



*Making Social Care
Better for People*

inspection report

FOSTERING SERVICE

London Borough of Bexley Fostering

**Howbury Centre
Slade Green Road
Erith
Kent
DA8 2HX**

Lead Inspector
Sue Grindlay

Announced Inspection
6th February 2006 9.30

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 London Borough of Bexley Fostering

Address Howbury Centre
Slade Green Road
Erith
Kent
DA8 2HX

Telephone number

Fax number

Email address

Provider Web address

Name of registered provider(s)/company (if applicable) London Borough of Bexley

Name of registered manager (if applicable) Tina Coburn

Type of registration Local Auth Fostering Service

Category(ies) of registration, with number of places

SERVICE INFORMATION

Conditions of registration:

Date of last inspection 28th February 2005

Brief Description of the Service:

Bexley Social Services fostering service is provided by an integrated Children's Placement Service, located within the Children's Resources and Commissioning Department, which also provides the council's adoption service. The team consists of a Unit manager, Practice manager, three senior social workers, five full-time and five part-time social workers, three social work assistants, a team administrator and three administrative assistants. The Statement of Purpose covers the work of the team.

SUMMARY

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

The inspection was undertaken by two inspectors over three days and included interviews with key staff, a group interview with supervising social workers, a meeting with the fostering executive, attendance at the Fostering Panel and visits to four foster carers. Questionnaires were received and analysed for four foster carers, six young people and nineteen placing social workers. The manager's self assessment report and the pre-inspection questionnaire were not received at the Commission until the last working day before the inspection began. Other documents looked at included carers' and children's files, complaints, training and recruitment folders and staff profiles. Statutory requirements made at the last inspection had been addressed, and six recommendations are renewed this year. A further nine recommendations are made.

What the service does well:

The service provides foster carers who are seen as warm, caring and committed to the young people in their care. They are well supported by skilled and experienced workers.

What has improved since the last inspection?

The new IT system has improved information gathering, and computers are now available for every full time supervising social worker. There has been a significant investment in recruitment of carers, particularly those from ethnic minorities, and the diversity of approved carers has increased, offering better opportunities for matching. Reviews of carers are now chaired by senior social workers from childcare teams, and this brings a necessary impartiality to the process. Also the department has responded to the wishes of young people about how their reviews are conducted, and where possible there is now continuity of the chairperson.

What they could do better:

The department must ensure that the commitment of foster carers and supervising social workers is not compromised by excessive demands. Placements should be made on the basis of good childcare practice, not through expediency or budget constraints. The model of a competency based assessment, and a review format linked to competencies should continue to be developed.

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 outcome for this Standard is:

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

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

JUDGEMENT – we looked at the outcome for Standard:

12

The fostering service puts a high priority on the health needs of children and young people in its care.

EVIDENCE:

There was evidence that carers had actively promoted the health of the young people in their care, taking them to hospital appointments and putting them in touch with the Looked After Children's Nurse. The Nurse had been instrumental in obtaining up to date immunisation records and these were seen on children's files in the fostering department. A Sexual Health Nurse is also available to advise and assist foster carers. One foster carer spoken to had been proactive in obtaining orthodontic treatment for the young person in placement. Medical consent was seen on some but not all carers' files and it is recommended that supervising social workers audit their files to ensure this information is available to carers (**Recommendation 1**). The fostering executive had obtained an example of a Children's Health folder in an A5 ringbinder format that is used by another local authority which, when complete, would give a complete picture of the young person's health record and would stay with them throughout their time of being looked after. The fostering executive said that the response had been positive in that it was "*an excellent resource*", but added, "*it never gets done*". This project is said to be "*on the back burner*" as the department has other priorities in complying with government requirements for information gathering. It is recommended that the development of a health folder be considered a priority (**Recommendation 2**).

Staying Safe

The intended outcomes for these Standards are:

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

The Commission considers Standards 3, 6, 8, 9, 15 and 30 the key standards to be inspected at least once during a 12 month period.

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

3, 6, 8, 9, 15 and 30

Children are protected and safeguarded by the systems and processes in place within the fostering department.

EVIDENCE:

Standard 3 – The manager of the Fostering and Adoption Team has been in post for nearly two years, and has the breadth of experience and training to fulfil the role. All the staff are appropriately qualified and have relevant skills and experience. One social work assistant is currently undertaking a degree in social work, and one social worker is completing the Practice Teaching Award at Goldsmiths' College. All the staff are registered with the general Social Care Council and criminal record bureau checks are up to date.

Standard 6 – The Statement of Purpose states, *"Our purpose is to provide good quality alternative care for children and young people that reflects and values individual needs and differences"*. Feedback from placing social workers, and young people, and visits to carers in their own homes indicated that children and young people had been placed with warm and nurturing carers in homes that were comfortable and welcoming places to be. Thirteen out of nineteen placing social workers said that the foster carers were looking after the young person, *"very well indeed"*, and comments such as, *"He is made to feel wanted"*, *"she goes the extra mile for the child"* and *"the child is the main focus"* indicate how child centred these placements are. The quality of the

relationship between the young person and the foster carer often made the difference in whether a placement succeeded. One young person in placement said, *"You can talk to [the carers] about anything"*. Another carer had done some excellent work with two young people, both placed in emergencies, after the breakdown of their previous placements. Foster carers had been invited to contribute to a revised version of the Good Practice Guide. The fostering team now includes transport in its Health and Safety report for foster carers' reviews, and the supervising social worker is required to check drivers' current MOT and insurance. This had not been included in a health and safety check done in December, and the department must ensure that the new templates are available for this.

Standard 8 – The department has a matching policy, and the referral form states the criteria for placing under 'Any Special Requirements', but staff said that this was usually only simple things like geography, placement as only child, or a female only placement. The department has targeted the recruitment of black and ethnic minority carers and carers for older children, and this is discussed in more depth under standard 7. A 'treatment foster care scheme' for young people with mental health issues, or who are at risk of secure accommodation is to be established, but no existing foster carers have come forward, so there will be a specific recruitment initiative. One carer is going to Panel to change her age range to 0-11, as she was finding older children more challenging. Despite this proposal, teenagers were still being placed with her. Some carers said that nearly all of their recent placements had been emergencies and were invariably from placement breakdowns. One carer stated that she is often pressurised to take a young person *"just for one night"*. The supervising social worker promises to move the young person the next day but then doesn't because, *"there's nowhere else for them to go"*. One carer recently had a child with her for six weeks on this basis. She phoned the department every day, asking for her to be moved, as she was having a negative effect on the dynamics of the household and this was jeopardising the two existing placements. Other members of staff endorsed this and said, *"good carers are overloaded"*. They highlighted the fact that in-house carers would be used in preference to using carers from independent fostering agencies, whether or not it was a good match. The manager confirmed that independent fostering agencies are used as a last resort rather than as part of a commissioning policy. There is a further example of this under standard 7. One staff member said, *"Children move from carer to carer rather than an initial good placement with an IFA"*. The Head of Children's Resources and Commissioning said that young people are placed with IFAs when their needs cannot be met within Bexley's own resources, but individual workers are unlikely to be aware of the number of such placements. Another said, *"budgets take priority over children's needs"*. It is recommended that placements are made on the basis of good child care practice not for expediency or on the basis of budget constraints (**Recommendation 3**). Placement agreement meetings are now chaired by the supervising social

worker, and this ensures that the child's needs are identified and can be met by the foster carer.

Standard 9 – Each foster carer is now writing their own safer caring policy, and this is devised and revised according to the specific child in placement. One foster carer demonstrated her awareness of safer caring issue with measures put in place to safeguard a young person who had been sexually abused, and the carer had handled her disclosure sensitively. The department is currently using the London Child Protection Committee document, "Working with Sexually Active Young People under the Age of 18 – A Pan London Protocol", and this will be disseminated to foster carers once the policy is agreed. All the placing social workers who responded to the questionnaire felt that the child they were responsible for was safe in their placement. Four out of six young people who answered the questionnaire said that punishments were fair and had been discussed with them; four said they were not bullied, and all six said that they were not subject to restraint. Training to carers on managing difficult behaviour is to take place in May this year.

Standard 15 – Staff employed in the fostering team were appropriately trained and experienced, and copies of professional qualifications were on their files. In addition, all the social workers in the team had registered with the General Social Care Council, and copies of their registration documents and criminal records bureau checks were held within the department. Some staff records were inspected. They were in good order and the required checks and documentation was in place.

Standard 30 – All first reviews, changes of approval and new assessments are brought to Panel. The Panel was appropriately chaired and constituted, and all the members of the Panel were enabled to participate in the discussion. There was appropriate input from health and education experts, and a recent member who was herself a care leaver felt able to contribute appropriately to the discussion. There were no men on the Panel on that day and only one black Panel member, and it is recommended that the Panel composition has greater diversity in order to best reflect the children and carers whom it serves (**Recommendation 4**). The regulations specify a Panel member who has been a foster carer in the last two years. It is believed that the Panel member with fostering experience may not meet this timescale and this should be checked to ensure compliance with the regulations. The policy document that describes the function of the Panel does not specify the quality assurance role, but the Chair did raise practice issues, and the attendance at Panel of the Unit manager ensured that issues could be brought back to the team for discussion. Leaflets for social workers and prospective foster carers attending panel are currently in draft and give useful information about the panel composition, its function and how it works.

Enjoying and Achieving

The intended outcomes for these Standards are:

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

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

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

7, 13 and 31

The fostering service ensures that young people are offered a service that promotes equality of opportunity and the chance for all children and young people to achieve their potential.

EVIDENCE:

Standard 7 – The Fostering Team has taken on board the recommendations from the previous inspection concerning the issues around diversity. There has been training for staff, panel members and foster carers around diversity, and a new course around food and spirituality is about to be held. An attractive flyer invited carers to sample things like jolloff rice or jerk chicken. The department also produces a colourful and informative guide to hair and skin care for black children, having identified the need for such at a training course. There is evidence that where children are placed transracially, additional input is given to support the young people, for example, two African/Caribbean boys placed with white carers have a mentor from their own racial background. Supervising social workers stated that the foster carers had been proactive in obtaining information, books and, in one case, taking the young person to a mosque to support their cultural background. The Equality Impact Advisor is attending support groups, and information relating to religious or cultural festivals is being circulated to team members to pass on to carers. An impressive range of initiatives has been made in the recruitment of black and ethnic minority carers, and this is beginning to yield results in terms of increasing placement choice. However some supervising social workers considered that the department was not committed to same race placements,

and would not agree to fund an independent fostering placement in order to provide an appropriate match in terms of ethnicity. This has already been raised under standard 8 and further highlights the need for better matching.

Standard 13 – The education of Looked After Children has a high profile in the borough. Education Liaison officers and the educational psychologist from the Children’s Planning and Safeguarding Team offer joint training to social workers, foster carers and schools. This includes advice on suitable provision, preparing for a Personal Education Plan and liaison with other local authorities as necessary. Four of the six young people who answered the questionnaire were positive about the help that foster carers gave them with their study. One said that the best thing that had happened in foster care was, *“My behaviour is much better and I go to college”*. Another said, *“getting back into school”*. In a Panel discussion around a new applicant, all Panel members showed demonstrable concern about the broader issue of raising the educational attainments of looked after children. The Foster Carers’ newsletter drew the attention of carers to a new website on the education of looked after children. The Fostering Team is promoting a drive to prevent children from being taken out of school in term time. However it was noted that a training course, entitled *“Education Protects”* in September last year only attracted four foster carers. Nevertheless the initiatives are in place and this standard is exceeded.

Standard 31- The short breaks family placement scheme for children with disabilities continues to grow. Equipment provided for children included a chairlift for a child, and stair rails for short-term carers. No inspection was made of this part of the service on this occasion.

Making a Positive Contribution

The intended outcomes for these Standards are:

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

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

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

10 and 11

The fostering service enables children and young people to voice their opinions about the care they receive, and promotes contact with their families of origin whenever it is in the child's interests to do so.

EVIDENCE:

Standard 10 – Supervising social workers support carers to promote contact either in their own homes or in one of the two family centres. One foster care said in the questionnaire response to this question, *"I firmly believe this is very important. As well as making sure contact takes place I encourage children to write, phone, give gifts/cards etc; I like to work well with the children's family"*. A placing social worker described how a carer had supervised contact, 'modelling' how to manage the children's behaviour, and said that the mother benefited from this input. Another carer had offered to go with the children's birth mother to a course on autism, and had undertaken days out with the children and their parents to support the contact. Another carer, describing the young person's father as strict, added, *"He just wants the best for his daughter"*. Where placing social workers said that the child was subject to restrictions on contact, they said that they were satisfied with the fostering service's management of these restrictions. Some carers had acted as back up for other carers in taking children to London for train links. This generosity of spirit and understanding of the importance of the children's families of origins shows good practice. This standard is exceeded.

Standard 11 – Bexley's policies and procedures ensure that children who are looked after have a voice and know that they will be heard. The Children's Rights Officer produces a regular magazine, runs groups for young people and issues questionnaires every two years to gauge any issues that may need to be

tackled, preparing a report on the findings. As a children's advocate she is usually the first port of call for a grievance. She works with the young person to deal with any problems before they become a complaint. She runs groups for young people that are activity based. Young people have representation on the Corporate Parenting Forum with councillors and senior managers, and are empowered to raise issues of concern also through this process. Six of the nineteen placing social workers said they had not been given information on the Fostering Service's complaints procedure, but foster carers and young people were aware of the complaints process. Four out of six young people who responded to the questionnaire said that their opinions were listened to, and one added, *"If there's a problem with the other children, my carer does her best to sort it out"*. Five complaints were made to the fostering team in the last twelve months. The log states the name of the person who investigated the complaint, the date completed and whether the complaint was substantiated. One young person was responded to in full by letter, and was praised for taking, *"a mature and reasonable view of the matter"*. There was no indication on file of the resolution of the complaint from one young person about the education she receives, nor from one young person who complained about her placement. In both cases, senior members of staff were able to fill in the picture, and in both cases there had been significant further work done to ensure the complainant was satisfied. Although this information was clearly recorded somewhere it is recommended that the complaints log have some record of the action taken, the complaint resolution and whether the complainant was satisfied, to give a complete picture of the way the complaint was handled (**Recommendation 5**).

Achieving Economic Wellbeing

The intended outcomes for these Standards are:

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

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

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

29

Allowances to foster carers are fair and costs are broken down as a guide to carers. One off payments should be reimbursed more speedily.

EVIDENCE:

Standard 29- Carers appeared content with their payments, which are well above the new national minimum allowances for foster carers proposed by the government, and these seemed to be made on time. However there were several comments made about paying upfront for specific items and then having to, in their words, "*fight to get the money back*". Supervising social workers considered this was "*fair comment*". Some carers felt aggrieved that the department is saying they do not want placements to break down, but are not prepared to invest. One said, "*When you're dealing with damaged people, you can't put a financial value on it*". It is understood that there may need to be negotiation with district teams on expenditure, but it is recommended that payments to carers are made in a timely way, and they are not penalised for responding to children's needs. This is therefore a renewed recommendation **(Recommendation 6)**. A review of the fostering service is underway and issues to be discussed include respite and holiday pay, and payment of retainers.

Management

The intended outcomes for these Standards are:

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

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

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

1, 5, 16, 17, 18, 19, 21, 23, 24, 25, 26 and 32

The fostering service is managed effectively, carers are well supported and records are maintained as required by law.

EVIDENCE:

Standard 1- The Fostering Service has a Statement of Purpose, last revised in October 2005, and all the staff said they had copies. Asked whether it reflected the team's practice, one staff member said, "Yes, it does and lots more". Placing social workers were divided about whether they had received a copy of the statement of purpose, with twelve of the nineteen saying they had not received a copy. It is therefore recommended that it be re-issued to the childcare teams (**Recommendation 7**). In the last inspection it was recommended that children coming into foster care be given more information about what that entailed. The borough has produced a booklet called, '*Being Looked After by Bexley*' that outlines what children can expect from the service. The design is eye-catching and the wording clear and unambiguous.

Standard 5 – A further recommendation of the last inspection was the recruitment of a practice manager. This has now been actioned and the practice manager is in post. She is an experienced worker who has worked in the Children's Placement Service for over thirteen years. She is responsible for the overall work of the team, supervising social workers, and deputising for the unit manager in her absence. The three senior social workers in the team have delegated responsibilities in respect of recruitment, staff training and duty.

Standard 16- The borough has introduced a new database system called Carefirst 21. Some social workers have already received training in using this, and it is hoped to improve efficiency by enabling social workers and their supervisors to log on during supervision, and download information such as carers' reviews. Social workers receive supervision once a fortnight for one and a half hours. At present workers in the team deal with both fostering and adoption, and there is some indication that staff would be resistant to separating out the roles. However the reality is that there are "*tight timescales for adoption work*", and also increasing pressure to meet timescales for the assessment of foster carers, and this must prove to be something of a juggling act for managers and workers alike. Some social workers were unhappy with the idea of setting a panel date for prospective carers at the start of the assessment and considered it might compromise the thoroughness of the process. The drive to recruit more carers means that there may be difficulties in allocating these carers for assessment. The unit manager stated that she had funds to contract outside assessors to do the assessments, but these workers need to be supervised during the assessment process and, as one staff member pointed out, they also need to be allocated to a supervising social worker once they are approved. All three foster carers who completed the questionnaire said that there were not enough staff in the fostering service but that they did a very good job. Although the team has no vacant social worker posts, some social workers said they felt overloaded and under pressure. A manager confirmed that all team members are within their caseload weighting points. However, some supervising social workers considered that the caseload management scheme was unfair as the weighting for the supervision of a carer is always one point, regardless of the number of young people in placement, or the distance to travel. This should be borne in

mind, and a review made of the caseload monitoring scheme to ensure that stress does not affect team morale (**Recommendation 8**). The team is supported by a group of administrators. One administrator was heard taking a call from a prospective carer making an initial expression of interest. She dealt with the call in a professional way, indicating when he could expect a social worker to call, using his name, and taking a clear message to pass on to the team. Some social workers said that they had to do their own filing, and this was very time consuming. It is recommended that managers consider whether social workers' time is best used in this way given that the main purpose of the role of the administrative assistant on their job description is to provide "*complete and comprehensive administrative and secretarial support to the team*" (**Recommendation 9**).

Standard 17 – The recruitment of foster carers is an important task of the team, and this is conducted in a thorough and robust way. The borough has particularly targeted ethnic minority carers through advertisements in the African Caribbean Business Directory and through road shows in Bexleyheath Broadway mall and Bluewater. Postcards with pictures of children from different ethnic groups were distributed to community centres, health clubs, G.P. surgeries, libraries and so on. In the last year twenty new carers have been approved of which three were from ethnic minorities. There are a further four ethnic minority carers in assessment. Despite the high profile campaign to recruit, the threshold is high, and carers are counselled out at an early stage if there are issues that might indicate their unsuitability for the task. The process of assessment includes a four day preparation group covering topics from the Fostering Network's Skills to Foster Training Pack. Supervising social workers are offered training to give them the opportunity to facilitate this training and to increase the pool of trainers. Prospective carers are observed during this training, and these observations provide material for discussion during the assessment and are incorporated in the final assessment. Four separate referees are contacted, including a member of the applicant's family, and employers are routinely contacted now, whether or not the applicant has worked in the field of childcare. Training for staff in the competency model was delivered in October 2004 and the competency model was introduced in January 2005. The Annual Review format was amended to reflect competencies in December 2004 and was implemented in May last year. This standard is exceeded.

Standard 18 – There is corporate insurance cover to protect costs arising as a result of claims against carers. Carers can contact the emergency duty team after hours. Supervising social workers said that they tried to show appreciation to their carers with 'Thank You' cards, but that the department could do more to value carers, such as social gatherings. A planned summer fun day did not take place, although this could have been a good occasion to show carers that their work is valued and to engender a sense of group purpose. Supervising social workers said that they try not to cancel visits and

know that carers appreciate any contact or thanks from the team manager or from the children's planning unit.

Standard 19 – The service runs a programme of training that is available to foster carers and staff alike. Asked in the questionnaire about training accessed during the year, one foster carer wrote, *"Too numerous to list"*. The practice manager is focussing on the new legislation for adoption, cascading information to the team. She made a presentation to the panel on Special Guardianship, highlighting the differences between this, Residence Orders and Adoption Orders.

Standard 21 - Carers are supported and supervised by the department, and a named supervising social worker visits them monthly. There is an agreed format to these meetings and carers sign a copy of the written record of this meeting. The unit manager is asking supervising social workers to ensure that these records are typed from now on. This will aid clarity, as the handwriting on one file looked at was particularly difficult to read. Carers value the support they have from the department. One said in the questionnaire that the best thing about the service was, *"Run efficiently, training is offered, reviews are held on time, support is available when needed"*. Another said that the support to foster carers was, *"first class"*. Reviews are now chaired by a senior social worker from the childcare teams, and this has meant greater independence in the reviewing process. Senior social workers have received training to undertake this role. However there are some tensions in this arrangement. Supervising social workers queried whether they had had training and said that they were inclined to focus more on the child than on the carer. The Unit manager is monitoring this. A scheme offering support to foster carers by way of transport, babysitting or alternative care during the day has enabled carers to feel supported and placements to be maintained. Those who attend support groups value the peer support, although some consider it could be more productive. One carer had been unable to go because she had two small children in placement, but said, *"I did enjoy my support groups"*. Carers had commented especially on the support given by the Special Needs Support Group (SNAP). Experienced carers are paired with new carers in a 'Buddy' scheme and this has proved invaluable for some carers. Supervising social workers were happy to endorse the role played by the child's social worker in helping carers to manage behaviour, but carers themselves complained that social workers were often unavailable, or did not do what they had promised.

Standard 22 – Thirteen out of nineteen placing social workers had been given information about the fostering service's complaints procedure. Complaints made about carers were subject to strategy meetings chaired by members of the Children's Planning and Safeguarding Team, and these were minuted, and records maintained to show the progress of the complaint. The new format for supervising social workers to complete when visiting foster carers gives a

clearer focus to the role. Unannounced visits had been made in the last year on the files looked at, and there was a proforma for recording these visits.

Standard 23 – There is a training programme delivered by staff in the department or from local practitioners, and there is an expectation that carers will attend. Numbers for training courses held at the end of last year were poor. The annual review form may be insufficiently geared to promoting training as an ongoing process. It states, "*Identify areas of additional training needed*", and this implies that training is intended to fill a gap rather than being an opportunity for all carers to increase their skills and to promote good practice. The department's intention is to return to previous practice of 'core training', and to deliver this training during evenings and weekends to encourage attendance. The kinship carer did not think the training was necessarily relevant to her, and it is recommended that consideration be given to running a training session for kinship carers. The unit manager said that this had been attempted in the past with little success, but it might be worth exploring once again **(Recommendation 10)**.

Standard 24 – The fostering team has a separate file for each child placed in foster care. These contained the Looked After Children paperwork, and other information such as record of immunisation. Foster carers are required to keep a diary and to log significant information about the child in their care. One carer did separate records for each child in her care on the computer, which was password protected. The social worker praised her recording, which had been used as evidence in court.

Standard 25 – A number of administrative records are now held electronically, and every worker has to input a password to gain access. Other departments cannot access records for the fostering team. The duty team operates a tee-card system that enables vacancies and carer availability to be seen at a glance. Foster carers' files have now been indexed and are easier to access. Not all files had an up to date record of placements in the front of the file. Where they did exist they included the reason why the placement ended. However the filing system used is poor in that it is sometimes difficult to insert paperwork, and the metal tags can be a safety hazard. It is recommended that ring binders or lever arch files are used to enable papers to be filed with ease and to create a more up to date and professional system of filing **(Recommendation 11)**. Files have recently been audited and are to be reviewed on a yearly basis. It is important that young people are aware that there is a record that they can access, and can make their own contribution to. Five of the six young people who answered the questionnaire said 'No' in answer to the question, "*Is there a plan written down saying what the foster home should do for you?*" It is recommended that the role of the foster carer be made clear to young people at the placement agreement meeting and time spent afterwards with the young person to reinforce these expectations **(Recommendation 12)**. Young people attending the Corporate Parenting Forum said that many looked after young people do not understand what their

status is or why they are in care, so the need for more direct work with children has already been flagged up. Young people were keen to give advice to other young people coming into the placement, and examples of these comments were, *"Don't worry about anything. You're in good care"*, and, *"At first you feel like you don't belong there but after a while it goes and the people are really nice"*.

Standard 26 – The fostering team is located on the second floor of one of Bexley council's main administrative buildings. The offices are secure in that a swipe card is needed to enter the offices, and there is a manned reception area to greet callers. Computers are now available for every full-time worker, and all the offices have natural light. A canteen is available on the ground floor, and a trolley service does the rounds twice a day with hot drinks and snacks. However the fostering team do not have access to a kitchen on their floor or even a water cooler and this would improve working conditions **(Recommendation 13)**.

Standard 32 – Of the twenty new carers approved by Bexley last year, seven were kinship carers. This indicates the value placed on preserving children's links with their family of origin. One kinship carer was visited as part of the inspection, and she and the young person in placement were described as, *"very close; he can speak to her about anything"*. The social worker also considered it was, *"a very good place for him to be"*. This carer's input was described as, *"very proactive. [She] advocates on his behalf"*. The supervising social worker was visiting every three months. The carer was content with this degree of support, but it is recommended to review and agree the frequency of visiting at annual reviews **(Recommendation 14)**.

SCORING OF OUTCOMES

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

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

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

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

STAYING SAFE	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
3	3
6	4
8	2
9	3
15	3
30	3

ENJOYING AND ACHIEVING	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
7	3
13	4
31	3

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

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

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

NO

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

RECOMMENDATIONS

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

No.	Refer to Standard	Good Practice Recommendations
1.	FS12	It is recommended that supervising social workers audit their files to ensure that medical consent is available for all young people in placement.
2.	FS12	It is recommended that the development of a health folder as a permanent record for all looked after children be considered as a priority.
3.	FS8	It is recommended that placements are made on the basis of good child care practice, not for expediency or on the basis of budget constraints.
4.	FS30	It is recommended that the Panel composition includes greater diversity in its membership.
5.	FS11	It is recommended that the complaints log include some record of the action taken, resolution of the complaint and whether the complainant was satisfied, in order to give a fuller picture of the way the complaint was handled.
7.	FS1	It is recommended that the fostering team's Statement of Purpose is re-issued to the borough's child care teams.

8.	FS16	It is recommended that a review be made of the caseload monitoring scheme to ensure that it is a fair way of assessing workload, and to ensure that stress does not affect staff morale.
9.	FS16	It is recommended that managers consider whether administrative staff should assist social workers with their filing.
10.	FS23	It is recommended that consideration be given to running a training session for kinship carers.
11.	FS25	It is recommended that ring binders or lever arch files be used to enable workers to file paperwork easily and to create a more up to date and professional system of filing.
12.	FS25	It is recommended that the role of the foster carer be made clear to young people at the placement agreement meeting, and time is spent afterwards with the young person to reinforce these expectations.
13.	FS26	It is recommended that a small kitchen area with a water cooler be provided for staff in the fostering team, to improve working conditions whilst in the office.
14.	FS32	It is recommended that the frequency of visits to kinship carers be discussed and agreed at reviews.

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