



*Making Social Care
Better for People*

inspection report

FOSTERING SERVICE

Middlesbrough Council Fostering

**MTLC
Tranmere Avenue
Middlesbrough
TS3 8PB**

Lead Inspector
Stephen Smith

Key Announced Inspection
16th October 2006 10:00

The Commission for Social Care Inspection aims to:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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SERVICE INFORMATION

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Name of registered manager (if applicable)	Jane Wilson
Type of registration	Local Auth Fostering Service

SERVICE INFORMATION

Conditions of registration:

Date of last inspection 5th December 2005

Brief Description of the Service:

The Middlesbrough Borough Council Fostering Service is managed within the council's Children, Families and Learning division. The service currently provides support to approximately 145 children in foster placements with around 100 foster carers. The service provides and supports long and short-term placements as well as respite placements and those where children are fostered by family or friends. The fostering service staff team comprises the manager, senior practitioner, four supervising social workers, two support workers, a Family Placement Development Officer and clerical and administrative support.

SUMMARY

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

The inspectors would like to thank the children, carers and staff for the way they helped the inspectors do their job and find out what the fostering service is like. The inspectors also want to thank children's social workers and other professional people who filled in forms or who told inspectors what they think of the fostering service. Staff in the fostering team, carers and children spoken to were very helpful and people spent time filling in surveys and sending them to the inspectors before the inspection. Information and facts in this report come from surveys sent to foster carers, fostered children and placing social workers and from written information the manager gave inspectors as well as from the things seen and the people spoken to when they visited. Inspectors visited four foster carers with children living with them. Questionnaires were returned from 14 fostered children, 14 foster carers and from 30 social workers in relation to 53 of the children fostered through the service. All together seven inspector days were spent with the fostering team and a further two days were spent reading questionnaires and sorting out the information in them.

A team of two inspectors carried out the inspection, which was done alongside an inspection of Middlesbrough Borough Council's adoption service and an inspection of its arrangements for private fostering. Readers may wish to refer to the reports from these inspections, which are available from the Commission for Social Care Inspection. Information was gathered by:

- Talking individually with children and foster carers;
- Individual and group discussions with fostering staff;
- Individual and group discussion with children social workers and their managers;
- Visiting foster carers' homes;
- Group discussion with foster carers and with fostered children;
- Reading children's, carers' and staff files;
- Reading records;
- Interviewing the Family Placement Development Officer;
- Interviewing the manager;
- Studying the surveys and other information sent back to us;
- Reading records of the meetings of the fostering panel and attending a panel meeting.

People who told inspectors what they think about Middlesbrough Borough Council Fostering Service generally said good things. The great majority of people said that support to foster carers and fostered children is very good. Foster children said things like, "Where I live is my home and will always be my home," "I am part of the family" and "Because (foster family names) treat me like they have known me since I was born. (Foster carers own children) share their mum and dad – How Nice!"

Although some foster carers said there are some things that need to be better most said very good things about the service. One said, "Over the eleven and a half years we have fostered we have had excellent support from our link workers and have had good support from all the social workers we have been involved with." Most carers said the authority is very good at supporting children with their health, education and lifestyle.

Children's social workers also said good things about the fostering service although some suggested how it could be made better. One social worker said, "The foster carer provides a very high standard of care for the young person. The supervising social worker supports the placement and actively liaises with the social worker" and another said "This particular placement is excellent and provides stability, permanence, guidance, warmth, protection, emotional warmth and security and the children are making excellent progress."

21% of foster carers said that the service has got better over the last 12 months and 72% said the service had not changed. Only 5% (1 response) said the service has got worse. Social workers agreed with this, 36% said it had got better, 61% said the service had stayed the same and only 3% (1 response) thought it had got worse.

When asked how the service could be improved few foster carers thought anything needed to get better. Two carers said the level of foster carer allowances is a problem. One said, "The service could not do anything better apart from paying the national rate as Middlesbrough pays one of the lowest." Other carers made comments like, "Over the years I have appreciated the help, support and backing of the fostering service, it has altered and changed, over the years, for the better." A few social workers said there should be more joint training between social workers and foster carers, some said that more foster carers are needed to allow better matching opportunities in emergency placements. A small minority said that foster carers need more encouragement to undertake more transport to school and contact, though findings in the rest of the inspection did not indicate that this is a problem. One social worker said, "Nothing – all needs are being met."

It is good that people said that generally the service works well and though there were some problems mentioned that are written in this report, most people are very pleased with how things are going for them. One foster carer said, "We have fostered for Middlesbrough for twenty-five years. We receive a lot of support from Middlesbrough as we have had some difficult children. We would, and have, recommended Middlesbrough to others who have wanted to foster, purely because of the support we receive. Regardless of the problem they will help to resolve it."

Most importantly, children said that they are well looked after and happy in their foster homes. They said things like, "I am very happy where I am living." One young person said, "I used to hate social services as a child but over the last four years I have come to realise that if it wasn't for social services and my foster family I wouldn't be who I am and where I am today." Another young person said, "My foster carers are just so wonderful. I love them loads. They're always there for me when I need them; they deserve a medal. They are doing such a wonderful job looking after me; I don't know where I'd be without them.

What the service does well:

Middlesbrough Borough Council Fostering Service is good at a lot of the things it does.

- The fostering service is good at working with people who want to foster to make sure that they are the right sort of people. It checks new foster carers out very carefully and they get good training before they can foster.
- New foster carers cannot foster until a group of experts called a panel make a recommendation that they are the right sort of people and have the skills they need to look after children properly. This panel is careful, gets a lot of information and thinks very hard about people before it recommends that they can foster. This panel also looks at all foster carers' reviews to make sure they are still doing a good job and getting the help they need to look after children well. This is good for children as it helps keep them safe and have a good life.
- The service is also good at supporting foster carers to look after children. Foster carers get visited regularly and get good advice about how to help the children they are caring for.
- The fostering service is good at making sure that children get to live in the place that is right for them. This is hard for it to do as it needs more foster carers but it works very hard to make sure that children go to carers who are right for them.
- Once children are in placements, social workers, foster carers and fostering staff are good at working together and talking to each other to make sure that children keep being well cared for.
- The service also works hard to make sure that all children get good help, in the way that is right for them, depending on what needs they might have because of their background, race, religion or disability. Children said good things about foster care, like "I love my new mam and dad. They always care and they ask me how I am and how's school gone.

Also they make me laugh," "Where I live is my home and will always be my home" and "I am part of the family."

- The service is good at helping children stay healthy and well. Children get good advice about their health and get help to get doctors and dentists when they need them. It also makes sure that children get their health checked often.
- The fostering service is good at helping children get a good education. It is good at helping children stay in school and helping plan the support they need at school. The service also has a lot of people who work to help children do well and get good grades at school. Children said things like, "Any problems I have at school are sorted right away," "My carer thinks I should get a good education; so do I, I want a good job" and "Everything I want to do at school subject wise, people support." There are also a lot of activities and events that fostered children are able to take part in in their spare time.
- The fostering service is good at finding out what children think about things and using this to make their care better or to help the service do things better. Children said they are listened to by their foster carers and, most of the time, by their social worker.

What has improved since the last inspection?

Since the last inspection has:

- Made sure that, where there are more children placed with a foster carer than are usually allowed or where children are different from the sorts of children that carers are approved for, a record is kept on foster carers' files showing the special permission for this to happen.
- A lot of foster carers have been given child protection training and other carers are going to get this training soon. This is good, as it will help foster parents keep children safer. A lot of foster carers have also done training about bullying which also helps them keep children safe.
- Better records are kept in foster carers' files of the recommendations of the fostering panel and the decision made about whether foster carers are the right sort of people to foster and the type of children they will be most suited to look after.
- Made sure that checks on staff members to make sure they are the right sort of people to work with children are redone every three years and made sure that telephone checks are made on staff as well as getting written references about them.

What they could do better:

Although the fostering service does a lot of things well there are some things it needs to do better.

- When children are placed with foster carers an agreement is made about how the children have to be looked after and who should do what to help the children. The service needs to make sure these agreement forms have all the information in them that the rules say they should have to make sure that foster carers know how to look after the children in the way that they need.
- The fostering service still needs to write down better the checks it does on, and the information it gets about new staff members, to make sure that they are the right sort of people to work with children.
- The authority needs to have a look at the numbers of staff members in the fostering team to make sure that there is enough staff to do the work properly and have time to find new foster carers.
- The authority still needs to do some work to make sure children's records have all the information about children that they should have. This is to help people look after children and plan for their future properly and also, if children want to look at their records, to help them learn about their past and the things that have happened to them.
- Foster carers should be given training in 'safe caring'. This is how to look after children in a way that is safe for the child and the foster carer. They should also be helped to write down a policy for how they will care for each child safely and check this out with the child's social worker.
- Foster carers should also get first aid, health and safety and behaviour management training and should be able to update this training every few years. This is important, as all this training will help carers look after children and keep them safer.
- The fostering service needs to get better at how it does foster carers' reviews. It needs to make sure that fostered children are asked what they think of their carers and take these views into account when it decides whether carers should keep on fostering children. The service should also use reviews as a way of making sure that all the checks that it needs to do on foster carers get done when they should be.
- The authority needs more carers and some people said foster carers get paid a lot less than carers working for other fostering services and that this is making it difficult to get new foster carers. The authority should finish the work it is doing to sort out its system for paying foster carers so that it can make sure this is not stopping it getting new carers.

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

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

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Being Healthy

The intended outcome for this Standard is:

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

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

JUDGEMENT – we looked at the outcome for Standard:

12

Quality in this outcome area is good. This judgement has been made using available evidence including a visit to this service.

Children's physical and emotional health needs are well met by the fostering service.

EVIDENCE:

A wide range of people consulted during the inspection told of good links being in place between children's services and health services working with children in the area. The authority has placed great emphasis on promoting the health of looked after children and people spoke highly of the effective work being carried out by the Looked After Children's (LAC) Nurse who provides good support to foster carers and young people. Commendably, this concentration on young people's health is supported by the fact that 96% of children are receiving annual LAC medical checks and creative ways have been introduced to encourage children to take part in these checks. A range of sports and leisure events are provided to encourage fitness and health promotion, sexual health sessions have been provided by the LAC nurse and carers have been provided with sexual health training.

Access to the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) is well supported and approximately a third of fostered children have received support from this service. In one situation, where a young person and foster carer had not been satisfied with the support provided by CAMHS, the fostering service supported them to pursue a complaint and have the situation redressed.

Evidence from case tracking during the inspection gave good examples of how children's health needs are met and provided for, including children's dietary, medical and emotional needs. Children visited and spoken to were all registered with doctors and dentists and foster carers and staff spoken to said that the local authority will pay for private dental treatment or explore specialist services for children who cannot get registered with an NHS dentist. One carer told the inspector that a young person has had to remain registered with a previous doctor as one near to her new home had a full list. This situation was being explored by the fostering service. In the case of one young person case tracked during the inspection, some of the child's LAC documentation examined was not fully completed. The child's Essential Information Record (EIR) contained no information about immunisations or illnesses and health information was not completed in a number of the young person's LAC review records.

Three of the four sets of foster carers visited by inspectors had not undertaken first aid training and some said that they thought they should do this training. Records showed that an ongoing first aid training programme for foster carers is not in place and although some carers had completed this qualification the fostering service did not have records of all those with the qualification. The fostering service manager acknowledged that the service needs to arrange this training for foster carers as previous arrangements for first aid training for foster carers had lapsed.

Those children spoken to directly during the inspection all said that their health needs are met in their foster placements. This view was reflected in the questionnaires returned by young people. 64% of children said in questionnaires that their health needs are 'always' well provided for, 15% said they are 'usually' well supported in this area and 21% said they 'sometimes' get good support and advice about being healthy. No child said that they 'never' receive help in this area. Children's comments about the health support they receive included, "Because I only have one kidney and so am healthy because I need to be," "I get support from my foster carer and the school nurse" and "I usually get advice because I don't eat veg." One young person said, "When I'm looking well people say you look really healthy and fit today."

Foster carers consulted were positive about how well the fostering service supports them to care for children's health needs. 40% said they get 'excellent' support, 40% said the support received is 'good' and 20% 'adequate'. No foster carer considered the support given for children's health to be 'poor'. Foster carers said, "This area (health) over recent years has been reinforced by the department and this is always asked at health reviews" and "Children have a medical every year, any health issues are covered at their reviews, i.e. dentist, doctors and hospital appointments."

Social Worker were similarly very positive about how well the service supports children's health needs with 36% considering the support 'excellent', 60% 'good' and 4% 'adequate'. No social worker considered the support to be 'poor'. Comments from social workers about the health support provided by to children included, "Excellent standard of care provided to provide healthy outcomes," "Foster carer ensures a healthy diet, regular health assessments and visits the GP when necessary. Encourages the child to participate in sports" and "Health is a key priority, have regular health checks. Good training programme in place."

Staying Safe

The intended outcomes for these Standards are:

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

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

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

3, 6, 8, 9, 15 and 30

Quality in this outcome area is good. This judgement has been made using available evidence including a visit to this service.

Middlesbrough Borough Council Fostering Service provides competent and well supported foster carers who keep children safe. The service is very thorough in its assessment of carers to make sure they are suitable to work with children and works very hard to ensure that children are matched with carers who will be able to meet their needs properly. The fostering panel is effective and makes good quality decisions to promote and safeguard children's welfare. The organisation's recruitment procedure is generally robust. Some areas of training, administrative arrangements and systems for ensuring all checks are up-to-date need to be improved.

EVIDENCE:

Foster carers visited during the inspection welcomed inspectors and observation of their homes showed that they are comfortable and appropriate for children. Foster carers receive health and safety training as part of their assessment process and health and safety information is set out in the foster carers' handbook. There was, however, no evidence to show that foster carers are provided with periodic updates to their health and safety training.

Most of the foster carers' files examined contained health and safety checklists though one file did not contain a checklist or evidence that car MOT and insurance had been checked. One file contained a dog safety questionnaire but there was no pet safety questionnaire in place for another foster carer who had kept cats.

This inspection has shown that that the authority's arrangements to match children with foster carers taking into account their specific needs are generally good. Social workers said that availability of placements can be variable and that there tends to be less choice of placements for older children with more complex needs and for long term placements. Social workers said that members of the fostering team know the carers' strengths well and the service is as careful in matching placements as it can be. The local authority has approaching one quarter of fostered children placed with independent agencies. These children are generally placed on a planned basis in long-term placements in line with the authority's placement strategy, though all parties spoken to said that there had been an increase in the number of placements with independent agencies made over the summer because of capacity issues rather than a planned strategy. One social worker said, "There's quite a few with agency carers, there's nothing wrong with that as they get good support but we need more placements in house to allow a choice of placement in emergency situations. It's particularly a problem with older, more complex children." The fostering manager said that a full review of the authority's commissioning strategy is underway to look at outcomes, costs and benefits for all fostered children and that this will consider the effectiveness of using both in house and independent foster carers. All parties spoken to said that the service is working hard to reduce the number of placements made in an emergency, by using service provision meetings and requiring service manager approval for all placements. Social workers said they have to have considered all alternative possibilities for a child before a foster placement will be considered as an emergency. They said that the authority is increasing its use of family and friends carers as a way of preventing children from becoming looked after or by keeping children with their extended family. Figures provided by the fostering service showed that overall 46% of placements are made in an emergency with the figure rising to 51% for children aged 10 and over.

The fostering service works hard to keep the number of situations in which exemptions from the usual fostering limit are used to a minimum and is good at monitoring those that exist. Statements of exemptions were in place for any situation noted where children were placed with foster carers outside their terms of approval.

Children spoken to by inspectors all said that they are happy in their placements and their needs are met well. Case tracking provided examples of very careful matching for a long-term placement and very high levels of support for the children concerned. Particularly good work was noted in respect of three young people as part of their plan for adoption to reunify them within the same foster home and to prepare them for adoption as well as promoting contact with a half sibling with a different plan. White English foster carers caring for children from a mixed race background gave examples of the support they had received to care for these children. The authority is involved with the Sahara Project regionally, which is helping to recruit foster carers from different ethnic backgrounds and providing direct support for children from minority cultural groups and their foster carers. A social worker spoken to gave an example of a situation in which she had been offered a list of potential carers for a short term placement required for a child and had met with them and arranged a programme of introductions for the child.

The authority has developed a new Placement Agreement that will supplement the LAC Placement Plan used currently. The fostering manager and staff said that this incorporates a section to gather additional information about safe caring and risk issues. They said that this document has been circulated to the children's social work teams for use but has not yet been used. This document must be implemented as soon as possible to ensure that full information is made available to foster carers about the child being placed. The service has developed a draft 'Essential Information/Placement Agreement' form to use for respite care situations to ensure that respite carers receive the information they need about the child they are caring for on a respite care basis.

When asked about the quality of information received before placements are made foster carers were generally very positive. 14% thought the information received was 'excellent', 57% 'good' and 29% 'adequate'. No foster carer said the information they received was 'poor'. Foster carers said things like, "I understand that at times there is only very basic information known dependant on the surrounding situation of the child, i.e. dire emergencies. More information is given if the child has had more contact with the service," "If information is available, i.e. a planned placement it is very good. If it is an emergency placement, obviously it may take longer to gather information to pass on" and "Usually the information is good." This is extremely positive in the context of a local authority service that has to respond to emergencies in order to protect children.

In questionnaire responses, 7% of social workers considered the authority's ability to provide a choice of placement to be 'excellent', 14% considered it 'good', 45% 'adequate' and 37% 'inadequate'. Comments made in clarification of these views ranged from, "Placement choice is good generally but it is much more difficult to find a choice of placement for young people with more complex needs" and "Choice has been excellent for long-term placements but is only adequate when short term placements are wanted" to "Insufficient resources frequently result in children being placed in vacant placements rather than a placement which has been matched to their need" and "We struggle to find placements for teenagers who will express their views."

Once children have been placed, social workers were generally very positive about the quality of information they receive about the child from the fostering service. 7% said they get 'excellent' information about how the child is doing, 60% considered the information 'good' and 27% 'adequate'. Only 6% of social workers who responded (2 replies) considered that they are 'inadequately' informed by the service. Comments included, "Good communication from the supervising social worker," "The fostering team are very good at keeping me informed about everything that is going on" and "Supervising social worker relates relevant information to the child's social worker." Comments from those who thought the communication from the fostering team is not good enough said, "More discussion needs to take place regarding emergency placements" and "Regular communication takes place but there is no written information."

When asked how well they are supported to maintain placements and allow planned moves, 57 % of foster carers thought the support 'excellent', 36% considered it 'good' and 7% 'adequate', none thought it 'poor'. Comments included, "They offer a support package that meets the needs of the children and we, as carers, have input into this package. The care given is constantly reviewed to meet their needs," "If a child placement becomes unstable more resources are given so the child is saved a move or a move happens in a planned way" and "If any difficulties arise in a placement I call in the social worker, my supervising social worker etc. to talk about what can be implemented to help maintain the placement." One carer did express the view that, "At times the fostering service need to reduce negative involvement from mums and dads as this involvement can and has destabilised children looked after in long term placements" but this is a common difficulty when working with children and their families.

Social workers reflected the positive view about the quality of support provided to maintain placements with 7% thinking it 'excellent', 70% 'good' and '17% adequate'. Only 2 social workers thought that the support is 'inadequate' but made no comment to explain this view, though one said "Difficult to find stable placements for teenagers, particularly those who present with difficult behaviour."

Other comments by social workers included, "The service works hard towards maintaining stability of placement," "Any movement of placement is kept to a minimum or none at all unless it is unavoidable" and "Once a child has found a long-term placement, stability is consistent."

Foster carers and social workers were also positive about the support given to foster carers to help them meet children's needs and make sure they are well cared for. 47% of foster carers said this support is 'excellent', 47% thought it 'good' and 6% (1 respondent) 'adequate'. 28% of social workers thought the service is 'excellent' at making sure children are well cared for, 52% 'good' and 17% 'adequate'. 3% (1 respondent) said the fostering service is inadequate at making sure children are well cared for. This was, however, an isolated view and the social worker made no comment to explain this view.

Foster carers made comments like, "Once any needs are identified there are placement reviews where everyone can see what the child or myself will need. Social services will provide support or refer to someone who can" and "At first we didn't know what to expect, we have been fostering the same three children for four years and to see the change in them has been great and rewarding for all concerned including the fostering service." One foster carer was less pleased with the quality of support provided; "It varies, some social workers are total rubbish at assessing the child's needs, others are brilliant." Social workers comments included, "This particular placement affords an excellent standard of care for the young person. The foster carer is supported by the supervising social worker from the fostering service," "Very high standard of good overall physical care is maintained and encouraged" and "Depends if foster carers have been appropriately matched and can deal with the emotional needs of the children placed."

Information about how to keep children safe, including child protection, unauthorised absence and behaviour management arrangements, is provided for carers in the foster carer handbook and foster carers receive child protection training during their initial assessment training. Ongoing training in child protection is provided by the fostering service, as is training about bullying with nearly half the authority's foster carers completing these training courses in 2006. There was, however, no evidence of ongoing training in safe caring or behaviour management being provided for foster carers. Children consulted reported only appropriate sanctions taking place. Examples included grounding, loss of treats or loss of use of the television or games machine. One said "I get stopped playing with the PS2 until I've done what I'm told." Records showed that no restraints had taken place and all parties spoken to said that physical intervention would only be used in situations of immediate physical danger. The fostering service manager has an effective system in place for monitoring allegations and complaints and ensuring action is taken to follow these through though the recording sheets used to record this monitoring were not completed with sufficient detail.

Five of the six foster carer's files examined contained safe caring policies though one did not. The policies in place, however, were not all sufficiently well developed for various reasons. One foster carer had a safe care policy that had been in place over a period of time in which 16 young people had been placed with the carer, another carer had a policy in place but this had been developed 12 months after the children moved to the foster carer's home and another was not completed with sufficient detail. Supervising social workers and the manager said that policies should be updated annually. It was noted that the dates of updating did not correspond to foster carer's reviews and that review forms did not contain a section to check whether an up-to-date safe care policy is in place. It is recommended that reviews of foster carers ensure that the safe care policy is up-to-date.

All foster carers whose files were examined contained up-to date Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) Disclosures. Some of the disclosures viewed had been updated later than the three year period set out in the national minimum standards though the situation had improved in the more recent files examined. It was noted that CRB disclosures are not recorded as being monitored through the foster carers' review process and it is recommended that reviews of foster carers ensure that their CRB disclosures are up-to-date.

A situation was identified during the inspection in which recording raised some concerns about the actions of a foster carer. This was discussed with the authority who are dealing with the matter and will be dealt with outside this report.

All children spoken to said they are happy and well cared for in their placement and older children knew who to speak to if they had a problem. Young people consulted had received a children's guide telling them who they can speak to and how to complain.

In their responses within questionnaires 93% of children said they are 'always' well cared for by their foster carers. 7% (1 respondent) said they are 'usually' well cared for but did not make a comment to explain. All comments made by children were very positive and included, "I love my new mam and dad. They always care and they ask me how I am and how's school gone. Also they make me laugh," "Where I live is my home and will always be my home," "I am part of the family" and "Because (foster family names) treat me like they have known me since I was born. (Foster carers own children) share their mum and dad – How Nice!" No child consulted raised any concerns about the care they receive from their foster carers.

In questionnaires 79% of children said they 'always' know who to speak to if they have a problem, 14% said they 'usually' know and 7% (1 response) 'sometimes' know who to speak to. No child said they do not know who to speak to and children gave examples such as, "We had a personal problem lately and I told my social worker and foster carers," "There's a lot of people, an adult, a friend, a social worker" and "I could speak to my social worker by contacting her." 77% of children said in their questionnaires that they know how to complain if necessary, though 3 children said they were not sure whether they know or not. Only one child consulted said she was being bullied but said "But my school are dealing with it." This child's details were given to the fostering service to allow them to ensure any problem was being dealt with properly.

Fostering staff recruitment files examined during the inspection did not contain evidence of the staff member's proof of identity, though CRB disclosures were in place. Evidence of the proof of identity seen must be retained on file. One staff member's file contained statements that CRB checks had been done on two occasions. The first statement did not contain the level of the check undertaken and the second did not contain the date of the check. The manager and staff member said that this check had just been carried out to update the previous check done three years before. Application forms seen did not require applicants to complete the months of dates of previous employment positions and did not require applicants to declare their reasons for leaving previous child care posts. It is recommended that the application form be redeveloped to include these requirements to ensure that applicants supply the information set out in Schedule 1 of the Fostering Services Regulations 2002.

Middlesbrough Borough Council Fostering service operates an effective panel that employs structured processes and keeps good records of its decisions and how it reaches them. Decisions and recommendations made are clear and the agency decision maker makes a decision promptly bearing in mind the panel recommendation; good records of these decisions and panel minutes are maintained on foster carers' files. All foster carers' reviews are taken back to panel for their consideration; this is good practice but has resulted in some delay in getting reviews to panel because of panel's workload. Examples were seen of reviews taking ten months or over to go to panel. There was, however, considerable evidence to show that this situation has improved greatly recently. The panel visited as part of the inspection was properly constituted and quorate and gave clear consideration to the cases presented to it. The panel chair takes part in the regional panel chairs group and there was evidence to show that panel policies and procedures are being reflected on to ensure they remain appropriate. The recruitment file of the panel chair was seen to comply with the requirements of the regulations and standards.

Enjoying and Achieving

The intended outcomes for these Standards are:

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

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

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

7, 13 and 31

Quality in this outcome area is good. This judgement has been made using available evidence including a visit to this service.

Children are very well supported with their educational and leisure needs. Foster carers get good support to help them care for children with different needs and from different ethnic backgrounds and the service is working to improve its provision in this area.

EVIDENCE:

The proportion of children from ethnic minority backgrounds fostered by the fostering service is low, in line with the general make up of the area. Similarly the fostering service does not have a high proportion of carers from ethnic minority backgrounds. The service is involved in the Sahara Project and currently has prospective foster carers from an ethnic minority background undergoing the assessment process.

Case tracking during the inspection showed some sensitive work taking place with two siblings from a mixed race background placed with white carers. Careful work was being undertaken around contact with the children's birth family and efforts to help the children experience aspects of their cultural background. This work had been difficult and foster carers and social workers have had different opinions about how to progress but, positively, all were working together for the benefit of the children in difficult circumstances. Case tracking also provided good examples of children receiving good support with issues arising from individual disabilities or difficulties faced and two young people told the inspector how they had transferred school to a school that contained all the equipment, resources and expertise to meet their needs.

Evidence from discussion with social workers, fostering staff and the Family Placement Development Officer showed that the authority is very aware of its needs and the needs of the community and has a strategy to recruit carers to increase its provision of carers from ethnic minority backgrounds and to provide support to carers and young people in creative ways, using the Sahara Project, family members and staff members from different backgrounds.

In questionnaires 36 % of foster carers said that the fostering service is 'excellent' at supporting them to address issues of diversity with their foster children and the remaining 64% said they get 'good' support from the service in this area. Carers said, "All the above is covered in our training programmes and courses" and "All children are treated as individuals and needs are assessed regardless of their culture, ethnicity or disability."

Social workers' views in relation to the same question were also positive; 4% said the service is 'excellent' at supporting foster carers with issues of diversity, 86% said it is 'good' at this and 10% said it is 'adequate'. No social worker thought that foster carers get 'inadequate' support in this area. Comments included, "Children are placed with families that meet their needs – ethnicity, culture etc." and "Acknowledged by all, appropriate services are being identified to promote young people's culture and identity." One social worker reflected the fact that more carers from different backgrounds are needed by saying "Some difficulties arise at times in terms of 'match' i.e. culture, ethnicity – however this is, in part, due to lack of resources rather than practice outcomes." The very positive views expressed by foster carers and social workers in this area despite a lack of 'resources' are worthy of note and demonstrate the authority's commitment in this area.

The foster carers' handbook provides carers with good information about the importance of promoting education for fostered children and the educational services and support available. Middlesbrough's figures show a commendably low level of school exclusions for fostered children and many people during the inspection reported very good support for children's education.

Over 70% of fostered children have up to date Personal Education Plans (PEPs) and the authority is continuing to work to increase this proportion, as well as introducing the PEP process for children aged 3 and over. 97% of young people in the relevant age group have Pathway Plans in place. Nine young people who had been fostered for over a year sat their GCSE exams in 2005 and two thirds of these young people achieved at least one GCSE at grades A*-G or an equivalent GNVQ.

Children's files inspected contained PEPs and Statements of Special Educational Need (SEN) where necessary and these had been updated regularly. Files contained good information about children's education and their achievements including school reports and evidence of educational input into young people's reviews. Young people's achievements are monitored, recorded and promoted. Records and interviews showed the work done by a foster carer and school to help a child develop to a point where a SEN was no longer necessary and the child was able to move into a mainstream school. Another had worked hard to get some wording removed from a young child's SEN to prevent stigma and stereotyping causing him problems in a later school. Foster carers consulted said they receive information about a lot of events and activities for young people that they are encouraged to take part in and there was evidence to show that the authority is taking children's education seriously. One foster carer said, "We receive through the post or a phone call with advance details of events in our area depending on the needs of each child." The authority has a pilot 'Make a Change' scheme to find work placements for young people leaving care within the authority. One young person on this scheme is likely to become a permanent employee of the council based in the same building as the fostering team. The authority is also working to involve children in the process of consultation with looked after children to seek their views and has received grants to fund individual tuition fees for looked after children and care leavers to help them prepare for the world of work.

Interviews and visits to carers and children during the inspection showed that a wide range of leisure and recreational opportunities and activities are in place for fostered children. Foster carers gave examples of the individual activities they support fostered children to take part in and told inspectors of the many activities organised by the authority, particularly through its education and leisure services. The fostering manager said that the authority has placed a priority for all its departments to contribute practically to its corporate parenting responsibilities by promoting services for looked after children. Foster carers provided examples of the following activities, among others, taking place for looked after children. Activity groups, a street dance group, a disc jockey course, monthly outdoor activities, motorcycling sessions, looked after children football team, Tuesday group with cooking, virtual babies etc. Carers said that transport is usually provided for children to and from these activities and that occasional outings and trips are arranged. They confirmed that extra funding is available for young people to take part in trips, activities and individual tuition such as music lessons or the purchase of instruments.

54% of children said in their questionnaires that they 'always' get the right sort of help with their education, 31% said that they 'usually' get the right help and 15% said 'sometimes'. Children's comments included, "Any problems I have at school are sorted right away," "Because (name) my carer thinks I should get a good education; so do I, I want a good job" and " Everything I want to do at school subject wise, people support." No child said that help is 'never' provided. Children also said that they are encouraged to think about their future. 42% said they 'always' get help to think about this, 29% said 'usually' and 29% 'sometimes'. Again no child said that help is 'never' offered. Children said things like, "People have asked me what I want to do when I get older and they've supported me when I say," "School talk to me and help with GCSE, carers discuss what to expect in the future" and "They give me support so I can achieve my goals."

Foster carers consulted by questionnaire were positive about the support given by the authority for the children's education. 36% considered the support 'excellent', 50% 'good' and 14% 'adequate'. No carer said the support is 'poor'. A foster carer said, "Each child has their own personal education plan and are involved with this. This is reviewed at school to air any concerns" and another said "They (the authority) update pc equipment and we and social services are in constant contact with schools, but we as carers take a very 'hands-on' role as we encourage children to do well at school."

Foster carers responses in questionnaires were also generally positive about how well the service supports fostered children to take part in activities in the community. 36% said the support is 'excellent', 43% 'good' and 11% 'adequate'. No foster carers said the support in this area is 'poor' although a small proportion of foster carers said that this area could be even better if fostering allowances for foster carers were higher. One said, "An increase in payments would help."

14% of social workers consulted by questionnaire said that children receive 'excellent' support with their education from foster carers and the fostering service, 62% said the support is 'good' and 21% 'adequate'. Only one respondent said that the support was 'inadequate'. This social worker expressed the view that "Some carers should be further encouraged to transport children to school, monitor homework and attend parents evenings etc." Other social workers' comments were much more positive and included, "Foster carers are given advice/training in the educational needs of the child. Support is given to carers by the supervising social worker" and "Payment for additional education support, i.e. tutors, has been made available through LAC team. Foster carer supports child in doing homework."

Social workers were also positive about how well fostered children are supported to take part in activities in the community. 7% said they get 'excellent' support, 68% said the support is 'good' and 22% said 'adequate'.

Only one respondent considered the support to be 'inadequate' stating, "Some carers need to be more pro-active in involving children in outdoor activities." Again, other views were more positive and included, "Excellent support is provided by the local authority Outreach Worker in close partnership with the council's recreational section" and " Foster carer actively promotes community activities and participation.

When asked their views about how well the fostering service and authority helps to provide an environment in which children can prosper, foster carers' and social workers' views were generally very positive. 43% of foster carers said 'excellent', 50% 'good' and 7% (one response) said 'adequate'. 10% of social workers said 'excellent', 53% 'good' and 33% 'adequate'. One social worker said that help for children in this area is inadequate making the statement, "Social worker is responsible for the child getting to an educational facility." Negative views were isolated however and it is clear that education and leisure provision is given a high priority by the authority and is providing good outcomes for children.

The authority does not provide a short break fostering service for children with disabilities living with their parents.

Making a Positive Contribution

The intended outcomes for these Standards are:

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

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

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

10 and 11

Quality in this outcome area is good. This judgement has been made using available evidence including a visit to this service.

Children generally get good support to maintain contact with their family and friends. Children are listened to and can influence the care they receive and the running of the service.

EVIDENCE:

The importance of promoting appropriate contact between young people and their families is set out in the foster carers' handbook and contact arrangements are covered in the placement agreement and social workers and fostering workers said that these arrangements are discussed at the placement agreement meetings. Foster carers spoken to during the inspection told inspectors about the actions they take to support contact and the support they receive from the fostering team and children's social workers. Examples of good work to encourage and re-establish contact with families was evident in all the situations case tracked. One pair of foster carers expressed concerns about contact arrangements for the children they were caring for; they had different views about the benefits of contact with the children's family and did not feel that they were being listened to by the children's social worker. Despite these concerns the carers were continuing to express their views and work cooperatively with the social worker to achieve the best outcomes for the children concerned. The authority was aware of this situation and working to address the situation for the children's benefit.

All parties reported good arrangements for contact where it is in children's interests and foster carers and social workers questionnaires considered that children have good networks with their families where these are possible. Foster carers said things about children's contact including, "All children have had support to maintain all areas of their networks until final plans have been agreed" and "The service provides transport when needed for contact." A social worker said, "(Young person) does struggle to maintain friendships but is offered help and advice by her foster carers in dealing with any friendship problems." Two young people made individual requests to inspectors about the contact arrangements with their families; these requests were passed to the fostering service to discuss with the children concerned.

The authority has appointed children's participation officers to promote the involvement of looked after children in decisions about the service and their care and has an independent advocacy scheme in place for children and a contract with an independent organisation to provide independent visitors. During the inspection a young person told the inspector how he had taken part in a group of looked after children who redesigned the children's consultation forms for looked after children's reviews. A looked after young person sits on the authority's corporate parenting board.

Within the fostering service, children's support groups and mentoring arrangements are in place and fostered children take part in foster carers' preparation training as do the birth children of foster carers. Foster carers and children made very positive comments about the arrangements made to involve and consult with children. Carers cited examples of transport being provided to and from events and attendance by an inspector at the 'Tuesday' group confirmed this.

Children spoken to said they are not consulted to have their views taken into account for foster carers' reviews. Records within foster carers' files confirmed this. The fostering manager also confirmed that this is the case and said that the service is going to begin to seek children's views for these reviews.

Children spoken to said that their foster carers seek their views about the care they receive and this was confirmed by responses of children in questionnaires where 86% said their carers 'always' listen to them and take notice of their opinions. 14% said that their carers 'sometimes' listened to them and explained this by comments like "When it's the right thing yes, but no if it's the wrong thing." Other children's comments included "I love her like she was my mum," "We talk and discuss things" and "Because anything I say to them is important and they would never ignore me!"

Children spoken to said that they are visited regularly by their social worker and have their views listened to though one child said that she had not seen her social worker for two months so did not feel she had enough chance to express her views. In questionnaires 58% of children said their social worker 'always' listens to them and takes notice of their opinions, 14% said their social worker 'usually' does this and 28% said 'sometimes'. Where children said sometimes, they made these comments, "Because I rarely see my social worker" and "When she says she's going to do something it takes her months to let us know if anything's getting done about it." Other children were very positive about their social workers making comments including, "When my social worker visits she listens to what I have to say" and "She's always there when I need her."

In questionnaire responses foster carers were positive about how good the service is at consulting children about the care they receive. 20% said it is 'excellent', 67% 'good' and 13 'adequate', no foster carer thought the service is 'poor' at this. One carer said, "Each child has a say at their reviews. The social worker will listen and discuss any issues with the child and myself." Social workers also considered the service good at consulting with children about their care, 7% said the service is 'excellent', 55% 'good' and 38% 'adequate'. No respondent thought the service 'inadequate' although one social worker did point out that "Young people vary in their response. Some young people like to be involved in decision making processes, others are less inclined."

When asked how good the fostering service is at consulting with children about the running of the service foster carers were, again, very positive. 21% said the service is 'excellent' at this, 36% 'good' and 43% 'adequate'. Social workers' views of the same question were slightly less positive with 34% thinking the service 'good', 59% 'adequate' and 7% 'poor'. One social worker made the comment, "Minimal involvement from young people at the level at which decisions like this are made." Others, however, made comments including, "Children's views are always listened to and acted upon where possible" and "Attempts are made to involve the young people but this has to be balanced with how involved the young person wishes to become."

Achieving Economic Wellbeing

The intended outcomes for these Standards are:

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

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

29

Quality in this outcome area is adequate. This judgement has been made using available evidence including a visit to this service.

The fostering service has an effective system for making foster carer payments. The audit of allowance levels and payment schemes needs to be completed.

EVIDENCE:

Middlesbrough Borough Council fostering service has a structured payments scheme in place that allows foster carers to progress to a higher 'banding' that includes a higher fostering allowance. Information about payment levels and the system of payments is contained in the foster carers' handbook. At the last inspection a large number of foster carers expressed their dissatisfaction with the level of foster carers' payments saying that they were the lowest in the area. Although fewer foster carers raised this as a problem at this inspection, some continued to do so making comments such as "Should pay proper wages for carers" and "Middlesbrough pays the least to its carers and should make an all out effort to put us level with other local authorities." A number of carers said that they thought that low payment levels will negatively affect the recruitment of new foster carers. The fostering manager and staff said that the authority has recognised that the way that it rewards foster carers needs attention and is consulting with carers about proposals for reviewing the level of foster carers' payments. This consultation had begun at the time of the service's last inspection but the situation has not yet been resolved. The manager said that an audit of allowances has now begun. This needs to take place as soon as possible to ensure that the fostering service is able to retain current foster carers and recruit new ones.

None of the foster carers visited during the inspection raised concerns about the level of fostering allowance and a number of carers consulted described how they are supported financially to provide equipment, additional tuition and activities for children. Comments included, "Provides equipment and financial support," "When we needed extra bedding for some children the council paid for it straight away" and "We were given extra money so that (young person) could have music lessons."

One foster carer said, "The service could not do anything better apart from paying foster carers the national rate as Middlesbrough pays one of the lowest."

Management

The intended outcomes for these Standards are:

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

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

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

16, 17, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25 and 32

Quality in this outcome area is adequate. This judgement has been made using available evidence including a visit to this service.

Arrangements for management of foster carers are generally good though some arrangements for reviews, foster carer training and recording could be improved.

Foster carers get very good support but the quality of recording in some children's files needs to improve to properly support the care provided to them.

EVIDENCE:

The fostering service is effectively managed and organised with clear lines of accountability and procedures for decision making. The service has a Family Placement Development Officer who is involved in development of policies and strategy for the fostering service. A system is in place to ensure that processes for foster carers' approvals and reviews are managed effectively. Reviews had been subject to delays, either being undertaken or taken to panel for consideration but the service is addressing this and the situation is now much improved. The service works closely with independent fostering providers through its own commissioning unit but is also involved in the newly formed regional commissioning process with other local authorities and most independent providers. Levels of clerical and administrative support are appropriate and the service is able to access and advice, guidance and specialist services to support young people and their foster families. The service has created a senior practitioner role but, at the time of the inspection, this post had still not been made permanent. The person appointed to this post was appointed from within the fostering team and the resulting vacancy for a supervising social worker has not been filled. This position works across both the fostering and adoption teams and has had a big impact in developing effective processes and systems where children's care needs involve both teams as well as providing additional management support for the service. This post should be made permanent as soon as possible.

Since the last inspection all work relating to long-term, matched fostering that would have been dealt with by the adoption team has become the responsibility of the fostering team. Additionally, full responsibility for the assessment and support of family network (kinship) carers has been assumed by the fostering team. Some weaknesses in case recording in foster carers' files was noted as were some delays in reviews taking place and insufficiently developed recording of foster carer supervision sessions. A number of people said that workloads within the team are high and that this is limiting the time they have available to concentrate on the authority's need to recruit more foster carers. These issues suggest that the team is being overstretched by its workload. It is recommended that the authority carry out an audit of staffing levels within the team to ensure that it is able to fulfil its duties effectively.

Foster carers' assessments reports seen showed that the assessment process is thorough and careful. Records contained evidence that referees had checked the content of records of the social worker's visit to them and signed to agree that their views were being reported correctly. This is good practice. Assessments contained good analyses of the information gained during the assessment.

Recommendations about applicants' suitability for fostering were clearly based on this information and analysis. Assessments are updated completely and thoroughly where matching arrangements for long-term fostering are being considered, based on information about the individual child concerned. Most foster carers' files contained a clear record of their approval history that includes the panel minute and the agency decision following their approval and subsequent reviews.

Social workers spoken to reported very good communication between the fostering team and themselves and were very positive about the support they receive from the fostering team. A number of people commented on the team approach to problem solving between social workers and the fostering team and people told inspectors that joint visits to foster carers and children often take place.

All parties spoken to described the difficulties in recruiting foster carers. A number of people cited 'competition' from other fostering providers and a number of people said that the authority's payment levels are lower than those of other services. The authority has a working party in place that includes foster carers, that is looking at recruitment and retention issues and is working to review its payment system and allowances. The Family Placement Development Officer has good arrangements in place to promote the recruitment of carers and uses statistical information effectively to identify the sorts of carers needed most. The authority is continuing to work to recruit more carers.

Records maintained of foster carers' reviews within carers' files were variable. Some foster carers' files contained a full review history that showed that reviews had taken place roughly annually, though, on one foster carer's file, a review undertaken in January 2006 had not yet been taken to panel for consideration. In another file the carer's reviews from a few years ago had been very delayed and the last review was taken to panel nearly 10 months after the date of the review. Additionally, the report completed by the child's social worker for this foster carer's review was dated over two weeks after the review took place so it would appear that the review took place without the social workers' views being considered. In some cases review forms had not been fully completed, the dates of all previous reviews were not recorded and some sections were not completed or completed with a lack of detail.

Children's views have not been sought directly for foster carers' reviews although social workers said that they reflect the view of fostered children in their reports. The manager said that work is being done to develop a form to be used to seek the views of fostered children and those children who have left a foster placement in order that their opinions can be considered at the carer's review. Similarly the service is planning to seek the views of birth children of foster carers as well. The service must implement a system for seeking fostered children's views for foster carers' reviews as soon as possible.

The fostering service has a system for updating foster carers' medical, CRB and health and safety checks in place but recording of these was not always clear. Similarly, one review form showed no unannounced visit taking place since August 2003 but the contact section in the foster carer's file showed a visit taking place in October 2006. Review records and the forms used do not include a checklist showing when safe care policies, health and safety checks, medical checks, CRB checks and unannounced visits have taken place. It is recommended that foster carer reviews monitor that all these checks are being updated as necessary. The manager said that arrangements for foster carers' reviews are being reviewed with the review and development unit and said that she would ask for these issues to be included in this review.

Foster carers visited as part of the inspection reported very good support from the fostering service and were also generally very pleased with the support received from children's social workers. One carer said, "Everyone knows my name and about me, I know where I am with them and they are always there for me when I need them." This view was reflected by foster carers who returned questionnaires with 54% considering the support 'excellent', 33% 'good' and 13% 'adequate'. No carer said that the level of support is 'poor'. Comments from carers included, "I know the children's social worker and my link worker are only a phone call away. If I need them I get a response straight away," "Over the eleven and a half years we have fostered we have had excellent support from our link workers and have had good support from all the social workers we have been involved with" and "The service provide emotional and practical help, listen to any concerns, provides any current information or guidelines, offers training courses, NVQ qualification and ongoing support." One carer wrote in the questionnaire returned, "We have fostered for Middlesbrough for twenty-five years. We receive a lot of support from Middlesbrough as we have had some difficult children. We would, and have, recommended Middlesbrough to others who have wanted to foster, purely because of the support we receive. Regardless of the problem they will help to resolve it." This level of satisfaction with the level of support from the service is commendable.

Foster carers spoken to said they receive regular supervision, most said that it takes place between monthly or two monthly. Foster carers' files, however, did not all contain full records of this supervision. One carer's file contained supervision records showing that supervision was taking place nearly every month, although there was a gap in the records from August 2005 to March 2006. Another carer's file, however, contained no supervision record forms, although the contact section of the file contained some recording to show that supervision was being carried out. The records did not, however, show that training needs were being considered. The carer said that she does receive regular supervision. In another file there were some supervision records, though most visits were recorded only in the contact section of the file.

A supervising social worker said that, at times the supervision form can detract from the process of foster carer support; pressure of work and lack of time were also cited as a reason why supervision forms are not always completed. The manager said that while supervisory visits are expected to take place monthly, only every other month would be seen as 'formal supervision'. She said that this frequency might be reduced to every three months for long-term matched placements that are very settled. The service should ensure that any formal supervision that takes place is recorded on a supervision form that ensures all supervision topics discussed are recorded.

General recording, however, showed that foster carers are visited regularly by supervising social workers and foster carers themselves confirmed this. Records of supervising social workers' case supervision by the fostering manager are retained on foster carers' files. These meetings and the records of them a useful tool for monitoring the quality of the work being done with foster carers. All foster carers' files contained fully completed foster carers' agreements that contain the information required by the regulations and standards.

The manager has a system in place to monitor the matters set out in Schedule 7 of the Fostering Services Regulations 2002 though records of this monitoring were not always fully complete. In a number of situations the young person's age rather than date of birth was recorded and, in another record, liquid paper had been used. The summary record of one allegation made against a foster carer did not contain information about any investigation that took place or its outcome and accident records did not always show whether doctors had been involved or visits to hospital had occurred. An instance of bullying recorded contained no details or outcome and records of medication given to fostered children stopped in December 2005. In discussion with the fostering manager it was clear that she does monitor these events and she was able to tell inspectors details of the situations. It is, however, important that accurate and detailed records are kept to help identify any patterns or trends.

Training records maintained on foster carers' are taken from a centrally held list. This record showed four training sessions taking place in the last year with large numbers of carers completing this training. 45 carers undertook child protection training, 52 undertook bullying training and 37 completed training on the Adoption and Children Act. The numbers of carers attending these courses is commendable. Foster carers and supervising social workers, however, cited training that had been undertaken that was not listed. The manager said that other training is accessed from other providers, including working with education, some training on weaning and healthy eating and that, currently, the system only records the training provided by the fostering service. Similarly, a carer said that first aid training had been undertaken but this was not recorded. The service should make sure that all training undertaken by foster carers is recorded.

Records and discussion with foster carers and fostering staff showed that there is currently no ongoing programme of training in first aid, health and safety, first aid or behaviour management. This training needs to be provided to foster carers and updated at appropriate intervals.

Eight of the authority's foster carers have completed NVQ level 3 in child care and twenty-one carers are currently working towards this qualification. The manager explained that the authority has had difficulty in supporting foster carers to undertake this qualification and is now exploring another route for equivalent qualification. This work should continue to increase the proportion of carers with this qualification. Foster carers spoken to were generally very positive about undertaking training. Though one carer said that she does not feel she needs the training provided others made very positive comments including, "We attend regular training events and the department paid my fees for NVQ 3 in the care of children. Better training equals better outcomes for the child." A number of social workers said in questionnaires that they would value more joint social worker and foster carer training sessions.

Some of the children's files examined contained full LAC documentation that was well completed and contained detailed information about the child. The records of the decision making process and permanence plans developed alongside the legal process for three children for whom adoptive parents were being sought were very good and educational information such as PEPs and SENs as well as records of annual medical checks were well maintained and in place on all files. Some records were subject to errors, however. The Initial Assessment Record on the files of three siblings all related to the oldest child and, in one situation, detailed recording about one child was retained in the file of the child's sibling. The Placement Plan (PP) Part 2 for another child was wrongly dated and in another young person's file the Essential Information Record (EIR) Parts 1 and 2 were not fully completed in terms of health and education details or placement history. This file did not contain a PP Part 2, the PP Part 1 had not been signed by the foster parents or young person and review records were not fully completed. Good core assessments and updates to these assessments were in place and information produced for court or for matching decisions for long-term placements was very detailed.

Current information about fostered children is retained within the files of their foster carers for easy reference by the fostering team. Evidence was available to show that the manager contacts children's social workers to ensure that up-to-date information is available.

Social workers spoken to described the increasing use of family and friends as carers for children, either before children become looked after or as kinship foster carers, called Family Network Care by the authority. The full responsibility for assessing family network carers for children placed with them under Regulation 38 of the Fostering Services Regulations 2002 now lies within the fostering team.

In a family network care situation examined, carried out before the fostering team took full responsibility for this work, the assessment process was commenced promptly and the full assessment was completed well. The kinship foster carer attended a fostering preparation group and a health and safety checklist was completed. This assessment was completed effectively and promptly though fell outside the timescale of six weeks set out in the regulation. The authority should continue to develop this process of assessment for kinship carers to ensure it complies as closely as possible with the regulation.

SCORING OF OUTCOMES

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

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

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

BEING HEALTHY	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
12	3

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

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

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

ACHIEVING ECONOMIC WELLBEING	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
14	X
29	2

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

Are there any outstanding requirements from the last inspection? No

STATUTORY REQUIREMENTS

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

No.	Standard	Regulation	Requirement	Timescale for action
1	FS8	34	The fostering service must implement the newly devised foster placement agreement form to ensure that all of the information listed in Schedule 6 of the Fostering Services Regulations 2002 is included in foster placement agreements.	23/12/06
2	FS9 FS22 FS25	42	Records of the manager's monitoring of matters included in Schedule 7 of the Fostering Services Regulations 2002 must be fully completed and sufficiently detailed.	27/01/07
3	FS15	20	Evidence of staff members' proof of identity must be retained on their files.	27/01/07
4	FS15	20	Evidence of CRB disclosures must include the date that the disclosure was received.	27/01/07
5	FS11 FS21	29	The views of fostered children and those who have moved away from a foster carer since the last review must be sought as part of the foster carers review process.	24/02/07
6	FS21	29	The fostering service must ensure that foster carers' reviews are recorded in correct and full detail, that the views of	24/02/07

			all necessary people are sought and that, if reviews are to be taken to panel, this happens in a reasonable timescale.	
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RECOMMENDATIONS

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

No.	Refer to Standard	Good Practice Recommendations
1	FS12 FS24	All children's social work files should contain full and up-to date LAC documentation.
2	FS6	All foster carers homes should be subject to health and safety checks annually, these should include pet safety questionnaires and car checks where applicable.
3	FS8	Foster placement agreements should set out clearly the elements of matching considered and the action to be taken to address any matching shortfall.
4	FS9	Foster carers should be provided with safe caring training.
5	FS9	All foster carers should have up-to-date safe caring policies in place that relate to the children they have in placement and are agreed with their social worker.
6	FS15	Applications forms for staff members should require applicants to state the months of commencing and leaving previous jobs as well as the years and to state reasons for leaving previous posts with children.
7	FS29	The authority should complete its work on auditing foster carer allowance levels and payment schemes as soon as possible in order to ensure it is able to recruit and retain foster carers.
8	FS17	The senior practitioner post should be made permanent.
9	FS17	The authority should carry out an audit of staffing levels within the team to ensure that able to fulfil its duties effectively.
10	FS21	Foster carer reviews should monitor and record when safe care policies, health and safety checks, medical checks, CRB checks and unannounced visits have taken place to ensure that all these checks are being updated as necessary.
11	FS23	The service should make sure that all training undertaken by foster carers is recorded.
12	FS6FS9 FS12	First aid, health and safety, safe caring and behaviour management training should to be provided to foster

	FS23	carers and updated at appropriate intervals.
13	FS23	The authority should continue to work to increase the proportion of its carers with NVQ level 3 in child care.
14	FS32	The authority should continue to develop its process of assessment for kinship carers to ensure it complies as closely as possible with the requirement to undertake such assessments within six weeks.

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