FOSTERING SERVICE

London Borough of Croydon Fostering Service

Room FR4.06
Fell Road
Taberner House
Croydon
Surrey
CR9 2BA

Lead Inspector
Elizabeth Brunton

Key Proportionate Announced Inspection
22nd November 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
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 Croydon Fostering Service

Address  Room FR4.06
       Fell Road
       Taberner House
       Croydon
       Surrey
       CR9 2BA

Telephone number  8686 4433  X3718

Fax number  020 8760 5665

Email address

Provider Web address

Name of registered provider(s)/company  London Borough of Croydon

Name of registered manager (if applicable)  Mr Sammy Forbes

Type of registration  Local Auth Fostering Service
SERVICE INFORMATION

Conditions of registration:

Date of last inspection 6th February 2006

Brief Description of the Service:

The London Borough of Croydon’s fostering service provides fostering placements for children looked after by the council and short breaks for children with disabilities. The general fostering service consists of three teams: the Fostering Recruitment/Assessment Team, which is responsible for the recruitment and assessment of foster carers, the Fostering Support Team, responsible for the support, supervision, reviewing and training of foster carers services and the Access to Resources Team, which arranges placements with in-house and independent foster carers and residential homes. Each team is staffed by a manager and a number of social workers/placement officers and administrators. Overall management of the general fostering service is provided by the service manager for fostering and adoption. The short breaks service is separately managed as a resource team within the service to children with disabilities. The Divisional Director of Children’s Services has ultimate responsibility for both fostering services.

The London Borough of Croydon has the largest population of any London borough and the second highest number of looked after children. At the time of inspection, there were 973 children and young people looked after, from a wide range of racial, cultural and religious backgrounds and a large proportion of whom were unaccompanied young people from overseas. This situation places enormous demands on Croydon’s fostering service, which had expanded rapidly over recent years.

At the time of the inspection, there were 244 young people placed with 169 Croydon foster carers, including friends and family carers. 444 young people were placed with foster carers provided by independent agencies. 37 carers were providing short breaks for 39 children with disabilities.
SUMMARY
This is an overview of what the inspector found during the inspection.

The inspection was announced and undertaken by one inspector over five days and a second inspector over three days. Three foster homes were visited, where foster carers and young people in placement were spoken to. Two short breaks carers were also visited and a parent spoken to. Supervising social workers for these foster homes were interviewed and placing social workers spoken to. The service managers responsible for each service, managers of the three fostering teams and the short breaks service and other staff working in the both services were also interviewed. A meeting of the fostering panel was observed and the panel chair interviewed. The safeguarding of children placed in the fostering service was discussed with the independent reviewing manager and a meeting held with representatives from the Croydon Foster Care Association. The looked after children education manager and designated nurse were spoken to, together with children’s rights officer from NCH Rightfully Yours.

Policy and procedure and other records were looked at, including staff recruitment files, foster carers’ and children’s records and fostering panel minutes. The office premises were also inspected. Questionnaires were sent out before the inspection and nine completed questionnaires were received from young people placed with LB Croydon foster carers, seven from foster carers and four from placing social workers.

What the service does well:

LB Croydon was providing an excellent fostering service in a challenging situation and managers and staff are to be commended for this. The service was well monitored and had a record of year on year improvement.

The general fostering and short breaks services were very well managed and staffing levels had kept pace with the expansion of the service. Staff were qualified, experienced, able and committed to providing a good service. Assessment of prospective foster carers and short breaks carers was very thorough and the supervision, support and training provided was of a high standard. Foster carers and short breaks carers were doing very good work in meeting the needs of children and young people. Young people were kept safe in foster homes and said that foster carers had helped them to stay healthy, in touch with their birth families and with their education. There had been few allegations and complaints against foster carers during the past year and those which had been made, had been thoroughly dealt with. The work of the fostering panel was also of a high standard.
What has improved since the last inspection?

Few requirements and recommendations were made at the last inspection in February 2006. Since then, POCA checks had been carried out and annual unannounced visits made to short breaks carers. Staffing of the general fostering service had expanded, following an increase in the size of and demands on the service. Good support from social workers in the children’s teams was reported by young people and foster carers.

What they could do better:

Few requirements are made following this inspection and a number of the recommendations mainly relate to other sections of department. The placement of young people with foster carers outside their terms of approval and reasons for the large proportion of ‘emergency’ placements need to be reviewed. Computers should be provided for all foster homes and foster carers should be notified of the outcome of their annual reviews. The current practice of staff starting work before LB Croydon’s CRB checks are finalised and of foster carers being provisionally approved before all enquiries and checks are complete, should also be reviewed.

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.
DETAILS OF INSPECTOR FINDINGS

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

The fostering service was doing well in meeting the health care needs of young people, with support from other services.

EVIDENCE:

Young people said that foster carers gave them support and advice about health care and this was confirmed by placing social workers. One young person said of her foster carer "she tells me what’s good for my body and cooks healthy food". Older young people spoken to said their foster carers prompted and reminded them to arrange health care appointments and to look after their own health.

Though the main responsibility remained with parents, short breaks carers were meeting the health care needs of children while they were staying with them. The importance of carers administering medications and dealing with specialist health conditions was taken very seriously and many of the children had complex health care needs. Risk assessments were undertaken prior to placement and training was provided for carers in administering medications and carrying out invasive procedures.

The designated nurse for looked after children had provided training for foster carers on a range of topics, which had been well attended. First aid training was compulsory for foster carers. The nurse gave health care advice to individual young people, foster carers and social workers and provided a link with community health care professionals. The designated nurse felt that the targeting of vulnerable children and her accessibility to foster carers and short break carers for advice could be further developed by an increase in the staffing of this service. CAMHS continued to provide a service to young people...
and foster carers. Staff in the fostering service hoped that further development of this service would enable it to provide rapid assessment and intervention when fostering placements ran into difficulties. (see recommendation 5)

LB Croydon’s Children and Young People’s plan published in March 2006 identified key priorities and action needed to improve young peoples’ health. This had resulted in a number of initiatives, including the development of a new outreach service providing information to young people about sexual health and a weekly life-skills group.
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, 30

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

Both services were very well managed by able and experienced managers. Foster carers and short break carers were giving a high standard of care and the safety of their homes was monitored. Matching was generally sound and placement agreement meetings held. Some review of the policy and practice of placing young people with foster carers outside their terms of approval was needed. The placement service was operating well under considerable pressure and with a high demand for ‘emergency’ placements. Young people had been kept safe from abuse and neglect and allegations had been well dealt with. Staff were able and experienced and their recruitment had been thorough, though the practice of allowing some staff to start work before LB Croydon’s CRB checks were complete is questioned. Both the assessment of foster carers and the work of the fostering panel were of a high standard, though greater clarity was needed over when some foster carers became ‘approved’.

EVIDENCE:

Both the general fostering service and the short breaks scheme were very well managed by able and experienced managers and staff spoke positively about
the management of the services. Recruitment references and checks for the managers were checked at previous inspections and not inspected again on this occasion.

Those foster carers and short breaks carers seen were giving excellent care and this was confirmed by young people in placement, a short breaks parent and by placing and supervising social workers. Of the nine young people who completed questionnaires, eight said they always felt well cared for by their foster carers. All homes seen provided safe, warm and comfortable accommodation. Foster carers and short breaks carers were aware of health and safety issues and annual health and safety checks of carers’ homes were seen on file. Parents contributed to the risk assessment of carers’ homes in the short breaks service.

The matching of young people with foster carers appeared to be generally sound and the case-tracked young people felt they had been well matched with their foster carers. One young person wrote “I feel like I’m at home because my foster carer is a really nice person”. A social worker commended the fostering service for “placing young people in well matched placements”. Care was taking over the linking of children with short breaks carers, with much exchange of information and introductory visits. Placement agreement meetings were held at the outset of placements and short breaks to agree the purpose of placements, roles, expectation and day-to-day issues. Minutes of these meetings were on all files seen and the service is to be commended for this.

Placements were arranged by the Access to Resources Team who were operating well under considerable pressure at times and whose staffing was fortunately to be increased. A large proportion of placements were ‘emergency’ placements. This was partly inevitable, as unaccompanied young people were referred from the locally based Home Office for same-day placements. However, staff felt that practice and procedures in the social work teams contributed to some placement requests becoming ‘emergencies’. The NCH worker who was developing a young people’s rights and representation service reported that young people were asking for the opportunity to get to know or at least to meet prospective foster carers before moving in. Given young people’s views, the frequency of ‘emergency’ placements should be looked into, to see whether more pre-planning was possible. (see recommendation 2)

The independent sector was extensively used and nearly twice as many young people were placed in foster homes provided by independent agencies as with in-house foster carers. This meant that the service was able to look outside its own provision for the best match for a young person and foster carers did not report being pressurized to take unsuitable placements. Pan London approved independent agencies were generally used and full information, including evidence of CRB checks, were normally sought on any prospective foster carer.
However, there was a situation earlier in the year when this process was not as thorough as usual, resulting in a LB Croydon child being placed with an independent agency foster carer, where all adult members of the household had not been CRB checked. This apparently happened at a time when the Access to Resources Team were under a great deal of pressure, hence the need for additional staffing. (see recommendation 3)

A number of young people had been placed with foster carers outside their terms of approval. Management agreement had been given to these placements but those forms seen gave little information about why placements were the best available option and in the best interests of the young people concerned. Panel chair’s approval was not sought and due to the pressure on panel time, there was a three/four month delay before these cases could be considered by panel for a change in foster carers’ terms of approval. The panel chair also expressed concern about this practice. Policy and practice should be reviewed, so as to ensure that placements outside foster carers’ terms of approval are made in exceptional circumstances only, where it is in a young person’s best interests and with the proper authorisation. (see requirement 1)

All foster carers and short breaks carers seen were very aware of the importance of child protection and safe caring and all placing social workers who gave their views, considered that young people were safe in their foster homes. There had been twelve allegations made against foster carers since the last inspection, all of which had been properly dealt with. Foster carers had been suspended and their approval reviewed by the panel where necessary. Safe caring was included in prospective foster carers’ and short breaks carers’ preparation training and assessment. However, it is suggested that all carers should draw up safe caring guidelines for their households, in line with this standard. (see recommendation 4)

Records showed there had been few accidents affecting young people in foster homes and these had been properly dealt with and notified. Those foster carers and short breaks carers seen had worked hard at maintaining boundaries and consistency in their approach to young people’s behaviour and with good results. Young people did not report unfair or inappropriate sanctions being imposed and no young people reported being bullied. Extensive information about child protection, safe caring and behaviour management was included in the foster carers’ handbook and a good range of training was provided for foster carers and short break carers in these areas, including safe caring, child protection and allegations against carers and behaviour management. Take-up on training courses had been good and child protection/safe caring was included in carers’ compulsory core training.

Interviews with staff and recruitment records seen showed that staff working in the fostering service had the necessary qualifications, experience, knowledge and skills. Discussion with the human resources recruitment team
showed that the authority had a sound recruitment and selection procedure for
the appointment of staff, which followed good practice in safeguarding children
and young people and included all the necessary references and checks. The
inspection of a sample of social work and administrative staff files showed that
this procedure had been adhered to. The CRBs of a larger sample of staff were
checked and all those seen had been conducted at the appropriate level and
had included the POCA check.

While all files inspected contained a CRB check conducted by the authority, it
was understood that LB Croydon had a policy of allowing staff to start work
before LB Croydon’s CRB checks were complete, provided staff had
satisfactory CRB checks made by previous employers within the past year. This
appeared to be a general policy rather than being applied in exceptional
circumstances. This is a practice which is no longer considered safe for people
working in children’s services and LB Croydon’s policy should be reviewed in
line with current guidance from the CRB. (see recommendation 7)

The Form F assessments of prospective foster carers and short breaks carers
seen were thorough and of a high standard. All references and checks were in
place. There was also a very efficient system for ensuring that foster carers’
CRB and medical checks were regularly updated. This was administered by a
member of staff in a recently established dedicated post. The service is to be
commended for the attention it has paid to this important aspect of
safeguarding children.

From observation of the fostering panel and an interview with the chair, it was
concluded that the panel was effective and thorough. The panel was properly
constituted and had access to legal and medical advice. One member of the
panel had worked with children with disabilities and professional advice from
the short breaks service was made available to panel when required. The chair
was consulted about the recruitment of new panel members and suggested the
addition of an independent member who had been looked after as a child,
when a vacancy next occurred. The chair was very satisfied with the panel,
with the level and spread of expertise and the quality of case discussions.
Consideration of cases presented to panel was thorough, with all members
contributing and discussion was skilfully led by the chair. The chair said there
had been some difficulties in ensuring consistency in the quality of
assessments of family and friend carers carried out in the child care teams.
One such case was dealt with at the panel meeting observed and panel was
unable to agree with the social worker’s recommendations. Some joint
training for panel members and social work staff might be useful, to ensure
that social workers are fully aware of the expectations of the panel. (see
recommendation 13)

Records showed that some panel recommendations for the approval of carers
had been made subject to certain outstanding matters being completed, such
as CRB checks. It would be a safer process, in term of safeguarding, if cases
were presented to panel when all enquiries and checks had been completed. Alternatively, the decision maker could take responsibility for ensuring that any outstanding checks/enquiries had been satisfactorily completed before notifying foster carers of their approval. There also needed to be greater clarity as to the date of approval of such foster carers. (see recommendation 14)

Given the rapid growth of the fostering service over the past two years, there was considerable pressure on panel time. Panel meetings were held fortnightly but even this frequency was causing undue delay in panel being able to consider proposed changes in foster carers’ approval, as mentioned under a previous standard. A selection procedure for panel members was being followed and up-to-date CRB checks were in place. It is suggested that prospective panel members are asked to provide a full employment history, as required for anyone seeking to work for the purposes of a fostering service. (see recommendation 15)
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, 31

Quality in this outcome area was excellent. This judgement has been made using available evidence, including a visit to the service.

Young people’s diversity needs were well met in both services, though some additional recording is recommended. Foster carers were providing good support to young people in their education, with the support of a comprehensive looked after children’s education service. Arrangements for short break care were sensitive to the fact that parents remained the main carers.

EVIDENCE:

Both the staffing of the fostering service and the pool of in-house foster carers were from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds and the service had done well in recruiting carers from diverse backgrounds, to reflect the wide range of young people needing placement. There was a strong commitment to placing young people with carers of the same race, cultural background, religion and language. Management agreement had to be sought for any trans-racial placement and the independent sector could be used in order to provide a better match.

The short breaks service aimed to make same race/religion placements wherever possible. However, there were a number of transracial/transcultural links but staff and carers spoken to stressed the importance of carers having the right attitudes, knowledge and expertise to work well with individual young
people and their families. Records showed that young people’s racial, cultural and linguistic needs had been considered as part of reviews. Staff and carers were well aware of the needs of children with disabilities and had attended training in the Disability Discrimination Act.

Excellent support and training was given to black and Asian foster carers who attended a very popular support group, provided specifically for these carers. There was also a support group for foster carers who were looking after unaccompanied young people. The service is also to be commended for recently holding an impressive celebration event to mark ‘Black History month’, which was attended by approximately 1500 people. Foster carers had been provided with recent training in equality and diversity and in asylum law.

The fostering panel chair said that the fostering panel addressed issues of diversity when considering cases, including how able prospective carers would be to promote anti-discriminatory practice. The chair confirmed that the panel was committed to equalities and gave examples to illustrate this. Some annual reviews of mainstream foster carers seen did not fully explain how placements had supported racial, identity and cultural needs, apart from with food and the panel chair had also noted this. Similarly, supervising social workers’ records of supervisory visits did not always include what foster carers were doing to meet young people’s diversity needs and what resources and support were available, particularly where young people were placed with carers of a different race, cultural background, religion and/or language. However, young people seen in one foster home confirmed that they were being given very good support in following their religion by foster carers who were of a different religion, so this may be a gap in recording rather than in practice. (see recommendation 1)

Those foster carers seen stressed the importance of supporting young people in their education and were working closely with schools in order to achieve this. Almost all young people who completed questionnaires said they always got the right help, so that they could be successful in their education. Young people said that foster carers helped them with homework, supported them in securing college places and in resolving problems in school. One young person who planned to go onto university said of her foster carer “she really encourages me and makes me think I can do well”. Computers had been provided for the majority of foster homes for the use of young people placed. However, the funding for this had now run out and computers were no longer being provided for newly approved foster carers. There was also no back-up support/maintenance service for computers in foster homes. Easy access to a computer is important for young people’s education and should be provided for all young people in foster care. (see recommendation 6)

In the short breaks scheme, parents retained responsibility for their child’s education and liaison with school. However, carers took an active interest in
children’s education and many developed links with schools. Carers also worked at encouraging children to develop their skills and to participate in activities.

A looked after children education team provided a range of services to support young people in their education, including help with reading and other aspects of learning and support to young people transferring to secondary school and to those out of school. This team also provided training for foster carers. An awards ceremony was held annually, at which a large number of young people received awards for progress in education.

LB Croydon recognised the value of family based short breaks for children with disabilities and their families and had continued to develop the service as part of the children with disability service and managed separately from the general fostering service. The service manager, team manager and social workers in the short breaks team gave evidence of how parents were supported in choosing carers for their children and in being fully involved in care planning. Social workers said carers fully recognised the role of birth parents as main carers and this was confirmed by carers seen and the parent spoken to. This parent also expressed appreciation of the support she was receiving from the short breaks service.
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, 11

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

Foster carers were giving good support to young people in maintaining contact with their families. Young people were involved in reviews and their views were sought by foster carers, social workers and in a recent, independent survey. They knew how to make complaints and had the support of a developing children’s rights service.

EVIDENCE:

Foster carers seen were giving good support to young people in their contact with birth families. They showed understanding of the issues and of young people’s feelings. Young people were spoken to who had recently come to this country unaccompanied and having left their families behind. They said their foster carers understood how this experience made them feel. Another young person said it was good to talk to her foster carer after family visits and to share her worries about her mother’s health. Social workers spoken to confirmed that foster carers were supporting young people well in their family contact. Foster carers spoke positively about the local contact centre ‘Red Gables’ which was used for family contact but were less impressed by some of the council facilities, which they said lacked space, toys and other equipment and facilities. The service manager said that the venues used for family contact in the borough were in the process of being improved. In the short breaks service, carers spoken to considered contact and liaison with children’s parents to be an essential part of their work. How carers had worked with
birth families was an important part of their reviews and parents’ comments had been noted.

Seven of the nine young people who completed questionnaires said their foster carers always listened to them and took notice of their opinions and the remaining two young people said their foster carers usually did. One young person said “if I tell my foster carer I need more help or want to change something, she listens”. Another said “almost all the time, she takes notice of my opinion”. Young people also confirmed that their social workers always/usually listened and took notice of their opinions. Young people participated in their LAC reviews and records showed that their feedback was sought for foster carers’ annual reviews. Most young people also said they knew how to make a complaint and information about how to do this was included in Croydon’s booklet for looked after children. Records showed that the few complaints made had been responded to promptly and fully looked into.

Communication booklets were being developed by the short breaks service and carers were encouraged to undertake training in Makaton and other communication methods. Feedback from parents and children was encouraged and had resulted in changes being made. A parent who used the short breaks service confirmed that she was consulted and listened to by her child’s carer and by the service. She knew her child was happy with the service by his responses and behaviour when he returned from short breaks and his excitement before visits.

A new young people’s rights and participation service was being developed for LB Croydon young people by NCH. Groups were being set up for young people and individual advice and advocacy provided. The children’s rights officer said that the team supported young people in getting concerns and complaints resolved as quickly as possible and without resorting to the formal stage of the procedure. As mentioned in the previous inspection report, the NSPCC was commissioned to undertake an independent survey of the views and experiences of young people placed in Croydon and independent sector foster homes during 2004/5. The service manager said the fostering service was now developing an action plan, based on the findings of this survey.
Achieving Economic Wellbeing

The intended outcomes for these Standards are:

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

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

29

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

The level of payments to foster carers and short breaks carers were satisfactory, though a review of payments made to family and friends carers is recommended. Payment systems were generally working well.

EVIDENCE:

Foster carers and short breaks carers spoken to were satisfied with the level of payments, which were above the rates recommended by the Fostering Network. The system of payments was well set out and explained in the foster carers’ handbook and this had been helpful in dealing with a recent complaint about allowances. Payments were reviewed annually.

Foster carers reported no problems or delays with the payment of regular allowances. However, delays were reported in one-off or ‘ad hoc’ payments and foster carers also complained that these payments were not itemised on their payslips. The service manager was confident that this problem would soon be resolved when the new computer system was fully operational.

In common with many authorities, foster carers approved to care for family or friends received a lower allowance, as they were not paid a fee and some concern was expressed about this. Criteria for the payment of the fee were set out in the foster carers’ handbook. Friends and family foster carers appeared to meet some of these criteria and it is suggested that the level of payments to this group of carers should be reviewed. Following consultation with short breaks carers, additional payments were now made in particular situations. (see recommendation 12)
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, 24 and 32 the key standards to be inspected at least once during a 12 month period.

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

17, 21, 23, 24, 32

Quality in this outcome area was excellent. This judgement has been made using available evidence, including a visit to the service.

All parts of the fostering service were very well managed and staff were able and experienced. Staffing was adequate and workload monitoring was underway but staff were adversely affected by working conditions. Recruitment and retention of carers had been successful and the service had
expanded over the past year. Very good support, supervision and training was provided for foster carers and short breaks carers who were keeping excellent records.

EVIDENCE:

As previously mentioned, both services were very well managed by able, experienced and qualified managers. Due to the successful recruitment and retention of foster carers, the general fostering service had expanded rapidly over the past two years and there had been a recent increase in staffing, in response to this. The Fostering Support Team was now very large and the service may have reached maximum capacity with the current structure. This team had recently undertaken a useful workload monitoring exercise, which could lead to a further increase in staffing or some redistribution of tasks. Managers of the children with disabilities service felt there were clear advantages in the current arrangement of the short breaks service being part of the overall service for children with disabilities. It meant that they could offer a more flexible and responsive service to children and families, whilst maintaining close links with the general fostering service.

The staff groups in both services were experienced and stable. Social workers and placement officers spoken to were skilled and committed, as evidenced by their work. Administrators were in post but it did seem that additional administrative input was needed in the general fostering service, for example in the organisation of annual reviews. However, a review of the service’s administrative support was in progress. Despite the stability of the staff group, it did seem that morale was adversely affected by working conditions. Staff felt that the current system of hot-desking, a shortage of computers and no facilities for breaks was affecting their work. This situation should be reviewed. (see recommendation 8)

As previously mentioned, recruitment and retention of foster carers had been very successful in terms of numbers and diversity and the service had grown rapidly. The Recruitment and Assessment Team were aware of the areas of shortfall and where future recruitment needed to be targeted. Despite the growth of the in-house fostering service, a large number of young people were still placed in the independent sector. However, the fostering service’s managers are right to question how much further their service should be expected to grow and particularly with its current structure. The short breaks service had continued to expand and retention of carers had been good. However, demand continued to outstrip supply, particularly of carers from ethnic minority groups and those whose homes could accommodate wheelchairs.

Foster carers and short breaks carers praised the support given by both teams. Records showed that supervising social workers visited and contacted carers
regularly and unannounced visits had been made. One foster carer said of the service “they support me in every way and are always at the end of the phone and will come to help me whenever I need it”. Another foster carer described her supervising social worker as “excellent, on the ball and her visits are very helpful and constructive”. A short breaks carer said “the team could not be more understanding; we get all the support we need” Another short breaks carer said of her supervising social worker “she gave me so much confidence”. The commitment made in the foster care agreement was to at least monthly visits to foster carers. Records showed that visits had normally been made this often but there had been some longer gaps and some situations where more frequent visits would have been ideal. The workload monitoring exercise referred to above was said to have indicated a need for reduced caseloads and this should enable more frequent supervisory visits to be made to foster carers. In the short breaks scheme, the expectation was that carers would be visited every three months. (see recommendation 9)

Staff provided an out-of-hours telephone support service to foster carers, to supplement the council’s emergency service. Foster carers said they had found this service very helpful. A range of support groups were also provided, some of which have already been mentioned and groups were well attended. One foster carer described her support group as being like a family and providing strong mutual support and practical help such as babysitting. It was suggested that family and friends foster carers might benefit from a support group of their own. Newly recruited foster carers were supported by mentors and a confidential counselling service was available. The foster care agreement was well set out and signed copies were on all files seen. Some additional items were needed, in line with schedule 5 to the regulations. All foster carers had been given copies of the handbook, which was in the process of being updated. (see requirement 3)

Annual reviews of foster carers and short breaks carers were comprehensive and had been carried out on time by supervising social workers. It was suggested to the service manager that the introduction of a more independent element in reviews would be a positive development. Staff had worked hard to get the views of young people in placement and their social workers and additional administrative support would be useful here, as previously mentioned. First reviews had been considered by the fostering panel and subsequent reviews where necessary. Others had been signed off by the manager. However, where reviews had not gone to panel, written notice still needed to be given to foster carers of their continued approval, in line with regulation. (see requirement 2)

A very comprehensive programme of training was on offer to carers and the staff responsible for organising and administering this are to be commended. Foster carers described it as a “brilliant programme” and particularly appreciated the short evening courses or ‘forums’ held on a variety of topics. Training courses were held at different times and were well publicised.
Records of attendance were maintained and each carer had a training profile. Most training courses were well attended and the feedback was positive. A number of foster carers had obtained or were currently studying for the NVQ 3 qualification. Induction training was compulsory for newly approved carers. Training was included in foster carers’ annual reviews but it is suggested that expectations for the coming year should be more specific. Finally, family and friends foster carers seen felt that a training event/workshop specifically for this group of carers would be helpful. (see recommendations 10 & 11)

Children’s case records were held in the children’s teams and foster carers said they had been given adequate information about young people placed. The Access to Resources Team used a comprehensive referral form to record information about young people. Supervising social workers ensured that copies of the LAC forms were given to foster carers at placement agreement meetings or as soon as possible afterwards. There was a very good recording policy with compulsory training for foster carers and those foster carers seen were keeping excellent records.

The assessment of friends and family carers was undertaken by the Recruitment and Assessment Team and the value of kinship care was recognised by the fostering service and the panel. The friends and family carers seen were providing very good care and felt well supported. A review of the payments made to friends and family carers and dedicated support group meetings and/or training have been recommended under previous standards.
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.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>Standard Exceeded (Commendable)</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Standard Met (No Shortfalls)</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Standard Almost Met (Minor Shortfalls)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Standard Not Met (Major Shortfalls)</td>
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“X” in the standard met box denotes standard not assessed on this occasion “N/A” in the standard met box denotes standard not applicable

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Are there any outstanding requirements from the last inspection?  

no

**STATUTORY REQUIREMENTS**

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Standard</th>
<th>Regulation</th>
<th>Requirement</th>
<th>Timescale for action</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>FS8</td>
<td>34(1)</td>
<td>Young people must only be placed with foster carers outside their terms of approval where it can be demonstrated that this is in a young person’s best interests and the arrangement can be approved by the panel (chair) without undue delay. Policy and procedure should reflect this.</td>
<td>01/03/07</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>FS21</td>
<td>28(5)</td>
<td>The foster care agreement must include all items listed under schedule 5.</td>
<td>01/04/07</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>FS21</td>
<td>29(6)</td>
<td>Foster carers must be notified of their continued approval following annual reviews.</td>
<td>01/03/07</td>
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</table>

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Refer to Standard</th>
<th>Good Practice Recommendations</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>FS7</td>
<td>Foster carers’ work towards meeting young people’s</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>FS8</td>
<td>The frequency of ‘emergency’ placements should be reviewed, to see whether more placements could be requested and planned in advance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>FS8</td>
<td>LB Croydon should ensure that young people are only placed with foster carers recruited by the independent sector who have had all the necessary checks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>FS9</td>
<td>Safe caring guidelines should be drawn up for each foster home and short break home.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>FS12</td>
<td>The LAC health service should be expanded in order to provide more targeting of vulnerable groups of young people and consultation for foster carers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>FS13</td>
<td>All foster homes should be provided with computers for the use of young people in placement, together with a support/maintenance service.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>FS15</td>
<td>The policy and practice of allowing staff to start work before LB Croydon’s CRB checks have been fully completed and where staff have satisfactory recent CRB checks from a previous employer, should be reviewed, in line with current guidance from the CRB.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>FS17</td>
<td>Staff working conditions should be reviewed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>FS21</td>
<td>The Fostering Support Team should aim for more frequent supervisory visits to some foster homes and a more independent element in annual reviews.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>FS21</td>
<td>A dedicated support group/training event should be considered for friends and family foster carers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>FS23</td>
<td>Training expectations should be made more specific in foster carers’ annual reviews.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>FS29</td>
<td>The level of payments made to family and friends carers should be reviewed.</td>
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<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>FS30</td>
<td>Training should be provided for children’s team social workers in the assessment of friends and family carers and panel expectations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>FS30</td>
<td>The policy and practice of conditionally approving some foster carers before all checks and enquiries are complete should be reviewed in relation to safeguarding children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>FS30</td>
<td>A full employment history should be obtained for prospective members of the fostering panel.</td>
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</table>