



*Making Social Care  
Better for People*

# inspection report

## FOSTERING SERVICE

### **Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council Fostering Service**

**Conway Building  
Conway Street  
Birkenhead  
Wirral  
Cheshire  
CH41 4FD**

*Lead Inspector*  
Jeff Banham

*Announced Inspection*  
8th January 2007      09:30

The Commission for Social Care Inspection aims to:

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

<b>Reader Information</b>	
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This is a report of an inspection to assess whether services are meeting the needs of people who use them. The legal basis for conducting inspections is the Care Standards Act 2000 and the relevant National Minimum Standards for this establishment are those for *Fostering Services*. They can be found at [www.dh.gov.uk](http://www.dh.gov.uk) or obtained from The Stationery Office (TSO) PO Box 29, St Crispins, Duke Street, Norwich, NR3 1GN. Tel: 0870 600 5522. Online ordering: [www.tso.co.uk/bookshop](http://www.tso.co.uk/bookshop)

*Every Child Matters*, outlined the government's vision for children's services and formed the basis of the Children Act 2004. It provides a framework for inspection so that children's services should be judged on their contribution to the outcomes considered essential to wellbeing in childhood and later life. Those outcomes are:

- Being healthy
- Staying safe
- Enjoying and achieving
- Making a contribution; and
- Achieving economic wellbeing.

In response, the Commission for Social Care Inspection has re-ordered the national minimum standards for children's services under the five outcomes, for reporting purposes. A further section has been created under 'Management' to cover those issues that will potentially impact on all the outcomes above.

Copies of *Every Child Matters* and *The Children Act 2004* are available from The Stationery Office as above

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# SERVICE INFORMATION

<b>Name of service</b>	Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council Fostering Service
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<b>Name of registered provider(s)/company (if applicable)</b>	Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council
<b>Name of registered manager (if applicable)</b>	
<b>Type of registration</b>	Local Authority Fostering Service

# SERVICE INFORMATION

## Conditions of registration:

**Date of last inspection**      13th February 2006

## Brief Description of the Service:

Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council's fostering service provides a variety of fostering services for children and young people. The service is based in council offices in the centre of Birkenhead.

The fostering service consists of a service manager, who oversees the operation of the service, a team manager, who is responsible for the day to day operation of the service, three team leaders, 13 supervising social workers, 2 social work assistants, 2 support workers and 5 administrative staff. The service works with social workers from the children and family area teams, education and cultural services, health and other appropriate agencies.

The core responsibility of the service is to provide a range of placements for children from Wirral who are looked after by the local authority. In order to achieve this the fostering team recruits, assesses, approves, trains, supports and reviews foster carers.

When it is unable to provide a foster placement for a child or young person from within its own resources, the fostering service will obtain a fostering placement from the voluntary and private sector.

# SUMMARY

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

The site visit was part of the service's annual key inspection. It was carried out by one inspector and took place over six days. Pre-inspection questionnaires were received from 8 foster carers, 7 children and 2 placing social workers. The inspector met with a group of seven foster carers and visited three other foster carers in their own homes. Eight fostered children and young people were spoken with.

The service manager, team manager, one team leader and three supervising social workers were spoken with.

The inspector met with a representative of the education service, the medical adviser for the fostering panel and the fostering panel chair, and attended a meeting of the fostering panel.

Information for the site visit was supplied by the service, and the inspector examined documentation relevant to the service, and children's and foster carers' files.

Personnel files for three members of staff were seen.

Each section or "outcome area" in this report contains a judgement about the quality of the service provided. This judgement is made using all the available evidence, including the site visit.

The overall quality of the service is **adequate**.

## What the service does well:

The fostering service provides good support to its carers. Many carers feel that the help they receive from the supervising social workers compensates for what has historically been a more vulnerable service from placing social workers.

The Children and Young People's Department has developed effective processes for enabling young people to be engaged in leisure activities, to reach their educational potential and to be involved in all aspects of the care they receive and the decisions that affect their lives.

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

The creation of one department combining social services and education has led to more joint working and integrated approaches to meeting children's needs.

The appointment of a Service manager as a temporary arrangement has enabled the service to review all aspects of its work, to produce development plans and begin the process of improvement. Changes to many systems, policies and procedures have been implemented and produced, and gradually the service has started to work on identified changes.

More children and young people have up to date health assessments, and the continued expansion of the *Steps into Leisure* programme has led to more children accessing activities.

Written risk assessments have been obtained for more children placed with carers.

Full investigations into allegations against carers are now carried out by the Quality Assurance Unit and written records are maintained.

A new fee and payment structure has been introduced to recognise the skills and commitment of carers.

The multi-disciplinary Fostering Taskforce monitors the developments of the Fostering Service.

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

Historically the Council has seen a relatively high turnover of social work staff and a relatively high number of children coming into care. These factors have been identified and are being addressed, but to some extent the legacy remains.

Carers see supervising social workers as offering more consistent and effective support than placing social workers. The issue of inadequate information being available to carers is significant and remains a potential risk to children and carers. Systems for defining "emergency" and "planned" placements need to be devised, and corresponding processes to ensure carers receive all available information put into place.

The work of the fostering panel would benefit from review to ensure it offers and independent and robust quality monitoring and quality assurance function to the service.

The management structure would benefit from review to ensure that the service is effectively and efficiently managed.

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

The report of this inspection is available from [enquiries@csci.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@csci.gsi.gov.uk) or by contacting your local CSCI office. The summary of this inspection report can be made available in other formats on request.

# **DETAILS OF INSPECTOR FINDINGS**

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# Being Healthy

## The intended outcome for this Standard is:

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

## The Commission considers Standard 12 the key standard to be inspected.

### JUDGEMENT – we looked at the outcome for Standard:

12.

The quality in this outcome area is **adequate**.

This judgement has been made using available evidence including a visit to this service.

Although foster carers demonstrate an awareness of their responsibilities in supporting children's health care, supervising social workers seek to ensure the relevant information is provided and a range of resources is available to identify and meet children's health needs, the inconsistency of up-to date and relevant information available to foster carers on children presents potential risks to the health of children and to carers.

### EVIDENCE:

Foster carers are aware of their responsibilities to ensure children's health needs are met, and case files show examples of carers registering children with GPs and dentists, of taking children for treatment and attending appointments. Each child should have a Health Plan, although there are examples of such plans not being held on file. The service recognises that it could be more proactive in supporting health plans and in supporting carers to develop their advocacy and assertion skills in order to achieve the aims of the plan.

Health issues are raised by the supervising social workers and records of these discussion and subsequent actions are kept on file. The statutory review process monitors the progress of health care and checks that all necessary actions have been taken.

The Wirral Hospital Trust provides a Designated Doctor for looked after children, and the looked after children nurses ensure that children have a health assessment at least every year. The authority provides a range of resources and arrangements with statutory and voluntary bodies to assist in meeting children's health needs.

A key factor in successfully identifying and meeting health needs is the quality of the information available to foster carers. The absence of such information is a significant feature of the authority's placement of children with foster carers. There are numerous examples of carers looking after children without having the relevant "Looking After Children" (LAC) documentation. One foster carer wrote, *"I received nothing and nine months on I am still waiting for more information despite requesting it."* Another wrote, *"Some vital information was withheld from us."*

There is evidence on records of foster carers' supervision of the issue being raised by foster carers during their supervision, and of supervising social workers and foster carers continuing to request the information from placing social workers sometimes weeks and months after a child has been placed.

One foster carer was concerned that a child placed with her in September last year may have Hepatitis C. The child also appeared to have had no immunisations. The record of one meeting held on 30/11/06 noted *"Hep C tests and routine immunisations/vaccination to be undertaken once appropriate consent has been obtained."*

On the 8/01/07 the foster carer believed that nothing had been done, that consents had not been obtained or dispensed with, and that the child had still had no blood tests or immunisations. The carer was concerned about the potential impact for others, children and adults, in her household.

However, the child's file contained the appropriate LAC documentation, copies of which had not all been given to the carer. This included written consent, signed by the child's mother on the 19<sup>th</sup> September 2006, to medical treatment, testing and immunisations.

The foster carer also said that although the child had been with her since September last year he had not yet had a health assessment.

# Staying Safe

## The intended outcomes for these Standards are:

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

## The Commission considers Standards 3, 6, 8, 9, 15 and 30 the key standards to be inspected.

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

3,6,8,9,15 and 30

Quality in this outcome area is **adequate**.

This judgement has been made using available evidence including a visit to this service.

The fostering service works hard to ensure carers are supported and children are safe. However existing systems and procedures should be revised to ensure the best and most consistent practice to keep children and carers safe. The function and organisation of the fostering panel should be reviewed to ensure it provides an effective quality assurance role for the fostering service.

## EVIDENCE:

Wirral Children and Young People's Department is managed by a Head of Branch. A Principal Manager is then accountable for the Fostering and Adoption Service. He is accountable for a temporary Service Manager who was in post at the time of the site visit, and she is responsible for a Team Manager. She in turn is directly accountable for the three Team Leaders who are responsible for the day-to-day management of the three teams into which the Fostering Service is organised. The temporary Service Manager is primarily responsible for the implementation of the development and improvement plans in which the service is currently engaged. All these staff are qualified social workers

with extensive experience in practice and management within children's services.

Health and safety assessments are undertaken on carers' homes at the time of the initial assessment and then through supervision and annual reviews. Each carer is provided with written guidelines on their health and safety responsibilities. All the homes visited as part of the inspection were clean, warm and well furnished. Most children had their own bedrooms; in one home children shared. They were all young, all related, and in favour of the arrangement.

Foster carers produce safe caring policies for the household and in respect of individual children placed.

One foster carer's file noted that two adult relatives of the foster carer had come to stay "*for a few weeks*" and that "*CRB checks are required on both.*" It appeared that the visitors had arrived in the house before CRB checks had been done or applied for, even though there were children in placement. There was no evidence that the checks were ever undertaken. Only one visitor eventually arrived and, according to the supervising social worker only stayed for a short time.

The fostering service has a policy of matching for long term or permanent placements to be done through planning meetings. All information, including matching reports, is then presented to the fostering panel. For short term or emergency placements matching is done on the basis of knowledge of the carers, information about the child and the availability of placements. The service is aware that placements are often made largely on the basis of placement availability. A programme of foster carer recruitment has been undertaken in order to increase the numbers of carers available to the Department.

The opportunity for a choice of placement is recognised to be relatively low, as the service needs more carers to be able to offer more choice. The number of exemptions is high.

In addition foster carers do not always receive written information that is available on children, and a number of placements do not have written foster placements agreements – parts of the "Looking After Children documentation serve this purpose - with the information required by Schedule 5 of the Fostering Services Regulations 2002.

The policy of the Department is to ensure that carers are informed of all known risks the child may pose. Carer's receive the risk assessment, copies of which are held on their file. In one case a child's risk assessment recorded that there were no issues concerning health. It subsequently came to light that there may be issues to do with possible blood infection and immunisation, but the risk assessment had not been updated to reflect this.

The fostering service makes it clear that no form of corporal punishment is acceptable. This is mentioned in the Foster Care Agreement that all carers are required to sign.

Given that the issue of carers taking children without all the appropriate information being provided to them is significant to the service, the Foster Carer Agreement could be amended to include a statement that foster carers should not take children without that information.

Allegations that involve foster carers are referred to the Quality Assurance Unit and an Independent Reviewing Officer conducts investigations. Management systems are in place to collate and evaluate information of the circumstances, numbers and outcomes of any investigations.

The Education Department provides a Missing Pupil Officer. Wirral also commissions a telephone helpline for reporting bullying and a voluntary organisation to follow up young runaways and to support young people at the risk of sexual exploitation.

Three personnel files were examined. One did not contain evidence of an updated CRB check or evidence of the member of staff's registration with the General Social Care Council. Both were subsequently located in other information storage systems, and placed on the file. On one other there was a discrepancy about the member of staff's date of the completion of her probationary period. This was subsequently amended. All other checks and references were in place.

The Head of the Department's Safeguarding Unit chairs the fostering panel. At the meeting attended by the inspector the panel did not have a member who was a social worker employed by the service. It did have a departmental representative who was a qualified social worker but who was not then employed as a social worker. The service manager said that steps are now being taken to recruit someone who is currently employed as a social worker by the department. The service manager also said that the recruitment of an independent chair of the panel had begun.

On the day of the panel applicants who attended were told by the chair, after discussion, that they were "*approved*". There was no recognition that the panel should make a "*recommendation*" to the agency decision maker for approval or not, as the case may be. A social worker who attended for another approval also spoke about the possibility of the panel "*approving*" on the day, and panel minutes on foster carers' files showed that the panel had previously "*approved*" on the day, and that there had been no reference to the agency decision maker. The service manager said that the function of "*agency decision maker*" had since been re-affirmed and was to operate for all future panels.

The panel agenda was large, and members subsequently spoke about the workload imposed by such agendas, that occurred regularly. A significant

number of items for the panel to consider are matters under Regulation 38 of the Fostering Services Regulations 2002.

This reflects on the relatively high number of family and friends carers with which the department deals. The relatively short timescales that result from the current system of managing such cases means that there a number of issues concerning approval that remain unknown and therefore that the panel is not able to take into account when considering approvals. This was the case at the panel attended by the inspector, when some items had a number of issues "*not known*".

The panel chair recognised the issue, and said it had previously been the cause of "tension" between the panel and the family placement team, and a meeting had been held to discuss the matter. The possibility of introducing a different system for such cases is referred to in "Management" below. The role of the "panel gatekeeper", someone who acts on behalf of the panel chair to provide a quality control function for matters placed before the panel, is not yet fully developed and seems to be split between a number of managers. The Team Manager said she is conscious of timescales for receiving papers and sending them out in good time to panel members, and that each of the three team leaders is responsible, through general supervision, for the quality of information presented to the panel.

There is no system for the panel to provide an explicit quality assurance function to the fostering service. The panel chair said she had meetings with the Head of Service at which she could raise particular issues, but there was no regular and systematic way in which the whole panel could discuss its business, agree on matters of concern and report this formally back to the fostering service. Panel members said they had undertaken training as a panel, but this was more to do with receiving information on specific topics rather than looking at the way the panel worked and what was of concern in the way in which carers were approved and supported.

# Enjoying and Achieving

## The intended outcomes for these Standards are:

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

## The Commission considers Standards 7, 13 and 31 the key standards to be inspected.

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

7,13 and 31

Quality in this outcome area is **good**.

This judgement has been made using all the available evidence including a visit to this service.

Wirral's Children and Young People's Department has developed a range of practices and resources to ensure children are supported to realise their potential and be treated as individuals within the fostering service. Foster carers are aware of their responsibilities in working with other professionals to assist children to develop.

### EVIDENCE:

The fostering service ensures that foster carers provide care that respects and promotes diversity. The topic is covered in initial approval, assessment and training. The service manager recognises that the pressure on finding suitable placements means that matching specific religious or cultural backgrounds can be difficult. To address this the service places greater emphasis on the need for carers to have an understanding and skills to enable them to care for children from a range of backgrounds.

The Department has a specialist team working with children with disabilities (CWD) and a social worker from the fostering service attends the monthly CWD Placement Panel to review children needing placement. The fostering service recruits and supports "family link" carers who provide short term breaks for children with disabilities.

The Children's Involvement Officer contacts all children who become looked after via a questionnaire. They are asked about any hobbies, skills or activities they wish to pursue or develop and this information forms the basis for their Leisure Plan, copies of which are on children's files. The *Access to Swim* programme offers all looked after children the opportunity to receive a 12-month swimming pass and swimming lessons. A range of other leisure and educational activities is also available. Children confirm that they are supported by carers in activities such as guides and scouts, football and other sports, and have access to a number of activities and outings. On one visit to a foster carer's house the inspector was told excitedly by two young children that they were not going to be around in the house for long as they were off to the "Rainbow Club" in a few minutes.

The Children and Young People's Department has a number of multi-disciplinary groups that oversee services to and monitor the performance of looked after children with regard to educational achievement. These groups form the "Virtual School" with a full time head teacher and governing body. The Educational Support Team provides help to looked after children. Each child has a Personal Education Plan, the progress of which is monitored by the fostering service. The service recognises there is a number of issues that could be improved in relation to supporting children in education, and is working with carers to achieve change.

Children's individual educational needs are identified in initial assessments and monitored through statutory reviews. Supervising social workers discuss educational issues at their meetings with carers and offer support where required.

The role of foster carers in supporting children is continually affirmed and monitored; this includes transport where appropriate, although some carers expressed concern about their perception of the transport policy. The service is attempting to "normalise" or "de-stigmatise" children living with carers by enabling them to go to school with carers or by using local transport, rather than by specialist taxis provided by the service. Some carers feel this will have a detrimental impact on their ability to organise their households, and is the subject of on-going discussion and clarification.

Foster carers are also asked to attend parent's evenings and support children with homework.

## **Making a Positive Contribution**

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

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

### **The Commission considers Standards 10 and 11 the key standards to be inspected.**

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

10 and 11.

Quality in this outcome area is **good**.

This judgement has been made using available evidence including a visit to this service.

Maintaining and developing significant contacts is integral to the practice of the service, and children are supported to maintain contacts with friends and family.

The service has a participation strategy that provides looked after children with every opportunity to be consulted and involved in their care and the development of the service.

### **EVIDENCE:**

Foster carers are active in promoting family contacts and friendships for the children in their care. The importance of contact is included in preparation training and reinforced and monitored through subsequent supervisory visits by supervising social workers. Records of these sessions are held on foster carers' files.

Wherever possible contacts take place in foster carers' own homes, where the children's risk assessment determines that this is possible. Foster carers are required to support contact arrangements where the child or young person has to travel. Records of contact are kept by the foster carers and checked by the supervising social worker.

The service emphasises to carers that they will assume primary responsibility for transport rather than using departmental transport or taxis. The manager said this development has been initiated after consultation with children. Some

foster carers are anxious that the responsibility may be too difficult for them to manage, and in exceptional circumstances departmental transport is provided. One carer said she did not have written details of the contact arrangements, and that they had only been passed to her verbally. Contact is reviewed through the statutory review process and amended if required. Children and young people were able to describe their arrangements for contact and the role of their carer in supporting them.

The Council as a whole has become committed to children's involvement in the way in which they are supported. The Council has been awarded "*Beacon Status for Positive Youth Engagement in the Democratic and Community Process.*"

The Children's Involvement Officer has worked to ensure children who are looked after are encouraged to participate in a variety of initiatives, and to empower them to influence practices within the fostering service and the wider department.

A DVD "*My ideal foster family*" has been produced to be used for training carers both before and after approval.

The views of children are sought for their reviews and for their health, leisure and education plans. Children are informed that they can have access to advocacy services, have support to make complaints and be involved in staff recruitment and foster carers' training.

The Service Manager said that plans for the future include better training for carers in contact issues, and more explicit links to skills based fee bands.

# Achieving Economic Wellbeing

## The intended outcomes for these Standards are:

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

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

14 and 29.

Quality in this outcome area is **good**.

This judgement has been made using all the available evidence including a visit to this service.

## EVIDENCE:

The Department has a Leaving Care Team that includes ConneXions advisers. The team works with the fostering service and carers who have older children. Training in "Preparation for Adult Life" is provided to foster carers. All children have a named Leaving Care worker and embark upon the production of a "Pathway Plan" from the age of 15 and a half.

The service manager said that the Wirral Homes Partnership is looking at ways of ensuring more young people can be housed. Employment for care leavers is being progressed through the "Care Leavers Employment Strategy Group". The service manager said this has a particular emphasis on developing the council's role as a "corporate parent" by maximising job and training opportunities within the council workforce. The 14-19 Partnership is supporting projects between work based learning providers and the special schools sector in order to provide pupils from special schools with experience of work-based learning opportunities.

The service manager said that Wirral MBC has revised its payment arrangements to carers following extensive consultation. New payment arrangements have been published and payments backdated to 01/04/06. Carers have been advised of the new arrangements via direct letters to them and information put on to the relevant web sites.

The arrangements consist of allowances paid for each child according to their age and professional skills-based payments to carers. There are three bands of fees, representing increasing levels of skill/competency and an expectation

that carers on higher bands will be able to care for children with increasingly complex needs. The new rates will be higher than the DfES recommended rates.

Carers are paid fortnightly. They report that in the main they are paid in full and on time. There is some confusion however about rates and allowances of initial clothing grants for new placements. Some carers said they believed they were entitled to a maximum of £200.00 to buy clothing for a child when first placed. Two carers said they had paid out that amount and had only received £50.00 in return, and wondered if it was because the child had already had money spent in previous placements. The service manager said the criteria for payment were described in the "Guide to Payment for Foster Carers", a draft of which was dated May 2006. This says, *"An allowance of £200.00 can be paid for each child. This amount is usually paid only once during each care career as the fostering allowance contains an element for clothing replacement etc. The allowance paid must allow the carer to purchase sufficient and appropriate clothing for the child."*

Carers feel that they are penalised if they have to spend what they see as a significant amount of money on shoes and clothing even if the child has been in a care placement previously, and their clothing arrives in unsuitable or insufficient condition.

# Management

## The intended outcomes for these Standards are:

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

**The Commission considers Standards 1, 16, 17, 21, 24, 25 and 32 the key standards to be inspected.**

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

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

Quality in this outcome area is **adequate**.

This judgement has been made using all the available evidence including a visit to this service.

The fostering service is making significant changes to its structures and processes. It has embarked on an improvement programme to a variety of procedures and systems to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the service. There are a number of areas where continued development will further improve outcomes for staff, carers and children.

### **EVIDENCE:**

The fostering service has a statement of purpose that is reviewed annually, presented to the Council in January, and is formally approved by elected members. The statement of purpose is published on the council's website.

Family placement staff are organised into three teams, each with a particular area of responsibility. Each team is managed by a team leader who carries a caseload. The team leaders are accountable to a team manager who also carries a small and reducing caseload. She in turn is accountable to a service manager. The levels of management appear to have been required as a response to the gradual and some extent unplanned systems within which the service operates, and it may be possible, as more effective systems are introduced, to reduce the levels of management and to enable managers to be responsible solely for management responsibilities.

In addition, the implications of decisions made by other placing social work teams, and their methods of operation, mean that the fostering service is not always able to control and manage its workload. This is particularly noticeable in relation to the work generated by the need to respond to placements made under Regulation 38 of the Fostering Services Regulations and the requirements of the courts. Further issues affecting the ability of the team to work effectively and efficiently include the level of administrative support, which some staff feel is not sufficient for the demands of the job, the quality of the IT infrastructure and support; not all staff yet have access to e-mail. There is still a heavy reliance on paper-based systems, and the quality of the equipment- telephones, photocopiers and faxes-with that the team has to work. The upgrading of IT equipment is being undertaken as a staged development.

The family placement staff have generally worked for the department for longer periods of time than staff in many of the social work teams. The relatively high turnover of staff in these teams - now reducing - and the fact

that many of the social workers are relatively inexperienced, has also had implications for the amount and nature of the work of the family placement team, and has affected their role in working with carers.

Supervising social workers are responsible for supporting carers, assessing new applicants and providing a duty system to deal with enquiries and referrals. They are employed by Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council, and subject to its terms and conditions of employment. Staff have access to a training programme, and a number of staff said the opportunity for training was good, and the employer was supportive of training needs. Staff receive regular supervision, and attend regular team meetings. It is recognised that the quality of foster carer assessments varies, and supervising social workers said they had either not received any training in competency based assessment, or that they had undertaken the training some time ago. Training in the role of the supervising social worker is also a topic that may be of benefit to those in the role.

Each supervising social worker carries a caseload of foster carers for whom they are responsible. These caseloads are relatively high, and at around 20+ significantly higher than that recommended by the British Association of Fostering and Adoption Agencies (BAAF). Nevertheless foster carers say that the support they receive from the team is good, and that they appreciate the role of the supervising social worker in offering a range of support and assistance. There were many examples quoted of the supervising social worker "stepping in" or "covering" the work of the placing social worker, who, it is recognised may be occupied elsewhere or inexperienced. Regular supervision takes place, and records of these meetings are kept. Not every carer has had at least one unannounced visit a year.

In addition, it may be beneficial if a schedule of all visits to carers was kept on one sheet on the file indicating the date, and purpose of the visit. This would enable managers to monitor at a glance the visits that had taken place.

Foster carers are subject to annual review, carried out by an Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO). Reviews are presented to the fostering panel, and records of the meetings and subsequent recommendations are kept on file. The IRO could present a regular report to the fostering service, possibly to the fostering panel, reporting on the main issues that have been significant to the functioning of the service. The structure for the review could be based on the "competency" approach that underpins the initial foster carer assessment, and link to a supervision record that followed the same format.

Foster carer training is available as part of the pre-approval process, induction and core continuing training. Staff report that there is variation in take up rates from carer to carer. Training is discussed at supervision, and records kept of training attended. Some carers say that they are not always able to attend training because of the times it is put on or other commitments. The

service may benefit from a full time training officer to co-ordinate, provide and develop training of carers.

Foster carers have access to out-of-hours support, and foster carers themselves are part of the regular support rota. Supervising social workers and managers adopt an apparently informal approach to out- of- hours support, with some being available at all times via mobile phones, and others not, according to personal decision. The appropriateness of this arrangement could be reviewed, and any subsequent system made explicit and formalised so that staff and carers knew what was expected of them and what was available.

Children have their own case records held and maintained by the placing social workers. The fostering service has a policy of not keeping children's records on carers' files, recognising that such information should be kept on the child's file. However some foster carer files contained *LAC* information, some for children in placement, some for children no longer in placement. Other information such as risk assessments and matching reports was also on carers' files.

In addition the fostering team had information about children in the "brown file" in cabinets in the office. The information held varied from child to child; some went back to 2001. The information seems to duplicate what is held elsewhere and appears to be a reaction to filing what is available, rather than responding to a clear recognition of what is required.

Each foster carer has their own record held and maintained by the relevant supervising social worker. At the front of each file is a "list of contents" and the file is divided into corresponding sections. The contents of the file do not always correspond to the identified structure. One file began with review reports that were not dated or signed. The list of children placed contained seven names, with a date of placement for only two, and a discharge date for only one. Parts of the "Looking After Children" documentation were present for the first child placed but not others who had subsequently been in placement or who were currently in placement. The foster carers' training record was not up to date. There was no copy of the Foster Care Agreement, although there was a sheet containing signatures to say one had been completed. This was however for the initial approval that had subsequently been changed, and for which there was no evidence that another agreement had been made. Risk assessments for children in placement were not held together in the same part of the file, and there were risk assessments for children who had left. One risk assessment did not accurately reflect the current situation concerning a child's health, and had not been updated to record potentially significant risks associated with possible hepatitis infection.

The supervising social worker responsible for the case said that there was some confusion about what should be held on file, as new forms and documents were always being produced. In addition the complete reliance on paper based systems, the relative lack of IT systems – some social workers do

not yet have access to e-mail - and demands of the caseload meant that sometimes filing was not always given the highest priority.

The service is based in offices in central Birkenhead in what was previously a school. Other services also use the premises, to which members of the public have access. Council staff can use a separate entrance that opens on to the main street. The door has an electronic lock activated by a swipe card. The inspector went out through the door on three occasions on one day, and on two the door had not been shut properly beforehand and therefore allowed access to people not authorised to be in the building. On the first day of the site visit one member of staff was concerned that her purse had been stolen. The matter was reported to the Police. The service manager said the caretaker was informed about the door and that steps would be taken to rectify the situation.

The accommodation is spacious and in the process of being organised, furnished and equipped. All the I.T equipment is yet to be provided, and the service is not yet supported by computerised information and support systems. Within the building records are kept securely, but access to the building is not secure.

One social worker said that some equipment vital to the everyday work of the team- fax, telephone and photocopier- was out of date and unreliable. The social worker said, *"It is a major issue"*.

The service manager said the deficiencies in equipment and support systems was recognised and was part of the Departments improvement plan.

The information provided by the fostering service said that at March 31<sup>st</sup> last year a total of 480 children were placed. Of these, 178 were placed with family and friends. At that time the proportion of family and friends placements (37%) was high, and represented a significant practice issue for the authority. In addition the authority has an above average number of looked after children for the population it serves. More recent statistics show that all these numbers are reducing in line with the authority's agreed strategy. There are now fewer looked after children. The proportion of family and friends placements is lower, and there are fewer out-of -authority placements.

However, despite these reductions the numbers are still relatively high and taken together have a considerable impact on the fostering service. There is relatively little choice of placements available at any one time. The numbers of registered foster carers has reduced from 341 in April last year to 298 in December. One social worker wrote in the pre-inspection questionnaire that *"There is rarely if ever any choice."* The number of placements with independent agencies (19) is also relatively high.

The Service Manager said the authority is undertaking an improvement programme to recruit more carers and reduce the numbers of children in out-of area placements.

However the practices and systems around placements with family and friends needs review. The culture of the authority appears to have historically been one of a relatively low threshold of risk resulting in the bringing of children into

the care system too easily, with relatively little attempt to prevent admission or divert families to other support services. The view is held that sometimes children are placed too soon and perhaps inappropriately with family and friends. This is countered by the fact that placement choice is low and there is therefore nowhere else to place children. Once children are in placement it becomes more difficult and demanding on time and resources to move them to alternative placements better suited to meeting their needs, even if they were available.

There was a feeling expressed by staff that they can be heavily directed by the Court for care planning issues, and the workload is not under the control of the Department. Staff feel that the authority's legal services and its own court liaison offices have an important role in informing the court about the practicalities and implications of its decisions.

The authority is aware of the issue and is developing strategies to deal with the problem. Changes will however take time to take effect. In the meantime the authority could review the way in which placements with family and friends are currently made. Systems could be introduced to ensure that the fostering service is notified of every placement made with family and friends.

Supervising social workers could make contact with families to offer advice and support, including information about payments. Joint viability assessments could be undertaken between the fostering team and placing social workers to provide an initial view about the suitability of the placement to meet the immediate and longer term needs of the children. The use of family group conferences, as research indicates, provides alternatives to foster placements and enable children to be returned to their families.

# SCORING OF OUTCOMES

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Are there any outstanding requirements from the last inspection?

### **STATUTORY REQUIREMENTS**

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

No.	Standard	Regulation	Requirement	Timescale for action
1.	FS12	17(3)	The manager must ensure that foster carers are provided with all information to enable them to provide appropriate care to children placed.	28/02/07
2.	FS12	15(2)(b)	The manager must ensure that consents to medical treatment are obtained and clearly understood by all those responsible for the care of a child.	28/02/07
3.	FS9	27 Schedule 3	The manager must ensure that CRB checks are obtained on all adults living in a carer's household.	28/02/07
4.	FS8	34(3) Schedule 6	The manager must ensure that all placements have written agreements with the foster carer covering all the matters in this schedule.	28/02/07
5.	FS22	33	The manager must ensure that all placements have at least one unannounced visit a year.	28/02/07

## RECOMMENDATIONS

These recommendations relate to National Minimum Standards and are seen as good practice for the Registered Provider/s to consider carrying out.

No.	Refer to Standard	Good Practice Recommendations
1.	FS9	The manager could ensure that children's risk assessments are updated to reflect the impact of new information on their care.
2.	FS8	The manager could ensure that reference to foster carers not taking children without all the relevant information is contained in the Foster Care Agreement.
3.	FS30	The manager could ensure that the role of "Panel Gatekeeper" is clarified to provide effective monitoring of the information presented to Panel.
4.	FS30	The manager could review the quality assurance function of the fostering panel to ensure it is systematic, robust and effective.
5.	FS29	The manager review could the payment of initial clothing grants to ensure it is clearly understood by carers.
6.	FS16	The manager could review the management structure for the fostering service.
7.	FS19	The manager could ensure that all staff undertaking carers' assessments and supervision receive appropriate training.
8.	FS21	The manager could produce a form recording all visits to foster carers to be held on carers' files.
9.	FS21	The manager could ensure that a written annual report is produced by the foster carers' Independent Reviewing Officer.
10.	FS23	The manager could ensure that one member of staff is responsible for the organisation and development of foster care training.
11.	FS22	The manager could ensure that the system of out of hours support provided by supervising social workers is clear and consistently applied.
12.	FS25	The manager could review the system for holding and storing information on children.
13.	FS25	The manager could review the format of carers' records to ensure they are up to date working tools and are effectively monitored.
14.	FS32	The manager could review the systems for approving and supporting family and friends carers.

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