



*Making Social Care
Better for People*

inspection report

Fostering Services

Buckinghamshire County Council Fostering service

Buckinghamshire County Council

Walton Street

AYLESBURY

Bucks

HP20 1YU

7th – 11th February 2005

Commission for Social Care Inspection

Launched in April 2004, the Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI) is the single inspectorate for social care in England.

The Commission combines the work formerly done by the Social Services Inspectorate (SSI), the SSI/Audit Commission Joint Review Team and the National Care Standards Commission.

The role of CSCI is to:

- Promote improvement in social care
- Inspect all social care - for adults and children - in the public, private and voluntary sectors
- Publish annual reports to Parliament on the performance of social care and on the state of the social care market
- Inspect and assess 'Value for Money' of council social services
- Hold performance statistics on social care
- Publish the 'star ratings' for council social services
- Register and inspect services against national standards
- Host the Children's Rights Director role.

Inspection Methods & Findings

SECTION B of this report summarises key findings and evidence from this inspection. The following 4-point scale is used to indicate the extent to which standards have been met or not met by placing the assessed level alongside the phrase "Standard met?"

The 4-point scale ranges from:

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

'O' or blank in the 'Standard met?' box denotes standard not assessed on this occasion.

'9' in the 'Standard met?' box denotes standard not applicable.

'X' is used where a percentage value or numerical value is not applicable.

FOSTERING SERVICE INFORMATION

Local Authority Fostering Service?

YES

Name of Authority

Buckinghamshire County Council Fostering service

Address

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

Local Authority Manager

Cate Burns

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01296 387925

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Registered Fostering Agency (IFA)

NO

Name of Agency

Tel No

Address

Fax No

Email Address

Registered Number of IFA

Name of Registered Provider

Name of Registered Manager (if applicable)

Date of first registration

Date of latest registration certificate

Registration Conditions Apply ?

NO

Date of last inspection

16-
27/02/04

Date of Inspection Visit		7th February 2005	ID Code
Time of Inspection Visit		10:00 am	
Name of Inspector	1	Mr Rob Smith	114335
Name of Inspector	2	Ms Barbara Mulligan	
Name of Inspector	3		
Name of Inspector	4		
Name of Lay Assessor (if applicable) Lay assessors are members of the public independent of the CSCI. They accompany inspectors on some inspections and bring a different perspective to the inspection process.			
Name of Specialist (e.g. Interpreter/Signer) (if applicable)			
Name of Establishment Representative at the time of inspection		Cate Burns - Fostering Manager	

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INTRODUCTION TO REPORT AND INSPECTION

Independent and local authority fostering services which fall within the jurisdiction of the Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI) are subject to inspection, to establish if the service is meeting the National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services and the requirements of the Care Standards Act 2000, the Fostering Services Regulations 2002 and the Children Act 1989 as amended.

This document summarises the inspection findings of the CSCI in respect of Buckinghamshire County Council Fostering service. The inspection findings relate to the National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services published by the Secretary of State under sections 23 and 49 of the Care Standards Act 2000, for independent and local authority fostering services respectively.

The Fostering Services Regulations 2002 are secondary legislation, with which a service provider must comply. Service providers are expected to comply fully with the National Minimum Standards. The National Minimum standards will form the basis for judgements by the CSCI in relation to independent fostering agencies regarding registration, the imposition and variation of registration conditions and any enforcement action, and in relation to local authority fostering services regarding notices to the local authority and reports to the Secretary of State under section 47 of the Care Standards Act 2000. The report follows the format of the National Minimum Standards and the numbering shown in the report corresponds to that of the standards.

The report will show the following:

- Inspection methods used
- Key findings and evidence
- Overall ratings in relation to the standards
- Compliance with the Regulations
- Notifications to the Local Authority and Reports to the Secretary of State
- Required actions on the part of the provider
- Recommended good practice
- Summary of the findings
- Report of the Lay Assessor (where relevant)
- Providers response and proposed action plan to address findings

This report is a public document.

INSPECTION VISITS

Inspections will be undertaken in line with the agreed regulatory framework with additional visits as required. This is in accordance with the provisions of the Care Standards Act 2000. The following inspection methods have been used in the production of this report. The report represents the inspector's findings from the evidence found at the specified inspection dates.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE SERVICES PROVIDED.

This was an annual inspection of the fostering service provided by Buckinghamshire County Council. The service provided emergency, short term and permanent fostering placements and respite care to children with disabilities. The service was subdivided into a fostering team covering the majority of emergency and short-term placements, a permanency team covering the majority of longer-term and permanency placements, as well as adoption work, and the Take a Break team which ran the respite service for children with disabilities. At the time of this inspection the fostering service was supporting a total of 138 foster placements across the three areas of operation.

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

This inspection was conducted in conjunction with the first CSCI inspection of the local authority's adoption service.

PART A SUMMARY OF INSPECTION FINDINGS

Inspector's Summary

(This is an overview of the inspector's findings, which includes good practice, quality issues, areas to be addressed or developed and any other concerns.)

Statement of Purpose Standard1

This standard had minor shortfalls. An appropriate and informative statement of purpose was in place but the completion of a specific guide for fostered children was still outstanding.

Fitness to provide or manage a fostering service Standards 2-3

One of these standards had minor shortfalls; the other was fully met. The manager appointed by the local authority was appropriately experienced and qualified in social work though lacking relevant management qualification. This will be needed by the new appointee to the post and consideration also needed to be given to reviewing the workload currently attached to this post. Structural changes to the organisation of fostering and adoption services were planned that inspectors felt would prove beneficial to the focus and effectiveness of the service in the future. Appropriate checks had been carried out on the fitness of the fostering manager.

Management of the fostering service Standards 4-5

Both these standards had minor shortfalls. Overall day to day management of the service by the fostering manager and individual team managers was seen to be effective but feedback from staff on consultation and involvement in more significant areas of service change and development was critical. Oversight and monitoring of practice was generally satisfactory although weaknesses in the monitoring of the adequacy of staff recruitment records was noted. Inspectors also felt there was scope for improvement in the systems for holding and monitoring management information on key aspects of the service.

It was positive to note the recent appointment of a fostering advisor to address developmental and quality monitoring processes across the service. A more coherent and structured approach to monitoring the quality of key aspects of the service was advised. Appropriate notifications were being made to CSCI in relation to emerging welfare concerns within the service.

Securing and promoting welfare standards 6-14

Three of these standards were fully met; six had minor shortfalls.

Improved attention was being paid to ensuring foster care households were safe environments for children through improved health and safety assessments and risk assessments of bedroom sharing arrangements although inspectors felt more attention needed to be paid to the potential impact of the smoking habits of foster carers. Appropriate

emphasis was being placed on issues of diversity in carer preparation and training but resources and facilities for supporting carers managing transracial placements needed clearer identification. Effort was being put in by the local authority in recruiting carers from minority ethnic backgrounds supported by the recruitment of specialist minority ethnic worker posts across the fostering teams. Some shortfalls in equipment provided to care for younger children placed in emergencies was noted by one carer.

Good attention was paid to matching and preparing carers for placements for children placed for Take a Break respite care or longer-term stays and fostering staff appropriately respected carers approval terms. Exemptions were appropriately managed and monitored. Foster placement agreements were sometimes lacking areas of key information and did not consistently identify issues of matching or mismatching and steps taken to address any shortfalls. Some children's case files did not have foster placement agreements in place.

Effective systems were in place to protect placed children from abuse in placements and any emerging child protection concerns were appropriately recorded and investigated. Clear guidance was provided for carers on appropriate ways of managing behaviour. Some modification was needed to existing child protection policies and more detailed guidance was needed for carers on managing disclosures and dealing with bullying and unauthorised absences.

Good support was offered by carers in promoting contact by placed children with families where safe and appropriate, but a range of concerns were raised by carers about the management of contact arrangements that underlined the need for development of clearer agreed policy and guidance on contact matters for carers and local authority staff. A range of mechanisms were in place for eliciting children's views and opinions about their care and further developments were being considered in conjunction with the advocacy service appointed by the local authority to support looked after children.

Health needs of young people were generally well met with good support from the Looked After Children nursing service. Some minor incontinency in annual medicals was noted and carers were critical of the lack of key medical and health information that sometimes was evident with emergency placements. Good support for children's educational achievement was provided by carers with good additional input, support and monitoring from the local ECPC service.

Some recent good work had been done by a group of carers and staff in developing training and workbooks to help prepare older children for leaving care, although the quality of input and support from the Leaving Care team in the local authority was subject to much criticism.

Recruiting, checking, managing, supporting and training staff and foster carers- standards 15-23

Four of these standards were fully met, four had minor shortfalls, one had major shortfalls.

Inspectors were very concerned to note that staffing recruitment files had repeated gaps in the range of information and evidence required by regulations. There had also been some confusion over the need to get administrative staff CRB checked.

The overall management and support of staff through training, supervision and appraisal was seen to be satisfactory although weaknesses in systems for introducing and inducting new staff were identified by fostering service staff. Workloads were managed informally but generally effectively and it is to be hoped that the significant changes planned to the service structure will remove some of the conflicting priority pressures currently experienced by staff.

Inspectors received consistent feedback about the inadequacy of the levels of administrative support across the service and this is an area of staffing that needs reviewing by the local authority. Inefficiencies were also noted by staff in systems for access to petty cash and for payments by the service to outside suppliers of services.

Although not strictly within the remit of this inspection, consistent comment was made by children, staff and carers about the level of vacancies in children's social work teams and the impact this was having on many aspects of the fostering service and on the effective planning and delivery of care to placed young people. Inspectors were aware this was being addressed by the local authority but the level of concern raised warranted specific additional reference in this report. Children's social work staff also reported what they felt was a difficulty in sometimes engaging in constructive professional debate with fostering staff and carers when concerns about care quality in foster homes arose.

Staffing levels in the fostering service appeared generally adequate with the exception of administrative support already noted and the planned, structural changes should improve the situation further. The recruitment of the fostering adviser and the ongoing development of the training co-ordinator role were seen as positive staffing developments by inspectors.

The local authority continued to work at developing the number and range of carers at its disposal and the planned focused recruitment and assessment team will be an asset in this area. There were recognised shortfalls in teenage placements and those for minority ethnic children. A fee based scheme for more difficult to place children was being explored.

Carer assessments were seen to be generally thorough and well presented but more attention to tangible evidence of competencies was sometimes needed.

Overall employment practices and support systems for staff and carers were seen to be satisfactory. A good range of written information and guidance was provided for carers and good attention was being paid to providing a relevant range of training delivered in flexible ways to meet the needs of carers.

Good systems were in place for staff supervision, training, development and appraisal.

A good range of supports were also in place for carers who were particularly complimentary about the direct support offered by family placement staff. Supervision arrangements for carers were good although more consistent attention needed paying to completion of unannounced visits to carer households. Household reviews were generally taking place at the required intervals though slippage in one case was noted. New updated foster carer agreements were being put in place across the service including the Take a Break section to address shortfalls noted at the last inspection.

Records - standards 24-5

Both these standards had minor shortfalls. Children's files had improved since the last inspection but still lacked some key areas of information. Carer files were generally of good standard but need more consistency in completion of various checklists held on files. Clarification was also needed on the recording of complaints arising about carers on files. A similar issue was identified in relation to staff personnel files. The foster carer register needed some minor adjustments to fully meet the expectations of regulations.

Fitness of premises for use as fostering service- standard 26

This standard had shortfalls. While the majority of the accommodation provided for staff was suitable for use particular shortfalls were noted by staff in relation to the office and storage facilities in the Aylesbury area. Appropriate facilities were in place for security, file storage and IT support for staff.

Financial requirements standards 27-29 (only standard 29 applied)

This standard was fully met. Arrangements for payments to carers, allowances and other financial support were all satisfactory.

Fostering Panels standard 30

This standard was fully met. The fostering panel was appropriately constituted, well run and had good administrative support. It carried out its duties appropriately and was effective in approving and challenging assessments for approvals and household reviews. The role of the new fostering adviser in supporting the panel was welcomed by inspectors. Inspectors advised tighter monitoring of unannounced visits and greater attention to diversity matters.

Short-term breaks standard 31

This standard was fully met. The Take a Break service provided good respite support for families with children with disabilities that appropriately recognised the continuing primary caring role of parents in such situations. This service was now fully managed by the fostering manager having been separated from fieldwork services and was a well run service providing valuable support to local families. Enhancements to payments for Take a Break carers was planned.

Family and friends as carers standard 32

This standard had major shortfalls

The local authority continued to develop its practice in relation to using family and friend carer placements and feedback from these carers indicated such placements were usually assessed, managed and supported well by fostering staff taking into due account the complexity typical in such arrangements.

Inspectors were however extremely concerned about the effectiveness of overall local authority systems for identifying and initially assessing such placements in line with the expectations of the relevant regulations. Evidence from panel observation and from files

indicated confusion about definitions, responsibilities and processes that needed urgent attention by the local authority.

Overall Conclusions

Inspectors were pleased to note that the majority of areas identified for action at the last inspection had been tackled by the fostering manager and relevant staff team. While some areas were still outstanding these did not present any significant or immediate welfare concerns.

The new areas for action arising from this inspection focused primarily on improvement and consolidation of existing practice and further development of policy, procedure and guidance in a number of practice areas. The major areas of concern arose in relation to better and safer management of regulation 38 placements and the impact on the overall quality of care offered to fostered children caused by the persistent shortages in children's social worker posts, which fell outside of the immediate remit of the fostering service to control.

The overall good progress noted was matched by the positive planning for the future restructuring of the adoption and fostering services in the local authority which, if successfully implemented, should provide a more focused and effective level of service delivery.

Overall therefore inspectors felt the fostering service was of a good quality providing suitable placements for a wide range of young people that were well supported by an experienced and dedicated staff team.

Inspectors would like to thank staff, carers and children for their assistance and hospitality during the course of the inspection.

Reports and Notifications to the Local Authority and Secretary of State

(Local Authority Fostering Services Only)

The following statutory Reports or Notifications are to be made under the Care Standards Act as a result of the findings of this inspection:

Report to the Secretary of State under section 47(3) of the Care Standards Act 2000 that the Commission considers the Local Authority's fostering service satisfies the regulatory requirements:

YES

Notice to the Local Authority under section 47(5) of the Care Standards Act 2000 of failure(s) to satisfy regulatory requirements in their fostering service which are not substantial, and specifying the action the Commission considers the Authority should take to remedy the failure(s), informing the Secretary of State of that Notice:

NO

Report to the Secretary of State under section 47(4)(a) of the Care Standards Act of a failure by a Local Authority fostering service to satisfy regulatory requirements which is not considered substantial:

NO

Report to the Secretary of State under section 47(1) of the Care Standards Act 2000 of substantial failure to satisfy regulatory requirements by a Local Authority fostering service:

NO

The grounds for the above Report or Notice are:

Implementation of Statutory Requirements from Last Inspection

Requirements from last Inspection visit fully actioned?

NO

If No please list below

STATUTORY REQUIREMENTS

Identified below are areas not addressed from the last inspection report which indicate a non-compliance with the Care Standards Act 2000 and Fostering Services Regulations 2002.

No.	Regulation	Standard	Required actions
			Outstanding requirements from the previous inspection are listed in the requirement arising from this latest inspection and where appropriated highlighted as repeated.

Action is being taken by the Commission for Social Care Inspection to monitor compliance with the above requirements.

COMPLIANCE WITH CONDITIONS OF REGISTRATION (IF APPLICABLE)
(Registered Independent Fostering Agencies only)

Providers and managers of registered independent fostering agencies must comply with statutory conditions of their registration. The conditions applying to this registration are listed below, with the inspector's assessment of compliance from the evidence at the time of this inspection.

Condition	Compliance	
Comments		

Condition	Compliance	
Comments		

Condition	Compliance	
Comments		

Lead Inspector	Rob Smith	Signature	_____
Regulation Manager	Clive Wooldridge	Signature	_____
Date	22.04.05		_____

STATUTORY REQUIREMENTS IDENTIFIED DURING THIS INSPECTION

Action Plan: The appropriate Officer of the Local Authority or the Registered Person (as applicable) is requested to provide the Commission with an Action Plan, which indicates how requirements are to be addressed. This action plan will be made available on request to the Area Office.

STATUTORY REQUIREMENTS

Identified below are areas addressed in the main body of the report which indicate non-compliance with the Care Standards Act 2000, the Children Act 1989, the Fostering Services Regulations 2002, or the National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services. The Authority or Registered Person(s) is/are required to comply within the given time scales in order to comply with the Regulatory Requirements for fostering services.

No.	Regulation	Standard *	Requirement	
1	3(3)	FS1	That the local authority completes the children's guide and ensures it is available, if required, in different formats and languages. Repeat requirement	30/06/05
2	34(3)	FS8	That the local authority ensures foster placement agreements are fully completed in all cases, that a copy is kept on children's files and that they evidence more clearly the extent to which placements meet the needs of children to be placed and any steps taken to address shortfalls.. Partially repeated requirement	30/04/05 ongoing
3	12	FS9	That the local authority revises its child protection policy to ensure all requirements under Regulation 12 are addressed, including reference to CSCI, and that more explicit guidance is provided for carers on immediate steps to take when dealing with any potential child protection situations. Repeated requirement	31/07/05

4	12	FS9	That the local authority expands its guidance to carers on the management of bullying and unauthorised absences to take account of the points raised under this standard in the main body of the report.	31/07/05
5	14	FS10	That the local authority puts in place comprehensive guidance for staff and carers on the expectations and processes for the management of contact arrangements and ensures contact arrangements specific to individual placements are consistently identified in writing as part of initial placement planning information.	31/07/05
6	15	FS12	That the local authority ensures satisfactory levels of information are consistently provided to carers on children's known health care needs prior to or at the point of placement.	30/04/05 ongoing
7	20	FS15	That the local authority ensures all information required in respect of staff under Schedule 1 and Schedule 2.2 is consistently obtained and retained on staff personnel files and that CRB checks at the required level are initiated for administrative staff working for the fostering service. Partially repeated requirement.	30/04/05
8	19	FS16	That the local authority urgently reviews the adequacy of the level of administrative support for the fostering service	31/07/05
9	29(2)	FS22	That the local authority ensures all household reviews for carers are conducted at the required intervals and that effective systems are in place to monitor compliance. Partially repeated requirement	30/04/05 ongoing
10	31	FS25	That the local authority ensures all the register information required by Regulation 31 in relation to Regulation 38 placements is consistently maintained and that management of the register ensures duplicate placement entries are not made.	31/07/05

11	38(2)	FS32	That the local authority as a matter of urgency reviews its policy, procedure and systems for the management of placements under Regulation 38(2)	30/06/05
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GOOD PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THIS INSPECTION

Identified below are areas addressed in the main body of the report which relate to the National Minimum Standards and are seen as good practice issues which should be considered for implementation by the Authority or Registered Person(s).

No.	Refer to Standard *	Recommendation Action
1	FS4	That the local authority considers the development of more structured systems of practice monitoring in line with expectations applied to independent fostering agencies under Regulation 42 and Schedule 7
2	FS5	That the local authority reviews its processes for consultation and information sharing with staff over significant developments in service provision and office moves.
3	FS6	That the local authority puts in place more detailed policy and guidance on the assessment of the implications of smoking by carers
4	FS7	That the local authority ensures adequate supplies are available out of hours to support carers taking emergency placements of babies and younger children.
5	FS7	That sufficient time and facilities are allocated to allow completion of the work on resources aimed at supporting diversity in foster placements and that issues of diversity are more fully explored and evidenced in placement planning and matching and in carer supervision and household reviews.
6	FS9	That the contents of the foster carer and Take a Break handbooks are reviewed to ensure consistent coverage of common key areas of practice.
7	FS15	That the local authority reviews records held in respect of foster panel members to ensure they conform with the expectations of the regulations and standards.
8	FS16	That the local authority improves the systems for access to petty cash by staff and for prompt payment of services provided by external parties.
9	FS16	That the local authority considers the introduction of a more formal workload management systems for fostering service staff.

10	FS16	That the local authority explores opportunities to develop appropriate exchange on matters of practice concern between foster carers, fostering staff and children's social work teams.
11	FS17	That the local authority reviews the current induction arrangements for staff in the light of comments made by staff noted in the main body of the report under this standard
12	FS17	That the local authority maintains ongoing review of the quality of carer competency assessments to ensure they are adequately supported by appropriate levels of evidence.
13	FS22	That the local authority ensures that at least one fully completed unannounced visit to carers is conducted each year.
14	FS22	That the local authority ensures improved attention is paid to maintaining records of training undertaken by carers
15	FS24	That the local authority ensures all required information is held consistently on children's individual case files
16	FS25	That the local authority ensures that where complaints or concerns about carers or staff have been investigated this is consistently recorded in the relevant sections of individual carer and staff files.
17	FS26	That the local authority identifies more appropriate accommodation and equipment storage facilities for the fostering services currently based in Aylesbury
18	FS30	That the local authority ensures more rigorous attention is paid by the fostering panel to monitoring of unannounced visits to carers and the adequacy with which issue of diversity are addressed in carer assessments, household reviews and matching processes.

* Note: You may refer to the relevant standard in the remainder of the report by omitting the 2-letter prefix e.g. FS10 refers to Standard 10.

PART B INSPECTION METHODS & FINDINGS

The following inspection methods have been used in the production of this report

Number of Inspector days spent	11
Survey of placing authorities	YES
Foster carer survey	YES
Foster children survey	YES
Checks with other organisations and Individuals	YES
• Directors of Social services	NO
• Child protection officer	YES
• Specialist advisor (s)	YES
• Local Foster Care Association	NO
Tracking Individual welfare arrangements	YES
• Interview with children	YES
• Interview with foster carers	YES
• Interview with agency staff	YES
• Contact with parents	NO
• Contact with supervising social workers	YES
• Examination of files	YES
Individual interview with manager	YES
Information from provider	YES
Individual interviews with key staff	YES
Group discussion with staff	YES
Interview with panel chair	YES
Observation of foster carer training	NO
Observation of foster panel	YES
Inspection of policy/practice documents	YES
Inspection of records	YES
Interview with individual child	YES
Date of Inspection	07/02/05
Time of Inspection	10.00
Duration Of Inspection (hrs)	88

The following pages summarise the key findings and evidence from this inspection, together with the CSCI assessment of the extent to which the National Minimum Standards have been met. The following scale is used to indicate the extent to which standards have been met or not met by placing the assessed level alongside the phrase "Standard met?"

The scale ranges from:

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

"0" in the "Standard met?" box denotes standard not assessed on this occasion.

"9" in the "Standard met?" box denotes standard not applicable.

"X" is used where a percentage value or numerical value is not applicable.

Statement of Purpose

The intended outcome for the following standard is:

- **There is clear statement of the aims and objectives of the fostering service and the fostering service ensures that they meet those aims and objectives.**

Standard 1 (1.1 - 1.6)

There is a clear statement of the aims and objectives of the fostering service and of what facilities and services they provide.

Key Findings and Evidence

Standard met?

2

The service had a clear and appropriate statement of purpose that provided parents, children and other external parties with a good overview of the structure and key operational aspects of the fostering services available. The statement accorded with the expectations of the regulations and standards.

The last inspection had identified the lack of a children's guide specifically focused on fostering within the local authority. Work on this was still underway and was being progressed in consultation with young people by Spurgeon's Child Care who were currently contracted by the local authority to provide advocacy services for the authority's looked after children. This work needed to be finalised and consideration will of course need to be paid to ensuring the finalised guide can be provided in alternative formats and languages as and when necessary.

A broad range of more general information was however available for all looked after children in the local authority covering key aspects of being looked after, complaints processes, help lines etc. This as available in written and CD ROM formats.

Fitness to Carry On or Manage a Fostering Service

The intended outcomes for the following set of standards are:

- The fostering service is provided and managed by those with the appropriate skills and experience to do so efficiently and effectively and by those who are suitable to work with children.

Standard 2 (2.1 - 2.4)

The people involved in carrying on and managing the fostering service possess the necessary business and management skills and financial expertise to manage the work efficiently and effectively and have the necessary knowledge and experience of childcare and fostering to do so in a professional manner.

Key Findings and Evidence	Standard met?	2
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The nominated fostering manager was appropriately qualified and experienced in social work, although lacking a formal management qualification. As the current manager was due to shortly leave her post, addressing this shortfall now would not be viable but will need to be borne in mind for the next post holder.

It was positive to note that in the light of observations made at the last inspection all aspects of fostering operations, including the previously separate Take a Break service for children with disabilities, had now been brought under the centralised management of the fostering manager.

The fostering manager had provided good levels of leadership and drive to push through changes required following the last inspection and maintained good oversight of the day to day running of the service. Inspectors did note however that the range of responsibilities held by the fostering manager was significant, covering most aspects of placement provided by the local authority. As a result the time that could be allocated to her various areas of responsibility was increasingly limited. Inspectors felt that reconsideration of the fostering manager's range of responsibilities will be necessary to make the task more manageable in the future.

Significant changes to the structure of both fostering and adoption services were being planned by the local authority, including the creation of a dedicated recruitment and assessment team for fostering and the separation out of adoption work as a separate entity. A further subsection of the restructured fostering service would primarily focus on developing practice with family and friends placements. Inspectors felt these changes, if successfully implemented in terms of attracting the required new staff, would provide better focus and outcomes for key aspects of the department's fostering and adoption work and were therefore welcomed.

Standard 3 (3.1 - 3.4)

Any persons carrying on or managing the fostering service are suitable people to run a business concerned with safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children.

Key Findings and Evidence

Standard met?

3

The fostering manager and other managers carrying on the fostering service were appropriately experienced and qualified and relevant checks had been carried out as part of their initial recruitment or updating vetting processes. The adoption inspection identified the need for an updated CRB for one senior manager responsible for the adoption service who also line managed the fostering manager.

Management of the Fostering Service

The intended outcomes for the following set of standards are:

- **The fostering service is managed ethically and efficiently, delivering a good quality foster care service and avoiding confusion and conflicts of role.**

Standard 4 (4.1 – 4.5)

There are clear procedures for monitoring and controlling the activities of the fostering service and ensuring quality performance.

Key Findings and Evidence

Standard met? 2

There were clear lines of management accountability and responsibility within the service overall and in the separate fostering teams, with the team managers for fostering, permanence and Take a Break, all reporting to the fostering manager, who herself reported to an identified senior children's services manager. Staff spoken with were clear about their lines of responsibility and accountability and this was reflected in staff job descriptions.

Various separate mechanisms were in place for the monitoring and quality control of fostering activities, such as the fostering panel, household reviews, the additional central placements panel, and feedback from the Foster Carer Forum, alongside more individual means such as staff supervision and appraisal. The fostering panel meeting attended by inspectors provided very good examples of appropriate challenge to the effectiveness of assessments and case planning. There was also evidence of one-off exercises by the local authority to assess service quality, for example a recent survey of carers about the quality of placement information received. Managers also highlighted the intention to develop 'exit' interviews for carers leaving the department to establish reasons for leaving and any areas of practice that might need addressing as a consequence.

Systems for carer and child file audit were in place although a number of files seen had blank audit forms on them. Inspectors were therefore not clear how regular or widespread the monitoring was. Inspectors were also concerned that shortfalls in staffing recruitment checks and related information, highlighted later in this report, had not been picked up by any monitoring or verification processes by managers.

Inspectors felt the effectiveness of some management information systems could be improved in providing consistent information about key aspects of service operations, for example the timeliness of household reviews or the renewal of CRB checks for carers. Individual team managers were maintaining much of this information on diverse stand-alone electronic database systems. The fostering manager was aware of this issue and seeking to develop more integrated systems, in liaison with IT services, especially as most of the key information could apparently be held, and more effectively shared and analysed, via the authority's main database system SWIFT. This would also enable ongoing central monitoring of key practice areas and placement movement by senior managers.

The authority had recently appointed a fostering advisor with a brief to develop quality monitoring of fostering practice as part of her role. Inspectors felt this provided a good opportunity to pull together various existing strands of quality monitoring into a more coherent framework and particular focus should be on mechanisms for obtaining more consistent feedback from foster children on service quality, outside of the current limited

context of their opportunities to contribute to household reviews. Consideration could also usefully be paid to developing a framework for practice monitoring that mirrors the expectations of registered independent fostering agencies under Regulation 42 and Schedule 7

The fostering manager was diligent in notifying CSCI of key events and issues even though, as a local authority service, this was not a statutory requirement. This process was not yet however backed up by written policy and procedure. Managers indicated this would be a task for the new fostering adviser to pick up on.

Number of statutory notifications made to CSCI in last 12 months:

Death of a child placed with foster parents.	0
Referral to Secretary of State of a person working for the service as unsuitable to work with children.	0
Serious illness or accident of a child.	0
Outbreak of serious infectious disease at a foster home.	0
Actual or suspected involvement of a child in prostitution.	0
Serious incident relating to a foster child involving calling the police to a foster home.	0
Serious complaint about a foster parent.	1
Initiation of child protection enquiry involving a child.	1

Number of complaints made to CSCI about the agency in the past 12 months: 0

Number of the above complaints which were substantiated: X

Standard 5 (5.1 - 5.4)

The fostering service is managed effectively and efficiently.

Key Findings and Evidence	Standard met?	2
<p>Overall inspectors judged that the fostering service was being managed satisfactorily on a day to day basis, based on the feedback from staff, team managers and on the evidence of the progress made since the last inspection. The planned developments in the adoption and fostering service structures noted above indicated a positive desire to move forward and develop more focused and responsive services.</p> <p>Feedback from staff in both fostering and permanence teams was however of a sense of not being consulted about broader changes in the department and some aspects of developments that did directly impinge on fostering operations. Repeated changes of accommodation for teams based in Aylesbury were cited as one example.</p> <p>Any absences of the fostering manager were satisfactorily covered by senior managers should major issues arise and by individual team managers on a more day to day basis.</p>		

Securing and Promoting Welfare

The intended outcome for the following set of standards is:

- The fostering service promotes and safeguards the child/young person's physical, mental and emotional welfare.

Standard 6 (6.1 - 6.9)

The fostering service makes available foster carers who provide a safe, healthy and nurturing environment.

Key Findings and Evidence	Standard met?
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Key Findings and Evidence	Standard met?
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Key Findings and Evidence	Standard met?
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The service had developed more extensive systems for ensuring the safety and appropriateness of foster carer households since the last inspection. Revised, more detailed health and safety assessments were being carried out for new approvals and being rolled out incrementally via household reviews for established carers. None of the households seen by inspectors during the inspection contained any significant environmental risks.

However in two of the households visited carers were evidently heavy smokers but there appeared to be a lack of clarity in initial assessment and subsequent household review systems for full evaluation of the risks associated with smoking for potential placements. Guidance on smoking by carers was also not addressed in the carers' handbook. More explicit guidelines and evidence of considered judgement in assessments and household reviews in this area were advised by inspectors.

Environmental health and safety issues were addressed in carer preparatory training and also covered in the revised foster carer handbook.

More focused individual household risk assessments in terms of safe caring issues were also being put in place although these were very new and the consistency of the application of these will be better assessed at subsequent inspections. Audit of bedroom sharing had been undertaken and some minor works done as a consequence to improve privacy. Discussion with fostering staff and carers confirmed that more evident attention and consideration is being paid to the issue of bedroom sharing and assessment of the associated risks, although inspectors were also informed that requests for written child-related risk assessments by placing social workers, as part of pre-placement planning, were not being consistently adhered to.

Standard 7 (7.1 - 7.7)

The fostering service ensures that children and young people, and their families, are provided with foster care services which value diversity and promote equality.

Key Findings and Evidence

Standard met? 2

The service provided a good emphasis on awareness of diversity issues via initial assessment and approval, and ongoing training for staff and carers, supported by general guidance in the foster carer handbooks. Diversity issues in terms of carer practice and individual children's needs were also monitored by household and care reviews and fostering panel processes.

A practical central resource facility for use by carers in addressing diversity issues, particularly when accepting transracially placed children, was in the process of development by one of the fostering team but managers indicated this had been hampered by repeated office changes for the staff in question. Discussion with some carers did indicate currently a lack of awareness of the various supports and services that might be available to help them care for transracially placed children and carer handbooks lacked the necessary specific information. Given the current relative lack of carers from minority ethnic backgrounds, and therefore the need to continue to place transracially, clearer indication to carers of supports available was advised. Inspectors also felt that this was an area that needed to be more rigorously explored and evidenced during placement planning and matching processes and very closely monitored via carer supervision and household review mechanisms.

The authority was seeking to extend its range of placements to offer a broader range of diversity in terms of carer ethnicity and cultural background than currently available. Since the last inspection three minority ethnic worker posts had been introduced to support and develop the various aspects of work of the service and in particular to stimulate interest from local minority ethnic communities in taking up fostering. The increasing use of family and friend placements evident at this inspection provided better opportunities for ensuring good matches in terms of ethnicity and/or culture.

Carers for children with disabilities, who were located mainly in the Take a Break Service reported generally good access to specialist equipment for caring for children with specialist needs, although one mainstream carer expressed concern about the lack of immediate access to equipment and supplies for caring for babies placed through out-of hours emergency systems.

Standard 8 (8.1 - 8.7)

Local authority fostering services, and voluntary agencies placing children in their own right, ensure that each child or young person placed in foster care is carefully matched with a carer capable of meeting her/his assessed needs. For agencies providing foster carers to local authorities, those agencies ensure that they offer carers only if they represent appropriate matches for a child for whom a local authority is seeking a carer.

Key Findings and Evidence

Standard met?

2

Within the constraints offered by the current range of placements available inspectors felt good attention was paid to matching children with placements. Carers spoken to confirmed good 'protection' of their approval terms by their family placement social workers and, in the cases where variation or exemption was being appropriately considered, good consultation in advance. Systems for consideration and monitoring of variations and exemptions appeared effective with senior manager approval required for any such short-term change and Panel approval for any situations likely to persist beyond a two-week period.

Good examples of matching reports were seen in relation to longer-term or permanency placements that were also subject to appropriate challenge and scrutiny by the permanency Panel. Good examples of assessment and matching of needs were also seen on a number of Take a Break carer and children's files. The placement matching process for trans-racially placed children and subsequent appropriate meeting of needs has been addressed under the previous standard.

Detailed matching was, understandably, less easy to achieve with regard to emergency placements but as already noted fostering staff were diligent in respecting carers' formal approval categories when considering placement options in emergencies.

Introductions to placements for children were well managed where this was feasible – usually in relation to longer-term or permanent or Take Break placements. Planned introductions and good information sharing and provision prior to placement was particularly noted by longer-term and Take a Break carers spoken with during the inspection.

The service was still using the now outdated LAC placement planning forms as the framework for mainstream foster placement agreements. The information included by placing social workers on these forms was not consistently completed, did not make explicit where any areas of matching shortfall lay or how they were going to be met. Inspectors also noted that these PP1 forms and other aspects of the range of LAC documentation were not always in evidence on either children's or carers files, the lack of the former being particularly concerning. The Take a Break service used modified forms that more appropriately met the expectations of the standards but again were not always explicit about any areas of mismatch or how they were going to be addressed.

Standard 9 (9.1 - 9.8)

The fostering service protects each child or young person from all forms of abuse, neglect, exploitation and deprivation.

Key Findings and Evidence**Standard met?****2**

Child protection matters were covered in both preparatory and ongoing foster carer training and for those carers for whom attendance at training was proving problematic a distance learning package was being considered by the training co-ordinator.

General safe caring guidelines were available to all carers and individual safe caring plans for each foster care household were now just being introduced; the impact of these will therefore be better judged at subsequent inspections. Clear guidance was available to carers on acceptable forms of discipline and control and no concerns about behaviour management were raised by foster children in discussions or questionnaires.

Central records on child protection incidents and allegations were being maintained and monitored and supported the view of inspectors that such concerns were being promptly referred to the relevant child protection teams for full investigation, pending which appropriate immediate action was taken to safeguard children's welfare.

The service's child protection policy was still not compliant with the expectations of the relevant regulation, regulation 12, and in particular did not make the necessary reference to CSCI. Inspectors also noted that the child protection guidance for carers in the main foster carer handbook did not provide guidance for carers on what immediate actions to take in the case of child protection concerns coming to their attention, either by disclosure or observation, and only passing reference was made in the equivalent Take a Break Handbook. Inspectors judged more detailed explanation of the immediate steps to take in relation to such concerns was needed, to cover for example the need to avoid asking leading questions, maintaining detailed notes, consideration of how/when parents should be contacted (particularly relevant in the case of Take a Break carers), timescales for notifying social workers etc.

Guidance on tackling bullying was included in the main and Take a Break carers' handbooks but needed expansion to address the potential for bullying within the foster household itself, and the steps carers should take to minimise the likelihood of this happening.

Guidance on how to manage unauthorised absence or absconsions was also brief in the main carer handbook and inspectors felt this needed expanding to clarify timescales for reporting of any such absences to the police and relevant social workers. No reference on how to manage unauthorised absences was included in the Take a Break handbook. The inconsistencies between the two handbooks led inspectors to conclude an overall review of both documents to ensure consistent coverage of common areas of practice would be of benefit.

Percentage of foster children placed who report never or hardly ever being bullied: As a full survey of foster children was not undertaken on this issue no figure is given here.

X

%

Standard 10 (10.1 - 10.9)

The fostering service makes sure that each child or young person in foster care is encouraged to maintain and develop family contacts and friendships as set out in her/his care plan and/or foster placement agreement.

Key Findings and Evidence**Standard met?****2**

Discussions with carers and feedback from young people, in person and in questionnaires, confirmed that good support was offered by foster families to supporting links with placed children's families and friends where this was both safe and appropriate. A number of family and friends foster carers were particularly complimentary about the support and advice provided by the fostering service to help manage contact in complex and emotionally charged family situations.

Feedback from foster carers also however highlighted a number of concerns about the practical management of contact arrangements. Carers cited ongoing concern about the unrealistic expectations on the part of some placing social workers, for example to support contact 'at any time', and about changes in arrangements at very short notice, without consideration of the practical impact and problems this might pose for carers and their families. Inspector scrutiny of Foster Carer forum minutes confirmed the persistence of some of these concerns and also anecdotal evidence of a lack of care sometimes taken to preserve the anonymity of carer addresses, either by passing on information or in one case by a birth mother actually being taken to a carer address she was not meant to know.

The last inspection had recommended the drawing up of specific guidance and protocols around the safe and consistent management of contact in foster care settings. This had not yet been done and the ongoing concerns served to highlight the need for this to be completed as a matter of urgency.

Inspectors also noted contact arrangement were not consistently laid out in detail on initial placement planning documentation and foster carers commented that, particularly in emergency situation's such expectations were not made clear or discussed fully as part of placement planning procedures often due to a lack of an allocated social worker.

Standard 11 (11.1 - 11.5)

The fostering service ensures that children's opinions, and those of their families and others significant to the child, are sought over all issues that are likely to affect their daily life and their future.

Key Findings and Evidence**Standard met?****3**

Feedback from foster children's questionnaires indicated a positive approach to involving them in both the day to day decisions of the foster household and key decisions about their future care arrangements. Files seen indicated generally good adherence to statutory review regularity at which children had further opportunities to express their views. The views of placed children were also sought as part of foster household review processes.

The families of looked after children were involved in the statutory review process as appropriate to their circumstances as the primary means of inputting their views and comments on the quality of care received by their children. The families of children using the Take a Break service were fully involved in care reviews and also contributed their views to household reviews.

The local authority contracted an advocacy service provided by Spurgeons Child Care for general advocacy support for all looked after children in the County and Spurgeons were in the process of developing strategies for more consistent feedback on children's experience of fostering services. The possibility of a forum for foster children was being considered.

Information for young people on who to contact if they had concerns or complaints was currently encompassed in the Your Shout children's complaints process for looked after children, a copy of which they received upon placement in care. Further information specifically for fostered children is planned to be included in the forthcoming children's guide mentioned earlier in this report.

Standard 12 (12.1 - 12.8)

The fostering service ensures that it provides foster care services which help each child or young person in foster care to receive health care which meets her/his needs for physical, emotional and social development, together with information and training appropriate to her/his age and understanding to enable informed participation in decisions about her/his health needs.

Key Findings and Evidence

Standard met? 2

Feedback from young people and their questionnaires, allied with discussion with carers and scrutiny of files, indicated overall good attention was paid to children's health and developmental needs and maintenance of healthy lifestyles, although there had been slippage in the regularity of annual medicals in the case of one child visited during the course of the inspection. Carers spoken with were clear about their responsibilities for day to day management of children's health needs and understood which matters they needed further permission or advice about before acting.

Carers confirmed that for planned placements provision of key medical and health care information was usually good, but problems were experienced with emergency placements, and especially unallocated cases, where collation and supply of information by placing social workers was often very delayed, leaving carers in the dark about possible immediate health care issues.

Staff and carers reported good support provided via the Looked After Children's nurse service which acted as both a monitoring and advice giving resource for carers, as well as providing a range of direct advice and support to children themselves in the looked after system. The nursing service was also represented on fostering panel. A range of good written material on health and developmental issues was available for older children, supplemented by contact numbers for health agencies and advice lines.

Information provided by the fostering training co-ordinator confirmed training for carers in child development, first aid and self-harming behaviour had been provided in the past year. Further training on promoting the health and education of looked after children had disappointingly been cancelled because of a lack of response.

Additional specific training had been provided for Take a Break carers in areas such as working with autism and where necessary invasive medication procedures. The local authority was still however experiencing problems in getting consistent and appropriate

training input in this area and was in liaison with the local Primary Care Trust (PCT) to try to move things forward. Inspectors offered their support in liaising directly with the PCT as well.

The main area of shortfall identified by both staff and carers in relation to health care needs was the difficulty of accessing timely input from the local Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services which inspectors recognised is a national, rather than specifically local, resource issue.

Standard 13 (13.1 - 13.8)

The fostering service gives a high priority to meeting the educational needs of each child or young person in foster care and ensures that she/he is encouraged to attain her/his full potential.

Key Findings and Evidence

Standard met?

3

Feedback in children's questionnaires and from carers was of good support for educational achievement in individual carer households and by the authority in general. Advice and support on educational matters was provided by the Education of Children in the Public Care (ECPC) team, employed by the education authority. This team also provided overall monitoring on the educational status and progress of looked after children in the County.

The roles and expectations of foster carers in supporting children's educational achievement were made clear in training and guidance and discussion with carers and scrutiny of records confirmed good day to day levels of liaison with schools and attendance at parents' evening etc. Where foster parents had experienced problems in relationships with schools they reported good support from the authority and ECPC team in getting problems ironed out promptly.

The local authority had operated a scheme to ensure all foster children had access to computer facilities for home study by provision of new laptops if necessary.

Standard 14 (14.1 - 14.5)

The fostering service ensures that their foster care services help to develop skills, competence and knowledge necessary for adult living.

Key Findings and Evidence

Standard met?

3

Inspectors were pleased to note the recent commendable initiative by fostering staff and a group of teenage carers to develop practice and guidance for carers preparing older children for moving on and leaving care. Training and good practical workbooks had been provided and this work was designed to link in with the development of Pathway plans for this age group.

Inspectors were however concerned to note the continuing level of dissatisfaction expressed by carers and fostering staff about the quality of contact and liaison from the local authority's Leaving Care team, who held case responsibility for the majority of older children about to leave care. Carers reported in discussion and questionnaires regular failure to return calls, high turnover of staff and a lack of response to queries and concerns. One young person and their carers visited during the inspection were unaware of any form of Pathway plan

being in place and were concerned about the lack of input that had been provided.

Recruiting, Checking, Managing, Supporting and Training Staff and Foster Carers

The intended outcome for the following set of standards is:

- **The people who work in or for the fostering service are suitable to work with children and young people and they are managed, trained and supported in such a way as to ensure the best possible outcomes for children in foster care. The number of staff and carers and their range of qualifications and experience are sufficient to achieve the purposes and functions of the organisation.**

Standard 15 (15.1 - 15.8)

Any people working in or for the fostering service are suitable people to work with children and young people and to safeguard and promote their welfare.

Key Findings and Evidence

Standard met? 1

Inspectors found that although the underlying theoretical recruitment process for staff was sound that the sample of files seen for both fostering and adoption staff showed inconsistent evidence of all processes having been fully completed, in line with the expectations of the standards and regulations.

Examples included

Reliance on one reference for internal candidates

An unsigned set of interview notes and an unsigned internal reference

Absence of evidence of telephone follow-up of references

Inconsistent verification of relevant qualifications

Inconsistent maintenance of photographic proof of identity

As a matter of urgency the authority needed to review its recruitment practice to ensure that all aspects of Schedule 1 and standards 15.1-15.4 are in future met on a consistent basis and that regular monitoring of these records is undertaken to ensure compliance.

It also emerged in the course of inspection that administrative staff working for both the fostering and adoption service were not being CRB checked, which is contrary to the expectations of the respective fostering and adoption regulations. In part this was due to past erroneous local NCSC/CSCI advice and genuine confusion over expectations. However subsequent to the inspection inspectors clarified that all staff working for the service must be CRB checked at the level appropriate to their role as laid out in Schedule 1.2. This will need to be expedited by the local authority as a priority. The authority did confirm that enhanced CRB checks were now in place for all staff with regular contact with children and this was confirmed by the file samples seen. The system by which staff CRB checks would be updated every three years in line with the expectations of standard 15.4 had not yet been put

in place and therefore needed clarification within the local authority.

Due to the range of legitimate confusion about various aspects of CRB requirements inspectors undertook to clarify CSCI expectations in separate subsequent communication with the local authority.

Due to difficulties with access to the relevant records, recruitment details for fostering Panel members were not seen although one very good file for an adoption panel member was seen. In the absence of vetting at this inspection the authority is simply advised to ensure that, as with employed staff, all the relevant information listed under Schedule 1 is in place for Panel members where applicable. The model used for adoption panel would be a good one to follow.

Managers confirmed that all relevant checks would be carried out for any sessional or agency staff used.

Staff working for the service were appropriately qualified and experienced in relevant aspects of practice and related legislation and procedure. Only qualified staff undertook assessment and approval work and any unqualified staff undertaking social work tasks were subject to oversight and supervision by qualified staff.

While there had been some movement of staff to different posts and positions within the various branches of the fostering service the overall level of staff stability was high especially seen in comparison to other areas of children's services in the local authority.

Total number of staff of the agency:	58	Number of staff who have left the agency in the past 12 months:	3
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Standard 16 (16.1 - 16.16)

Staff are organised and managed in a way that delivers an efficient and effective foster care service.

Key Findings and Evidence

Standard met? 2

On the basis of feedback from staff and managers, inspectors felt the direct work of the fostering service was appropriately managed on a day to day basis and that the plans in hand for restructuring would help address a number of the shortfalls identified. There were however a number of additional organisational and staffing issues impinging on fostering operations which have contributed to a lower overall score under this standard.

Although the fostering teams did not have formal workload management systems in place staff spoken with indicated team managers generally managed the balance and flow of work well taking account of both departmental and individual case priorities appropriately.

Staff did comment however in the fostering team of the difficulties posed by the conflicting pressures of recruitment, preparatory groups, and new assessments alongside sustaining ongoing support to carers, particularly in complex family and friends placements. While these conflicting pressures had not resulted in any evident diminution of support for carers, attention to recruitment and assessment tasks was felt by staff and managers to slip at times, resulting for example in delays in processing of enquiries and applications, which was reflected in some of the questionnaire comment from carers.

The planned structural changes to allow the development of a specific recruitment and assessment team should help to address the potential conflicting demands leaving the revamped fostering team, with adoption responsibilities removed, able to focus on ongoing support for existing foster carers. Inspectors would still however advise the development of more structured workload management systems for all the teams to ensure effective future management and oversight of work flow and pressures.

Staff and carer feedback indicated the service was satisfactorily supported by legal, medical and educational services on an ongoing basis and in formal structures such as the fostering and permanency panels. Appropriate arrangements were in place for staff supervision and support and for provision of ongoing training and developmental opportunities. All staff received relevant job descriptions and contracts as part of normal local authority employment practices and were supported by appropriate policies covering grievance and disciplinary matters, equal opportunities and health and safety.

Repeated concerns were raised about the adequacy of administrative support to the fostering service by administrative staff, team managers and social work staff. While there was no criticism of the quality of work from administrative staff it appeared that there had been little or no increase in administrative hours in recent years to match the growth of the social work teams and associated administrative demands.

Feedback from social work staff indicated they were consequently having not only to do most of their own typing (which is not untypical) but also more basic administrative tasks, for example lengthy photocopying of papers for Panel, which inspectors felt was a clear waste of valuable social work time. A more specific example was the current lack of any allocated administrative support for the new post of training coordinator, which again involved the post holder in undertaking a range of basic admin tasks that detracted from her time to carry out her core task. Senior managers indicated that processes did exist for formal review of admin support but they had failed to highlight any significant shortfalls. In the light of comments by staff inspectors feel this situation should be urgently re-examined to ensure an adequate level of administrative support for the number and range of tasks being undertaken by the various fostering staff team members.

Systems for access to petty cash and for payments to suppliers of goods and services used by the fostering teams was subject to much criticism from staff. Inspectors were told that lack of ready access to petty cash meant staff having, for example, to initially pay themselves for food and refreshments for training and other group events. Inspectors were also told that lengthy delays in formal payments systems meant that external providers of services often had to wait many months for payments. Examples were quoted of a doctor, a children's entertainer and an external trainer who all had to wait for payment for so long staff felt they were unlikely to offer their services to the County again. Senior managers needed to look into this problem to ensure adequate access to reasonable levels of petty cash and to ensure payments systems work more swiftly and effectively.

Staff and carers were fully aware of the differences in the roles of children's own social workers and fostering staff however discussion in this area highlighted the major source of concern raised during this inspection by both staff and foster carers, and by some young people, and that was the shortage of, and high turnover in, children's social workers.

Inspectors were aware of the background of current levels of acute staff shortages in some of the children's social work teams and the attempts being made both in the long and short term to address these. While this issue strictly fell outside the remit of this inspection such was the evident impact on many aspects of fostering services work that note of its impact is nonetheless recorded here.

In questionnaires and interviews foster carers made regular complaint about the consequences of unallocated emergency cases, high turnover of allocated staff, and for example simply not being told when allocated workers had left. The impact of these shortfalls was outlined in terms of occasional poor levels of information at the point of placement, lengthy delays on the setting up of initial placement planning meetings, inconsistent approaches between successive social workers, inadequate levels of contact between social workers and placed young people, difficulty in getting prompt decisions made (e.g. over holidays abroad, school trip payments or overnight stays), and delays in permanency planning with allocated workers often being diverted to high priority emergency situations. One child's case file seen by inspectors during this inspection indicated that at three successive care reviews the need to initiate permanency planning procedures had been made a priority for action, yet nothing had transpired, even though in this case the social worker had been consistent. Discussions with foster carers indicated that wherever possible their family placement workers had tried to resolve immediate problems and carers were grateful for this input. However this could only be a temporary solution and inevitably led not only to potential confusion of roles for family placement social work staff but impacted on the time they had to carry out their own work.

Self-evidently the local authority must continue to work vigorously to address the current shortfalls in children's social work teams to minimise any further negative impact on foster carers and fostering staff and most importantly on the effective and consistent planning and delivery of good care to placed children. As this matter fell outside of the remit of this inspection and was being addressed and monitored through other CSCI regulatory functions no related requirements or recommendations have been made in this report.

Inspectors also interviewed a small number of children's social workers during the course of the inspection. While acknowledging the shortage of staff and its impact on many aspects of fostering operations, this group of staff also highlighted from their perspective what they saw as a sometimes overprotective approach from family placement workers towards foster carers and an occasional unwillingness on the part of the fostering service to acknowledge shortfalls in the quality of foster care provided. They felt as a consequence there was sometimes a lack of a healthy professional dialogue between the different services. While inspectors were not in a position to adequately substantiate these views they were concerned that in the current pressured working environment the differing perspectives on either side of the fostering/social worker divide were at the very least unhelpful. Inspectors felt that senior managers needed to be aware of this issue and look to develop opportunities for joint working and training between children's social work staff, fostering staff and foster carers in order to stimulate better understanding of different perspectives and pressures and to support a healthier exchange on legitimate areas of professional practice concern.

Standard 17 (17.1 - 17.7)

The fostering service has an adequate number of sufficiently experienced and qualified staff and recruits a range of carers to meet the needs of children and young people for whom it aims to provide a service.

Key Findings and Evidence

Standard met? 2

The overall levels of social work staff and managers working for the fostering service appeared just sufficient to manage the current range of demands on the service, although a number of staff and managers commented on the pressure they felt under at times, particularly when conflicting priority expectations arose. As noted earlier the plans to restructure the fostering and adoption services should improve this situation as the overall level of staffing will increase and will also offer more focus on particular tasks. It was also positive to note the introduction of the new fostering advisor post and the impact of the previously recruited training co-coordinator. These posts should offer the opportunity to more satisfactorily address the ongoing level of developmental and training related work that had previously been part of overall team management responsibilities.

Feedback from staff did however raise concerns about aspects of the local authority's approach to recruitment and retention of staff. Some newly arrived staff were very critical of the lack of planning that had gone into their induction and the failure to provide simple practical supports such as desk, telephone and email address at the start of their employment. Additionally, although not a focus of this inspection, fostering staff were also critical of the process by which they felt new children's social workers, sometimes recruited from overseas, were almost immediately given inappropriately large and complex caseloads. Staff felt this had contributed to a number leaving very quickly after starting, although inspectors were not in a position to substantiate this observation.

Inspectors were aware that overall staff recruitment and retention was a major area of concern and work for the local authority in which it was receiving support from a Business Support Team (BST) to address concerns arising from the last Social Services Inspectorate inspection of children's services. The issues raised by staff in this inspection did however underline a particular need for a thorough review of induction processes for new staff.

With regard to carers, the local authority continued to work generally at developing the number and range of carers at its disposal with a particular focus on being able to meet the needs of more challenging teenagers, who might typically end up in specialist out-of-county or agency fostering placements, and those of minority ethnic children, to reduce the need for transracial placements. The viability of developing a fee based scheme for more challenging young people was also being assessed by an outside consultant and inspectors were informed that one such placement, a transfer from an independent agency, would soon be in place. Currently there was overcapacity in the younger age range with a number of carers for this age group consequently commenting on their relative lack of usage. Senior managers were anticipating that the new recruitment team would develop a more defined carer recruitment strategy as part of its early work.

The local authority used the BAAF competency-based assessment framework for carer assessments. This covered the areas expected under the standards. The examples of assessments seen during this inspection were generally good and thorough covering all the required areas in reasonable depth. Some particularly good assessments for Take a Break carers were seen. One mainstream fostering case presented at panel did however lack

sufficient, tangible evidence to support some aspects of the assessed competencies. This was picked up by the panel itself and resulted in a deferred decision on approval.

Standard 18 (18.1 - 18.7)

The fostering service is a fair and competent employer, with sound employment practices and good support for its staff and carers.

Key Findings and Evidence

Standard met?

2

Concern about aspects of induction arrangements for staff has already been highlighted under the previous standard. With regard to other aspects of employment and staff and carer support practice covered under this standard matters were found to be satisfactory.

Foster carers reported generally good access to satisfactory advice and support both, in and out of hours. Effective systems were in place for regular carer supervision, review and support, all of which were reported favourably upon by carers. Health and safety policy and guidance covered the needs of staff, carers and children and whistle blowing policies and guidance were now in place for staff and carers.

Standard 19 (19.1 - 19.7)

There is a good quality training programme to enhance individual skills and to keep staff up-to-date with professional and legal developments.

Key Findings and Evidence

Standard met?

3

Feedback from staff indicated generally good support by the local authority for ongoing professional development and training. Opportunities were made available to undertake post-qualifying awards alongside more specific one-off training to support the work of the service in areas such as promoting diversity, assessment skills etc.

All staff were subject to formal annual appraisal to assess work performance and identify training and developmental needs. It appeared however this was a generic appraisal framework that staff felt would benefit from tailoring to meet the specific needs of the fostering service.

A limited level of joint training involving carers and staff had taken place but the training co-ordinator was committed to trying to increase this in the coming year where viable. As already noted the scope for joint training including children's social workers should be considered wherever viable.

Standard 20 (20.1 - 20.5)

All staff are properly accountable and supported.

Key Findings and Evidence

Standard met?

3

Staff were provided with regular, recorded, individual supervision. Inspectors received some comments about the variability of the quality of supervision but overall staff appeared satisfied with the level of both formal and informal support they received. Inspectors were also aware that staff supervision was a core area of development identified by the local authority in liaison with the BST and that a roll out of supervision training for managers was underway, therefore no additional requirements or recommendation have been made in this report.

Fostering staff had opportunities to meet together in regular team meetings for their particular area of fostering operations.

Standard 21 (21.1 - 21.6)**The fostering service has a clear strategy for working with and supporting carers.****Key Findings and Evidence****Standard met?****3**

Overall inspectors felt the local authority provided a good overall strategy for supporting and working with carers.

Carers spoken to during the course of the inspection and those submitting questionnaires were particularly complimentary about the level of input received from family placement staff via regular contact, both in person and on the telephone, formal supervision sessions (appreciated more by some than others) and prompt advice and support in emergencies, through either allocated or duty family placement staff.

Other supports offered by the local authority to carers included

Regular relevant training opportunities

Regular formal supervision

Local foster carer forum

Advice and support from the ECPC team and Looked After Children nursing service

Access to in and out of hours emergency advice and support

Respite care breaks

Membership of the Fostering network

Provision of written policies, procedures and guidance

Support group for teenage carers

Regular household reviews

The primary concern of a number of carers in relation to support was the extension of current resources to provide more respite breaks, an issue the local authority was aware of and seeking to address in its carer recruitment strategy.

Foster carers were clear about the roles of the family placement staff although, as already noted, circumstances often dictated that these staff did take on a more direct role in promoting the needs and interests of placed children in the absence of allocated children's social workers.

Standard 22 (22.1 - 22.10)

The fostering service is a managed one that provides supervision for foster carers and helps them to develop their skills.

Key Findings and Evidence

Standard met? 2

As noted already carers were generally very pleased with the support and supervision received.

Revised up to date foster carer agreements were now in place for all newly approved carers and a rolling programme of updating was being undertaken for existing carers at household reviews. Inspectors did however find one example of a very outdated agreement for a permanent carer dated some three years previously that had not been updated, in part because it also appeared a number of household reviews had not been undertaken for the same household which was more concerning. This was brought to the attention of managers to address.

Arrangements for household reviews were generally satisfactory with most reviews taking place at the required intervals and with first reviews being presented at panel as required by regulation. With the minor exceptions noted elsewhere in this report household review reports were appropriately thorough and covered all expected areas of assessment and information. The tracking and scheduling of review dates was largely down to individual allocated family placement workers to manage with oversight from team managers although, as clearly indicated by the apparent lapse in regularity of review for the permanent carer noted above, this was not a foolproof process. As noted elsewhere the potential for more effective use of the SWIFT system to schedule and flag up carer reviews for both staff and supervising managers needed to be explored.

The updated handbook for mainstream carers had been completed and was in the process of distribution and a similar document for Take a Break had just been finalised and was due for imminent distribution. The handbooks, with the exceptions already pointed out earlier in this report, were generally helpful and informative.

All carers were being supervised by appropriately qualified staff to monitor, support and develop their fostering skills, Regular formal recorded supervision sessions with carers were being undertaken by supervising family placement staff – a more regular pattern was established for mainstream carers than for Take a Break carers, who might have infrequent patterns of usage. Carers' responses to formal supervision were mixed. More mainstream, regularly used carers appreciated the opportunities to formally discuss issues whereas family and friends, carers and Take a Break carers were generally less enthused. This will hopefully change as they become more familiar with the process and its benefits.

Unannounced visits to carer households by supervising staff were taking place but inspectors were concerned that judging from household review reports and carer files it appeared that, if carers were not in for any reason, these unannounced visits were not then always rescheduled – as a result some households would not be getting the expected minimum of one unannounced visit per year. This needed addressing by team managers and tighter scrutiny by panel.

Information on complaints processes for both carers and placed young people was widely available and complaints were being appropriately monitored centrally within the fostering

service and, more broadly, by the departmental complaints officer, if they proceeded to a higher level. Information on processes for investigation of child protection concerns and allegations was made available to carers in the fostering handbooks.

Access to independent support and advice from the Fostering Network was available to carers subject to investigation although feedback from questionnaires indicated some concern from carers that, when investigations were underway they often felt very isolated and ill informed as to what was happening. The fostering manager recognised this issue and was looking at better ways of sustaining ongoing departmental support and communication links with carers in these situation in ways that did not compromise ongoing investigations.

Central monitoring of allegations and child protection concerns relating to carers was being maintained by the fostering manager. Appropriate steps had been taken in such cases to safeguard the immediate welfare of any children and policy and procedures were in place for consideration of removal of carers from the register following investigations.

Standard 23 (23.1 - 23.9)

The fostering service ensures that foster carers are trained in the skills required to provide high quality care and meet the needs of each child/young person placed in their care.

Key Findings and Evidence

Standard met? 3

Improved focused attention was being paid to meeting the training needs of carers by the local authority. The mainstream fostering training co-ordinator had now been in post for a little over a year and had both reviewed training needs and strategies and developed a good framework for future training expectations of carers covering a range of core essential topics alongside some more optional ones. Training needs for Take a Break carers were overseen by a worker in that team but there was evidence of appropriate liaison and sharing of training opportunities between the two aspects of the service.

A range of relevant training had been provided over the past year and was planned for the future covering relevant key areas of practice. Carers were also well supported by the local authority if they wished to pursue NVQ qualification.

Uptake of training continued to be an area of concern for the training co-ordinator and alternative more flexible means of training delivery were being considered such as workbooks and distance learning packages, particularly for working partners of carers whose attendance on training was very patchy. Feedback from carers during the inspection continued to reinforce the need for flexible timing of formal courses to include evenings and weekends as well as the need for childcare support to enable attendance. The training coordinator was aware of these issues and seeking to tackle them.

Take up of training by family and friend carers also continued to be a challenge, as they often did not see the relevance. This will need to continue to be an area of attention for family placement officers supporting such placements.

Records of foster carers' training on carer files needed continuing attention to bring them up to date.



Records

The intended outcome for the following set of standards is:

- All appropriate records are kept and are accessible in relation to the fostering services and the individual foster carers and foster children.

Standard 24 (24.1 - 24.8)

The fostering service ensures that an up-to-date, comprehensive case record is maintained for each child or young person in foster care which details the nature and quality of care provided and contributes to an understanding of her/his life events. Relevant information from the case records is made available to the child and to anyone involved in her/his care.

Key Findings and Evidence	Standard met?
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Key Findings and Evidence	Standard met?
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Key Findings and Evidence	Standard met?
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The case records for children were held and maintained by the children's social work teams in the local authority. The sample seen during this inspection indicated some improvement over the standard seen last year with the majority of key information about children's care histories, care needs and placements seen to be in place but, as file audits on some of the files seen confirmed, there was still scope for improvement. Particular inconsistencies were noted in the range and content of LAC documentation in place for each child and comprehensive chronologies were not yet consistently in place.

The local authority had appropriate policies and procedures in place governing the maintenance, storage and retention of files and access to them by children or other interested parties.

Although some concerns have already been noted about the management of emergency placements and the initial sharing of information, carers visited during the course of the inspection were clear about children's reasons for placement in care and understood their responsibilities to try to help children reflect upon and understand their past life experiences.

Carers were encouraged to support children in developing life story work, personal scrapbooks and collections of personal photographs and family memorabilia. Foster carers visited were clear about the records they were expected to keep and the need for due confidentiality and some good examples of daily log books were seen by inspectors. Carers spoken with were clear about the sort of information they need to pass on to relevant departmental staff and this was reinforced in the carer handbooks.

Standard 25 (25.1 - 25.13)

The fostering service's administrative records contain all significant information relevant to the running of the foster care service and as required by regulations.

Key Findings and Evidence

Standard met? 2

The files maintained on individual foster carers seen during this inspection were generally of a good standard. Some gaps were still noted in minor areas like checklists of information sent to carers and training undertaken but also more importantly in areas such as the chronological list of children placed.

Inspectors also noted that a specific concern raised in respect of the care provided by one carer, although fully documented in the body of the file, had not been included on the relevant checklist of complaints/concerns on that file. This may in part have been because the issue had been raised as a 'concern' rather than a formal complaint, but inspectors were of the view that any emerging issue, be it complaint or expressed concern, should be logged on this section of the file to ensure an accurate chronological overview about the quality of care provided by individual carers can be sustained.

As already noted under the section on staff recruitment, improvement to staff file record keeping was needed in respect of recruitment information. Inspectors also noted that an investigation into allegations about the conduct of a family placement social worker, although fully documented on the files of the carer making the complaint, was not reflected in any record then subsequently made on the member of staff's individual file. This particular complaint was fully investigated and found to be wholly without substance, but a record to that effect should have been made on the relevant staff file again, as with the carer record mentioned above, to maintain an accurate chronological overview of any emerging practice concerns.

The fostering service was maintaining the relevant foster carer register in largely appropriate ways on a stand-alone spreadsheet maintained by the fostering manager, drawing on information provided by the separate fostering service subsections. Discussions were taking place at the time of the inspection with central IT staff to produce the relevant register print-out from the local authority's main Swift database system to simplify the process. The recording of Regulation 38 placements on the current register did need some further work as there were examples of duplication where these placements had changed status from Regulation 38 to approved placement but were listed as both. Additionally the register did not hold, as required for Regulation 38 placements, the date of the initial Regulation 38 agreement.

Central records of complaints, serious accidents to foster children, investigations etc were being appropriately maintained by the fostering manager.

Number of current foster placements supported by the agency:	138
Number of placements made by the agency in the last 12 months:	159
Number of placements made by the agency which ended in the past 12 months:	135
Number of new foster carers approved during the last 12 months:	20
Number of foster carers who left the agency during the last 12 months:	18
Current weekly payments to foster parents (NB does not include Take a Break carers):	Minimum £ 132.30 Maximum £ 278.25

Fitness of Premises for use as Fostering Service

The intended outcome for the following standard is:

- **The premises used as offices by the fostering service are suitable for the purpose.**

Standard 26 (26.1 - 26.5)

Premises used as offices by the fostering service are appropriate for the purpose.

Key Findings and Evidence

Standard met?

2

The fostering service was housed in a range of different council offices across the county. Fostering teams were based primarily in council offices in Aylesbury and Amersham. Take a Break staff were based both in Aylesbury and High Wycombe. A small additional office was used by one family placement officer to support her work in Buckingham. The offices in Aylesbury, Wycombe and Amersham were seen during this inspection.

This was quite a disparate spread of accommodation reflecting in part the geography of the county but it did not aid the integration and consistency of working practices, nor was it easy for managers to keep an effective overview of operations in such a large number of different offices. The fostering manager's office was in fact, at the time of the inspection, housed in yet another separate location on the outskirts of Aylesbury.

While staff in Amersham raised relatively few concerns about the quality of accommodation there, aside for the occasional need to 'hot desk', staff based in Aylesbury had a number of legitimate concerns, in the view of inspectors.

Since the past inspection two office moves had been imposed on the fostering team and they were now co-located with some of the Aylesbury children's social work teams. While there were obvious benefits to this co-location in terms of communication with, and access to some of the children's social workers, the subsequent space available for fostering staff was quite limited, hampered by a lack of obvious items like shelving and the noise level in the shared, open plan area was considerable. There was very limited access to smaller rooms for individual meetings and supervision. There were also inadequate facilities for storage of equipment adjacent to the teams' work area. As a result equipment was stored on different floors of the tower block making ready access difficult and time-consuming. Similar concerns about equipment storage were raised by Take a Break staff in relation to both the Aylesbury and Wycombe offices. The quality of the reception rooms available in Aylesbury for use for meeting with carers and/or children was also poor and had to be shared with the social work teams housed in the same building.

While inspectors appreciate the overall difficulties of finding adequate office accommodation for staff, the accommodation and storage facilities in Aylesbury were less than ideal especially when seen in comparison to that enjoyed by other departments in the same building and every effort should be made to improve the current situation. Particular attention will clearly need to be paid to provision of more suitable office arrangements when the new planned team structures are brought into place.

Aside from issues of variable quality the offices had satisfactory security arrangements in place and adequate secure file storage facilities. IT and telephone systems were satisfactory to support staff.

Financial Requirements

The intended outcome for the following set of standards is:

- The agency fostering services are financially viable and appropriate and timely payments are made to foster carers.

Standard 27 (27.1 - 27.3)

The agency ensures it is financially viable at all times and has sufficient financial resources to fulfil its obligations.

Key Findings and Evidence	Standard met?	9
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Not applicable to a local authority fostering service.

Standard 28 (28.1 - 28.7)

The financial processes/systems of the agency are properly operated and maintained in accordance with sound and appropriate accounting standards and practice.

Key Findings and Evidence	Standard met?	9
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Not applicable to a local authority fostering service.

Standard 29 (29.1 - 29.2)

Each foster carer receives an allowance and agreed expenses, which cover the full cost of caring for each child or young person placed with him or her. Payments are made promptly and at the agreed time. Allowances and fees are reviewed annually.

Key Findings and Evidence

Standard met?

3

The local authority had a clear system of payments and allowances for foster carers that was outlined in the carers' handbooks. Allowances paid to Take a Break carers had traditionally been paid on a different basis and at much lower levels. Inspectors were informed that due to clearer identification of Take a Break funding, following its separation from children with disabilities field work services, an upward revision of Take a Break allowances, to reflect that paid to mainstream carers, was anticipated. The local authority was committed to ongoing yearly review of carers' allowances.

Other schemes were in place to support particular financial outlay for carers including loans to purchase larger cars (particularly positively received by carers) and to cover extensions or adaptations to property.

No concerns were raised by carers about financial matters or payment efficiency during the course of this inspection.

Fostering Panels

The intended outcome for the following set of standards is:

- **Fostering panels are organised efficiently and effectively so as to ensure that good quality decisions are made about the approval of foster carers, in line with the overriding objective to promote and safeguard the welfare of children in foster care.**

Standard 30 (30.1 - 30.9)

Fostering panels have clear written policies and procedures, which are implemented in practice, about the handling of their functions.

Key Findings and Evidence

Standard met? 3

Inspectors only observed and monitored the operation of the fostering panel during the course of this inspection. The permanency panel which approved adoption and permanent fostering placements was inspected as part of the adoption inspection.

Both the panel composition and the systems by which it operated had changed little since the last inspection and were still seen to be working well judging from observation of panel during the inspection and from scrutiny of past panel minutes.

The panel was appropriately constituted with good representation from independent members and a local authority councillor also attended. The panel chair was appropriately experienced and qualified and arrangements were in place for deputising if necessary. The panel was well supported administratively.

It was positive to note the appointment to the new Fostering Advisor role, which will relieve the existing panel adviser of potential conflicts of interest with her role as manager of the mainstream fostering team. This new role will also offer scope for developing quality assurance functions of the panel in a more coherent and consistent manner.

Since the last inspection new applicants were now attending panel and plans were in hand to extend this to carers undergoing their first household review. Panel members had received training in anticipation of carers attending.

Observation of panel and scrutiny of minutes provided evidence of good, appropriate challenge to various aspects of assessments and household reviews and during the inspection the Panel was seen to be very effective in challenging the appropriateness of care planning undertaken in relation to a Regulation 38 placement that had been presented for approval.

Inspectors felt however that on the evidence of cases seen and scrutiny of carers files the panel did need to be tighter on monitoring the completion of unannounced visits to approved carers and ensuring better attention was paid in assessments and household reviews to issues of diversity.

As noted earlier panel member personnel files were not accessible during the inspection but

inspectors did advise review of these records to ensure conformity with the regulations and standards and the model used by the adoption service would be a good one to follow.

Short-Term Breaks

The intended outcome for the following set of standards is:

- When foster care is provided as a short-term break for a child, the arrangement recognises that the parents remain the main carers for the child.

Standard 31 (31.1 - 31.2)

Where a fostering service provides short-term breaks for children in foster care, they have policies and procedures, implemented in practice, to meet the particular needs of children receiving short-term breaks.

Key Findings and Evidence	Standard met?	3
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This standard was seen as applying primarily to the operation of the Take a Break service at the time of this inspection, due to the relative lack of mainstream fostering respite services. This latter aspect of respite provision was one the local authority was hoping to expand in the future both to support existing full-time carers and those families and children for whom a full-time care placement might not be an appropriate option.

The Take a Break service was now fully under the overall line management of the fostering manager, having been separated out since the last inspection from the fieldwork services for children with disabilities. While this shift had not been without problems of adjustment to new roles and expectations Take a Break staff spoken with during the inspection felt that there was now much better clarity about the respective responsibilities in the department towards carers and placed children. As noted above the shift had also identified an historical pattern of budget underspend on the TAB service which was being used in a variety of ways, including plans to significantly improve Take a Break carer payments.

The TAB service appeared well run by its dedicated manager and staff team and its policies and procedures, whilst appropriately coming more into line with the overall expectations of fostering standards and regulation, still maintained an appropriate balance recognising the primary role that parents still played as primary carers. This was reflected in the feedback from and discussion with Take a Break carers, and from families who made use of the service.

Family and Friends as Carers

The intended outcome for the following set of standards is:

- **Local authority fostering services' policies and procedures for assessing, approving, supporting and training foster carers recognise the particular contribution that can be made by and the particular needs of family and friends as carers.**

Standard 32 (32.1 - 32.4)

These standards are all relevant to carers who are family and friends of the child, but there is recognition of the particular relationship and position of family and friend carers.

Key Findings and Evidence

Standard met? 1

The local authority continued to develop the use of family and friends placements as part of its overall range of placement options. A sample of such carers were seen during the inspection and they reflected positively on their experience of departmental intervention and support in their role as carers. The service did attempt to ensure family and friend carers conformed with practice expectations in line with those of mainstream carers but there was a recognition of the difficulties sometimes faced in getting such carers, for example, to attend training or to make best use of formal recorded supervision. A number of family and friends assessments were seen during the inspection and were felt by inspectors to have been carried out thoroughly and with an appropriate balance between recognising the value of such placements in preserving continuity for young people, whilst still recognising the inherent risks and complexities involved.

Given the complexity of both assessing and then providing ongoing support and monitoring to such placements inspectors welcomed the intention to develop a particular sub-group of staff within the proposed future fostering team to develop work with family and friends carers.

Despite the above positive comments inspectors were however concerned about the overall departmental management of Regulation 38 placements, which has led to a low score under this standard. One such case was presented to panel during this inspection. The inspectors shared the panel's strongly expressed concern about various aspects of the casework planning and the poor initial placement assessment that had gone into this case prior to presentation at panel. But it was also evident that there had been little opportunity for input and assessment at the early stages of this placement by staff in the fostering service who, inspectors felt, would have been in a better professional position to assess its appropriateness. It also appeared that a formal agreement covering all the areas required under Regulation 38 had not been put in place. This particular case was followed up by CSCI during the course of the inspection to confirm that appropriate steps had been taken to address the concerns raised.

Subsequent scrutiny of other files for current Regulation 38 placements confirmed a picture of confusion about what actually constituted a Regulation 38 placement and a failure to have in place the required formal agreements under that regulation. Discussion with fostering

team members and managers confirmed they also had concerns about the process and responsibility for assessment of Regulation 38 situations and anecdotally indicated these sometimes came to them too late to complete assessment for ongoing placements within the six week timeframe allowed under regulation. These issues were discussed at length with fostering services managers and inspectors required that the department urgently review its policy procedures and systems for defining, assessing and approving Regulation 38 placements.

PART C

LAY ASSESSOR'S SUMMARY

(where applicable)

Lay Assessor

Signature

Date

PART D

PROVIDER'S RESPONSE

D.1 Registered Person's or Responsible Local Authority Manager's comments/confirmation relating to the content and accuracy of the report for the above inspection.

We would welcome comments on the content of this report relating to the Inspection conducted on 7th – 11th February 2005 and any factual inaccuracies:

Please limit your comments to one side of A4 if possible

Action taken by the CSCI in response to the provider's comments:

Amendments to the report were necessary	<input type="checkbox"/>
Comments were received from the provider	<input type="checkbox" value="YES"/>
Provider comments/factual amendments were incorporated into the final inspection report	<input type="checkbox" value="NO"/>
Provider comments are available on file at the Area Office but have not been incorporated into the final inspection report. The inspector believes the report to be factually accurate	<input type="checkbox" value="YES"/>

Note:

In instances where there is a major difference of view between the Inspector and the Registered Provider responsible Local Authority fostering service Manager both views will be made available on request to the Area Office.

D.2 Please provide the Commission with a written Action Plan, which indicates how statutory requirements and recommendations are to be addressed and stating a clear timescale for completion. This will be kept on file and made available on request.

Status of the Provider's Action Plan at time of publication of the final inspection report:

Action plan was required	<input type="checkbox" value="YES"/>
Action plan was received at the point of publication	<input type="checkbox" value="YES"/>
Action plan covers all the statutory requirements in a timely fashion	<input type="checkbox"/>
Action plan did not cover all the statutory requirements and required further discussion	<input type="checkbox"/>
Provider has declined to provide an action plan	<input type="checkbox" value="NO"/>
Other: <enter details here>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Public reports

It should be noted that all CSCI inspection reports are public documents. Reports on children's homes are only obtainable on personal application to CSCI offices.

D.3 PROVIDER'S AGREEMENT

Registered Person's or responsible Local Authority Manager's statement of agreement/comments: Please complete the relevant section that applies.

D.3.1 I _____ of Buckinghamshire County Council Fostering Service confirm that the contents of this report are a fair and accurate representation of the facts relating to the inspection conducted on the above date(s) and that I agree with the statutory requirements made and will seek to comply with these.

Print Name _____
Signature _____
Designation _____
Date _____

Or

D.3.2 I _____ of Buckinghamshire County Council Fostering Service am unable to confirm that the contents of this report are a fair and accurate representation of the facts relating to the inspection conducted on the above date(s) for the following reasons:

Print Name _____
Signature _____
Designation _____
Date _____

Note: In instance where there is a profound difference of view between the Inspector and the Registered Provider both views will be reported. Please attach any extra pages, as applicable.

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