

WIRRAL COUNCIL

CHILDREN'S SERVICES AND LIFELONG LEARNING OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE: 11th NOVEMBER 2008

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES

INSPECTION OF WIRRAL METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL FOSTERING SERVICE FEBRUARY 2008 AND JULY 2008

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report outlines the findings of two inspections of Wirral Fostering Service undertaken in February 2008 and July 2008 by Ofsted, in accordance with the Care Standards Act 2000, and updates Elected Members on the outcome of these Inspections.

This report also updates Elected Members on action taken to implement the findings of the Committees Scrutiny of Outcomes for Children in Foster Care.

1. Background and Overview

1.1 The Wirral fostering service has been inspected by Ofsted on two occasions during 2008; the second inspection was at the request of the local authority. The service is assessed against 32 standards, the majority of which are grouped under the five Every Child Matters outcomes, with an additional set of standards for Organisation. The Inspection judgements are made on the following basis:

- Outstanding: this aspect of the provision is of exceptionally high quality
- Good: this aspect of the provision is strong
- Satisfactory: this aspect of the provision is sound
- Inadequate: this aspect of the provision is not good enough

The judgement for the whole service is also made on this basis.

1.2 The inspector met with a number of professionals and foster carers for the February inspection however, for the July inspection the inspector's main focus was on the core work of the service. Consequently, the inspector did not wish to meet with a range of professionals again.

1.3 In terms of findings, the inspector can make Statutory Requirements and Recommendations. Statutory Requirements are actions specified by the Inspectorate which the responsible authority is required to implement and the Inspectorate also specifies the date by which the actions must be taken. Recommendations are suggestions from the Inspectorate, which the responsible authority may wish to consider, but is not obligated to do so.

FEBRUARY 2008 INSPECTION

2. Summary Findings from the Inspection

2.1 The inspection was undertaken during the week 11th-15th February 2008. Overall, the Inspectorate judged the quality of the service as satisfactory, making three Statutory Requirements and six Recommendations.

2.2 In summary the inspector found that foster carers are well supported by supervising social workers, the service is working to improve management systems, functioning and strategic direction. The information provided to foster carers including consent to medical treatment for children is not consistent and the role of the supervising social worker could be more robust. The foster panel performs well and has effective gate keeping procedures to monitor quality. Supervising social workers have received training in assessments.

3. Being Healthy

3.1 This outcome was judged as Satisfactory. While carers were supported by supervising social workers and health professionals which includes receiving individual health plans, foster carers were not consistently provided with full information about the health needs of children and procedures governing consent to medical treatment were not always implemented. As a result, one statutory requirement was made.

4. Staying Safe

4.1 This outcome was judged to be Inadequate. This was primarily due to the inconsistencies around information provided to foster carers therefore, there was potential for the support provided to some children being compromised (although the inspector found no evidence of outcomes being affected during the inspection). This did not result in a statutory requirement.

4.2 Two statutory requirements were made; one regarding staff recruitment and employment checks and the second to ensure that the placement of a child matched the foster carers approval status.

4.3 The Inspector found that the fostering panel demonstrated good outcomes for children, was well-managed and had effective membership and was also able to maintain independent scrutiny of the fostering service and challenge where appropriate. The Inspector noted that the quality and consistency of information being presented to panel had improved. The appointment of an Independent Chair to the fostering panel was a significant factor in these improvements.

5. Enjoying and Achieving

5.1 The quality of service in this outcome area was judged to be Good. The inspector found that the fostering service values and promotes children's diversity, tries to ensure that all children have equal opportunity to access activities, and promotes children's social development. The work of the Cultural Inclusion Officer was highlighted for developing a range of leisure activities made available to children and their carers. Specialist resources were found to be available to promote the educational achievement of children, reflected in the awareness that carers have and the range of policies and procedures in place. This was further evidenced by the Virtual School and the Enjoy and Achieve strategy group. He found that fewer children in foster care had missed significant periods of education than the national average of all children.

6. Making a Positive Contribution

- 6.1 This outcome was judged to be Satisfactory. It was noted that maintaining contact between children and their families was integral to the fostering service and reflected in the training provided to foster carers. A good range of methods for consulting with children who are fostered was found, notably around contact. He found that the fostering service works in partnership with parents. The only issue highlighted, was that foster carers do not always have copies of legal orders, for instance, in relation to contact arrangements. This was the first time this issue had been highlighted during an inspection.

7. Achieving Economic Well-Being

- 7.1 This outcome was judged to be Satisfactory. The support foster carers give to young people in preparation for independent living was noted. He found that the local authority worked in partnership with other agencies and young people have the opportunity to participate in work based learning experiences.
- 7.2 The new and improved payment procedure to foster carers was seen as a positive improvement including foster carers being able to progress through the bands. The benefits of piloting the CWDC foster carer standards were also noted. The only issue highlighted by the inspector was that the fostering service had not yet implemented the national minimum allowances for foster carer payments.

8. Organisation

- 8.1 This outcome area was judged to be Satisfactory and there were no statutory requirements. While the inspector commented on the good leadership of the service, support provided to foster carers, staff training and a clear programme of service development, the fact that foster carers do not always receive appropriate documentation from placing social workers prevented this outcome area from being judged as good. The inspector commented that the role of the supervising social worker could be more robust.

9. Summary

- 9.1 The issue of information to foster carers and arrangements for delegating consent to medical treatment has been a consistent theme in recent inspections and resulted in the judgement of inadequate for Staying Safe. The other findings under Staying Safe relating to personnel files and placing children outside the foster carers registration, whilst significant, were relatively simple to rectify. Another key theme from this inspection is that the role of the supervising social worker could be more robust.

JULY 2008 INSPECTION

10. Preparation for the Fostering Inspection

- 10.1 A re-inspection was undertaken between: 21st – 25th July 2008, and focused on standards and regulations. This inspection was at our request.
- 10.2 Following the inspection of the service in February, a decision was made to invite the inspector back within 6 months in order to demonstrate the progress made to address the previous findings.

- 10.3 A Service Improvement Team was established using aspects of the School Improvement approach, overseen by the Head of Branch and chaired by the Strategic Service Manager, Resources. Through an independent officer, an approach of service monitoring, supporting, challenging and intervening was deployed, to deliver the required changes. The team met regularly to plan each stage of the improvement trajectory with a key focus on communicating the need for change each step of the way; assisting social workers with producing and updating documentation and also checking documentation for quality. This involved writing to all staff in the localities, presentations at management meetings and visits to every locality team on a weekly basis.
- 10.4 Supervising social workers visited every foster carer over the space of 2/3 months and a database was produced and updated on a weekly basis as the visits increased and which outlined for every child what information was outstanding. The data base was forwarded to the social work teams on a weekly basis for the placing social workers to address the gaps in information and report this back to the fostering service when complete.
- 10.5 Over the weeks, relationships were built with the locality teams and the visits rather than being seen as critical were in fact valued and there was much evidence of activity to update information. Relationships between the social work teams and the fostering service improved, and through the process there was an increasing sense of common purpose.
- 10.6 The policy on LAC documentation was updated and re-circulated and alongside this each team was given a folder which contained filled in good examples of each document and this was used as part of the service manager visits.
- 10.7 The fostering service also produced and sent a standard letter to foster carers delegating consent to routine and emergency medical treatment for every child placed subject to an Order. The letter also provided information on the common-law powers of medical professionals when dealing with consent and also when children and young people themselves can consent to medical treatment.
- 10.8 The service also wrote to foster carers delegating consent for non-hazardous activities, such as routine school trips and also giving advice on what amounts to a hazardous activity and what to do in this situation. Placement Agreement forms were checked to ensure they had been appropriately signed either by a parent or a District/Service Manager delegating consent to routine and emergency medical treatment to the foster carer.
- 10.9 All personnel files and panel members' files were also checked and updated accordingly.
- 10.10 The fostering service also checked foster carer agreements were up to date for all carers to ensure children were not placed outside the carers registration.

11 Summary Findings from the Inspection

- 11.1 Overall, the Inspector judged the quality of the service as Good, with no Statutory Requirements and only one Recommendation.
- 11.2 The inspector highlighted that children are well cared for by the fostering service and that significant changes had been made to a number of aspects of practice and

procedure including, the role of the supervising social worker was clearer and more robust and the quality and quantity of information to foster carers on children placed had improved. Outcomes for children are demonstrably good and children in placements are able to develop with security and in accordance with their identified care plans. Carers were found to be well supported by supervising social workers and were aware of their responsibilities.

12. Improvements since the last inspection

- 12.1 Foster carers now have all the available information on children placed with them and procedures for ensuring that this practice becomes consistently applied are in place. Carers now also have clear and effective delegated consent to medical treatment. Children are placed with carers who are approved to meet their needs and reflected in the registration status of each carer through the foster care agreement.
- 12.2 Information held on staff has been strengthened and the service is able to demonstrate that all staff members are suitable to work with children. The role of the supervising social worker is clearer and more robust both in relation to monitoring foster carers practice and in representing the fostering service within Children's Services as a whole.

13. Being Healthy

- 13.1 This outcome was judged as Good. The quality of information on children in placement had improved significantly since the last inspection. The inspector commented that foster carers feel part of a team and the support provided by foster carers ensures that a high priority is given to meeting children's health care needs.

14. Staying Safe

- 14.1 This outcome was judged Good. The inspector commented that children are cared for safely by the fostering service. Over the past 12 months there have been changes to the strategic management and leadership of the service due to better designation of roles and a greater emphasis on performance management. The inspector commented that there is a clearer sense of direction and an improved ability to identify and prioritise areas where improvement is needed.
- 14.2 Safe caring practices are robust and implemented consistently. Management systems are in place to collate and evaluate allegations of neglect or abuse of a child in foster care. The fostering panel is organised effectively and efficiently and is able to make good quality decisions about approval of foster carers.

15. Enjoying and Achieving

- 15.1 This outcome area was judged to be Good. The education and development of children is given a high priority within the service. There was evidence to confirm that children are given to support with their schooling and education and that carers talk to children and young people and involve them in their educational development.
- 15.2 A wide range of leisure activities are available and help provide children with opportunities to develop skills and experiences that promote self-confidence and develop self-esteem.

16. Making a Positive Contribution

- 16.1 This outcome area was judged to be Good. Contact arrangements are set out in placement plans and carers are aware of their responsibilities in this area. The opinions of children are obtained regularly and there are systems for encouraging children's participation in discussion and decision making.

17. Achieving Economic Well-Being

- 17.1 This outcome area was judged to be Satisfactory. Young people receive assistance and support to help them prepare for leaving care and adult life. The service can demonstrate how it has supported young people to develop and mature and how a variety of staff work together to ensure positive outcomes for them.
- 17.2 Financial support is available to foster carers and the efficiency of the payment system ensures that carers obtain the amount to which they are entitled at the right time. The fact that the council had not yet implemented the national minimum allowance for foster care payments prevented this outcome area from being judged as Good.
- 17.3 Progress has since been made with this, and in September 2008, Cabinet agreed to the incremental increase in the fostering allowance commencing 1st October and to implement the full National Minimum Allowance from the 1st April 2009.

18. Organisation

- 18.1 This outcome area was judged to be Good. It was judged that the fostering service is well managed and a significant number of improvements have been made to ensure that children are placed appropriately with capable carers who are able to meet their identified needs, in secure placements. Managers have identified and prioritise a range of relevant areas to the operation of the fostering service in order to improve outcomes for children. Significantly, an improvement plan has been successfully implemented and built into future and ongoing practice

19. Summary

- 19.1 The outcome of this inspection shows a number of improvements made since February 2008 following the successful implementation of the improvement action plan. The overall judgement of the service has improved from satisfactory to good and all outcome areas except for Achieving Economic Well-being have been judged as good, including Staying Safe, which was previously judged as inadequate. The inspector did not make any Statutory Requirements and made only one recommendation, that is, to ensure that carers understand what information they are expected to keep and what information needs to be passed on to the fostering service (NMS 24). To put this issue into context, the inspector found that one foster carer had kept the documentation for a young person who had since left their care. While the issue of documentation is covered in the revised foster care handbook, the service will write to all foster carers reminding them of the policy and what information they should return when a child or young person moves on.
- 19.2 In a relatively short space of time, the service in conjunction with the locality social work teams has been able to bring about significant improvements in the information supplied to foster carers on children placed including the quality of this information. This includes making it clear in every case the delegation of consent to routine and emergency medical treatment. These were the most significant issues from the last

inspection and which had been a consistent theme in previous inspections. The issues of placing children outside the foster carers registration and recruitment processes have been addressed and systems are in place to ensure the improvements are sustained.

- 19.3 The Service Improvement Team with its focus on, monitoring, support, challenge and intervention in the locality teams in conjunction with the commitment of supervising social workers and managers in the fostering service have been key factors in making the necessary improvements.

20. Overview and Scrutiny Committee – Scrutiny of the Fostering Service

- 20.1 Below is an update for Members about the progress in implementing the recommendations from their review.

21. Recommendations for children in foster care:

- 1 The authority should continue to try to improve the stability of placements. This will be achieved by better matching of children and carers, which in turn is made possible by increased recruitment of foster carers: -**

As highlighted in this report, significant progress has been made in recruiting foster carers, leading to increased placement choice. The stability of placements has also been improved by ensuring that the foster carer agreements reflect foster carers registration thereby, ensuring that children and young people are appropriately matched.

- 2 Ensure that foster children have ready access to their social workers and are able to maintain good communications, so that they are aware when the social worker might not be available and will know how to contact any alternatives**

Implementing this action has been significantly assisted by the fact that the Department has been able to recruit social workers and through the completion of training by 10 trainees in July 2008, is now up to its full complement of social workers. Social workers are aware of the importance of maintaining good communication with children and both social workers and team managers are aware of their roles in ensuring that young people are able to speak to another social worker if the allocated social worker is not available. It will be important to monitor how well systems are working through the Children in Care Council.

- 3 Encourage social workers to be more proactive in their dealings with looked after children. Looked after children perceive them as the statutory decision makers, but they should also be able to look on them as a friend.**

All social workers now have mobile phones and e-mail so they can be contacted by children more directly. We continue to have a high number of children who are supported to give their views to their reviews and via the complaints process.

- 4 Give as much flexibility as possible to foster carers in relation to permission's for the involvement of looked after children in extra-curricular and social activities.**

All foster carers have been sent a letter delegating consent to non-hazardous activities such as school trips. Foster carers have also been given advice on what is a

hazardous activity and what they need to do in order to obtain consent for a young person to take part in such an activity. This has freed foster carers up to make decisions on children who they know well. Further work will continue on ensuring these types of issue are discussed and agreed at Placement Agreement meetings.

5 Ensure that looked after children are aware of their financial entitlement.

Foster carers are able to advise children and young people on their financial entitlement and it is also the social workers responsibility to make children and young people aware. This has been discussed at the children's services management team and clear messages have been given to social work teams.

22. Recommendations for foster carers:

1 The authority should aim to widen the geographical area in which foster carers are recruited and ensure that the necessary network of support is in place to achieve that aim (and consider providing financial support for house extensions)

The fostering service recruitment strategy ensures that foster carers from across the borough are targeted to ensure the widest possible catchment. In recognition that the majority of foster carers come from the Wallasey and Birkenhead areas, the service is currently in the process of developing a campaign in consultation with the press and media officer in order to attract a wider range of foster carers, living in all wards across the borough. As highlighted in this report, the inspector commented on the success of the recruitment strategy and the increase in placement choice, which in turn made matching children with appropriate foster carers a strength of the service. There are clearer processes in place with regards to housing extensions and adaptations. All expressions of interest are responded to and an assessment is undertaken. The service has developed links with the home improvement team.

2 Foster carers should be treated and accepted as fellow professionals. That would involve showing more trust in terms of the information that is shared with them -- within legal limits they should have all information necessary to ensure the welfare of the foster child, especially medical information.

Significant progress has been made in this area. The service piloted the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) training support and development standards and is now in the process of rolling this out across the service. The standards are aimed at professionalising foster carers and recognising the important role they play as part of the children's workforce. As noted in this report, the flow and quality of information to foster carers has increased significantly, which includes clear arrangements for delegating consent to routine and emergency medical treatment. Regular consultation with foster carers is important to make sure that improvements in communication and sharing information are sustained.

3 Also, they should be made to feel valued, possibly by means of an annual awards ceremony or mayoral reception.

The Department held an awards ceremony "Listen to Me" in March 2008, which was an opportunity for young people to nominate people who have listened to them. This could be teachers, foster carers and many other professionals. The event was a great success and a number of foster carers were nominated and formally commended for

the good work they do. This will now be an annual event, with the next one scheduled for March 2009.

In addition to this, the Department will progress plans with the mayors office to hold a reception for foster carers.

4 Access to training for foster carers should be improved, with courses specific to their requirements (via an individual improvement plan) and convenient in terms of times, location and crèche facilities

Foster carers are able to access general training provided by the Department and benefit from attending courses with social workers and other professionals. Foster carers access the permanency planning training and their contribution is highly valued and this is another opportunity to train alongside social workers. The service is developing links with lifelong learning in order to develop and deliver tailor-made courses for foster carers. Taster courses were recently held during adult learner's week. Training has and continues to be developed to enable foster carers to complete the CWDC training, support and development standards. The service is currently looking at alternative venues and facilities. The workforce development team are in the process of strengthening their focus on specific training for foster carers.

5 Training should include health issues, as they affect both the child and the carer.

Foster carers have a very clear understanding of their role in ensuring children's health needs are met and which includes individual health plans. The inspection highlighted that foster carers are very skilled in this area and not afraid to be proactive. The service has strong links with the LAC nurses who provide regular health updates through the newsletter and also put on training at the foster carers drop-in meeting.

6 The foster carers handbook should be updated on a regular basis.

The handbook has been recently updated and will now be updated on an annual basis.

7 Ensure that payments to foster carers, in particular Christmas allowances, are paid promptly

The service has moved from the previous Trojan payment system to the SWIFT foster carers' module. This is a far more efficient system and while there were some teething problems in the early stages, these have now been remedied. There should no longer be a situation where for instance Christmas allowances are not paid promptly.

8 There should be strong encouragement for foster carers to attend school's parents evenings and personal education plan meetings and provide the means for doing so through additional childcare arrangements. Carers should have regular contact with the designated teacher.

The inspection found that education and development of children is given a high priority within the service and that foster carers are clear about their responsibilities and are able to act assertively and on their own initiative to support children in school.

- 9 Whilst it is accepted that they may be necessary in an emergency, in which case additional support should be provided, exemption placements should be avoided.**

As placement choice has increased, the number of exemptions (more than 3 children in one placement) has fallen. This was commented on by the inspector in July. In cases where an exemption is required, this must be approved by the LAC Service Manager and involves assessment of risk, careful matching and consultation with children's social workers.

- 10 Provide departmental support for the foster carers association in order to help it to represent all carers in the borough, including taking over production of their newsletter.**

The team manager meets with the foster carers association on a monthly basis to ensure there is good communication, to hear and respond to concerns or requests for funding. The service has not yet taken over the production of the newsletter. It is anticipated however, that the service will take over the production of the newsletter within the next three months, following consultation with the adoption service to see if it is possible to pool resources. The adoption service currently produces its own monthly newsletter.

- 11 Measures should be put in place to ensure that an individual 'contract' (Placement Agreement) is always signed and in place in respect of each new placement.**

This issue was highlighted in the February 2008 inspection and was a focus of the improvement plan for the July 2008 inspection. LAC documentation for every child in foster carer has been checked and any gaps identified and rectified. The inspector commented that the improvement plan had been successfully implemented. The challenge is to ensure that the improvements are sustained and therefore, the improvement group continues to meet in order to ensure this.

- 12 The position of kinship carers should be clarified to ensure the correct level of support is provided for the child.**

The July inspection highlighted that there are systems for approving and supporting family and friends carers, which ensure that practice conforms to the National Minimum Standards and children are cared for safely and effectively. The service promotes training and development for kinship carers and they are required to complete the CWDC training, support and developments standards for foster care. Where there are concerns about standards not being met, an assessment of the needs of the child and the strengths/weaknesses of the kinship foster carer is undertaken against the Every Child Matters 5 outcomes with any gaps highlighted and measures put in place.

- 13 Foster carers should attend hearings of the fostering panel where appropriate.**

Foster carers are encouraged to attend both at the approval stage and for the first annual review. Attendance is generally good, and will continue to be promoted. The role and performance of panel was described as good by the inspector.

23. Recommendations for Professional staff

1 The staffing complement for social workers should be kept under review

The Department has been successful in recruiting social workers in the localities and through the traineeships is now up to full complement. With regards to the fostering service, one family support worker was recently successful in obtaining a traineeship, and their post is being held for their return. The recruitment process is underway for the vacant treatment fostering social worker. The fostering service complies with sickness absence procedures and any long term absences through sickness are addressed. It is important that we keep the staffing complement under constant review.

2 The effectiveness of financial incentives should be reviewed, in terms of both attracting staff and retaining them, taking account of comparisons that other local authorities

As indicated above, the Department has been successful in attracting social workers and where appropriate used incentives such as "golden hellos". Work is underway through the wellbeing programme to improve working conditions, which include measures such as re-launching the supervision policy, making sure that workloads are manageable and subject to review, and developing more robust induction for newly qualified workers and career pathways for social care workers. We have experienced difficulties in recruiting to team manager vacancies and have been auditing salaries paid in comparator authorities. A report is being prepared for the Employment and Appointment Committee with regard to recruitment and retention of team managers.

3 Social workers concerns about the adequacy of administrative Support should be addressed in a review of respective duties. The findings could be reported to the overview and scrutiny committee.

The authority successfully attracted pilot status to remodel social work delivery. As part of this pilot we are undertaking a review of roles and responsibilities which includes the role and function of administrative staff members in their support of social workers, enabling them to maximise the time spent with children and families, and less time on bureaucracy. As the pilot progresses a report will be prepared for this Committee detailing their findings and recommendations.

4 Consideration should be given to reviewing the system for weighting of social workers caseloads.

A system of caseload management for social workers is being revised and will be piloted in one team from January 2009 for 6 months and then roll-out across all teams is planned.

5 Full availability of information technology, as a key element of communications and for effective case management, should be a priority for social work staff.

A rolling programme of IT installation has ensured that all Social workers now have their own computers, which includes the fostering service.

6 Improve communications between the family placement team and social work teams, including a better understanding of each team's role.

Significant progress has been made in this area following two inspections during 2008. As a result of the role of the supervising social worker becoming more robust, this naturally led to more direct communication with placing social workers and a better understanding of each other's roles. This is evidenced by the success of the service improvement plan following the February inspection, when the fostering service and locality social workers worked hard to ensure foster carers had all relevant information on children placed. Plans to link a member of the fostering service to each locality team have not yet been implemented however, this is still a priority.

7 Social workers relationships with foster carers and looked after children should be a key element of their training

With the appointment of a number of newly qualified social workers, permanency planning training is being rolled out across the Branch. This involves foster carers, social workers and other social care professionals jointly attending the training and learning from each other's perspectives. The training also includes a focus on how children make attachments and therefore places the child's perspective centrally. A workshop entitled 'Team around the Child in Care' was held on 17th October to consider how to improve joint working and planning between all partners involved in the lives of children in care, this had foster care and residential worker representation – the action plan is being generated to foster improved team working to meet children's needs through close and co-operative working between all partners involved with children in care.

8 Social workers should be contactable by mobile phone in the same way as family placement team members

All social workers now have work mobile phones.

9 Consideration should be given to combining, to a greater or lesser extent, joint care meetings – LAC reviews and PEP meetings -- in order to make more effective use of professionals' time.

While effective use of professionals' time is an important consideration, the focus of reviews and meetings relating to a child is the actual child. LAC reviews have a specific focus on the care plan and in some instances will involve court, legal issues and other more sensitive matters. Combining these reviews with a personal education plan is not therefore, always appropriate. The Independent Reviewing Officer in consultation with the social worker, the child, family and other professionals could agree that it is appropriate to hold the two together in some circumstances and this does happen. It is always important to review the PEP at each Looked After Children Review.

10 Every effort should be made to reduce the time taken for assessments of foster carers.

Completing assessments of foster carers in a timely fashion has been affected by some staffing issues as highlighted above however, it is anticipated that the majority of these issues will be resolved very soon. On average, assessments are completed within six months of the prospective carer wishing to be assessed and where this is not possible, the service informs the applicant in writing. During the last 12 months, the service has recruited a large number of foster carers, thereby increasing placement choice and this was commented on by the inspector.

- 11 The team manager for family placement should not have to carry an individual case load, in order that she can have a proper overview of the service and to be able to ensure that assessment deadlines are met.**

The team manager for the fostering service no longer carries a caseload although at times has managed individual cases, for instance where there has been staff sickness. Nonetheless, this is not a regular occurrence and the inspector commented on managers in the service being able to identify and prioritise a range of areas relevant to the operation of the service in order to improve outcomes for children. In addition, management roles within the service have been redefined and are clearer and this has contributed to the overall judgement in the inspection of organisational capacity.

- 12 There should be no reason why the social worker or family placement worker does not attend hearings of the fostering panel, or, if they are not available, are represented by a senior fellow professional who has a full understanding of the case in question.**

Attendance of supervising social workers at panel has improved significantly. The attendance of placing social workers has improved particularly with regards to matching and if they are not able to attend, in most cases a report is provided. This is however, an area that the service is continuing to focus on and gradually, placing social workers are starting to see the value of attending panel, especially for matching.

- 13 Every effort should be made to continue the improvement in the quality of reports to the fostering panel**

This continues to be a focus. Processes for quality assuring reports have improved and this was reflected in the recent inspection. Systems have recently been developed to ensure that assessments consistently contain all the additional pieces of work, such as the safe caring policy, health and safety checklist. The chair of the fostering panel meets regularly with the LAC Service Manager to discuss panel generally and also any issues around quality assurance. The chair has recently commented that generally, the standard of assessments presented to panel is good.

- 14 The family placement team should provide a regular report to the panel that brings its attention to any breakdowns on placements, in a format that is acceptable to the panel**

This has been discussed with the independent chair however, is not yet standard practice. It is proposed that this will be discussed at the next fostering panel development day.

24. Recommendations for the educational achievement of looked after children

- 1 There should be tighter and more robust controls on school attendance of looked after children, supported by timely and accurate information**

Recent statistics for children in foster care in Wirral show that the numbers who do not attend school is below the national average. The fostering service is improving its links with the Virtual School to ensure that foster carers fully understand their role in ensuring that children and young people achieve their potential.

- 2 **Emphasis should be given to identifying what skills looked after children might have in relation to extra-curricular activities such as sports and music.**

Children and young people are encouraged to attend clubs and activities outside of school and in the majority of cases foster carers provide the transport. The Cultural Inclusion Officer is responsible for identifying young people's interests and aptitudes for such activities and then finding the provision.

25. Recommendations for the Virtual School

- 1 **That the profile of the Virtual school be raised in order to ensure that all members of the council are aware of their role as corporate parents.**

This will be placed on the agenda of the next meeting of the Virtual School Governing Body meeting.

- 2 **That the Governors continue to act as the driving force in improving standards for looked after children.**

The Virtual School Governing Body will continue to consider and encourage strategies to improve the attainments of Looked After Children. The Enjoy and Achieve sub group, which focuses on children in care, has a specific set of actions to improve the achievement of children in care. The work of this group is reported to the Virtual School Governing Body, through the report of the Virtual School Head Teacher.

- 3 **The additional support being given to looked after children in year 11 should be extended as soon as possible to earlier years.**

The Quality Assurance Manager for Early Years has taken responsibility for this issue by working with the LAC EAT group, referred to above. A report on additional support to young children will be provided to the Virtual School Governing Body this academic year.

26. Recommendations for welfare

- 1 **That procedures for the provision of all necessary medical information to named nurses, and other appropriate professionals including foster carers, be reviewed.**

As highlighted in the July inspection, the Service Improvement Team have achieved a major improvement in this area and professional roles have recently been reviewed. Work is currently underway with PCT colleagues responsible for the LAC nurses and school nurses to strengthen notification systems and to ensure that health information and plans are reviewed and actively used in inform the care plans for children in care.

Summary

The Scrutiny report into the Outcomes for Children in Foster Care has provided a very useful framework for developing the service. The broad focus on all matters which affect the safe and secure placements of children with foster carers has contributed to improvements in quality which have been evidenced through the inspection regime. Progress is being made on all aspects of the recommendations, however, all elements require constant review, ongoing attention and there are still some areas requiring

significant work. When we have implemented all aspects of the Review we really will have made significant inroads to improve outcomes for the children in foster care.

27. Financial Implications

27.1 There are no particular financial implications associated with this report.

28. Staffing Implications

28.1 There are no particular staffing implications associated with this report.

29. Equal Opportunities Implications

29.1 Foster care is available to all children and young people looked after, subject to an assessment that this is the most appropriate way of meeting their needs.

29.2 Foster carers are recruited from all sections of the community.

30. Community Safety Implications

30.1 The aim of providing stable and secure foster placements for children in care is consistent with the aims of reducing offending and diverting young people from anti social behaviour.

31. Local Agenda 21 Implications

31.1 The increased development of a range of locally based foster care placements reduces travel by parents, carers and social workers.

32. Planning Implications

32.1 None.

33. Anti-Poverty Implications

33.1 Incremental implementation of the national minimum fostering allowance rate from 1st October 2008, leading to full implementation from 1st April 2009, will mean that foster carers are appropriately remunerated for the care they provide to vulnerable children in care.

34. Social Inclusion Implications

34.1 The majority of children in care benefit from placement in a family setting where they can develop trusting relationships with adults, who promote their inclusion in school, leisure and community activities.

35. Local Member Support Implications

35.1 Children and young people placed with foster carers come from all Wards within Wirral. Foster carers live in all Wards in Wirral; there are a small number who live outside the borough.

36. Background Papers

36.1 Inspection report – Wirral Fostering Service – 27th February 2008

36.2 Inspection report -- Wirral Fostering Service -- 25th July 2008

37. RECOMMENDATIONS

- (1) That members note and comment on the contents of the Fostering Inspection Report and update on the Scrutiny of the Outcomes for Children in Foster Care.

Howard Cooper
Director of Children's Services