



Champions for
Social Care
Improvement

inspection report

Fostering Services

Buckinghamshire County Council Fostering service

Buckinghamshire County Council

Walton Street

AYLESBURY

Bucks

HP20 1YU

16th - 27 February 2004

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

Local Authority Manager

Carol Atkins

Tel No:

01296 387925

Address

Buckinghamshire County Council, Walton Street,
AYLESBURY, Bucks

Fax No:

01296 382768

Email Address

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 ?

Date of last inspection

Date of Inspection Visit		16th February 2004	ID Code
Time of Inspection Visit		09:30 am	
Name of Inspector	1	Rob Smith	114335
Name of Inspector	2	Shelley MacDonald	
Name of Inspector	3		
Name of Inspector	4		
Name of Lay Assessor (if applicable) Lay assessors are members of the public independent of the NCSC. 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 - Service manager	

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Part B: Inspection Methods & Findings

(National Minimum Standards For Fostering Services)

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- 2. Fitness to carry on or manage a fostering service**
- 3. Management of the fostering service**
- 4. Securing and promoting welfare**
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INTRODUCTION TO REPORT AND INSPECTION

Independent and local authority fostering services which fall within the jurisdiction of the National Care Standards Commission (NCSC) 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 NCSC 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 NCSC 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 inspection was carried out on the fostering services of Buckinghamshire County Council. The fostering service, at the time of the inspection, supported over 140 placements, covering short-term and permanent fostering placements and respite care for children with disabilities. The service was subdivided into three core areas. The fostering team, based in Aylesbury, managed short to medium term placements; the permanency team, based In Amersham, managed the longer-term 'permanent' fostering placements, alongside its adoption work; and the Take a Break service, managed from the Wycombe area, oversaw the respite care services for children with disabilities.

The short term and permanency teams were overseen by one central service manager, whereas the management for Take a Break services rested within the separate children's disability services structure.

This was the first inspection of the service by the NCSC.

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.)

This was the first inspection of the fostering services of Buckinghamshire County Council under the National Minimum Standards.

The inspection did not identify any immediate concerns or risks to the welfare of placed young people and inspectors were generally impressed by the quality of the direct care offered by carers visited during the course of this inspection. This positive view was reflected in the feedback received from placed young people in interviews and via their questionnaires. The vast majority indicated they felt well cared for and supported in their placements. Other areas of strength included the support and attention given to children's health and educational needs and the quality of direct support and advice offered by fostering staff to their allocated carers. The fostering panel was well-organised and generally effective in its role.

However the inspection has identified many areas for action by the local authority if the expectations of the standards and associated regulations are to be met consistently. Before summarising those areas it is important to note that while the operation of the local authority's children's social work teams was not the focus of this inspection, inspectors could not overlook the impact of the acute shortages of social workers within these teams upon many areas of fostering services operation. This was the major area of concern raised by carers, young people and fostering staff during this inspection and the impact is highlighted where relevant in the body of the report. This area of the local authority's operation has been subject to recent inspection by the Social Services Inspectorate and will be subject to ongoing monitoring by that body and its successor the Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI).

On the structural management front the local authority needed to identify the person to take on the role of fostering manager and subsequently to consider the integration of Take a Break fostering service under the unified management of that identified person. Some minor adjustments to the statement of propose and children's information were required and the need for a tightening of processes and recording around the identification and management of potential risks and health and safety matters in placements was highlighted.

Practice on the drawing up and content of placement agreements needed considerable improvement and the service needed to ensure that appropriate information was consistently and promptly provided to carers when emergency placements were being made. Aspects of child protection policy guidance needed amendment and better recording of the management and outcome of allegations made against carers was required.

Medical and health care provision was generally good but greater clarity on the training expectations for carers undertaking invasive medical procedures was needed, as was

greater clarity on the expectations of carers in preparing older children for adulthood and independent living.

Some aspects of staff recruitment procedures and associated record-keeping needed tightening up and some CRB checks for existing staff were outstanding. While staffing levels were under pressure, for a variety of reasons, the overall staffing establishment appeared adequate with the exception of more time being needed for managers to carry out developmental tasks.

Staff morale was noted to be at a low level in some of the teams as a result of organisational change, office moves and a sense of being undervalued within the department as a whole. While carers were generally very positive about the direct support offered by fostering staff a number commented on the feeling of being undervalued and poorly treated by the local authority and they were particularly critical of the quality of information and support offered by children's social work teams.

Urgent attention needed to be paid to ensuring the regularity of foster household reviews and also ensuring up to date, accurate foster carer agreements were in place for all approved carers. The outstanding work on the foster carer handbook also needed to be completed as a matter of urgency along with an improvement in general communication with, and distribution of information to, carers.

Outstanding work on the finalisation of a number of central records and registers needed completion and significant improvement in the quality of foster carer file records was required.

Overall inspectors were of the view that the local authority had been slow to fully recognise and respond to the expectations of the National Minimum Standards and associated regulations, which came into force in April 2002. So while it is not unusual to find some areas of shortfall at a first full inspection, the scale of the shortfalls noted on this occasion were considerable, and will require a significant effort on the part of the local authority to bring standards across the board up to the required level. Inspectors will certainly expect to see a significant level of improvement at the next inspection in a year's time.

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?

NA

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	

Action is being taken by the National Care Standards Commission 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		

Condition	Compliance	
Comments		

Lead Inspector	Rob Smith	Signature	
Second Inspector		Signature	
Locality Manager	Clive Wooldridge	Signature	
Date			

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 and recommendations 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	3.1	FS1	That the fostering service revises the statement of purpose to include all the information noted as outstanding in the body of this report.	30/08/04
2	3.3	FS1	That the fostering service finalises and distributes the information leaflets for fostered children taking into account inspectors' observations made in the body of this report.	30/09/04
3	10	FS2	That the fostering service identifies the person to take on the responsibility of the post of fostering manager, taking into account inspectors' observations in the body of this report.	31/05/04
4	34(3) & Schedule 6(1)(d)	FS6	That where consideration is being given to bedroom sharing arrangements and specific risks are identified that formal recorded risk assessments are carried out.	27/02/04 Immediate and ongoing
5	17(1)	FS6	That the fostering service finalises and distributes guidance for carers on health and safety matters.	30/09/04

6	34(3)	FS8	That the fostering service ensures that appropriately detailed placement agreements are drawn up for all placements made.	27/02/04 Immediate and ongoing
7	12	FS9	That the fostering service puts in place child protection policy and guidance more targeted at the needs of foster carers, covering all the areas outlined under Regulation 12.	30/08/04
8	34(3) & Schedule 6(1)(d)	FS9	That the fostering service ensure that where specific guidelines or strategies relating to child protection issues are proposed in respect of individual foster placements that these are formally recorded and agreed as part of placement planning processes.	27/02/04 Immediate and ongoing
9	12	FS9	That the fostering service puts in place a system for central recording and monitoring of the incidence and outcome of any allegations made against foster carers in line with the expectations of standard 9.5.	30/06/04
10	17(1)	FS14	That the fostering service puts in place clear policy and guidance for carers on expectations in relation to preparing older children for independence and adulthood.	30/08/04
11	20(1)	FS15	That the fostering service ensures that all the information required by Schedule 1 in respect of all staff appointments is consistently obtained and evidence of the satisfactory completion of all recruitment checks is maintained on staff personnel files.	27/02/04 Immediate and ongoing
12	20(1)	FS15	That the fostering service ensures as a matter of urgency that, where required, a CRB check is carried out on all existing staff who have not yet had one.	27/02/04 Immediate
13	19	FS17	That the fostering service ensures there is adequate scope within management staffing structures and responsibilities for ongoing developmental work to be carried out.	30/06/04

14	29(2)	FS21	That the fostering service ensures all household reviews take place at the required minimum annual intervals and that written notice of decisions made subsequent to such reviews is consistently provided to carers and a copy maintained on carers' files.	27/02/04 Immediate and ongoing
15	28(5)(b)	FS22	That the fostering service ensures that accurate and up to date foster carer agreements are put in place for all approved carers.	27/02/04 Immediate and ongoing
16	17(1)	FS22	That the fostering service ensures that the revision of the foster carer handbook is completed as a matter of urgency and distributed to all approved carers.	30/12/04
17	17(3)	FS24	That the fostering service ensures foster carers are promptly provided with all key information needed to care for placed children appropriately.	27/02/04 Immediate and ongoing
18	31 & 22 & Schedule 2	FS25	That the fostering service finalises the work on the foster carer and children's registers required by regulations and puts in place a system for central recording of all serious accidents occurring to children while in placement.	30/08/04
19	30(1)	FS25	That the fostering service improves the overall quality of case records for carers and specifically ensures that they include all the information required by regulation.	27/02/04 Immediate and ongoing

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
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1	FS2	That the fostering service considers the integration of the management of the Take a Break fostering service under an operational level fostering manager
2	FS4	That the fostering service ensures more consistent monitoring of practice standards is put in place in line with the expectations of Regulation 42 and Schedule 7
3	FS4	That the fostering service makes clear to carers the need to declare any potential conflicts of interest.
4	FS4	That the fostering service puts in place a system for notification of significant events in line with the expectations of Regulation 43 and Schedule 8
5	FS6	That the fostering service ensures that better attention is paid to consideration and recording of health and safety matters in household review reports and in ongoing visits by fostering staff to foster carer households.
6	FS7	That the fostering service consolidates its various support structures for transracially placed children into a written strategy and guidance package for staff and carers
7	FS7	That a more rigorous exploration of diversity and anti-discriminatory practice is undertaken in the drawing up of approval and household review reports and in any subsequent consideration of those reports by managers or the panel.
8	FS9	That the fostering service ensures child protection training forms an ongoing part of the training expectations for all approved carers.
9	FS9	That the fostering service revises the guidance for carers on bullying to address issue of bullying within the fostering setting itself.
10	FS10	That the fostering service takes account of the concerns expressed by carers regarding the making of contact arrangements and puts in place clearer guidance for carers on expectations and processes in this area of practice.
11	FS11	That the fostering service considers establishing a consultative forum for children in foster care and that more attention is paid to eliciting the views of placed children as part of the household review process.
12	FS18	That the fostering service extends formal 'whistle blowing' policies and guidance to include foster carers.
13	FS19	That the fostering service continues to ensure staff and carers are made aware of the expectations of the National Minimum Standards and have ready access to copies if required.

14	FS20	That the fostering service ensures clearer links are made between decisions made in staff supervision and records maintained in carer files.
15	FS21	That the fostering service continues to explore ways of formally recognising and valuing the work carried out by its carers and that consideration is given to ways of stimulating and supporting informal carer support networks.
16	FS22	That the fostering service reviews its systems for communication and dissemination of information to carers.
17	FS22	That the fostering service makes clear in information provide to carers the various supports available should they be subject to allegations and investigation.
18	FS23	That the fostering service considers including the development of Take a Break training strategies within the overall brief of the training co-ordinator post.
19	FS24	That the local authority pays urgent attention to improving the quality and consistency of children's case files.
20	FS24	That the fostering service ensures foster carers keep separate individual records for children placed with them.
21	FS25	That the fostering service maintains clearer records on carers' files of the investigation and outcome of any welfare concerns.
22	FS29	That the fostering service considers the concerns raised by foster carers about household insurance costs.
23	FS30	That the fostering service makes clear in its statement of purpose the differing routes for assessment and approval of shorter-term and 'permanent' fostering placements.
24	FS30	That the fostering service looks to more fully develop the quality assurance role of the fostering panel in line with the expectations of standard 30.
25	FS32	That the local authority reviews the effectiveness of its approach to the identification, monitoring and approval of placements made under Regulation 38.

* 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	15
Survey of placing authorities	NO
Foster carer survey	YES
Foster children survey	YES
Checks with other organisations and Individuals	YES
• Directors of Social services	YES
• Child protection officer	YES
• Specialist advisor (s)	NO
• Local Foster Care Association	YES
Tracking Individual welfare arrangements	YES
• Interview with children	YES
• Interview with foster carers	YES
• Interview with agency staff	YES
• Contact with parents	YES
• 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	NO
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	NO
Date of Inspection	16/02/04
Time of Inspection	10.00
Duration Of Inspection (hrs)	100

The following pages summarise the key findings and evidence from this inspection, together with the NCSC 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 statement of purpose was a generally satisfactory document outlining the key aspects of the range and type of services provided, however there were a number of areas where greater clarity and detail were needed.

The number of established posts for staff in the fostering service needed to be noted, rather than those actually in post at the time of the statement being drawn up. Some of the terminology for aspects of the service, e.g. 'the task centred team', was now inaccurate and the statement also did not clearly indicate formal approval by the relevant Council members. Inspectors also advised the insertion of a brief section outlining the regulatory role of the NCSC (CSCI as will be) in relation to the service and contact details.

The information provided for children placed within the fostering service drew, in part, upon more general information for children in the looked after system of the local authority. This information, including an interactive CD ROM, was of a good accessible standard. The more specific information relating to the fostering service was still in early draft form and, while covering the key areas of information, the two age-targeted leaflets were not attractively presented or child friendly in tone. The draft leaflets also made reference to access to 'independent visitors' rather than to the established system of independent advocacy within the local authority and there was no specific reference to how to access complaints procedures

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?
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The situation with regard to the fostering manager position was subject to much discussion at the time of this inspection. The person previously nominated by the local authority was about to leave for another post, and was in fact on sick leave at the time of the inspection. Inspectors were also concerned that the level at which the nominated manager sat within the local authority management structure was too senior to exercise the level of day-to-day control and monitoring expected of the role of fostering manager. The situation was exacerbated by the separate management structure for the authority's Take a Break respite fostering services for children with disabilities, which only converged managerially with that for mainstream fostering at these senior management levels. This led to the potential for divergence in development and practice expectations between the mainstream and Take a Break services, which was already evidenced by some of the findings of this inspection.

In the light of the above observations inspectors strongly advised the local authority to reconsider the allocation of the responsibility for the fostering manager role to a more hands-on management tier, and to include the management of Take a Break fostering functions. Given that this would require some significant reallocation of management responsibilities NCSC is prepared to allow a reasonable period for consideration of the suggested changes and to allow for the person now assuming the responsibilities of previously nominated fostering manager to carry those responsibilities in the meantime. This situation will be followed up by NCSC subsequent to the inspection.

It should be noted that on a day to day basis each of the three main areas of fostering operation were directly managed by team managers, appropriately supported by existing line management structures. Staff in those management roles were appropriately qualified and experienced in fostering work. The previously nominated fostering manager was also appropriately qualified and experienced, though lacked relevant management qualification. Once clarity over the role of fostering manager has been established within the local authority the NCSC will re-confirm that that person nominated meets the expectations of the relevant regulations and standards.

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?

2

This inspection did not identify any concerns about the overall suitability of the persons carrying on the fostering service on behalf of the local authority. However aspects of the record keeping in relation to employment checks, references etc for **all** staff, including those carrying on the service, did need improvement to fully meet the expectations of this and subsequent general staff recruitment standards. For example telephone follow up on references (Standard 3.2) was not a standard part of recruitment procedures. This is dealt with in more detail under standard 15.

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

Inspectors saw evidence of various appropriate quality control and monitoring systems being used, both specifically in respect of fostering operations, and more generally for children's services within the County Council. For example the fostering panel had a clear role in practice monitoring, regular supervision of fostering staff was taking place and the work of the Quality Protects health nurses and Education of Children in the Public Care (ECPC) team ensured regular monitoring of work in these key areas.

Inspectors were nonetheless concerned that evident deficiencies and inconsistencies in areas of practice detailed later in this report (for example in relation to the regularity of household reviews, the variable quality of record-keeping and the inconsistent use of foster carer agreements) had not been picked up by existing monitoring processes. Inspectors advised, as a matter of good practice, that the local authority considers instituting the range of practice monitoring and care quality reviewing outlined in Regulation 42 and the related Schedule 7, to which independent fostering agencies have to adhere.

Appropriate financial and audit processes were in place as part of overall local authority systems and procedures. The fostering service did not currently offer, and therefore charge, for services provided to other placing authorities. Foster carers were not currently advised of the need to declare potential conflicts of interest in line with standard 4.5.

Inspectors also advised that, as a matter of good practice, the local authority should conform to the requirements placed upon independent fostering agencies by Regulation 43, and the related Schedule 8, for notifications of certain events to specified agencies, including the NCSC.

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

0

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.

0

Initiation of child protection enquiry involving a child.

0

Buckinghamshire County Council Fostering service

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Number of complaints made to NCSC about the agency in the past 12 months:	0
Number of the above complaints which were substantiated:	0

Standard 5 (5.1 - 5.4)		
The fostering service is managed effectively and efficiently.		
Key Findings and Evidence	Standard met?	2
<p>Within the constraints imposed by the lack of clarity about the role of fostering manager noted earlier, there were clear management structures and lines of accountability in place for each of three core fostering operations run by the local authority. The relatively new service manager covering the mainstream fostering and permanency teams was also noted to be working hard to improve management oversight and scrutiny of practice. Relevant job descriptions were in place and decision-making responsibilities in the absence of front-line managers were clearly understood by staff spoken with.</p> <p>Clearly, following any changes in the position of the fostering manager, job descriptions and management responsibilities will need to be revised, especially in relation to Take a Break services.</p> <p>The local authority did identify an anomaly in the management of its fostering services, whereby responsibility for managing one set of carers recruited specifically to provide a service for the Outreach service had remained largely within that service. Inspectors supported the intention to relocate responsibility for these carers within the mainstream fostering service.</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?	2
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In general inspectors felt that foster carers were providing safe and healthy environments for placed children, judging by the sample of households visited during this inspection. With one exception, relating to bedroom sharing arrangements, no concerns were highlighted during these visits by either inspectors or placed young people. The one exception was discussed with managers for appropriate action to be taken.

Initial carer assessments and subsequent household reviews addressed physical standards and issues of safety in foster homes, but the level of detail on review reports was often limited. More detailed, standardised health and safety checklists were being introduced as part of reviews across all areas of the fostering operation and this should address the shortfall. More attention also needed to be paid to regular recorded comment, both in reviews and in the course of family placement worker visits, on the state, satisfactory or otherwise, of bedroom arrangements for young people.

Additionally, while discussion with staff and carers supported the view that due consideration was given to issues of safety and risk when bedroom sharing arrangements were being considered, there was little evidence on carer and child files of formal written risk assessments being undertaken. Where potential risks are identified they, and the steps taken to address them, should be clearly and formally assessed as part of the placement planning process.

The service needed to finalise its health and safety guidance for carers for inclusion in the revised foster carer handbook and ensure that health and safety issues formed part of the ongoing training schedule for carers both in mainstream and Take a Break settings. Particular attention needed to be paid to ensuring manual handling and lifting issues were appropriately covered for carers working with children needing a significant level of physical assistance.

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 local authority was aware of a significant shortfall in the provision of carers from minority ethnic backgrounds, making placement matching in terms of race and ethnicity difficult. Various initiatives were underway, or planned, to address this shortfall, including the recruitment of minority ethnic worker posts for the mainstream and Take a Break fostering service to both stimulate carer recruitment from minority communities and to explore what service provision might be most appropriate to meet the needs of those communities.

This was essentially a longer-term strategy but inspectors were also made aware of specific initiatives to support current transracial placements of minority ethnic children. These included access to advice from specialist agencies, support from existing black and minority ethnic carers and the development of an information resource within the fostering service. Inspectors felt that the various initiatives would benefit from being drawn into a coherent written strategy and well-publicised support package that all staff and carers could draw upon as required, as some carers indicated they often did not know where to go to access advice and guidance on caring for transracially placed children. Mention was also made of a mentoring scheme for black and minority ethnic children in the looked after system, however, although this was a good idea that inspectors would support, it had yet to materialise into a definite support system.

Diversity awareness formed part of carer pre-approval training and assessment and some additional specific post-approval training in this area had been provided, although, in common with much of the training, take-up had been low. The local authority will need to ensure that training in this area plays a central role in ongoing training strategies for carers.

With regard to disability issues the Take a Break service focused primarily on this area of need and parents who contacted inspectors were very positive about the way it offered increased life opportunities to disabled children. Take a Break carers were provided with the necessary equipment to care appropriately for the children placed with them. The mainstream fostering service however lacked resources to offer placements for children with disabilities. This again was a shortfall recognised by the team managers concerned.

The ability of carers to provide appropriately sensitive and non-discriminatory care placements was monitored through the approval process and subsequent household reviews, although inspectors would concur with the views of some staff that exploration of these areas in approval and review reports, and in panel discussion, would benefit from more detail and evidencing.

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

The local authority faced an overall shortage of foster placements, with a more acute shortfall in relation to teenage placements, as well as the lack of diversity noted in the previous standard. In this context choice and ideal matching was often difficult to achieve for shorter-term or emergency placements, although a drop (possibly temporary) in demand for under 10s placements had led to a greater degree of placement choice for this group at the time of the inspection. Inspectors did feel however, that in placing children short term, due consideration was paid to carers' approval terms and that minimal use was made of exemptions in respect of either number or age. Longer-term exemptions were appropriately overseen by the fostering panel.

The general position on the use of placement agreements was of concern. The local authority made use in mainstream settings of the standard LAC documents, PP1 and PP2, to fulfil this statutory expectation, although it should be noted that these in fact now make reference to superceded fostering regulations. More concerningly inspectors found that use of these documents was patchy and there was scant evidence of them on either carers' and children's files. Where the documents did exist they were often incomplete or vague about the detail of expectations placed upon carers. They also did not clearly identify elements of matching and mismatching considered in the placement decision-making process as expected under standard 8.4. A much more consistent and detailed approach to the use of these key agreements is needed.

For longer-term and permanent placements good consideration was given to matching considerations, as evidenced by matching reports seen on a number of files. In these situations periods of introduction were usually arranged to allow children themselves a greater element of consideration and choice in placement.

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

Inspectors judged that overall reasonable attention was paid to the safety and welfare of children in foster placements and that appropriate systems were in place to identify and respond to any emerging concerns.

There was a range of departmental policies and guidance in place on child protection, although these tended towards generic child protection procedures and advice, rather than focusing on the specifics of fostering settings. Consequently inspectors felt that some further work on child protection guidance and procedure was needed to bring it fully into line with the expectations of Regulation 12. This should include clear unambiguous guidance for carers on what immediate steps to take if they became aware of abuse concerns.

Clear policy and guidance was in place for carers on safe and appropriate disciplinary measures although, due to the delay in production of an up to date handbook, inspectors were not reassured that all carers always received up to date copies of such policies and guidance. Carers were also provided with the useful 'Safe Caring' booklet produced by the Fostering Network. Feedback from children via questionnaires and interviews did not raise any concerns about how behaviour was being managed in foster homes.

At a more specific individual placement level inspectors came across little evidence of written risk assessments or behaviour management strategies where it was acknowledged that children's behaviours, past experiences or vulnerabilities might present particular areas of risk. For example where children with a known background of abusive experiences were placed in a bedroom sharing arrangement. Feedback from carers was that these areas of concern were usually discussed but rarely formulated into clear written guidelines and expectations. Such matters should be dealt with more comprehensively as part of the process of drawing up placement agreements and associated planning.

A range of child protection and safe caring advice had been made available to carers as part of pre and post approval training. The service will need however to ensure that as part of the new training schedules regular updates on child protection matters and responses to allegations is included and that these are regarded as mandatory training modules for all approved carers in both mainstream and Take a Break services.

There was one longstanding concern about child abuse allegations in one foster care setting that was in the court process at the time of this inspection. No other recent serious concerns or allegations had arisen. The service was advised that a management system for central recording and monitoring of any allegations relating to foster care settings was needed to comply with the expectations of standard 9.5.

Guidance on management of bullying was provided for carers, although this focused primarily on settings outside of the foster home. This needed reworking to address, in addition, the consideration of bullying within the foster care setting itself. Due to the low number of foster child questionnaires returned it was not possible to provide an accurate percentage return on the numbers not reporting any significant experience of bullying. None of the children who did respond, or that inspectors talked to, raised any worries of this nature.

Guidance had been produced for carers on the safe management of any unauthorised absences however this had been produced some time ago, as part of the original carers' handbook and in common with other information materials for carers it was unclear how widely it had been distributed. This guidance will need to be included in the planned revision of the handbook.

Percentage of foster children placed who report never or hardly ever being bullied:	X	%
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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

Inspectors came across evidence of good support being provided by carers for children's continuing contact with family and significant others. There were a number of good examples of carers carrying out direct skilled work in helping parents and children establish more productive relationships. Children's questionnaires and direct feedback confirmed the help given by carers in this area.

Carers did however raise a number of concerns about some practical aspects of contact arrangements. A number were concerned that names and addresses of placements were, as a matter of course, provided to birth families at the point of placement where children were accommodated, rather than subject to care or protection orders. While the principle of this provision of information was understood by carers, they felt that due consideration was not being paid to the potential risks to carers by revealing their addresses, especially where there might be known concerns about parental or family behaviour. Again this would appear to be a matter that needs clarification and discussion at the point of placement planning. Carers were also concerned about the lack of adequate and timely liaison from placing social workers about changes to contact arrangements.

A guidance document on contact issues was seen by inspectors but this was very oriented towards formal supervised contact in a family centre type setting and was not directly relevant to the sort of ongoing contact managed by foster carers. More appropriate guidance needed putting in place, as part of the carer handbook, to help in part address some of the above problems.

One young person did raise concerns with inspectors about contact plans and this was passed back to the local authority for further action.

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?**

2

Feedback received from children through discussions and questionnaires was that they felt their views were sought and respected by their carers. Children made reference in this respect to both day-to-day living arrangements and more significant consultation over planning for the future. Carers supported children's attendance at and/or contribution to statutory reviews.

The local authority did not have a consultative forum for receiving feedback from fostered children either separately or as part of the more general looked after child population. Inspectors also noted the comparative lack of feedback received from placed children as part of household reviews of carers.

Children were provided with a range of information on who to contact outside of their foster

setting if they had concerns or worries. As noted earlier, contact details for the NCSC needed to be added to this information.

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

Inspectors were impressed with the overall arrangements for promotion of the health of fostered children. Foster carers were generally well informed about health care needs, although some concerns were raised about the lack of adequate basic health and medical information provided following emergency placements.

There was an excellent level of support, advice and monitoring provided by the specialist Looked After Children (LAC) nurse service. A useful and accessible set of guidance on children's sexual health and development had been drawn up by these nurses, along with a 'health fax' booklet for looked after children to keep details of key personal medical and health information. The nurse service also provided advice on access to specialist health resources. Monitoring of children's health and development was also carried out via the statutory review system.

There was some confusion about the provision of training and support for carers potentially carrying out invasive procedures, especially those in the Take a Break service. Two carers, for example, made reference to having been 'trained' in the past in procedures by the parents of the placed children. The fostering service must ensure that any such training is provided by appropriately qualified health professionals and that permission for any invasive procedures to be carried out by carers is obtained from children's GPs, or consultants, and incorporated into agreed care plans signed by all relevant parties, including parents and placing social workers. Subsequent to the completion of the inspection, the local authority confirmed this was now current practice.

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

Again inspectors saw evidence of good support being provided by carers and the fostering service for children's educational achievement. A key role was played by the Education of Children in Public Care (ECPC) team. This team was alerted to new children entering the looked after system and provided support and advice for children and carers in accessing appropriate educational resources and supporting existing fragile school placements.

Children inspectors talked to were positive about the direct help and encouragement given by their carers to achieve educationally. As part of a special scheme a number of carers had also been provided with computers by the local authority to help children's schoolwork.

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?**

2

While inspectors came across a number of individual examples of good work being carried out by carers to help and support children towards adulthood and independent living, the fostering service lacked an overall framework of expectations and guidance in this area of practice.

The local authority outlined intentions to carry out joint work between foster carers and the Leaving Care team to clarify roles and expectations in working with children preparing to leave the care system. This is clearly needed, given the particular criticisms some carers had about the quality of their liaison with this team. Subsequent to that work the fostering service needs to ensure that appropriate and clear expectations are then included in guidance for foster carers working with this older age group.

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? 2

Overall recruitment processes were sound and covered in extensive recruitment procedure guidance. There were however some improvements in process and record-keeping needed to accord fully with the expectations of Schedule 1 of the Regulations. Staff files looked at for staff appointed since the introduction of the relevant regulations did not contain photographic identification, and evidencing of satisfactory CRB checks was inconsistent. There also did not appear to be any process for obtaining telephone confirmation of references.

Subsequent to the inspection it was also discovered that a small number of existing fostering staff had still not obtained CRB clearance. This must be addressed as a matter of urgency by the local authority.

The staff employed were appropriately experienced and qualified and had access to a range of relevant, ongoing training opportunities. It should also be noted that in comparison to other areas of social services operations the stability and low staff turnover in the fostering team was commendable.

Approvals and assessment work was only carried out by qualified workers with relevant experience. Some ongoing support of established carers had been carried out by unqualified social work assistants. In one case looked at it appeared that insufficient support and guidance had been given to the worker concerned, although a formal supervision arrangement with a qualified staff member was in place.

Total number of staff of the agency:

46

Number of staff who have left the agency in the past 12 months:

3

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

Aside from the issue of the fostering manager post and the position of the Take a Break service the overall management structure of the fostering service appeared satisfactory, with managers in place for each of the main fostering operations. The two mainstream services were under the line management of one service manager who also covered a range of other placement service responsibilities. Over the past year recentralisation of fostering and permanency workers into single, centrally located teams had taken place and some settling down and adjustment to new locations and structures was still evident.

It was positive to note the recent introduction of the manager post for the Take a Break service, which had led to a more appropriate separation of its line management from referring disability fieldwork teams. Each of the immediate team managers was appropriately experienced and qualified and had an understanding of their roles and responsibilities. As already noted inspectors would still strongly advise the integration of Take a Break services under the direct management of an operational fostering manager post.

Staff were appropriately supported through established supervision and appraisal systems and had access to relevant legal and specialist advice as and when required.

There was evidence of day-to-day pragmatic prioritisation of work by the team and service managers, although the service lacked a formal system of workload management and prioritisation. Unsatisfactory delays in progressing applications and assessment processes had been identified by the local authority and the intention was now to identify a specified worker to 'fast track' this aspect of work, which is endorsed by inspectors. Inspectors also noted the positive work undertaken by the service's recruitment officer in not only encouraging new fostering applications, but also providing good levels of informal support to existing carers and promoting their interests. The brief of this post was under review as the workload had grown to potentially unmanageable levels.

The quality of administrative support appeared generally satisfactory and only a few concerns were raised by staff about the overall level available. Support for panel functions was particularly good and efficient. Inspectors did not feel therefore there was evidence to suggest an overall inadequacy in administrative support systems, but this is clearly an area the local authority will need to keep under review, especially in the light of increasing delegation of numerous staff and finance related tasks to team levels, with the introduction of the new county-wide Sapphire information management system.

In the mainstream service staff, carers and children had a clear understanding of the distinct roles of family placement and children's social worker roles, although the severe shortages in the latter teams had led to inevitable blurring of roles as family placement staff had attempted to cover gaps caused by those shortages. Within the Take a Break service, until very recently, the same staff had supported carers and the children in placement. It was reassuring to note that this inappropriate arrangement was now almost at an end with Take a Break family placement staff limiting their role purely to that of carer support.

It is pertinent to note here the distinct level of frontline staff dissatisfaction and low morale,

found most notably in the mainstream fostering teams. A number of staff expressed concern at feeling under-valued, being poorly consulted over reorganisation and office relocation issues and being distanced from senior management decision making considerations. From an inspection perspective it was difficult to judge the accuracy of those perceptions but the end result, of which the local authority does need to be aware, was clearly an increasingly disillusioned work force.

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 adequacy of fostering service staffing levels was difficult to judge accurately. The low numbers of children’s social workers had clearly impacted on the work of family placement staff, as they had attempted to deal with issues arising from those shortages; additional work which was certainly recognised and appreciated by carers themselves. There were also a number of staff vacancies on both the fostering and permanency teams, which were adding to current pressure on the staff teams, as reflected in comments made by a number of staff in these teams. There was also an absence of a formal workload management system, which might highlight any developing concerns about the adequacy of staffing levels. Carers who submitted questionnaires consistently highlighted the lack of staff, but this appeared related to the absence of children’s social workers, rather than staff in the fostering service itself.

Clearly the local authority was committed to filling the existing vacant posts, a number of additional minority ethnic worker posts were also in the process of recruitment for both mainstream and Take a Break services and a training co-ordinator post had been recently established and filled. In this context inspectors felt there was no clear evidence of significant levels of understaffing at front line worker levels, but this will naturally continue to be a focus of subsequent inspections.

There was however an evident lack of time and/or staff resources to carry out development work in a considered and planned manner. Inspectors received regular comment from team managers that day-to-day operational priorities had resulted in delays in addressing many of the practice development shortfalls noted in this report. The delays in production of a revised carer handbook were quoted as a prime example. The local authority needs to ensure that there is scope for managers, or other identified senior staff, to undertake service development work. Mention was made of the possible introduction of a senior practitioner level within the mainstream teams to share the managerial and supervisory load of team managers. This would appear to be a sensible approach to tackling the problem that inspectors would fully support.

With regard to the adequacy of the number of carers, as already noted, the local authority recognised the need to increase their number and range to improve placement choice and matching, and this was planned to be a particular focus of work for the recruitment officer

and the intended additional minority ethnic staff.

Assessment processes for mainstream carers were seen to be thorough and well presented in reports to panel. The established BAAF assessment framework was being used and competency based assessments were now being more widely used as staff became more familiar with this form of assessment.

A less detailed assessment process was being used for Take a Break carers, although this still did cover key areas of competency for the intended role. Managers indicated work on developing a better targeted assessment framework was underway in conjunction with the Shared Care Network. This will be followed up in subsequent inspections.

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

Inspectors judged that the local authority was largely competent in its general employment and staff and carer support practices. Appropriate management and support structures were in place for staff and for carers both during office and out of hours periods. Staff were covered by a comprehensive range of health and safety procedure and guidance, although this was an area that needed development with regard to carers, as already noted.

A whistle blowing policy was in place for staff although expectations in this area did not appear to be made explicit to 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?

2

There were appropriate structures in place for the development of staff, covering induction, probation and post probation progression. These processes were fed by an established structure of regular staff supervision and appraisal. Team managers were responsible for the direct supervision of all their team members. This took a considerable portion of their time and, as already noted, consideration could usefully be given to the introduction of a senior practitioner role to share this area of responsibility and release team managers' time for more developmental considerations.

There were appropriate opportunities for further professional development and post-qualifying training which a number of staff had taken up. Inspectors did note however a variable awareness of, and familiarity with, the National Minimum standards amongst fostering staff. Although it was evident that past workshops had been held on the standards managers need to ensure that staff continue to be fully aware of the expectations of the standards and have ready access to copies for reference. A similar lack of familiarity was noted in discussions with carers.

Standard 20 (20.1 - 20.5)

All staff are properly accountable and supported.

Key Findings and Evidence

Standard met?

2

Staff spoken to were clear about their respective responsibilities and lines of accountability and all had written job descriptions. Appropriate supervision and appraisal systems were in place as confirmed by a sample of supervision records looked at. Inspectors did note however, on the basis of feedback from staff and team managers, that the link between decisions made in staff supervision and records made on individual carer files needed attention. The use of the specific management decision sheets, outlined in recording procedures, was inconsistent.

Regular team meetings were held in the different teams which staff could freely attend.

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?****2**

The fostering service had put in place a number of key supports for foster carers. Carers were very positive about the immediate support received from their allocated family placement officers and via other systems, such as the fostering duty service and out of hours emergency duty team. There was a good level of formal and more ongoing contact between fostering staff and the carers they were responsible for, although formal supervision was only belatedly being put in place; carers spoken with were noted to be largely positive about formal recorded supervision as a better way of recording and tracking decision-making processes.

Carers' major concern in terms of support, as already noted, was the shortage of children's social workers and the resultant difficulties, exacerbated by poor quality of basic communication and liaison with that service. In this context carers clearly expressed the view that family placement officers 'went the extra mile' to try to ensure any problems arising as a result were dealt with as quickly as possible.

Positive views were held by carers about the input of the ECPC and LAC nurse services and the Sons and Daughters scheme, designed to support foster households' own children. Carers were also provided with automatic membership of the Fostering Network as a source of independent information advice and support. Access to respite breaks for carers was currently quite limited, as was recognised by the service itself and managers indicated an intention to develop this aspect of support for carers.

The local authority also ran a Foster Carer Forum as a vehicle for foster carers to raise, through selected delegates, any areas of concern. Surprisingly, the minutes for this body had only recently started to be distributed to all carers, so awareness amongst carers of the potential role and importance of this body had yet to fully develop. A specific support group was being run by two fostering staff for carers working with teenage placements and was found to be very useful by those carers attending. A number of carers commented on the potential isolation of carers in a county so geographically 'spread out' and said they would welcome more support from the local authority in developing local informal support groups. Some of these had evidently already arisen by dint of personal contacts between carers.

At a more general level a number of carers commented on how they often felt undervalued by the department as a whole, and that their views were often not respected as key figures in the care and planning network for looked after children. In this context inspectors received a lot of positive comment from carers about the seemingly small gestures of the carers' awards evening, which had been arranged in the past year, and the giving of gift vouchers to carers last Christmas. These had been tangible, if small, steps on the part of the local authority which had been very positively received and would suggest that continuing attention to measures to formally celebrate and recognise the hard work put in by carers will pay dividends in terms of carer satisfaction and retention in an increasingly competitive market.

Inspectors were concerned about inconsistencies in the regularity of household reviews. While the system for arranging first annual reviews and for reviews considering a change of approval (which were both scrutinised by the fostering panel) were effective, the subsequent

pattern of reviews for established carers was, on occasion, slipping outside of the regular annual timescales. Inspectors saw three files where records indicated gaps of 17-18 months between reviews. A better system for management information on household reviews was needed to allow managers and panel to maintain more effective monitoring of this area of practice.

Inspectors also noted that the quality and depth of reporting and evidence in review reports varied considerably, and more consistent reference to achievement of competencies would provide a better picture of the grounds for the continuing appropriateness of foster household approval. The Take a Break review records were particularly light on detail and evidence and needed to be brought more into line with mainstream carer review expectations. Review reports also did not provide consistent detailed evidence of the views of placed children and carers' own children. The recording of formal decision-making subsequent to household reviews on carer files also needed attention, as, on a number of files, inspectors could not locate the formal written notice of decisions made, as required by Regulation 29(6). For Take a Break carers these decisions appeared to be contained within the record of the review meeting.

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? 1

Foster carers were supported, in the main, by allocated professionally qualified staff, although on some occasions social work assistants had been carrying out support tasks, as noted earlier in this report. The direct support offered by these staff was seen by carers as good. As noted under the previous standard formal recorded supervision with carers was only just getting underway. Unannounced visits to foster carer households were also just being introduced.

Inspectors were concerned about the inconsistencies noted in the recording and updating of foster carer agreements. While the revised format for the agreements covered the areas required by regulation, on a number of the files looked at during the inspection foster carer agreements were either not in place, or did not reflect the current approval, where this may have been changed from that originally granted. The problem was particularly evident for longer-term carers and the authority conceded that no formal agreements were in place for any Take a Break carers. These are key documents outlining the mutual undertakings and expectations of the fostering service and its carers and urgent attention needs to be paid to ensuring up to date and accurate agreements are in place for all current carers.

The provision of information to carers also needed urgent attention. The current foster carer handbook was outdated and although initial work had been put into production of a new version, this had stalled and was not yet near completion. Finalisation of this work, so that a comprehensive range of relevant information is available for both mainstream and Take a Break carers, should be a priority area of work. Fostering staff explained that, pending revision of the handbook, key new information and policy developments had been sent out to carers on an incremental basis. Systems for tracking and recording what ongoing information had been provided for individual carers were, however, not seen to be effective as, for example, the checksheet to monitor information provided was not being completed on

the carer files seen during the inspection.

Carers were also critical of the overall effectiveness of communication with them by the local authority. A number commented that sometimes information on key issues, policies and procedures, or about training and other events did not get out to everyone. The key example of the non-distribution of Fostering Forum minutes, which had now been addressed, was quoted.

Inspectors were assured that carers had been provided with information on complaints processes both for themselves and for the young people in their care and this was confirmed in carer and child interviews. Monitoring of complaints, their management and outcomes was handled effectively through the local authority's corporate complaints structure with clear feedback mechanisms in place to individual managers and, where appropriate, through the fostering panel structure.

Carers subject to allegations had access to general support and advice from the Fostering Network and managers explained that, if needed, more structured individual support would be arranged. One example of this being provided was discussed, but it was unclear how widely access to this additional level of support was known amongst carers. It would be useful for the various supports available to carers in such circumstances to be made explicit in, for example, the revised carer handbook.

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? 2

Pre-approval training for carers followed the established BAAF structure and covered an appropriate range of issues, including basic child protection and safe caring practice. With regard to post-approval training, although an appropriate range of training courses were highlighted in discussion with fostering staff and carers as having been made available in the past, there had been a lack of a clear overall training strategy. It was also evident that attendance at the courses was low and tended to include primarily the same core group of carers each time. On a positive note a number of carers had been supported in undertaking NVQ qualification by the local authority.

Carers views on training were generally that where they had attended training it had been useful but that the timing, location and delivery methods all needed reviewing if attendance and involvement by a wider range of carers was going to be achieved.

Inspectors were therefore pleased to note the recent appointment of a training co-ordinator for the mainstream fostering service, with a clear brief to provide a more coherent and structured approach to training provision and expectations. Discussion with this post holder indicated an intention to address areas that inspectors themselves had noted, including looking at ways of improving and broadening attendance, clarifying a mandatory core of courses for new and established carers, ensuring that where couples were approved as carers that a core of training was attended by both and exploring more flexible ways of training content delivery.

The training for Take a Break carers was not looked at in depth at this inspection but appeared more limited in comparison to that for mainstream carers, related in part to the less intensive role carried out by this set of carers. The same core issues identified in relation to improving mainstream carer training provision nonetheless apply and it will be important to ensure that an equally structured approach is applied to training strategies for Take a Break carers. In this context the local authority should consider whether the training co-ordinator brief could be extended to encompass Take a Break training, as there will be inevitable areas of overlap and commonality that would be better managed from a central standpoint.

Scrutiny of carer files showed that up to date training profiles were not being accurately maintained despite the provision of a recording format to do so. Therefore from both an inspection and operational management point of view it was difficult to establish a clear picture of training successfully completed and, correspondingly, any areas of outstanding need. Staff explained that ongoing discussions with carers and the processes of approval and household review were the primary mechanisms by which emerging training needs were identified, however inspectors saw little evidence of this information being pulled together in a coherent way that would aid strategic training development. The training co-ordinator confirmed that an audit of outstanding training need was planned as one of her priority early stage tasks.

While this report identifies a number of concerns about aspects of the training provision the appointment of the training co-ordinator is a positive step that should help address the structural and strategic concerns noted. In this context a limited number of requirements and recommendation have been made about training, but clearly significant progress will be anticipated by the time of the next inspection.

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? 1

The case records for the children placed with carers were maintained by the children's social work teams within the local authority. While, therefore, the responsibility for the maintenance of these records fell outside of the direct responsibility of the fostering service, the local authority's children's service as a whole needs to take account of the following concerns noted by inspectors.

The theoretical structure and content of children's files was appropriate but, in actual practice, the quality of these files was very patchy, as was evidenced by the local authority's own file audits on a number of the files seen. Many key aspects of the LAC documentation structure for looked after children were either absent or inconsistently completed, review minutes were often either absent or very delayed in going on file. Very few of the files seen contained current placement plans (PP1s and PP2s) and some on file had not been signed by carers accepting the placement. Getting a coherent picture of children's current needs and care history was often difficult, with the rare exception of those files where social work staff had completed regular summaries. On one file the recording of actions taken in response to potential child protection concerns was unsatisfactorily vague. These findings support the concerns about the quality of record-keeping expressed in the recent SSI report on children's service in the county.

Due to the poor quality of the files inspectors questioned how accessible or helpful any child would find their individual files in understanding or coming to terms with their experience of being looked after.

A number of carers had carried out good work with placed children in helping them to understand their past life experiences via, for example, life story books and training and support on carrying out this task was said to have been provided.

Carers were expected to keep records of significant events and incidents involving their placed children. Inspectors noted however that some carers were keeping a single 'log book' for all their placed children rather than one for each. Explicit guidance on carer record keeping expectations should be included in the revised handbook.

In questionnaire responses the majority of carers did not raise any concerns about the level

and quality of information received at the point of placement. However in interviews and other meetings carers carrying out short term and emergency placement work were very critical of the lack of initial basic information provided on children already known to the care system in the county or where new children were being looked after the failure to provide information within a reasonable period of time. One carer for example referred to an admission of a very young child where two weeks after placement she had still not had received the key Essential Information and Placement Plan parts of the LAC documentation system. This is again reflective of the severe problems caused by the lack of available children' social worker staff.

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? 1

The local authority was in the process of finalising its systems for production of the foster carer register to meet the expectations of Regulation 31. Existing systems were able to generate the majority of the information required but in separate unintegrated formats. The register of placed children, required by Schedule 2, was also not in a final form. All the required information was held on the Country's Swift client database system but a report format covering all required information had not yet been finalised.

Other central records were generally of an acceptable standard but attention needed to be paid to establishing a central system for recording of all accidents occurring to children in foster carer households.

As will be evident from comments elsewhere in this report there were significant weaknesses in the maintenance of satisfactory foster carer files. They did not consistently hold all the information required by Regulation 30; for example there were missing or out of date foster carer agreements, formal written notifications of approval by the service decision maker were not always on file, the list of children placed was rarely up to date. The file index used by the permanency team did not even have a section for carer agreements. In addition the authority's own recording-keeping structure required inclusion of current LAC documentation and placement plans for currently placed children – this was conspicuous by its regular absence. Various potentially useful forms and checklists were seen on carer files (for example covering training undertaken, information issued etc) but these were not being used consistently. Ironically the largest amount of information seen was often LAC information on children no longer placed with the carers in question – this old information should be routinely removed from files and routed back to the placing social work team.

Inspectors also advised clearer recording of any investigation of concerns re carers. One example was seen where details of concerns and the subsequent investigation and outcome were largely buried in chronological notes rather than being subject to a separate recording strand within the file.

Number of current foster placements supported by the agency:	141
Number of placements made by the agency in the last 12 months:	124
Number of placements made by the agency which ended in the past 12 months:	123
Number of new foster carers approved during the last 12 months:	26
Number of foster carers who left the agency during the last 12 months:	19
Current weekly payments to foster parents: Minimum £	108.99
Maximum £	268.59

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?

3

The offices currently used by the various fostering teams were located within larger County offices. The offices seen were appropriately equipped and secure. One smaller office in Buckingham was not seen during the inspection but the staff using it confirmed it was satisfactory.

The location of the fostering team offices in Aylesbury was about to be reallocated elsewhere within the same building, next to some of the children's social work teams. There are clearly good and justifiable reasons for such a move not least the potential improvement in liaison and communication. There was however considerable discontent amongst the team affected related to justifiable concerns about adequacy of space for desks storage etc. The local authority will need to ensure these legitimate concerns are taken into account in finalising the details of the move.

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?
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	9
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This standard is primarily applicable to independent fostering agencies and was therefore not assessed during this inspection. As a local authority service however the financial underpinning of the service was secure.

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?
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	9
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This standard is primarily applicable to independent fostering agencies and was therefore not assessed during this inspection. As a local authority service however the financial systems and procedures were subject to scrutiny as part of overall audit and financial management systems for local authorities.

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 overall system for payment of regular allowances was seen to be running effectively with few concerns raised by carers. Allowance rates were subject to annual review and updating and some adjustments had recently been made to bring the rates of long and short-term carers into line. Other positive changes had been made in the last year in relation to lump sum contributions to assist vehicle purchase and development of a fairer system for managing the financial implications for carers of loans from the local authority for building adaptations.

Carers did however raise concerns about excessive delays in getting reimbursement for one-off expenditure, for example for clothing for newly placed children. While good assistance was provided by finance department staff in trying to chase up these matters, again the lack of children's social workers to approve reimbursement had proved an obstacle. Managers indicated that the system for such payments would now be brought under direct fostering service control to address these problems.

Carers also raised concern about the current expectation that any claims for damage to their property or belongings should be routed through their own household insurance arrangements. This had resulted for some in significantly increased premiums and loss of 'no claims' bonuses. Inspectors felt this system was unfairly financially punitive on carers and needed review by the local authority.

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

Approvals and reviews of foster carers were routed through the main fostering panel or if placements for permanency were being considered through the permanency panel which also considered adoption approvals and placements. This reflected the allocation of fostering work between the fostering and permanency teams. While this division of responsibilities for differing types of fostering appeared well understood by the majority of staff clearer explanation in the service's statement of purpose would be of benefit. Observation of the fostering panel was included in this inspection. The permanency panel was not observed but its operation will be scrutinised in the NCSC inspection of adoption services within Buckinghamshire and in subsequent fostering service inspections.

The fostering panel was appropriately constituted, well organised and well supported by administrative staff. The one area of membership yet to be achieved was representation from a person who at some time had been placed in fostering or parent of the same. Both panel chairs were interviewed during the course of the inspection and were found to have appropriate qualification and experience to carry out the role. Appropriate checks were carried out on panel members. Inspectors were made aware of the possibility of increasing the regularity of fostering panel meetings; should this be the case, careful attention will need to be paid to the continuing adequacy of administrative support, as current support is at its limit with the level of demand on the administrators for both the fostering and permanency panels. Given the complexity of minute-taking in panel processes the local authority could usefully give consideration to the training of back-up support for the current administrators as it appeared no formal arrangements were in place to cope with their absence outside of them covering for each other.

The membership of the panel had changed considerably over the past year and newer members were still finding their feet and developing confidence to both raise and challenge matters. More established members were however seen to be effective in identifying and challenging issues in relation to approvals and household reviews. It was good to note the plan to introduce carers to the proceedings of Panel and a training day to discuss how this would be best managed took place during the course of the inspection.

As already noted inspectors highlighted the need for the Panel to develop effective information systems for monitoring the process for households reviews not required to come to Panel. As a local authority Panel inspectors will also expect to see a development of the

overall monitoring of the adequacy and range of placements in line with standard 30.7. Current monitoring, as evidenced in the last annual report, was somewhat limited in its scope and detailed comment in this area.

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?	2
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The majority of short-term breaks were provided by the Take a Break service. This service appropriately recognised the more substantial ongoing role played by parents in such situations and an understanding of this balance was reflected in the questionnaires and direct feedback from Take a Break carers.

While the focus of the Take a Break service is recognised by inspectors as being different from that of mainstream fostering it is important that there is a recognition that it is still governed by the same regulations and standards. As will be evident from comments elsewhere in the report, inspectors noted areas where the Take a Break service was not in line with regulatory expectations, for example the lack of foster carer agreements and the lack of appropriately structured household review reports, the absence of a foster carer handbook, the lack of formal supervision and unannounced visits. Managers will need to ensure that the development of this service is kept in line with the expectation of the standards and regulations. Inspectors would also re-emphasise the potential benefits of integrating the management of this aspect of the fostering service under one operational fostering manager so that issues and developments common to all aspects of fostering operations can be progressed in a coherent and consistent manner across the board.

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?
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Fostering staff and managers spoken with were clear that the expectations of the standards and regulations did apply as equally to 'family and friends' carers as to more mainstream foster carers. The inspection confirmed that equally rigorous approaches were applied by fostering staff to the approval and review processes for this group of carers. There was however an equal awareness that the application of other general expectations on carers such as training, supervision and record-keeping needed to be managed sensitively, in recognition of the different perceptions and motivations of kinship carers. Feedback from one such carer household visited during the inspection confirmed that the fostering service had been excellent in its support of the situation and in its recognition of the particular pressures and difficulties faced by carers in this position.

The one area of concern with such kinship placements arose from the anecdotal comments from fostering staff that they were often alerted late to the existence of such placements, especially where they originated in emergency situations under Regulation 38. As a result they said getting assessments and approvals to panel, to conform to the six week timescale allowed by regulation, was often difficult. Inspectors did not examine this issue in any detail but given the impact of children's social work staff shortages this would not be an unsurprising situation. Managers did not have ready access to information to clarify the situation or, equally, whether the initial visiting requirements to such placements were being fulfilled by children's social workers. Inspectors would strongly advise the local authority to review practice in this area to ensure the required regulatory expectations are being consistently met.

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 16th – 27th February 2004 and any factual inaccuracies:

Please limit your comments to one side of A4 if possible

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

Amendments to the report were necessary

Comments were received from the provider

Provider comments/factual amendments were incorporated into the final inspection report

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

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 by 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

Action plan was received at the point of publication

Action plan covers all the statutory requirements in a timely fashion

Action plan did not cover all the statutory requirements and required further discussion

Provider has declined to provide an action plan

Other: <enter details here>

Public reports

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