



*Making Social Care
Better for People*

inspection report

FOSTERING SERVICE

Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council Fostering Service

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

Lead Inspector
Dave O`Connor

Announced Inspection
13th February and 15th – 21st February 2006 09:30

The Commission for Social Care Inspection aims to:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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SERVICE INFORMATION

Name of service	Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council Fostering Service
Address	Conway Building Conway Street Birkenhead Wirral Cheshire CH41 4FD
Telephone number	0151 666 4696
Fax number	0151 666 5665
Email address	
Provider Web address	
Name of registered provider(s)/company (if applicable)	Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council
Name of registered manager (if applicable)	Anthony Burscough
Type of registration	Local Auth Fostering Service
No. of places registered (if applicable)	0
Category(ies) of registration, with number of places	

SERVICE INFORMATION

Conditions of registration:

Date of last inspection 14th February 2005

Brief Description of the Service:

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

The fostering service consists of a service manager, who oversees the operation of the service, a team manager, who is responsible for the day to day operation of the service, three team leaders, 13 supervising social workers, 2 social work assistants, 2 support workers and 5 administrative staff. The service works 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. 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 young people to

be placed in residential care, to return them from residential care to their families or foster care, to prevent children from having multiple placements in foster or residential care, and to enhance the prospects of the young person returning home.

- Providing permanent placements in Wirral to enable young people to maintain contact with their family and established social networks.

When unable to provide a foster placement for a child or young person in Metropolitan Borough of Wirral, the fostering service will obtain a fostering placement from the voluntary and private sector.

SUMMARY

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

2 inspectors carried out this inspection over 6 days. A sample of records and policies and procedures were seen. 4 foster carers homes were visited and the children and the foster carers spoken with. A questionnaire about the operation of the fostering service was sent to all children over 8 years old and to every foster carer. A group of children were spoken with about their views on the fostering service. A group of foster carers were also invited to meet with the inspectors to give their views about the service. The fostering service supervising social workers, the team manager and the service manager were spoken with. Parents of the children who were visited were spoken with. The placing social workers were also asked to give their views.

What the service does well:

The people managing the fostering service and those working within it are appropriately qualified for the position. Suitable foster carers are provided. There was evidence of matching children to appropriate foster carers. The fostering panel makes sound decisions in respect of whether foster carers are suitable to care for children.

Contact between children in foster care and their family and friends is promoted by the fostering service. The fostering service consults young people to find out their views.

There are clear strategies in place for supporting foster carers. Foster carers have access to a range of training to enable them to develop their skills. The case records relating to children and the administrative records are appropriately maintained.

Some positive comments from children around their experiences of foster care included:

“playing on PC’s and getting looked after well.”

“you get looked after more and always have someone to talk to.”

What has improved since the last inspection?

Since the last inspection an inclusion officer for people with disabilities has been appointed to help further develop opportunities for children with specific needs. A children's guide has now been developed for younger age children. The management of the fostering service have introduced more ways of monitoring to ensure the service performs well in meeting children's needs. More field work social workers have been appointed and there are plans to introduce a more flexible payment scheme to foster carers helping to ensure that skilled and experienced foster carers are caring for children and young people. The management of the service have identified areas of improvement for the service including identifying strategies and improvement plans, although these have yet to be fully in place. There are plans for the Wirral's fostering services contract department to introduce a new contract format to be used when a child is placed from the Wirral area with any private fostering agency. This will help in clarity around specific responsibilities between the two agencies. There is clear evidence that the service continues to improve in meeting the minimum standards and providing a very good service for children in foster care.

What they could do better:

Improvements need to be made to the records of recruitment checks in respect of individuals working for the fostering service. The limited number of foster placements available for children at present has an impact on how effective the matching process can be for children. Action is being taken to address the shortfall in foster carers, although particular attention needs to be paid in ensuring demands for respite carers and carers from an ethnic minority background is met. Improvements need to be made to the management systems in place to oversee allegations of neglect or abuse of a child in foster care in order to ensure there is a record of the outcome of all investigations. Were the approval of foster carers is recommended to be considered at the fostering panel following an allegation, there should be no reasonable delay in ensuring the review takes place.

Improvements could be made to the timescale for managing complaints. Further work is needed around auditing the current training needs of foster carers.

Some comments from children about the experience of fostering included:

“not being able to stay at my friends house ever” (a significant number of children raised as an issue having to get agreement to stay overnight at a friends house.)

“for everyone to tell the truth about why things happen to me and why I get moved from places.”

“Having loads of forms to fill in.”

Of the 65 foster carer questionnaires received the following was noted:

30 felt very satisfied and 15 quite satisfied with the support they receive by the fostering service, with 5 indicating they don't get enough support.

44 indicated that there is not enough staff in the fostering service with 14 indicating enough staff are in place.

39 indicated that they had not been asked their opinions about the way the service was being run, 22 indicated their opinions have been sought.

50 indicated they are consulted over decisions regarding children in their care and 48 indicated they are informed about the background of a child in their care.

Only 2 placing authority questionnaires were returned, although both indicated the child in care is supported very well by the carer.

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

The report of this inspection is available from enquiries@csci.gsi.gov.uk or by contacting your local CSCI office.

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Being Healthy

The intended outcomes these Standards are:

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

The Commission considers Standard 12 the key standard to be inspected at least once during a 12 month period.

JUDGEMENT – The intended outcomes for these Standards are

12

Focused and flexible foster care services are provided to help ensure each child's health care and social development is valued and promoted.

EVIDENCE:

As identified during the previous inspection the fostering service benefits from a having two full time named nurses seconded from a Primary Care Trust who take the lead in terms of health promotion for all looked after children within Wirral Borough Council Social Services Department. The named nurses have been in post from November 2003 and provide a specific service for all looked after children in collaboration with health visitors, school nurses and community paediatricians. Looked After Children have the opportunity to have an annual medical and health care assessments for 11 to 18 year olds routinely involve mental health screening where issues identified can be referred to mental health services. Discussions with carers and questionnaires received indicate the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service is particularly valued as an excellent resource in providing help and support to both the child and carers. It is clear from case tracking visits carers have a clear understanding of their role and responsibilities in relation to children's health promotion. Individual carers keep records of any visits to health professionals and liaise closely with the fostering and social work teams where required. Children with specific needs are placed with specialist therapeutic carers. These carers and children placed with them benefit from a from a "wrap around" service with support from mental health and psychologists were necessary. Carers involved in caring for children within this service have undertaken specialist training with a robust child and carer support service being in place.

Foster cares are provided with information regarding a child's health care needs via the Looked After Child (LAC) documentation including important current and historical health care information. Most of the files inspected contained appropriate medical consent information and carers had copies of this information. However, carers visited in relation to the kinship and respite fostering schemes did not have copies of written medical consent.

There are plans for the Departments computerised systems to be reviewed and updated and as identified during the last inspection LAC nurses rely on their own databases and do not have access to the department's SWIFT computer database. It is recommended that any review of the fostering services integrated computer system take into account the health care information systems of looked after children in order that appropriate and up to date health care information is held and easily collated. Foster carers are provided with a rolling programme of first aid training.

Since the last inspection the medication procedure has been amended to include additional and useful information for carers. A revised medication administration sheet has been introduced and when fully completed provides a well detailed record and audit trail of medication administered to children, however the inspectors found that the recording of medication is variable with some carers not completing the form indicating the reason for prescribed medication not being administered. Carer's may need further guidance/training in relation to the completion of these forms. Foster carers are provided with safe storage facilities in relation to medication and topical creams etc.

A cultural inclusion officer was appointed in March 2003 and contributes to the health promotion of looked after children by providing opportunities for leisure, arts and sporting activities. There is a focus on providing access and opportunities for children with a disability and statistical data is collated and analysed for trends in relation to the activities/initiatives provided and the take up of these. It is pleasing to note that there are plans for a disability inclusion officer to be appointed which will further increase the opportunities and outcomes for children with special needs. All young people in care above a certain age are provided with a free swim pass.

Carers are provided with useful information in relation to health and social development matters during induction and ongoing training and also within the foster carer's handbook. Similarly, children and young people are provided with information in the young persons guide to ensure they are informed about decisions around health matters and opportunities for social participation.

Staying Safe

The intended outcomes these Standards are:

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

The Commission considers Standards 3, 6, 8, 9, and 15 the key standards to be inspected at least once during a 12 month period.

JUDGEMENT – The intended outcomes for these Standards are

3, 6, 8, 9, 15 and 30

The people managing the fostering service and those working within it are appropriately qualified for the position. In general appropriate recruitment checks are made before staff begin their employment, however some improvements need to be made.

Suitable foster carers are provided. There was evidence of matching children to appropriate foster carers. The limited number of foster placements available for children at present has an impact on how effective the matching process can be for children.

Improvements need to be made to the management systems in place to oversee allegations of neglect or abuse of a child in foster care.

The fostering panel makes sound decisions in respect of whether foster carers are suitable to care for children.

EVIDENCE:

The fostering service has a clear written recruitment and selection procedure for appointing staff that follows good practice in safeguarding children. The manager's personnel records were seen at a previous inspection and contain the required information. A sample of fostering service social workers files

were seen and in general, contained records to indicate that they are suitable for the position for which they are employed. However, some improvements need to be made to these records as a photograph was not available on each of the files seen, there was no written record to indicate that telephone enquiries to follow up written references had been made and there was no written record to indicate that a member of staff transferring from another childcare position within Wirral Borough Council, had been interviewed prior to the transfer. The social workers involved in the assessment and approval of foster carers are qualified, have experience of foster care and have been trained in assessment. Students or social work assistants who may undertake assessments and approvals do so under the supervision of a qualified and experienced member of staff who takes responsibility for the assessments and approvals.

During the course of the inspection 4 foster carers homes were visited. There was sufficient space to accommodate the number of children for whom the carers are approved. The homes visited were free from hazards and clean and well presented. The files inspected contained evidence that the foster carers' homes had been inspected within the last 12 months to ensure that it meets the needs of foster children. There was evidence to show that where the foster carers provide transport for the child, the service ensures this is safe and appropriate to the needs of the child. The files inspected contained safe caring policies for specific children being looked after.

The preparation training for foster carers, covers health and safety issues, safe caring and child protection.

In general children had their own bedrooms. One foster carers file seen contained a risk assessment where two children were sharing a bedroom on a temporary basis. There was evidence in the records to indicate that this arrangement was not appropriate, and that there was an identified risk to the welfare of the children. The risk assessment was not detailed enough to provide the foster carers with clear guidelines as to how they were to minimise the risks presented.

There was evidence of matching children with foster carers who could meet their assessed needs available on all the files examined. In discussions with the supervising social workers it was identified that a great deal of preliminary assessment takes place in order to identify appropriate placements for children. Regular meetings are held to consider the needs of children who are waiting for a long-term placement and whether a match with appropriate carers can be identified.

Looked After Children documentation is used to assist matching, the files inspected indicated that this information was available. As already indicated, one carer visited had not been given copies of this information. The records seen and foster carers and supervising social workers spoken to indicated that periods of introduction take place prior to a child's placement.

The limited number of foster placements available for children at present has an impact on how effective the matching process can be for children. 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 indicative of an insufficient amount of foster carers. A recruitment plan is in place to attempt to reduce the number of exemptions. At this inspection there were 22 foster carers with exemptions, which is a significant reduction to the number of exemptions at the time of the last inspection.

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

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 only being available for the last 2 years. It is important that this information is made available as soon as possible so as to enable managers to ensure that foster carers who need it are provided with this training.

All the files examined had safe caring guidelines that are specific to each foster placement and fostered children. These guidelines are drawn up with the foster carers and where appropriate with all household members. It is understood that these guidelines are checked 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 foster care agreement. A policy on acceptable and unacceptable sanctions that can be used by foster carers is available.

The procedure for the arrangements for the protection of children now includes contact details for the local authority and the Commission for Social Care Inspection.

A bullying policy and procedure has been developed and is 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. 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 foster carer agreement.

There are management systems 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. During the inspection a sample of records relating to investigations into allegations were seen. The record of a strategy meeting that concluded no further action would be taken was not available and there was no other record to indicate how this decision was reached. There was evidence that in two further records seen there was a significant delay in presenting the outcome of the investigation to the fostering panel for consideration as to whether the foster carers registration should continue.

Foster carers are notified in writing of any decision to deregister, this includes the reason for the decision and the process and timescale for appeal.

During the last inspection a fostering panel was observed. The panel was well organised and conducted itself in an appropriate and professional manner. There was evidence of all panel members' views being taken into account. At this inspection the minutes from the last three panels held were seen. The panel minutes indicated that there is clear decision making which is fully recorded. The minutes also indicated that the panel is performing a quality assurance function in terms of decision-making around the approval and continued approval of foster carers and recommendations around future social work practice.

Enjoying and Achieving

The intended outcomes these Standards are:

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

The Commission considers Standards 7, 13, and 31 the key standards to be inspected at least once during a 12 month period.

JUDGEMENT – The intended outcomes for these Standards are

7,13,31

A fostering service is provided which values and promotes children's diversity and tries to ensure that all children have equal opportunity to access activities and promote their social development. However, improvements can be made in relation to accessing respite care services and placing children with carers from the same minority background. Children's priority to attaining their educational attainment is good and children are encouraged to reach their full potential.

EVIDENCE:

Statistical information has been collated by the service in relation to: the demography of the local area, numbers of non white children placed with carers from a different background and the recruitment of carers from ethnic minority groups. Following the analysis of the information available managers of the service acknowledge there is a small number of carer's recruited from minority backgrounds and strategies need to be considered and in place to fully meet the needs of children from minority backgrounds. The service does provide carers with induction and ongoing training in relation to valuing diversity and equality issues. It is evident where children are placed with carers from a different background, arrangements are made to provide for any cultural and religious needs. Literature printed by the service is printed in predominately in English, although arrangements can be made for literature to be printed in other languages were necessary. As previously identified there are plans for a disability inclusion officer to be appointed and there is a clear focus on ensuring that children's opportunities for social development through access to a range of activities and initiatives is promoted. During the inspection the inspector met with a group of children who are involved in the "My ideal foster carer dvd" project which is being facilitated by the cultural inclusion officer. It is envisaged that children will be instrumental in the completion of this dvd which will be used as a training/information tool for new carers and will also be helpful for children whose care is to be met via the fostering service. During discussions with the children it is evident they valued the opportunities to access varied activities provided and the dedication of staff in running the various schemes.

Questionnaires received and discussions with children indicate foster carers value children's education and support them in relation to the completion of homework etc. Some children have access to a computer provided by their carer and this is useful in completing assignments and preparing for GCSEs and other examinations. Other children that don't have this resource could use the school or library facilities. The Looked After Children Education Services (LACES) team have the remit of promoting the educational attainment and school attendance of looked after children. LACES provide support and advice to carers and children regarding education and training opportunities where required. Files inspected contained personal education plans statements of educational needs etc. and carers are provided with copies of these. Children and carers benefit from the virtual school which is a forum bringing together professionals from different agencies to address matters that can impede and to advance educational matters and attainment. A significant number of children and carers state there are issues around receiving consent for educational trips and other activities organised by schools with consent often being delayed disadvantaging the young person.

The fostering service provides short-term break and family link schemes. Appropriate policies and procedures are in place in relation to these schemes with emphasis on promoting parents involvement.

Information provided during the last inspection indicated there was 4 children on the waiting list to receive this service, during this inspection the inspector was informed 7 children are currently on the list awaiting matching to a short breaks carer. As identified during the last inspection there is continued drive to recruit more carers to this scheme although the success to recruit additional carers has been limited. Managers of the service recognise that this aspect remains an area of improvement to ensure demands of the service is met.

Making a Positive Contribution

The intended outcomes these Standards are:

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

The Commission considers Standards 10 and 11 the key standards to be inspected at least once during a 12 month period.

JUDGEMENT – The intended outcomes for these Standards are

10 and 11

Contact between children in foster care and their family and friends is promoted by the fostering service. The fostering service consults young people to find out their views.

EVIDENCE:

Evidence gathered during the case tracking exercise indicated children's contact arrangements are being met and promoted in accordance with their wishes, needs and care planning. Records indicate children's views with regards to contact had been ascertained and provided adequate information regarding contact arrangements.

Issues around contact are discussed within foster care preparation training. During this training prospective foster carers have the opportunity to speak with an existing foster care to discuss a range of issues including contact where necessary.

Records and interviews with a sample of foster carers, provided evidence that a variety of support is provided to foster carers in dealing with difficult contact situations that may arise. In the sample of foster carers visited, the carers were aware of the need to promote contact and the possible impact of this on children's lives. Financial support is provided to carers in order to ensure contact takes place.

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

The children spoken with indicated they 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 children's 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 whom to approach if they needed to make a complaint. A referral can be made by a social worker for a young person to see an independent visitor, where appropriate.

There is a children's involvement officer who ensures that young people are kept informed about local and national issues affecting young people in care. The children's involvement officer is involved in a number of projects to enable the views of children and young people to be heard on a range of issues in different forums within the Borough Council.

As previously identified staff in consultation with children in various types of foster placements are working with children and other groups to produce a My Ideal Foster Carer DvD. Last year children were instrumental in the development of a My ideal Social worker DvD. Children have been consulted around the leisure plans about activities children want to pursue and this informs the "Step into Leisure" which are run through each school holiday. The cultural inclusion officer works closely with the children's involvement officer to progress the above initiatives. It is evident there is a strong emphasis on the fostering service seeking the views of children to the extent where children commented they are always filling in questionnaires. In response to this suggestion by children the fostering service are considering amalgamating the consultation process for their LAC review and review of their foster carer.

Achieving Economic Wellbeing

The intended outcomes these Standards are:

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

The Commission considers Standards 29 the key standard to be inspected at least once during a 12 month period.

JUDGEMENT – The intended outcomes for these Standards are

29

Foster carers receive an allowance and agreed expenses in respect of the type of fostering service provided. Payments are made in good time with good administrative systems in place to support these payments.

EVIDENCE:

The numerous schemes within the fostering service receive differing levels of allowances and payments according to the stated terms of the scheme. Carers receive agreed expense allowance payments where appropriate. Carers that spoke with the inspectors indicated that payments are received timely and any mistakes quickly rectified. Appropriate computerised payment databases are maintained.

As identified during the last inspection the arrangements for carer's payments is under review with a competency based payment for skills model likely to be introduced. The inspectors are informed that the review of foster carer payments will also take into account sessional payments made to respite carers. Foster carers have been continually consulted regarding these proposed changes.

Management

The intended outcomes these Standards are:

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

The Commission considers Standards 17, 21, and 24 the key standards to be inspected at least once during a 12 month period.

JUDGEMENT – The intended outcomes for these Standards are

1,2,4,16,17,21,22,23,24,25 and 32

The fostering service has a clear statement of aims and objectives. The service is well managed by staff with appropriate skills and experience with improved systems being in place for monitoring the activities and performance of the service. There are clear strategies in place for supporting foster carers. Foster carers have access to a range of training to enable them to develop their skills. The case records relating to children and the administrative records are appropriately maintained.

Improvements could be made to the timescale for managing complaints.
Further work is needed around auditing the current training needs of foster carers.

EVIDENCE:

The statement of purpose for the fostering service is detailed containing informative information regarding health, education and therapeutic services available to children and young people looked after by the service. As recommended during the last inspection there are plans for the document to be approved by elected members. A children's guide is available and this is aimed at children 10 years and younger. Since the last inspection a guide aimed for younger children aged from 5 years has been drafted. The inspectors are informed that further work is to be undertaken to provide a guide for children with special needs.

The management of the service have the necessary business and management skills to effectively manage the service and social work staff have the necessary knowledge and experience of childcare and fostering. The team manager of the fostering service was appointed in August 1990 and holds a recognised professional qualification in social work. Social work staff that spoke with the inspectors indicate they receive structured supervision and support that they clearly value. The manager has and continuous to undertake training pertinent to her role and responsibilities and has begun an Institute of Learning and Management course and is hoping to complete the course within twelve months. The service manager position, which is responsible for the overall management of the service has recently become vacant although there are plans to recruit to this post. An experienced person is currently overseeing this role.

The manager and staff within the fostering service have defined roles and responsibilities and copies of these are maintained on their personnel records. The vacant service manager post has a generic job description that reflects aspects of management responsibilities within the children's service. As recommended during the last inspection the job description should also include roles and responsibilities specific to the overall management and monitoring of the fostering service. There are clear lines of responsibility and accountability within the service and staff and carers that spoke with the inspectors are aware of these. The fostering service has a defined, devolved budget and the acting service manager is responsible for the delivery and review systems of the services financial processes and systems. Purchasers of services are provided with information relating to charges of services through Individual service agreements. Since the last inspection a Taskforce Team has recently been set with a terms of reference to include monitoring progress, developing and implement a recruitment of carers strategy and develop a workforce within fostering to meet the demands of the service. The group meets weekly and is attended by numerous professionals from a number of agencies. Although the group is in its infancy the aims and objectives of this group should enhance the monitoring systems already in place.

There are systems in place to determine, prioritise and monitors workloads. Staff that spoke with the inspectors indicate they felt very well supported, and although busy felt that caseloads are manageable. The team is experienced with a low turn over of staff. Morale within the team seems very good and staff indicate they are provided with very good training opportunities. Since the last inspection there has been some changes to the systems within the team with staff undertaking less "duty" responsibilities, although caseloads have increased slightly as a result of this change. There is evidence in place at the time of the inspection indicating the service is deliverable within resources in place. As indicated during the last inspection the management review of the flow and volume of work within the fostering service is now being undertaken in order to determine future appropriate staffing arrangements within the team. The vast majority of foster carer questionnaires received praised the work undertaken by the team with nearly three quarters of carers stating they felt there is not enough staff within the team. One comment included, "The fostering service do the best job possible with the resources they have." The inspectors are informed that since the last inspection the administrative support within the team has increased although staff felt that further admin support would be beneficial.

Since the last inspection there has been a lot of progress in ensuring foster carers receive an annual review of the registration. However, it is noted there remains some work needed to continue to reduce the numbers of carers that have an exemption to their registration. The management recognised this aspect remains an area of improvement.

The fostering service has a clear strategy for supporting carers, which includes training, provision of information, support from an allocated supervising social worker, supervisory visits, support groups and support services. A Foster Carer Handbook is available which provides a good reference point for foster carers. Out of office hours foster carers can contact an emergency duty social worker, foster care co-ordinators are available to provide support until 10pm and supervising social workers provide foster carers with a contact telephone number to use in an emergency.

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 Looked After Children Education Service provides support to foster carers around education matters. Leisure provision is organised by the Cultural Inclusion Officer and the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service and the Looked After Children's nurses provide support around emotional and physical health issues.

There was evidence from the foster panel and from an examination of records that reviews of foster carers' registration have taken place on an annual basis. Supervision is provided to foster carers by a supervising social worker. The foster carers interviewed were aware of the role of the fostering service supervising worker as were the supervising workers themselves.

All files inspected contained a signed foster care agreement that covers all issues in Schedule 5 of the Fostering Services Regulations 2001. Looked After Children documentation provides the basis for the placement agreement. In general, all foster carers visited had a placement agreement. As already indicated this information was not available in one placement visited.

The issue of uncertainty amongst foster carers as to who can give consent to school trips arose again at this inspection. This was discussed with the manager who advised that further attempts would be made to address this matter.

Supervision is provided to foster carers by the supervising social worker. All carers currently have a supervising social worker allocated to them. The timescales for undertaking supervisory visits by supervising social workers are written in the foster care agreement.

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 documentation in relation to a sample of complaints was examined. 2 complaints managed at Stage 1 had received a final response around 10 weeks after the complaint was made. The complaint procedure does not give a timescale for responding to complaints at Stage 1, although a 28 day timescale is usually worked to. It is recommended that this timescale be formally recorded in the complaint procedure.

The pre-approval training for foster carers covers the issues identified in the National Minimum Standards. New foster carers reported that during the approval process they were given sufficient information to enable them to undertake their role adequately.

A discussion with the team manager and an examination of the records of training available for foster carers indicated that there is a range of training on offer. This covers the training identified in the National Minimum Standards. The staff development officer, family placement team and foster care liaison officers meet in order to identify training needs and to look at what factors need to be addressed to enable foster carers to attend training events.

Training is provided both in-house and from outside agencies depending on the training need. Experienced foster carers are involved in contributing to the training provided. 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.

A system for identifying, which foster carers have had which training is available but only provides information for the last 2 years. It is important a record of training provided to foster carers at least within the last 5 years is available in order this information can be used to effectively target training resources.

There is a written policy on case recording available. The files examined contained the relevant information. In general, foster carers reported having received sufficient information to enable them to care for the children they are looking after. Foster carers interviewed knew of the child's care plan and the reasons why they needed to be looked after. Induction and follow on training covers the importance of information relating to the child's life history for their emotional development. The foster carers visited were aware of the importance of recording significant life events and retaining memorabilia. The foster carers visited at this inspection were storing records securely.

At the last inspection the record storage systems were seen and there were appropriate arrangements to hold paper and computerised records securely. A sample of files seen at this inspection indicated the team manager and team leaders sign case records in order to monitor the quality of the information recorded. A register of all children placed with foster carers and a register of all carers was made available during the inspection and was accurately maintained.

Just under a quarter of the carers provided by the fostering service are 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 supervising social worker who undertakes supervisory visits and is available for support.

There is recognition amongst the supervising social workers of the particular relationship and position of family and 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 sample of records examined at this inspection.

Discussion with the manager indicated difficulties have been experienced in encouraging some family and friends who are foster carers to undertake training. Continued efforts are being made to encourage this. This has involved working alongside local community groups to set up a support service for foster carers, which could provide training on an informal basis.

There are guidelines for the placement of children in an emergency with a relative or a friend. These guidelines cover the matters detailed in Regulation 38 of the Fostering service Regulations 2002. A sample of files examined indicated that this procedure is being followed.

SCORING OF OUTCOMES

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

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

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

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

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

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

MAKING A POSITIVE CONTRIBUTION	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
10	3
11	4

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

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

yes

Are there any outstanding requirements from the last inspection?

STATUTORY REQUIREMENTS

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

No.	Standard	Regulation	Requirement	Timescale for action
1	FS6	11	The foster service provider must ensure that where children share a bedroom and there is an identified risk to the welfare of the children, a thorough risk assessment is made available to foster carers that, details the actions they are to take to minimise the risks presented.	21/02/06
2	FS9	12	The foster service provider must ensure that there is a full written record of the investigation into allegations of abuse and their outcome.	21/02/06
3	FS9	12	The foster service provider must ensure that were the approval of foster carers is to be considered, at the fostering panel, following an allegation of abuse, there is no delay in presenting this information to the fostering panel.	21/02/06
4	FS15	5, 7 and 20	The foster service provider must ensure that a recent photograph is available for any person carrying on, managing or working for the fostering service.	21/02/06
5	FS12	17	The foster service provider must ensure that all carers including	01/04/06

			respite and kinship carers are provided with written information in relation to medical consent for medical treatment of any child placed with them. (this requirement remains outstanding from the last inspection timescale 25/02/05)	
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RECOMMENDATIONS

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

No.	Refer to Standard	Good Practice Recommendations
1	FS15	A written record should be made of all interviews held with prospective staff, including those who transfer to the fostering service from another department within Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council.
2	FS15	A written record should be made of telephone enquiries to follow up written references.
3	FS22	Further attempts should be made to ensure that foster carers and field social workers are clear about the arrangements for giving consent to school trips.
4	FS22	It is recommended that a 28 day timescale for responding to complaints made at Stage 1, is recorded in the complaint procedure.
5	FS23	A record of training provided to foster carers, at least within the last 5 years, should be made available, so that this information can be used to effectively target training resources.
6	FS12	It is recommended that any review of the fostering services integrated computer system take into account the health care information systems of looked after children in order that appropriate and up to date health care information is held and easily collated.
7	FS12	Arrangements should be in place to ensure that carers keep an accurate record of all prescribed medication administered including for what reason medication not administered for example if a child refuses.
8	FS4	The responsible individuals job description should include role and responsibilities specific to the overall management and monitoring of the fostering service.

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