHY</b>	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
<b>12</b>	2

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

<b>ENJOYING AND ACHIEVING</b>	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
<b>7</b>	3
<b>13</b>	3
<b>31</b>	1

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

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

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

Are there any outstanding requirements from the last inspection? Yes

**STATUTORY REQUIREMENTS**

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

No.	Standard	Regulation	Requirement	Timescale for action
1	FS8 FS10 FS12	34	The fostering service must ensure that all of the information listed in Schedule 6 of the Fostering Services Regulations 2002 is included in foster placement agreements. <b>(Previous timescale of 01/08/05 not met.)</b>	01/03/06
2	FS15	20	Staff recruitment records must contain all the information set out in Schedule 1 of the Fostering Services Regulations 2002.	03/02/06
3	FS15	20	Evidence of Criminal Records Bureau disclosures must make clear the level of the disclosure and whether it related to working with children	03/02/06
4	FS9 FS6 FS31 FS21	CSA 2000 Sec 43(b)	The shared care fostering service operated by the children with disabilities team must be brought within the fostering team and managed by the Fostering Team Manager or regarded as a separate service to be regulated in its own right in order to safeguard the young people fostered through the shared care	31/03/06

			service and to comply with the Care Standards Act 2000 and the Fostering Services Regulations 2002.	
5	FS6	34	Exemption statements covering the conditions set out in Regulation 34(2) of the Fostering Services Regulations 2002 must be retained for all emergency placements of children outside a foster carer's terms of approval.	03/02/06
6	FS9 FS23	12	Foster carers must be provided with regularly updated child protection training.	03/03/06
7	FS30	26, 28	Records of decisions of the fostering panel and notices of approval must contain the full details of foster carers' recommended terms of approval.	03/02/06

## 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	FS15 FS17	Criminal Records Bureau disclosures for staff should be renewed every three years.
2	FS15	Recruitment files should contain evidence that a verbal follow up is made to verify written references.
3	FS8	Foster placement agreements should set out clearly the elements of matching considered and the action to be taken to address any matching shortfall.
4	FS8 FS9 FS23	Foster carers should receive training in bullying and working with children from different cultures or ethnic backgrounds.
5	FS29	Allowances paid to shared care foster carers should be reviewed annually.
6	FS24	Children's social work files should contain full and up-to-date LAC documentation.

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