



Champions for
Social Care
Improvement

inspection report

Fostering Services

**Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council
Fostering Service**

Conway Building
Conway Street
Birkenhead
Wirral
Cheshire
CH41 6LA

24th November 2003

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

Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council Fostering Service

Address

Conway Building, Conway Street, Birkenhead, Wirral,
Cheshire, CH41 6LA

Local Authority Manager

Anthony Burscough

Tel No:

0151 666 4696

Address

Conway Building, Conway Street, Birkenhead, Wirral,
Cheshire, CH41 6LA

Fax No:

0151 666 4651

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 ?

NO

Date of last inspection

Feb 03

Date of Inspection Visit		24th November 2003	ID Code
Time of Inspection Visit		09:30 am	
Name of Inspector	1	Julia Toller	103343
Name of Inspector	2	Beate Roth	
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.		NA	
Name of Specialist (e.g. Interpreter/Signer) (if applicable)		NA	
Name of Establishment Representative at the time of inspection		Anthony Burscough	

Introduction to Report and Inspection

Inspection visits

Description of Fostering Service

Part A: Summary of Inspection Findings

Reports and Notifications to the Local Authority and Secretary of State

Implementation of Statutory Requirements from last Inspection

Statutory Requirements from this Inspection

Good Practice Recommendations from this Inspection

Part B: Inspection Methods & Findings

(National Minimum Standards For Fostering Services)

- 1. Statement of purpose**
- 2. Fitness to carry on or manage a fostering service**
- 3. Management of the fostering service**
- 4. Securing and promoting welfare**
- 5. Recruiting, checking, managing, supporting and training staff and foster carers**
- 6. Records**
- 7. Fitness of premises**
- 8. Financial requirements**
- 9. Fostering panels**
- 10. Short-term breaks**
- 11. Family and friend carers**

Part C: Lay Assessor's Summary (where applicable)

Part D: Provider's Response

D.1. Provider's comments

D.2. Action Plan

D.3. Provider's agreement

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 Wirral Metropolitan Borough 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.

The fostering service team of Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council shares a building with a number of other social services teams. There is access to meeting rooms and training rooms within the building, at other social services offices and within community facilities.

The fostering service consists of a service manager who oversees the operation of the service, a team manager, two team leaders, 10.5 supervising social workers, a support worker and administrative staff. The fostering service has two teams, comprising of family link/mainstream and teenage scheme/remand. At the time of the inspection there were 226 foster carers providing care to children looked after by Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council. The service works closely with social workers from the children and family area teams, education and cultural services, health and other appropriate agencies.

The core responsibility of the service is to provide a range of placements for children from Wirral who are looked after by the local authority. At the time of the inspection the fostering service was providing placements for 320 children. In order to achieve this the fostering service team recruit, assess, approve, train, support and review foster carers.

The following services are provided:-

- Planned short breaks and family link placements to prevent family breakdown. The aim of this provision is to maintain children in their own families thereby preventing the need for longer periods of accommodation.
- Approving family and friends as carers to maintain children either within their extended family or community links to prevent risk of making these links more fragile or having to place children outside of these support networks.
- Providing a range of placements, for example, short term, medium/long term, teenage, remand and emergency out of hours fostering. The primary purpose being to safeguard children and work with families to prevent, wherever possible, long term care away from home.
- Providing therapeutic fostering to prevent the need for children to have multiple placements in foster or residential care, and to enhance the prospects of the child returning home.
- Providing permanent placements in Wirral to enable children to maintain contact with their family and established social networks.

Where there is a need for a foster care placement that cannot be met within Wirral a placement will be commissioned from the voluntary and private sector. At the time of the inspection children were placed with foster carers in the voluntary and private sector.

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 second Inspection of Wirral Borough Council's Fostering Services. Unfortunately, there has been a limited period of time between the first inspection, and in particular the report, and the second Inspection. This must be borne in mind when considering the number of outstanding requirements identified in this report.

1. STATEMENT OF PURPOSE. One standard was assessed, and was met.

Wirral Borough Council have developed a statement of Purpose and Children's guide.

2. FITNESS TO PROVIDE OR MANAGE A FOSTERING SERVICE. Two standards were assessed one was met, one was not.

Staff were found to have appropriate qualifications and experience. However, the level of checks on individuals requires further attention so that the authority complies with the standards and Regulations.

3. MANAGEMENT OF THE FOSTERING SERVICE. Two standards were assessed, one was met, one was not.

Staff reported that they felt adequately supported, with systems in place to provide regular team meetings and individual supervision. However, inspection of foster carers files reflected that the documents developed to provide consistent monitoring of foster carers are not being completed using the guidance provided. This requires monitoring to achieve consistency.

4. SECURING AND PROMOTING WELFARE. Of the Nine standards assessed, none were met.

Last years Inspection report discussed a number of recurring themes/issues , that were evidenced in children's files, also being raised during meetings and discussions with children and foster carer's. Unfortunately, from discussions during this inspection, there appears to have been little progress made with these issues, as follows;

Children reported that they were still encountering problems around permission to attend school trips and activities, and also visits and "sleep over's" at friends houses. There was also a mixed response regarding social work support, and the regularity of visits.

The foster carer's meeting reflected levels of confusion over "correct" practices. Carer's felt that although they received good support from their supervising social worker, advice was not always consistent.

Carer's believed that a handbook would be a useful tool with regard to this matter to refer to as and when necessary. Inspectors were told that this handbook was in draft at the last Inspection; this is still the case at this Inspection, and therefore requires urgent attention. Alongside this, the Foster care team must devise methods of disseminating information to foster carers in a planned and structured manner to ensure that foster carers have clear, up to date guidance.

Home visits were positive, with carers demonstrating an awareness of the children in their care needs. Affection was demonstrated and reciprocated by children and carers, and accommodation was of a satisfactory standard.

5. RECRUITING,CHECKING MANAGING,SUPPORTING AND TRAINING STAFF AND FOSTER CARERS. Of the nine standards assessed, four were met, five were not.

Inspection of the foster care register showed that 18 foster carers have exemptions to their registration at present. The need to require additional carers was discussed during the last Inspection(an issue that the authority was aware of), Inspectors were made aware of the “fast track “ system that has been introduced, which would enable carers to progress through the registration system in a limited period of time. The system as described would appear to be beneficial in reducing the present strain on specific carers, and in particular allowing sibling groups to stay together or be re-united.

Inspection of staff files showed that progress has been made with staff providing primary evidence for CRB checks. However, staff files have not been brought in line with the Regulations as required at the last Inspection. Personnel staff did not have a copy of the NMS which would be beneficial.

6. RECORDS. Two standards were assessed, neither were met.

Children’s files reflected that the required documentation, such as placement plans is not always available on children’s files. Recording of the matching process also requires attention so as to ensure that the decisions and risk assessment around placements is clear and readily available on file.

7. FITNESS OF PREMISES FOR USE AS A FOSTERING SERVICE. This standard was met.

The premises were found to provide adequate facilities for the fostering service to operate from, although meeting rooms were found to be limited. There is also suitable equipment for the safe storage of documents.

8. FINANCIAL REQUIREMENTS. Only one standard in this section was assessed, which was not met.

There appeared from meetings with foster carers that there is a level of confusion around payments for placements and allowances. This requires attention.

9. FOSTERING PANELS. This standard was met.

Inspectors attended a fostering panel and again found this to be well planned, with stringent practices in place. Prospective foster carers are now able to attend the panel, and are available for the clarification of issues by the panel. This change was seen to be beneficial to the process, however, the inclusion of these individuals has also lengthened the timing of the panel, which requires review.

10. SHORT TERM BREAKS. This standard was not met.

The provision of short term breaks is provided mainly for children with special needs and/or disabilities. At the time of Inspection, there was a waiting list for this service, which reflects the need for additional recruitment. The inspection found that training of this group is an issue and needs further consideration and review to achieve adequate on going training.

11. FAMILY AND FRIENDS AS CARERS. This standard was not met.

This group of carers are recruited and proceed through the same level of checks as other foster carers. Discussions throughout the inspection, reflected that training was also an issue requiring attention for this group of carers.

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:

NO

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:

YES

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:

The National Care Standards Commission, in their inspection of Wirral Borough Council's fostering service, in November 2003, were not satisfied that the Regulatory requirements, under the Fostering Regulations 2002, were met.

Thirteen Requirements and Four Recommendations were made at this inspection and a timescale of two months has been given for compliance.

A further inspection is scheduled to monitor the action taken and ensure compliance.

Implementation of Statutory Requirements from Last Inspection

Requirements from last Inspection visit fully actioned?

NO

If No please list below

STATUTORY REQUIREMENTS				
Identified below are areas not addressed from the last inspection report which indicate a non-compliance with the Care Standards Act 2000 and Fostering Services Regulations 2002.				
No.	Regulation	Standard	Required actions	
1	15	6	All risk assessments must be recorded and clearly indicate how a decision has been reached. These assessments must be accessible at all inspections.	7 March 2003
2	29	21	Reviews of foster carers are to take place at intervals of not more than one year.	7 March 2003
3	28	22	All new foster carers are to be provided with a foster care agreement which covers all the matters identified in Schedule 5 of the Fostering Services Regulations 2001.	7 March 2003
4	28	22	Existing foster carers are to be provided with a foster care agreement which covers all the matters identified in Schedule 5 of the Fostering Services Regulations 2001 within 6 months.	7 September 2003
5	7	7	Wirral fostering service must ensure that children, young people and their families are provided with foster care services which value diversity and promote equality.	31st August 2003
6	8	8	Wirral Fostering service must ensure that there is an effective "matching" process available when placing children in foster placements.	31st August 2003

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	NA
Comments		

Condition	Compliance	
Comments		

Condition	Compliance	
Comments		

Condition	Compliance	
Comments		

Lead Inspector Julia Toller **Signature** _____
Second Inspector Beate Roth **Signature** _____
Locality Manager _____ **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	15	6	All risk assessments must be recorded and clearly indicate how a decision has been reached. These assessments must be accessible at all inspections.	March 31 st 2004
2	29	21	Reviews of foster carers are to take place at intervals of not more than one year.	10 th December 2003
3	28	22	All new and existing foster carers are to be provided with a foster care agreement which covers all the matters identified in Schedule 5 of the Fostering Services Regulations 2001.	March 31 st 2004
4	7	7	Wirral fostering service must ensure that children, young people and their families are provided with foster care services which value diversity and promote equality.	December 10 th 2003
5	8	8	Wirral Fostering service must ensure that there is an effective "matching" process available when placing children in foster placements.	March 31 st 2003.
6	5,7,20	15	Staff files must be maintained in line with Schedule 1	February 28 th 2004
7	14	10	The fostering service provider shall promote contact between the child, their parents and friends in line with regulation 14.	December 10 th 2003.

8	34(3)	24, 8	Foster placement agreements must be in line with Schedule 6.	31 st March 2004
9	42(1)	30,23	Foster carers reviews must be conducted, at least annually, and must take into account the information in schedule 7.	31 st March 2004
10	17	21	The fostering service provider shall provide foster carers with such training, advice, information and support as necessary. See Rec. 2	31 st March 2004
11	18	9,11	Wirral Borough Council must conduct complaint investigations in line with their internal complaint procedure.	10 th December 2003
12	15	12	The fostering service shall promote the health and development of children placed with foster carers.	31 st March 2004.
13	35	24	Children's case records must reflect the needs of individual children, placement plans must be in place and completed to the standards identified in standard 24.	31 st March 2004

GOOD PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THIS INSPECTION

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

No.	Refer to Standard *	Recommendation Action
1	15	Personnel staff would benefit from holding a copy of the NMS.
2	21	Foster carers would benefit from a "handbook" for reference and information.
3	29	A review of the procedures around payments, and of the payment levels would be beneficial.
4	31	Wirral Borough Council should consider the ways in which short term break carers can access training.

* 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	22
Survey of placing authorities	NO
Foster carer survey	YES
Foster children survey	YES
Checks with other organisations and Individuals	
• Directors of Social services	NO
• Child protection officer	YES
• Specialist advisor (s)	NO
• Local Foster Care Association	NO
Tracking Individual welfare arrangements	YES
• Interview with children	YES
• Interview with foster carers	YES
• Interview with agency staff	YES
• Contact with parents	NO
• Contact with supervising social workers	YES
• Examination of files	YES
Individual interview with manager	YES
Information from provider	YES
Individual interviews with key staff	YES
Group discussion with staff	YES
Interview with panel chair	YES
Observation of foster carer training	NO
Observation of foster panel	YES
Inspection of policy/practice documents	YES
Inspection of records	YES
Interview with individual child	YES
Date of Inspection	24/11/03
Time of Inspection	10.00A.M
Duration Of Inspection (hrs)	144

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?

3

The Statement of Purpose has been developed in line with the NMS.

The policies, procedures and written guidance made available to staff and carers about the functions of the service, that were provided to the inspectors, accurately reflected the Statement of Purpose.

A children's guide has been developed since the last inspection in a "filofax" design. Some of the children who met with Inspectors confirmed that they had received a copy of this. Whilst many had not actually read it, they felt that it would be beneficial to refer to as and when necessary.

It is also recommended that this document be produced in different formats to meet the needs of different groups of children.

It is understood, that Wirral Borough Council have devised a method to update and modify, as necessary, the Statement of Purpose, but at least annually.

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?	3
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The staff group within the fostering team have a variety of qualifications and experience, which are satisfactory to carry out their role, staff report that they are supported in continuing their professional development.

The level of commitment demonstrated by the staff group again impressed inspectors.

There are regular and planned meetings between the manager, team leaders and supervising social workers. Staff reported that they felt the level of meetings to be adequate and that additional support and advice was available as and when necessary.

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?	1
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Whilst the experience and qualifications of staff, were found to be appropriate, the level of checks on individuals needs to be improved and brought into line with the NMS with specific reference to the quality of identification checks.

Photographic identification of staff, was raised as an issue at the last Inspection, this remains outstanding.

The level of primary evidence for staff checks has improved since the last Inspection.

The personnel department would benefit from holding a copy of the NMS. Not all of the staff files examined had references in place before individuals had started their employment, nor had checks taken place with previous childcare employers in line with schedule 1.

A system must now be developed to renew CRB checks every three years.

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

Inspection of files showed that a system for formal monitoring during home visits of foster carers had been introduced. However, the forms were not available on all files, nor were they completed in line with the documentary guidance. This must be monitored and reviewed.

Wirral Borough Council has a formal policy regarding any possible conflict of interest, there is not however a policy for conflict of interest for foster carers this must be developed.

At a time when confusion is apparent with many foster carers, the fostering service would benefit from an individual having the opportunity to monitor the care practice being provided by foster carers to ensure quality performance.

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

4

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.

3

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.

1

Serious complaint about a foster parent.

0

Initiation of child protection enquiry involving a child.

0

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?****3**

Since the last Inspection, the manager of the fostering service has been enabled to concentrate additional time on the fostering services provided by Wirral Borough Council. From discussions with the Foster care team, and manager, there are regular planned meetings at which the foster care team have the opportunity to discuss their individual workloads and pertinent issues, which may affect the whole of the service. Information from these meetings is cascaded appropriately. Again, staff reported that they felt listened to and supported, whilst remaining aware of the present shortfalls of the service.

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

The seven foster carers visited provided suitable living environments for the children/young people being cared for. The foster carers homes were well decorated, well furnished, warm and maintained to a good standard of cleanliness and hygiene.

The children/young people who were being fostered in the foster carers homes visited had their own bed.

18 Foster carers are currently operating with exemptions to their registrations, this will reduce the choice of children with regard to sharing a bedroom or having a room of their own. Whilst it is acknowledged that it is not a legal requirement for children to have their own bedroom, standard 6 refers to the need to assess the suitability of the sharing of bedrooms in all circumstances.

In general, the foster carers homes visited were free from avoidable hazards and provided any necessary safety equipment. The arrangements for the storage of medication in some of the homes visited were not secure. This was brought to the attention of the Local Authority manager to be addressed.

The foster carers visited and others spoken with during the inspection reported that supervising social workers and the children's social workers inspect their homes to ensure that the accommodation being provided continues to be satisfactory. The National Minimum Standards indicate that an inspection of a foster carers home is to take place annually. The reviews of foster carers are designed to incorporate a health and safety check. However, the inspection identified that a number of reviews have not taken place on an annual basis and some first review reports being presented to panel did not contain this information.

There was evidence that the fostering service is ensuring that transport provided by foster carers is safe for use in their initial and follow on health and safety checks. Again, reviews must take place within the prescribed frequency in order for this information to be up to date.

Equipment is provided to foster carers to enable them to care safely for the children they are looking after. A small number of foster carers reported that when equipment is supplied it is sometimes broken or substandard. This was discussed with the family placement manager who reported that she would look into this issue without delay.

The foster carers preparation training covers health and safety issues briefly. A further training course is offered, however the numbers of foster carers who had received this was unclear due to the collation of information around this being in the early stages. It is important that this information is available as soon as possible so as to enable managers to

ensure that foster carers who need it are provided with this training.

The foster carers visited and who were met with during the inspection understood the role of the National Care Standards Commission and that they may be visited or interviewed as part of the inspection.

In general, the foster carers visited at this inspection were storing records securely. The fostering service provides carers with a lockable box. Two carers visited did not have a lockable box or lockable area in which to secure records but had ensured that the records were kept in a safe place. This was brought to the attention of the provider so that they can ensure that all foster carers are provided with a lockable storage facility.

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?
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The limited number of foster care placements available within Wirral fostering service does not allow for any real choice to take place. Active steps are being taken to recruit more foster carers. The fostering service manager reported that further work is being undertaken to recruit foster carers from ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic backgrounds that reflect the backgrounds of children requiring a foster placement. This will be assessed further at the next inspection.

The fostering service manager reported that if a child is placed with foster carers who do not share the same cultural, religious or cultural background then support is provided to foster carers in meeting these needs.

There are support services available for foster carers and children placed in foster care. Support workers within family placement, respite care and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services and support from the supervising social workers are available. There is limited therapeutic provision available for the under 5 age range, this is currently being worked on and will be assessed further at the next inspection.

Preparation training for foster carers is provided around meeting the ethnic, racial, linguistic and religious needs of children and around enhancing children's feelings of value and self worth. A further training course is offered, however the numbers of foster carers who had received this was unclear due to the collation of information around this being in the early stages. It is important that this information is available as soon as possible so as to enable managers to ensure that foster carers who need it are provided with this training.

A cultural inclusion officer has been in post since March 2003. The aim of this post is to improve the life chances of looked after children through better opportunities for leisure, arts and sporting activities, this in turn positively impacting on reducing offending and improving education and health. A report to the Employment and Appointments Committee recommending the permanent establishment of this post highlights the very positive work undertaken by the cultural inclusion officer since appointment.

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?

1

In general there was little evidence of matching a child/young person with a foster carer who could meet their assessed needs. It is understood that the Looked After Children documentation is used as a basis for matching, however, the inspectors observed, in the small sample of files inspected, that these documents are not always fully completed. There was limited use of written assessments by the child's social worker. Reference was made on some files of discussion taking place between the child's social worker and the supervising social worker around family finding. However, the conclusions reached about the needs of children and which foster carers may match these needs are not documented. In discussions with the supervising social workers it was identified that a great deal of preliminary assessment does take place in order to identify appropriate placements for children. This information needs to be recorded.

The issue of there being limited information to determine if matching was taking place was identified at the last inspection and since then a form has been implemented that will ensure that this information is recorded.

The limited number of foster placements available for children at present has an impact on how effective the matching process can be for children.

The manager of the fostering service reported that children are being identified who require and have not been provided with a permanent placement; action is then being taken to match them with carers. Therefore, preventing children who are being looked after "drifting" in care. The collation of information in relation to this was not examined at this inspection and will be looked at further at the next inspection.

In general, the placement agreements examined did not contain specific reference to elements of matching that were considered when agreeing the placement. The placement agreements for a short term break foster placement contained detailed information.

Evidence was provided to the inspector as to how a foster carer was supported to care for a young person placed with a carer from a different racial and cultural background.

The small sample of files inspected and foster carers visited indicated that periods of introduction take place prior to a child's placement.

Information gathered during the Inspection from questionnaires and from foster carers who met with Inspectors, reflected that there have been delays in receiving information about the needs of a child/young person. The looked after children documentation that was available on the files inspected were not always fully complete.

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

Preparation training for foster carers is provided around caring for a child who has been abused, safe caring skills, managing behaviour, recognising signs of abuse and on ways of boosting and maintaining a child's self-esteem. Further training courses are offered around these issues, however the numbers of foster carers who had received this was unclear due to the collation of information around this being in the early stages. It is important that this information is available as soon as possible so as to enable managers to ensure that foster carers who need it are provided with this training.

There are general safe caring guidelines available for foster carers. Guidelines that are specific to each foster placement and fostered children need to be made available. These guidelines are to be drawn up with the foster carers and where appropriate to all household members. These guidelines are to be cleared with the child's social worker and explained clearly and appropriately to the child.

Wirral Borough Council fostering service makes clear to foster carers that corporal punishment is not acceptable and this is written in the existing and revised foster care agreement. The revised agreement includes a policy on acceptable and unacceptable sanctions, that can be used by foster carers.

Management systems are in place to collate and evaluate information on the circumstances, number and outcome of all allegations of neglect or abuse of a child in foster care. This information is subject to a regular review. However, inspection of the complaints records highlighted that a complaint made by a child included a number of allegations, which were not included in the database of allegations.

A bullying policy and procedure has been developed and is to be made available to foster carers. This identifies the action foster carers are to take to tackle any bullying behaviour identified in the foster placements. Foster carers are now to complete a monitoring form when an incident of bullying has been brought to their attention. The information collated will be looked at, at the next inspection. The policy and procedure should be extended to include incidents of bullying that occur outside of the fostering environment, this will then ensure that bullying is identified if it is occurring elsewhere and will identify the need to address this.

There is a written policy and procedure available around what foster carers are to do if a child/young person is missing from home. This is incorporated in to the revised foster carer agreement.

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

X

%

Standard 10 (10.1 - 10.9)

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

Key Findings and Evidence**Standard met?**

1

The files examined indicated contact plans for children in terms of dates, times and frequencies. Information around the roles foster carers play in contact was not sufficiently detailed in the foster placement agreements on some of the files examined. A small number of foster carers reported that the level of involvement they are expected to have in contact is not always made clear and often they transport a child to contact when it has not previously been agreed.

The inspectors were informed that contact with individuals important to children is considered when identifying placements, however there was little recorded information to support this.

The inspectors were concerned that the withholding of contact between a child and a family member had been used by a foster carer as an acceptable sanction. The list of sanctions permissible in Wirral Borough Council's policy on Care and Control of Children and Young People who are Looked After states that the restriction of visits to or by a child or young person, or any restriction or delay in agreed levels of communication by telephone or post with individuals important to a child must never be used. The Local Authority manager had been made aware of this issue, investigation had shown that this had taken place without the agreement of the social worker or supervising social worker, and action has been taken to ensure it does not occur again.

The minutes from statutory reviews indicated that children's views are being sought in relation to contact issues. An issue raised at the meeting the inspectors had with young people who are in foster placements was brought to the attention of the children's involvement officer to be addressed.

The foster carers visited were not all recording the outcomes of contacts and their perceived impact on the child. It is understood that training around what foster carers need to record is to be provided early in the new year.

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

There was evidence that the fostering service is making efforts to make sure that children's opinions are sought frequently over matters affecting their daily lives. The foster carers spoken to by the inspectors were aware of the importance of listening to the views of the children in their care.

The children interviewed as part of the children's group had all been asked for their views about matters affecting their daily lives, such as their choice of food, activities, clothes, how to decorate their room, and about fostering. The inspectors also examined a sample of children's questionnaires and found that most of the children said that they are asked their views about their daily lives.

When a young person is looked after they are given an information guide, this guide was produced in consultation with looked after young people and covers a range of issues such as health and education and how to access different professionals. The guide details the complaint process and how to access an advocate. The children interviewed as part of the inspection were aware of the complaints procedure. A complaint made by a young person in foster care had not been responded to within the timescales identified in Wirral Borough Council's complaint procedure.

A referral can be made by a social worker for a young person to see an independent visitor

Young people who met with the inspectors, foster carers and files examined indicated that a number of young people have experienced times when they have not had an allocated social worker. It was also reported by young people and foster carers that when there is an allocated social worker they often do not visit the young people within the prescribed frequencies. This could make it difficult for a young person in care to make their views frequently known to a social worker.

There are two children's involvement officers. One officer works specifically with children who have physical and learning disabilities. This is a new post with the current focus being on the communication needs of young people in care with disabilities. The children's involvement officers ensure that young people are kept informed about local and national issues affecting young people in care. A consultation group is in operation, which involves a children's involvement officer and 8 young people looking at issues that are important to young people and to social services. The children's involvement officers may also be asked to look at a specific issue a child has raised at a review.

The reviewing officers interviewed reported that the views of children/young people are presented at reviews either through attendance, consultation documents or through the child's social worker, carers or parents/significant others. The reviewing officers reported that at present around 50% of children who are looked after attend statutory reviews. The children's involvement officer is undertaking research in order to determine what factors may inhibit children/young people from attending. The children/young people interviewed, reviewing officers and children's involvement officer reported that the consultation documents need revision in order to encourage children/young people to complete them. Steps are being taken to address this.

The reviewing officers reported that 98% of reviews are now taking place within the prescribed frequencies. A delay in circulating the minutes from reviews was reported by a small sample of foster carers who met with the inspectors. The reviewing officers agreed that there can be a delay due to lack of administrative support. The reviewing officers also have responsibility for child protection reviews, some for the initial child protection conferencing, the reviewing officers reported that meeting the timescales for this work can have an impact on producing statutory review minutes.

Reviewing officers are involved in providing initial training to social workers around the completion of the looked after children documentation.

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

The foster carers who met with the inspectors were clear about their role in relation to promoting the health of looked after children. They were also aware of how to access health services.

At the last inspection it was reported that there is no formal method of foster carers monitoring contact with health professionals and that a system for the recording of such information should be devised and cascaded to foster carers and support workers. At this inspection there is varying practices in the information recorded by foster carers. It is understood that training around this issue is to be provided early in the new year.

The looked after children documentation for the sample of files examined indicated that the health histories of looked after children were not fully completed for some children.

Training is available around first aid and health and hygiene issues. The number of carers who have received this training was not available as this information is in the process of being collated.

In general the carers whose files were examined had signed information enabling them to take children for routine and emergency treatment. One carer providing care on a family link basis did not have this. A form compiled to give permission for a child to attend activities and have an overnight stay at a friends included giving permission to the carer to allow a child to have emergency medical treatment if it became necessary. It was not clear where this authority had come from. There was no printed name underneath the signature. The foster carers interviewed were unclear about the issue of who can give permission for medical treatment. A clear policy and guidance regarding medical consent; needs to be made available. It is understood that this is in the process of being developed.

The inspectors noted that in the foster homes inspected, where medication was administered to the child, no foster carer had recorded when the medication was administered and the quantity of medicine that had been given to the foster child. It is understood that the medication policy available for foster carers is being revised and will be available early in the new year. The local authority manager has liaised with the pharmacists from the NCSC in the production of this information.

Support services are accessible to foster carers to help maintain placements. This includes providing respite to carers who are looking after children with challenging behaviour and access to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services.

Two health advisors have recently been appointed whose role it is to work in a multi-agency manner to improve the health of looked after children/young persons and care leavers. This is to be achieved by a system of thorough assessment, effective planning and providing holistic health care. Part of the role of the health advisors will be to work on improving communication about the health needs and histories of looked after children. It is anticipated that this will lead to less gaps appearing in the looked after children's health information completed by the social worker.

The appointment of the cultural inclusion officer in March 2003 is contributing to the health promotion of looked after children by ensuring that they have greater opportunities for leisure, arts and sporting activities. This is a time limited post for one year, hopefully this post will continue beyond this period so as to further promote the well being of looked after children.

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?

2

The children/young people who met with the inspectors reported that their foster carers support them with their educational needs. All said that they have a quiet area to study.

At the last inspection foster carers reported that on occasions, the lack of social work contact can be detrimental to meeting the educational needs of young people. At this inspection, this issue was not raised by foster carers, however, the continued problem of children not having an allocated social worker or visits by social workers not occurring consistently was raised. This cannot have a positive effect on children's educational plans.

At the last inspection the inspectors spoke to the manager for the LACES team, who discussed the current processes they have in place for care planning with schools and their aspirations for the future. Whilst the inspectors found this information to be appropriate, concerns are again raised regarding the lack of social work support, and therefore the positive outcome of these plans.

Information around the roles foster carers play in promoting the educational achievement of children/young people they are caring for was not sufficiently detailed in the foster placement agreements on some of the files examined. The practicalities of educational attendance, particularly around issues such as parent/carer meetings and school trips were not clear.

The fostering service has information systems to demonstrate the educational attainment of looked after children and young people in their foster care services and to demonstrate the numbers excluded from school. A report for the Social Care and Health Select Committee of Wirral Borough Council was made available during the inspection. This contained information relating to educational attainment of looked after children in both residential and foster care and steps taken by the Education and Cultural Services and Social Services Departments to support the education of these children.

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**

There is a leaving care team available for young people. A referral is made to the team when a young person is 15 ½. A pathway plan is developed which looks at what a young person wants to do in the future and how this can be achieved and a needs assessment is completed which details the current physical, educational, emotional, social and behavioural needs of the young person. A programme of support is then developed either through one to one sessions or through referral to a group.

The view of the staff at the leaving care team was that in general foster carers prepare young people for leaving care but that some provide more support than others.

A discussion with a training co-ordinator from Wirral Borough Council and the family placement manager indicated that training is provided to foster carers around the importance of preparing young people for leaving care. The number who have received this training is unclear as the system for determining this information is in the process of being developed. At present the leaving care team are not asked their views about the support provided by a foster carer to young people for the foster carers review. This would be a valuable way of identifying when praise is due or where there is a training need. There was a view amongst the workers at the leaving care team that it would be a positive step to develop greater links with family placement so as to encourage greater communication around young peoples care plans.

The leaving care team have been moved to a new building which is not as easy for young people to get to as the old town centre location and does not have sufficient facilities to meet with young people or to provide a drop in resource. It is understood that an additional resource is also due to open in the near future.

Preparation training for foster carers briefly covers preparing young people for adulthood. Further training in this area is also available. Again, the numbers of foster carers who had received this was unclear due to the collation of information around this being in the early stages. It is important that this information is available as soon as possible so as to enable managers to ensure that foster carers who need it are provided with this training. There are no written guidelines for foster carers outlining what is expected of foster carers in terms of preparing children and young people for independent or semi-independent living. This is to be made available.

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?

3

The records of a sample of staff employed within the family placement team were examined. These contained evidence of appropriate checks having been undertaken and appropriate references having been sought.

A sample of prospective and current foster carer records were examined. These provided evidence of appropriate recruitment checks having been carried out. In general, there was also evidence in the records examined of any concerns identified being checked out, appropriate decisions being made and the outcome recorded.

There was evidence from the records inspected and staff interviewed that the experience and qualifications of the staff employed to work within the fostering service meets the National Minimum Standards. There was one social work student on work placement at the time of the inspection. A discussion with the team leaders indicated that students carry out assessments and approvals of foster carers under the supervision of a qualified worker who takes responsibility for their work.

The figures below are in addition to five vacancies, which have been advertised.

Total number of staff of the agency:

12

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

2

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

The fostering service is divided in to a number of functions comprising of family link/mainstream, teenage scheme/remand, short term placements and therapeutic foster placements. There is an overall manager who is currently taking the main responsibility for short term breaks and two team leaders who share responsibility for the remaining functions. There are clear lines of accountability within the fostering service. Staff from the family placement team are aware of who to approach in the absence of the team manager.

The staff interviewed informed the inspectors that they have clearly defined job descriptions and that they are aware of their own and other's roles and responsibilities.

Team meetings take place on a monthly basis. There is also a development meeting that takes place on a monthly basis. The staff interviewed reported that there is clear communication from the manager to them. They also reported that their views are elicited regarding the operation of the service. Staff reported that there are sufficient administrative resources to assist them in their work.

At the last inspection it was reported that other than supervision and management meetings, there appeared to be no other way of determining the workloads of family placement staff. It was recommended that a system be developed which is able to more accurately reflect the time available for each member of staff and the time all allocated tasks require as this will better assist in determining if greater resources are needed. A system has been developed, however it is only in the early stages of implementation. This will be looked at further at the next inspection.

It is understood from discussions with family placement staff that supervision occurs on a monthly basis. A record is maintained of supervision sessions, supervision is subject to a contract and those who provide supervision have been trained to do so. At the last inspection it was reported that the team leader for the link/mainstream team is not supervised as often as the team leader for the teenage scheme/remand. At this inspection it was reported that both team leaders are now supervised on a monthly basis. Professional consultation is provided by appropriately qualified staff.

At the time of the inspection there was a student on placement. A discussion with the manager and team leaders indicated that such placements are very closely monitored and that although there is one designated practice teacher, the whole team takes responsibility for supervision.

It was identified at this inspection that a significant number of reviews have not taken place on a 12 monthly basis. The responsibility for reviews is to eventually move to the quality assurance unit, in the meantime the workload has been split in order to ensure that the back log of reviews is dealt with. A small number of review forms were presented to the fostering panel observed by the inspectors. These forms were incomplete and some lacked information on what training carers had received in the preceding 12 months and what training they require. This information needs to be obtained and recorded in order for reviews to fulfil a quality assurance function.

Two assessments presented to panel lacked information that could have been obtained prior to the presentation of these assessments. This together with the incomplete review forms indicates a role for supervisory staff within the fostering service to look at the assessments by supervising social workers prior to this information being submitted to panel.

It is understood that when a child is placed with foster carers through an independent fostering agency the contract provided by the independent fostering agency is used. Legal advice is obtained by the Wirral Borough Council fostering service manager before the contract is agreed to. It is recommended that Wirral Borough Council establish a contract relating to the services that are to be provided to them by any independent fostering agency that meets with the National Minimum Standards. It is understood that this is currently being developed.

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**

There was evidence from the records inspected and staff interviewed that the experience and qualifications of the staff employed to work within the fostering service meets the National Minimum Standards. At the time of the inspection there was a vacancy for two supervising social workers. These posts have been advertised. The vacancy identified at the last inspection for a support worker has been filled.

There was a sense throughout the inspection of there not being enough foster carers available to meet the demand for the children who require a placement. This was confirmed by members of staff interviewed. Having foster carers with exemptions to enable them to care for more children than they were originally approved for, for a time limited period is also indicative of this. The business plan for April 2002 – 2003 indicates that a main objective is to reduce the numbers of children placed in each family to no more than three in accordance with The Foster Care Regulations. At this inspection there were still a significant number of carers looking after more than three fostered children.

A discussion with supervising social workers and their immediate managers within the fostering service indicated that there are and have been great efforts to attempt to recruit foster carers. There are a number of projects underway to recruit foster carers for specific groups of children where it has been identified that need is greatest. The impact of these will be assessed at the next inspection.

At the last inspection the supervising social workers reported that they do not consider there are enough resources to enable a sufficient amount of time to be dedicated to the recruitment and processing of applications. This issue was not raised at this inspection. It appears that the recruitment of carers has been divided amongst more supervising social workers rather than recruit additional staff.

An examination of a sample of assessment reports of foster carers and the preparatory training indicated that the assessment process cover the issues outlined in the National Minimum Standards.

The fostering service manager reported that on average it takes 4 – 6 months to recruit new foster carers. Some of the foster carers interviewed during the inspection reported that the approval process takes too long.

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?****3**

A sample of supervising social workers were interviewed. They reported that they feel supported in their roles. The arrangements for supervision and team meetings have been reported above.

Supervising social workers have a contract of employment and clear job descriptions. An appraisal scheme is available for family placement staff and foster carers.

A sample of files indicated that the the grievance and disciplinary procedure had been made available. There is an equal opportunities policy available.

An out of hours support service is available for foster carers. There is also a foster carer help line which is run by foster carers.

A whistle blowing policy is available which has been made available to all staff working within the service.

The foster carers visited and some questionnaires indicated that the support provided by the supervising social workers is sufficient. Some questionnaires and some of the foster carers who met with the inspectors during the inspection indicated that they receive insufficient support from the fostering service. The general consensus amongst the foster carers with this view was that the family placement workers are overworked and therefore not able to provide the support they need.

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?	
<p>An examination of the records of training available and a discussion with two staff development workers indicated that a variety of training is provided.</p> <p>A discussion with the supervising social workers indicated that their training needs are identified in appraisals, supervision and at team meetings. They considered that good training opportunities are provided both in-house and through accessing external training events. The staff interviewed considered that they are kept informed about changes in legislation and practice.</p> <p>The four supervising social workers interviewed were involved in different aspects of fostering service work. All considered that value is placed on their professional development by the local authority.</p> <p>The fostering service team manager and the staff development workers indicated that there is a plan for the provision of induction training provided to fostering service staff which is in the process of being finalised to ensure it meets the timescales indicated in the National Minimum Standards.</p> <p>Opportunities are provided for foster carers and fostering service staff to receive joint training.</p>		2

Standard 20 (20.1 - 20.5)
All staff are properly accountable and supported.

Key Findings and Evidence	Standard met?	
<p>The staff interviewed informed the inspectors that they have a contract of employment, clearly defined job descriptions and that they are aware of their own and other's roles and responsibilities. A sample of staff of contracts and job descriptions were examined and contained the appropriate information.</p> <p>The staff reported that they feel supported in their roles. The arrangements for supervision and team meetings have been reported above. An appraisal scheme is available for family placement staff.</p>		3

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

There are a number of systems in place for working with and supporting carers. Supervision is provided to foster carers by a supervising social worker. Since the last inspection a pro-forma has been introduced to ensure that there is a clear focus to these supervisory visits.

During office hours foster carers can approach their link worker or any other member of the family placement team for support and advice. Out of office hours a team of social workers are available to respond to emergency enquiries. The fostering service manager reported that since the last inspection a procedure for responding to foster carers has been developed with the emergency duty team. There is also a foster carer help line, which is run by foster carers.

Support groups are available for carers. A drop in group operates on a weekly basis and four support groups meet monthly. Here foster carers meet up and can receive support from other foster carers. Training is provided at some of these sessions. Representatives from the family placement team attend the support groups.

There are foster carer committees and foster care co-ordinator meetings which are attended by a representative from the family placement team. These meetings enable foster carers to voice their views about the service being provided to them from social services.

The foster carers interviewed were aware of the role of the fostering service supervising worker as were the supervising workers themselves. The fostering service workers reported good communication with the children's social workers. At this inspection no children's social workers were interviewed.

There was evidence from the foster panel and from an examination of records that reviews of some foster carers have not taken place on an annual basis. As already indicated, steps have been taken to address this.

There were varying views amongst foster carers around the level of support provided by the fostering service.

Standard 22 (22.1 - 22.10)

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

Key Findings and Evidence

Standard met?

2

Since the last inspection a foster care agreement that covers all the matters identified in Schedule 5 of the Fostering Services Regulations 2001 has been issued to all foster carers for consultation and signatures. The procedure on the arrangements for the protection of children needs to be updated to include contact details for the NCSC and Wirral Social Services so as to enable the foster carers to contact these agencies with any concerns regarding child welfare and safety as detailed in regulation 12(f) of The Fostering Service Regulations 2002.

At the time of the inspection the Looked After Children document regarding the placement plan provided the basis for the placement agreement. Several of these documents were examined and did not provide clear advice to foster carers around the nature of their responsibilities to the children they were caring for in all the matters detailed. This is to be addressed by ensuring that clear information is provided to carers around all matters listed in Schedule 6 of the Fostering Services Regulations 2002.

Supervision is provided to foster carers by the supervising social worker link worker. It is recommended that the timescales for undertaking supervisory visits by supervising social workers and the child's social worker be incorporated in to the foster care agreement.

The foster carers for the therapeutic foster care placements receive a higher level of support and supervision due to the needs of the children that are placed with them. There is a small group of foster carers providing these placements. They have their own monthly support groups, there is group supervision and respite care is provided between the therapeutic foster carers if this is needed. Monthly supervision is provided by a mental health clinician or the family placement link worker. 6 weekly planning meetings are also held. Two foster carers who provide therapeutic foster care placements were interviewed and commented positively on the support they are receiving from this service.

A handbook containing the departmental policies and procedures relevant to foster carers has not been made available. It is understood that this is in the process of being developed. The foster carers visited and the small sample who met with the inspectors reported that they did not have copies of Wirral Borough Council's policies and procedures relevant to their fostering role.

Information around the complaints procedure is provided to foster carers. The foster carers interviewed were aware of how to make a complaint. Records of complaints made are kept within the fostering service and at the Quality and Complaints Unit. The quality and complaints officer and the fostering service manager informed the inspectors of how this information can be used to inform service provision. The documentation in relation to a sample of complaints were examined. Some complaints had not been responded to within the timescales indicated in Wirral Borough Council's complaint procedure.

Management systems are in place to collate and evaluate information on the circumstances, number and outcome of all allegations of neglect or abuse of a child in foster care. This information is subject to a regular review. However inspection of records showed that there was one complaint containing allegations of abuse that did not appear on the database of allegations.

A number of foster carers reported inconsistent contact with the children's social workers. Concern was expressed about the impact of this on the children being looked after and in terms of the difficulties this can cause for the foster carers themselves.

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**

A list of issues covered during the approval process meets the issues identified in the National Minimum Standards.

A small sample of foster carers who met with the inspectors reported that during the approval process they do not think they were given sufficient information to enable them to undertake their role adequately. In particular, foster carers did not think the issue of what they can and cannot give permission for was adequately covered. The information they are supposed to receive before a child is placed was also not made clear. Two newly approved foster carers reported that at the first child care review they attended they had to ask this information. This was brought to the attention of the fostering service manager.

Questionnaires reflected concerns regarding social work support, and visits to children.

A small sample of foster carers were interviewed during the inspection and reported having received very few departmental policies and procedures. A variety of issues were discussed with these foster carers, such as who can give consent to medical treatment, whether or not a child can leave the Wirral area for a day trip without informing the family placement team, the level of involvement of male foster carers in caring to female children fostered. The responses indicated a level of confusion and differing ideas as to what is acceptable. The foster carers interviewed reported that this level of confusion is reducing their morale.

A handbook containing the departmental policies and procedures relevant to foster carers has not been made available. It is understood that this is in the process of being developed. It is important that this document is made available as a matter of urgency given the level of confusion around day to day practical issues currently being experienced by some carers.

A discussion with two staff development workers and an examination of the records of training available for foster carers indicated that there is a range of training on offer. Discussions are currently taking place with the family placement team manager to ensure that all the training identified in the National Minimum Standards is offered.

At the last inspection it was reported that there needs to be a system in operation between the family placement and staff development teams to identify which foster carers have had which training and when. This would therefore enable resources to be targeted in response to need. At this inspection these records are currently being collated. There was no clear idea as to the training that needs to be provided to individual foster carers or of what constitutes training foster carers must undertake following approval. Given the wide variety of training on offer and some foster carers having attended more training events than others, it is recommended that a skills audit be undertaken and training directed to foster carers accordingly. A list of core training could also be established in order to ensure that all foster carers attend this.

At the time of the inspection some foster carers were undertaking a National Vocational Qualification in child care and a small number had obtained this qualification. The exact numbers were not made available. The training co-ordinator for the NVQ qualification reported that there are support systems available to enable foster carers to undertake this qualification. This includes access to an assessor, additional training and distance learning.

The staff development officers have met with the family placement team and with foster care liaison officers in order to identify training needs and to look at what factors need to be addressed to enable foster carers to attend training events. The inspectors consider that further consideration needs to be given to these issues given that their discussions with foster carers indicated that foster carers are not attending training due to transport problems and due to the time the courses are available.

Training is provided both in-house and from outside agencies depending on the training

need. In undertaking training foster carers have the opportunity on some courses to train with social workers and family placement workers. Foster carers reported that they are asked to evaluate the training provided. The foster carers interviewed also reported that the training events available are well publicised by the family placement team. At the last inspection it was reported that one family placement worker was working on setting up a support group for the children of foster carers. This has not been established due to other work commitments but will be looked at further next year. As already indicated there was evidence that not all foster carers were having reviews within the 12 monthly timescale. Some review documents prepared by supervising social workers indicated what training a foster carer has had others refer to training being offered but do not list what it is and whether the foster carer attended. Given the quality assurance function of the review process it is important that this information is documented.

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

Case files that were inspected were often difficult to follow, and information was difficult to locate. It was difficult to ascertain the reason why children were placed with foster carers or why alternative placements were sought. This requires attention. Placement plans were often incomplete or not completed adequately, leaving questions around the day to day practicalities of a child's care, this is an issue that was raised by foster carers and children alike, both of whom raised questions that should have been considered and discussed during placement plan agreement meetings. Some foster carers reported that they are still often left waiting for essential information details on children, foster carers were clear that this was very much dependant on the social worker allocated to the child. In general, the foster carers visited at this inspection were storing records securely. The fostering service provides carers with a lockable box. Two carers visited did not have a lockable box or lockable area in which to secure records but had ensured that the records were kept in a safe place. This was brought to the attention of the provider so that they can ensure that all foster carers are provided with a lockable storage facility.

Standard 25 (25.1 - 25.13)			
The fostering service's administrative records contain all significant information relevant to the running of the foster care service and as required by regulations.			
Key Findings and Evidence		Standard met?	2
Wirral Borough Council holds separate records in accordance with standard 25, which are stored securely. One of the files inspected showed evidence of internal monitoring. There is a system for keeping records about complaints and allegations. The documentation surrounding allegations made and the outcome of allegations were found to be clear and comprehensive. However, one of the complaints files inspected also contained details of an allegation. This information was not on the allegation database, and an outcome of the allegations could not be found. The fostering manager has forwarded further information surrounding this issue, which reflects that the service has now taken appropriate action.			
Number of current foster placements supported by the agency:			X
Number of placements made by the agency in the last 12 months:			X
Number of placements made by the agency which ended in the past 12 months:			X
Number of new foster carers approved during the last 12 months:			X
Number of foster carers who left the agency during the last 12 months:			X
Current weekly payments to foster parents: Minimum £	X	Maximum £	X

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 premises are in general appropriate for the purpose. The fostering service shares a building with a number of other social services teams. There is limited access to meeting rooms. Rooms within the building, at other social services offices and in community facilities can be accessed.

The premises have lockable filing cabinets to secure confidential information. There are security systems in place to prevent inappropriate access to the building.

There were computers available for staff to share. Staff have been made aware of the need to adhere to the Data Protection Act, this policy needs to be developed in line with standard 26.

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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	0
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This standard is not applicable to local authority fostering services.

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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	0
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This standard is not applicable to local authority fostering services.

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?

2

The foster carers interviewed were aware of the current allowances payable to them. The general view was that the level of payments were insufficient. The payments provided to foster carers are reviewed on an annual basis and this information is provided to foster carers.

Some foster carers reported that payments are not always provided at reasonable times. They reported that when a child is placed with them and requires clothing a delay is experienced in receiving this money, which results in foster carers using their own finances until they are reimbursed. This was discussed with the fostering service manager who advised that an advance payment could be made. There appears to be a lack of understanding from foster carers around this. Such information should be provided in the foster carers handbook so as to avoid confusion.

Foster carers also raised the issue that the allowance for Christmas expenses was not being paid until 12 December which did not allow a great deal of time to undertake Christmas shopping. The fostering service manager reported that she would ensure that this situation does not occur again next year.

It is understood that the payment system is audited. Written information in relation to this was not inspected.

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
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During the course of the inspection one fostering panel was observed by two inspectors. Their observations led them to conclude that that the panel was well organised and conducted itself in an appropriate and professional manner. The panel was well chaired and there was evidence of all panel member's views being taken into account.

The panel met the regulations in terms of the number and role of the individuals present.

The inspection of previous panel minutes indicated that there is clear decision making which is fully recorded.

The administrator for the panel reported that the paperwork for all applications being considered is forwarded to panel members in advance of the panel. This was confirmed by panel members.

As already indicated there is a role for supervisory staff within the fostering service to look at the assessments by supervising social workers prior to this information being submitted to panel.

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

The fostering service provides short-term breaks for children. This service is predominantly for children with learning and physical disabilities and is available to alleviate the pressures on families of caring for a child with disabilities on a full time basis. At present there are 12 short - term break carers providing short-term placements to around 18 children. Some carers are available for day care also.

The fostering service also have a family link scheme available. This resource is predominantly available to alleviate pressures in families where there are child protection concerns or where a child is displaying very challenging behaviour. Overnight and weekend stays are arranged where foster carers work with children on specific issues identified. There are currently 18 family link carers providing care to 30 children.

A discussion with family placement social workers indicated that the short term breaks and family link schemes are provided to reflect the differing needs of children receiving this service. The emphasis is very much on birth parents remaining central to the promotion of their child's welfare and development. To achieve this, where possible a close working relationship between the carers and those with parental responsibility is promoted and parents are central to the formulating of care planning information.

All short - term break carers and family link carers are offered the same training as full time carers. During the inspection it was brought to the attention of the inspectors that training can be difficult to access for carers who work full-time. As short term break and family link carers often work the take up of training may be difficult. This was confirmed by a carer interviewed. It is understood that this issue is currently being addressed and a 6 week course focusing on caring for children who have experienced trauma is being provided in the new year.

All short - term break and family link carers are subject to the same assessment as full time carers and are provided with the same introductory training. The policies and procedures implemented in practice to meet the needs of children having short - term breaks are similar to those for carers providing care on a full time basis.

Training around meeting the needs of children with challenging behaviour or a physical/learning disability is available. In addition, written information on particular disabilities is provided for carers to assist them in their care of children.

There is a waiting list for both the short term breaks and family link schemes. A discussion with the family placement social workers interviewed indicated that regular meetings take

place amongst the family placement social workers involved in the scheme, to look at how the scheme is run and the issue of recruitment in order to reduce the waiting list. The gaps in service provision and how this can be alleviated is also looked at.

The issues raised in relation to training and information provision to foster carers also relates to carers who provide foster care on a short term basis.

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?

2

The fostering service has 80 foster carers who are family or friends of the children they are looking after.

These carers are assessed and approved in the same way as mainstream foster carers, are subject to the same policies and procedures and have access to the same training. Each carer has access to a named family placement social worker who undertakes supervisory visits and is available for support.

At the last inspection the family placement social worker who has the main responsibility for the assessment, approval and provision of support for foster carers who are family or friends was interviewed. This, together with an examination of records and discussion with some of these carers indicated that there is recognition of the particular relationship and position of family or friends as carers, in the assessment and approval process. The importance of children being cared for by individuals who have a significant link to them was clearly acknowledged in the small sample of records examined at the last and at this inspection.

The details of reviews of family or friends of carers and discussion with some family members approved as foster carers indicated a poor take up of training events. The records of training received have only just begun to be collated so it was not possible to get an overall view of the level of training received in the last 12 months by all the foster carers who are family and friends. Family placement workers did confirm that there has been some difficulty in getting these carers to access this training. The manager of the family placement team reported that this issue is being looked at.

The issues raised in relation to information provision to foster carers also relates to carers who provide foster care on a family/friends basis.

PART C

LAY ASSESSOR'S SUMMARY

(where applicable)

Lay Assessor _____ **Signature** _____
Date _____

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 24th November 2003 of Wirral Borough Council 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	<input type="checkbox"/>
Comments were received from the provider	<input type="checkbox"/>
Provider comments/factual amendments were incorporated into the final inspection report	<input type="checkbox"/>
Provider comments are available on file at the Area Office but have not been incorporated into the final inspection report. The inspector believes the report to be factually accurate	<input type="checkbox"/>

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	<input type="checkbox"/>
Action plan was received at the point of publication	<input type="checkbox"/>
Action plan covers all the statutory requirements in a timely fashion	<input type="checkbox"/>
Action plan did not cover all the statutory requirements and required further discussion	<input type="checkbox"/>
Provider has declined to provide an action plan	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other: <enter details here>	<input type="checkbox"/>

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 Anthony Burscough of Wirral Borough 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 Anthony Burscough of Wirral Borough 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:

Please see comments on report emailed to Julia Toller 3/3/04.

Print Name Tony Burscough
Signature Tony Burscough
Designation Service Manager
Date 6/3/04

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.