

The right people for me

Helping children do well in long-term foster care

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This bulletin is designed to assist those with responsibilities for looked after children to improve the stability of foster care placements. This includes the managers of foster care agencies and councils responsible for looked after children and for their education. It will be of interest to foster carers and to organisations such as the Fostering Network.

We highlight the innovative ways in which some foster care providers and local councils are improving the placement stability for young people in foster care.

'Quality Issues in Social Care' Publication Series

The primary function of the Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI) is to promote improvements in social care for the benefit of the people who use care services. We have a statutory duty to report on the performance of social care services and we disseminate information that promotes choice and independence for people who use services.

This bulletin is part of a series of CSCI publications that focus on particular quality issues in social care provision. Topic areas for each bulletin have been drawn from consultation with people who use services; information from our assessment of the performance of social care services; and issues that concern the public.

We are producing these bulletins for three reasons:

- To share what we have learnt from inspecting fostering agencies and in responding to concerns from people who use services.
- To identify the factors that may have an influence on performance.
- To identify practical steps that can be taken by service providers to improve the experiences of people who use social care services.

How have we developed this bulletin?

We have gathered information from various sources to draw together the conclusions in this bulletin. We have:

- Reviewed a sample of CSCI inspectors' reports to identify the key components for good performance.
- Listened to what children in foster care have said.
- Spoken to CSCI inspectors to get a better understanding of common issues in fostering agency performance.
- Looked at what leading research bodies, user representation organisations and government agencies have identified as the factors that promote placement stability, and why it is important.

The information presented in this report does not constitute a systematic review of all of the evidence available on placement stability in foster care. This bulletin captures CSCI's current understanding of the extent and quality of placement stability and explores the issues that underlie our assessment of current performance.

Summary of key points

Children who spend long periods of time in foster care need the opportunity to develop positive relationships with committed and competent carers. Finding the right people to care for these children is the challenging task of people who work in fostering agencies across England.

The stakes are high. Almost all children in foster care have limited experience of close, nurturing relationships with their parents and their vulnerability is tied in with a troubled past. A stable placement with foster carers whom the child gets to know and where he or she feels supported can go a long way to improve self-esteem and future life opportunities.

Between April 2004 and March 2005, 13% of all looked after children had experienced three or more placements during the year. However, this is not a straightforward measure of placement stability. Stability is not just about staying in one placement for a long time – it's about a child feeling comfortable and supported with the right people.

Improving the performance of fostering agencies

This bulletin draws on the Commission for Social Care Inspection's (CSCI) experience of regulating and inspecting fostering agencies to identify ways that managers and staff can better support children in long-term foster care, and maximise their chances of securing good outcomes.

There were 385 fostering agencies registered in 2004-05, of which 146 were council agencies. Overall, the performance of foster agencies against the National Minimum Standards improved from 2002 to 2004, particularly those run by councils (see the Appendix). While this improvement is positive, there is some indication of poor performance against particular standards that have a direct or indirect impact on placement stability.

This bulletin describes the national performance of fostering agencies, focusing particularly on those aspects of performance linked to placement stability and provides information on ways to improve performance.





Finding and keeping enough carers to support choice

Performance: Over one quarter of foster agencies have insufficient staff or carers available and many of these agencies have no strategies in place to address these problems. Children with the greatest needs are often the hardest to place.

Key Point: Fostering agencies need to undertake a robust needs analysis to identify strategies for effectively recruiting carers in their area. Councils need to be more proactive and strategic in order to establish a sufficient number of placements. This could include adapting funding models and establishing partnership arrangements with other councils and with the independent sector.

Improving the matching of children with carers

Performance: Performance against the 'matching' standard is one of the poorest areas, with just 52% council services and 60% of independent fostering agencies meeting this standard. Fostering agencies may be applying too 'rigid rules of thumb' in matching children strictly with carers from the same background.

Key Point: Fostering agencies could do more to facilitate the success of placements by ensuring that children and carers have time to get to know one another and to decide whether the placement is right for them.

Providing good information to children and carers

Performance: Completed case records are not the only ingredient to providing good information to children and carers but it does help, particularly when there are changes in carers or social workers. Case records for the child are not comprehensive for 51% of council agencies and 61% of independent fostering agencies. Case records hold the critical information that carers need to understand the child in their care.

Key Point: In addition to improving case records, fostering agencies could do more to ensure that carers understand the child's needs so they can be prepared for some of the issues they face in providing care. Children also need information on how the carer's household operates to help them fit in.

Maintaining important relationships

Performance: The majority of fostering agencies work hard to ensure children maintain important links, in whatever way is most appropriate.

Key Point: Contact arrangements often need to be actively managed and supported. They may have adverse effects on children's welfare and so should be carefully monitored.

Providing specialist support for foster carers and children

Performance: Nearly 70% of fostering agencies now meet the National Minimum Standards in terms of providing training and payment to carers. Agencies do less well in providing supervision.

Key Point: Training programmes, specialist support and supervision are essential to ensure the foster carers have the skills and support to provide good quality care to fostered children. Fostering agencies are encouraged to develop good foster care training models, which include the range of relevant skills needed and which can be linked to NVQ training standards.

Promoting educational achievement

Performance: While 83% of council agencies and 78% of independent agencies met this standard, good outcomes in educational achievement have yet to translate into better outcomes for children.

Key Point: Fostering agencies need to make sure that carers are clear about their role in relation to the school and see the child's experiences at school as important.

Keeping children in their communities

Performance: Of the children being newly accommodated in 2004-05 who were still being accommodated at the end of March 2005, 11% were placed with foster carers who lived more than 20 miles away from the child's home.

Key Point: Efforts are needed to ensure that no newly accommodated children are placed a long way from home without good reason.

Conclusion

Finding the right people to provide care for a child in long-term foster care is a challenging task when the options are limited. Improvement in the recruitment and retention of foster carers requires action at the practice and strategic levels. Foster carers need to be well supported by a range of services, reinforced with good training and supervision, in order to feel confident in providing what is a challenging, but ultimately rewarding, service to children in need. Councils need to strengthen their collaborative work with health, education and social care providers to understand local needs and develop a strategic approach to commissioning and sustaining foster care services.

Section 1

Introduction and background

“I love where I am because they are like my real family. I love them with all my heart.”¹

Child in foster care

1 Scope of this bulletin

There are some children and families in England who, for many reasons, are not able to live together. Many of these children live with foster carers for some, if not all, of their childhood and adolescence. Practice should aim to enable such children to develop positive relationships with committed and competent carers. Those working in this field know, however, that there are very real challenges in making this a reality.

As at 31 March 2005, there were 41,700 looked after children in England who spent some time in foster care. This represents 68% of all looked after children.² For some children, their time in foster care provides their parents with a necessary break from parenting. For others, foster care is a step along a journey where the future is more uncertain. They may be waiting for an adoption, for their parents to be able to care for them, or for other opportunities to open up.

This bulletin is primarily concerned with how we can best ensure stability for those children who remain looked after for long periods of time and whose future options may be less certain. These children are the ones

who have been assessed as appropriate for and in need of long-term foster care. Stability is particularly important for those children who are unlikely to return to live with their parents and who are not likely to be adopted. This bulletin does not focus on children who need short-term foster care, children who are assessed as not suitable for foster placements or the one in five looked after children who are now placed with relatives or friends.

Stability is not just about a child staying in one placement for a long period of time. Some moves are beneficial for children – for example, moving from short-term care into long-term care or moving from a placement that has not proved satisfactory to one that is more likely to succeed, perhaps because the child feels that he or she ‘fits in’ better. However, there are many types of placement moves that can have detrimental effects – moves made because of budgetary pressures, or because the planning has been poor, or because the right support has not been available. These are the kinds of moves that this bulletin is concerned with.

1. Sinclair, I. (2005).

Fostering Now: Messages from Research. London: Jessica Kingsley.

2. Department for Education and Skills (2006). *Statistics of Education: Children Looked After by Local Authorities Year Ending 31 March 2005*.

2 What this bulletin is about

This bulletin describes the national performance of fostering agencies, focusing particularly on those aspects of performance linked to placement stability.³ In reporting performance, we have categorised agencies into those that meet the standards and those that do not. Agencies that do not meet the standards include those that have failed for reasons deemed to be minor shortfalls and those that have failed in more serious ways. Even minor shortfalls may have significant consequences and, although they may be more easily remedied, any failing is a failure of nationally agreed minimum standards, and is therefore reported as such.

There are two types of fostering agency. Council social workers seeking a placement for a child either use the council's own fostering service or the services of an independent fostering agency.

Fostering agencies must register with the Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI) and are legally required to conduct their work in accordance with the Fostering Services Regulations 2002. In addition to the regulations, the Commission inspects fostering agencies and reports on their performance against National Minimum Standards for fostering services (the standards).

The bulletin concludes with information on the actions fostering agencies and councils can take to improve placement stability for children in long-term care (see Section 3). Some of the key messages in this bulletin

may also be useful for social workers in assessing the future care options for any looked after child.

This bulletin complements the practice guide available from Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE), which draws on current research and provides examples of the ways various councils and independent fostering providers are addressing certain issues raised in both the guide and this bulletin.⁴ Research in Practice (RIP) also provides a number of leaflets to guide people who deliver or use foster services.⁵

3. A summary of the performance of fostering agencies against the National Minimum Standards can be found in the Appendix at the back of this bulletin.

4. Social Care Institute for Excellence (2004). Practice Guide 3: *Fostering*.

5. See Research in Practice leaflets (available at www.rip.org.uk).

3 Why the stability of placements for children and young people in foster care is an important quality issue



Attachment is often described as an emotional bond between two people. The first attachments most of us experience are usually to our parents. Small children do not have the physical or emotional resources to protect themselves or meet their own needs. Attachment relationships therefore have the primary objective of ensuring the child's survival. Secure attachments are thought to be critical to how we develop, how we regard ourselves, and how we relate to others. Children with secure attachments to their parent(s) thrive. They feel good about themselves and others, generally cope well with life's challenges, and are able to form good relationships.

Children who have not enjoyed such a close, nurturing relationship do not find life so easy. They often view themselves very negatively, seeing themselves as unlikeable. They may be reluctant to trust others. Depending on the nature of the problems that infants experience in these first intimate relationships, they may develop coping strategies that cause problems for them and for those caring for them.

Some children who become looked after are securely attached to their parents. Others have had very insecure attachments, resulting in a number of developmental problems. Many have been abused, neglected and perhaps rejected. The majority have experienced a great deal of uncertainty and instability in their family situations. Any move to a new family or into residential care is stressful. It is even more stressful if this means changing

school, losing friends, and moving away from one's community roots.

Whatever the reasons behind children becoming looked after, it is particularly important that they go on to experience stability in their care arrangements. 'Placement stability' is a shorthand way of capturing the stability and continuity that children need in their relationships with adults in order to flourish and realise their potential. It is not, therefore, just a matter of a placement 'lasting' over time. A child who is unhappy and unsupported in a lengthy placement cannot be said to be enjoying stability. Conversely, a move to a more supportive placement will not be a 'bad thing'. Generally, however, frequent moves suggest that all is not well, and it makes sense that children should not be moved more frequently than is absolutely necessary, given the impact that this can have on their ability and willingness to form close relationships.

In recent years, there has been a growth in concerns about the experiences of children in the care system. These children, many of whom already have very troubled pasts, enter a system that often lets them down. Children looked after frequently leave care with few or no educational qualifications, ill equipped for leaving care, and are often poorly supported when they do so. These are failures in 'corporate parenting'.

One of the factors contributing to these poor outcomes for children is thought to be the frequent changes of placement experienced by significant numbers of looked after children.⁶ This is particularly significant for children requiring long-term care because of the need to develop positive attachments with adults.

6. Held, J. (2005). *Qualitative Study: The Placement Stability of Looked After Children*, London: Department for Education and Skills.

4 What matters to children in foster care

In 2004, the Children's Rights Director sent questionnaires to 1096 children in foster care. 410 (37%) children returned completed questionnaires. This was in response to a national survey of foster children, foster carers and birth parents designed to find out what they thought of foster care.⁷ They had lots of positive things to say about foster care, and a good deal of sound advice. We incorporate their evidence throughout this report.

In this section we outline some of the key messages they provided about the ways in which placements and changes of placement are handled. Two out of three children in the survey had been in at least one foster home before the one they were living in when they completed the survey. There were things that children liked about foster care. They liked the care and support that many were given. They liked being part of a family and valued the opportunities that fostering gave.

However, amongst the things they did not like were:

- Two thirds of these children said they had no choice at all when they moved into their present foster home. This may be the result of a lack of potential placements to choose from, or the child feeling that his or her opinions are not counted.⁸
- One third of the children said they had not been given enough information about their present foster family before they moved in.

- One in five said they had wanted more reassurance about their future foster homes before they moved in.
- One third of children said they no longer had any contact with their birth parents. One in eight had some contact, but it was 'hardly ever'. Just under one third had contact most weeks.
- Coming into foster care had stopped one in ten children from doing a sport or activity they had done before.
- Children said the worst things about being fostered were missing your birth family and past friends, the rules and punishments in your foster home, and feeling you are the odd one out because you are in care. A third of children said 'nothing' is the worst thing about being fostered.

The ideal foster carer, according to children, is friendly, kind, cheerful, fun, caring – and easy to talk to. But however friendly, kind and caring the foster carer, the stress inherent in joining a new family remains something every child has to negotiate. For those whose placements 'work', there is much to celebrate. Those who, for whatever reasons, are repeatedly moved may find the odds increasingly stacked against them. They may come to expect change, and even rejection, as normal, and lose any sense of control.

7. Children's Rights Director (2005). *Being Fostered: A National Survey of the Views of Foster Children, Foster Carers, and Birth Parents about Foster Care*. London: Commission for Social Care Inspection (www.rights4me.org.uk)

8. Social Care Institute for Excellence (2004). *Practice Guide 3: Fostering*.

5 Making every child matter

A number of recent policy initiatives are designed around improving outcomes for all children. *Every Child Matters: Change for Children*⁹ set out the national framework for putting children at the centre of services. This is based on the Children Act 2004. The five *Every Child Matters* outcomes are as follows:

- Be healthy.
- Stay safe.
- Enjoy and achieve.
- Make a positive contribution.
- Achieve economic well-being.

It stresses the importance of listening to children and others in planning and developing services. *Choice Protects*¹⁰ focuses particularly on improving outcomes for children by improving the commissioning and delivery of foster care services.



Those responsible for placing children in foster care settings and supporting them in those placements have a major role to play in ensuring that carers make a positive

9. UK Government (2004). *Every Child Matters: Change for Children*. [See www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/strategy/guidance/].

10. Department of Health (2003). *Choice Protects: Improving Placement Quality and Choice*. Supplement 1: featuring good practice in supporting foster carers.

11. Department for Education and Skills (2005). *Children's Services Grants 2005-06* (LAC(2005)6).

“The key objective of Choice Protects is to support local authorities in developing the placement choice required to meet the needs of the local population of looked after children in order to provide better matched placements, to increase placement stability and to improve outcomes for looked-after children.”¹¹

contribution to children's lives. This includes ensuring that children who are looked after have, and are able to make use of, the opportunities that most parents provide for their own children, and that carers support them to become confident and fulfilled adults.

In 2003, the Government provided increased funding of £19.75 million over three years to councils, to 'fund improvements to placement services for looked after children'. To date the funding has been targeted on:

- Improving the support and training offered to foster carers.
- Developing new services to meet specific needs.
- Providing specialist services that help foster carers to improve children's health or educational attainment.
- Developing a multi-agency approach to commissioning fostering services.

In 2005-06, the recruitment and retention of foster carers remained a key issue nationally. Particular consideration was given to the funding of longer-term commitments, such as the staged improvement of payment to foster carers. Local councils need to continue to work with foster carers to identify exactly what foster carers want and need, and to make sure that resources are in place to provide the support they require.

"looks closely at how local authorities can improve services to foster carers."

The Choice Protects initiative

6 How well are children served?

At 31 March 2005, there were 60,900 children and young people looked after by English councils.¹² This was a decrease of less than 1% from a year earlier, but an increase of 3% from 2001.

Between April 2004 and March 2005, 13% of all looked after children had experienced three or more placements during the year. Of those children under 16 who had been looked after for two and a half years or more, 65% were living in the same placement for at least two years or had been placed for adoption. The remaining 37% experienced more than one placement in the previous two years.¹³ These figures have remained fairly constant over the years from 2001-02.

There is, therefore, still much to do to improve the quality of the lives of children looked after

in England. Central to that improvement is strengthening the stability of placements: giving children and young people a sense of security, of belonging, and the experience of a trusting and confiding relationship with a carer or carers who care.

12. Department for Education and Skills (2006). *Statistics of Education: Children Looked After by Local Authorities Year Ending 31 March 2005*.

13. Annual performance assessment information completed by each local council in England and submitted to CSCI.



7 Issues for fostering agencies



The stakes, then, are high. Fostering agencies are asked to find and support placements with carers for some of the most vulnerable children in our society. They are expected to minimise the disruptions to those placements and to ensure that children get the help and support they need to achieve outcomes commensurate with those of other children.

They do this in a difficult context. There is a shortfall of social workers and of foster carers. This presents a number of challenges in ensuring that children get the right placement at the right time. Children from minority ethnic groups and children with special needs may find it especially hard to get the right placement. The shortfall of social workers may also impact on the quality of assessments that may underpin the planning of children looked after.¹⁴ Without a good

quality assessment, the chances of securing an appropriate placement are compromised.

Social workers responsible for placements cannot always command the resources from other agencies that children might need, for example from health services or schools. In the absence of appropriate help, the problems children both experience and present can put placements under strain.

Key challenges facing fostering agencies include:

- How to find and keep enough carers to support choice.
- How best to provide specialist support for carers and children.
- How to improve the matching of children and carers to reduce the number of moves a child has to make.

CSCI's inspection data identify how well fostering agencies are doing on a range of standards that are relevant to placement stability and whether performance is getting better over time. We have drawn on our experience of regulating and inspecting fostering agencies to identify ways that managers and staff can better support children in foster care, and maximise their chances of securing good outcomes.

14. Commission for Social Care Inspection (2005). *Making Every Child Matter*. London: Commission for Social Care Inspection.

Section 2

Facts and figures

8 How well are agencies performing?

There were 385 fostering agencies registered in 2004-05, of which 146 were council agencies.

Fostering agencies are inspected against a set of National Minimum Standards (see the Appendix). Overall, the performance of foster agencies against the standards improved from 2002 to 2004, particularly those run by councils (see the Appendix). While this improvement is positive, there is some indication of poor performance against particular standards that have a direct or indirect impact on placement stability.

Research in foster care¹⁵ and evidence from our inspections underline the importance of the following factors for placement stability:

- Finding and keeping enough carers to support choice.
- Improving the matching of children with carers.
- Providing good information to children and carers.
- Maintaining important relationships.
- Providing specialist support for foster carers and children.
- Promoting educational achievement.
- Keeping children in their communities.

These are not things that lend themselves to easy-to-apply rules. How many carers

are 'enough'? Logic predicts the answer must be more than the required number of carers for each looked after child. How many more is difficult to specify. Too many will be prohibitively costly and carers who are not used may leave. How is an important relationship identified? For some children it is not in their best interests to maintain a parental relationship that impacts negatively on their emotional and psychological development. For some children, important relationships might be with siblings, grandparents or other relations.

Sometimes trade-offs have to be made between things that matter. Maintaining a child at his or her school may generally be important, but for some, a change of school might sometimes lead to a placement with carers who can meet a wider range of the child's needs. Perhaps in a new area and a new school, some children may be able to feel less stigmatised.

This bulletin addresses what agencies can do to improve performance in these areas, many of which are closely related. It does not replace the need for careful assessment and child-focused care planning.

15. Sinclair, I. (2005). *Fostering Now: Messages from Research*. London: Jessica Kingsley.

Berridge, D. (2000). *Research in Practice No. 2: Placement Stability*. Totnes, Devon: Research in Practice.

Social Care Institute for Excellence (2003). *Innovative, Tried and Tested: A Review of Good Practice in Fostering*.

8.1 Finding and keeping enough carers to support choice

As stated above, providing choice requires an over-provision of carers that can be difficult to achieve and sustain, and is costly. Agencies need a large enough number of potential carers to facilitate choice. This is the basis of ensuring that the child's placement with carers is likely to meet his or her needs, i.e. child and carers are well matched. Such a pool of carers needs not only to be large enough in terms of numbers, but also in terms of their profile, enabling children to be matched in terms of their ethnicity or religion, and in respect of any special needs they may have.

In recent years, the number of potential placements has been reduced substantially. In 2003, The Fostering Network estimated that 8,000 more carers were needed in the UK. By 2005, they estimated the UK shortfall at around 10,000.¹⁶ CSCI inspections confirm that over one quarter of agencies have insufficient staff or carers available. Many of these have no strategies in place to address these problems. Similarly, there is a shortfall in the ability of an agency to provide suitable carers for particular children.

The reasons for the growing shortfall in both staff and carers reflect wider societal changes, such as the numbers of women

Std No	Standard	Percentage meeting or exceeding standard 2004/05		Key points
		Council agency	Independent agency	
17	Sufficient staff/carers	70%	73%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The fostering service has an adequate number of sufficiently experienced and qualified staff and recruits a range of carers to meet the needs of children and young people for whom it aims to provide a service. There are contingency plans for any shortfall in staffing. Staff policies encourage retention of salaried staff – including training, regular supervision, study leave, clear workloads and terms and conditions – and of carers by providing support, training and services.
6	Providing suitable carers	67%	76%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The fostering service makes available foster carers who provide a safe, healthy and nurturing environment. The foster home is inspected annually to make sure that it meets the needs of foster children and can accommodate all who live there.

16. Swain, V. (2005). 'Campaign update', *Foster Care Issue* 120. London: The Fostering Network.

in paid employment, or with other caring responsibilities, and the increase in single parenthood. It may also reflect the changing nature of foster care. Children entering foster care are likely to have more complex needs than was the case 20 years ago. In addition, the greater emphasis on contact often requires carers to support and work with parents, often in stressful circumstances. Whatever the reasons behind this trend, fostering agencies and councils are required to develop strategies for addressing these issues.

Council fostering agencies appear to be hardest hit by problems in recruitment and retention, possibly because of the differences in levels of remuneration and support that can exist between the two groups of providers.

8.2 Improving the matching of children with carers

Evidence from foster carers and foster children suggest that placements made out of convenience, or necessity, are particularly vulnerable to disruption.

A number of standards examine aspects of decision-making that impact upon effective matching. As well as the 'matching' standard, those concerned with valuing diversity and the effectiveness of the fostering panels are also relevant.

Generally, agencies are doing well in taking steps to ensure that each child's ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic background

is valued. Children are being encouraged to maintain an active interest in their culture and events linked to their background, ethnicity and religion. However, the shortage of potential foster carers means that not all children are placed with families from a similar background.

Fostering panels carry the ultimate responsibility for decision-making in relation to fostering services. Inspections indicate that, in some agencies, fostering panels would benefit from improved systems and performance.

Given the problems with recruitment and the functioning of some panels it is perhaps not surprising that the poorest performance overall is in relation to 'matching' itself. The matching process tends to focus on criteria such as background, race, ethnicity, gender and age, the composition of the foster family, their likely ability to meet the child's needs, and soon. These are important considerations, but research suggests that such criteria fail to address more dynamic factors that may have more impact on the long-term viability and success of a placement. These include whether or not the child and carer 'click' and enjoy a good relationship. Is the placement where the child wants to be? These factors are difficult to programme, but point to the importance of providing good information to children, giving them a chance to find out what the placement might be like, and enabling them to say 'no' when necessary [this is addressed later in this bulletin].

Std No	Standard	Percentage meeting or exceeding standard 2004/05		Key points
		Council agencies	Independent agencies	
8	Matching	52%	60%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Each child or young person placed in foster care is carefully matched with a carer capable of meeting her/his assessed needs. Placement decisions consider the child's assessed racial, ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic needs and match these as closely as possible with the ethnic origin, race, religion, culture and language of the foster family. The foster family receives additional training, support and information to enable the child to be provided with the best possible care and to develop a positive understanding of her/his heritage.
7	Valuing diversity	76%	89%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The fostering service ensures that children and young people, and their families, are provided with foster care services which value diversity and promote equality. Each child and her/his family have access to foster care services which recognise and address her/his needs in terms of gender, religion, ethnic origin, language, culture, disability and sexuality. Foster carers' preparation and training cover this.
30	Fostering panels	66%	59%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fostering panels have clear written policies and procedures, which are implemented in practice, about the handling of their functions. Fostering panels provide a quality assurance function in relation to the assessment process – to monitor and review the work of the assessors; to provide feedback; to identify problems; and to ensure that there is consistency across the service. Local authority panels monitor the range and type of carers available to the authority in comparison with the needs of children.

Finally, another factor not sufficiently addressed – perhaps because of the shortfall – is the competence of carers. Being a foster

carer can be a demanding job. Some carers are 'naturals' at providing care for looked after children. Others will utilise the support and

training provided to become better skilled at dealing with difficult situations. Others may try their best but, even with good support and training in place, they may continue to struggle to meet the needs of the children in their care. Fostering agencies need to help those carers not suited to the position to become aware of their shortfalls. Where competencies cannot be developed, fostering agencies should ensure that the carers are no longer used, to safeguard the interests of vulnerable children.

8.3 Providing good information to children and carers

Ensuring that the foster carer knows why a child is in foster care and understands the basis for the placement is one of a range of issues covered in the 'Case records' standard. This standard also covers expectations about helping the child understand his or her history and making relevant information available to him or her, as well as keeping records secure.

In 2004-05, this standard was met by 55% of council fostering agencies and 61% of independent agencies. More can be done to improve practice in this area.

The survey of foster carers by the Children's Rights Director found that one third of foster carers were concerned that they had been given only some, little or none of the information they needed about the children they were fostering at the time of the survey. They mainly wanted medical information, information about the children's family background, and to know more about any behavioural problems that the child might have.¹⁷ Lack of information can result in inappropriate placements being made. It can also result in distress to children, and to foster carers.

Some carers have told CSCI that they believe social workers withhold important information from them about the children for whom they are seeking placements. These carers said they would not have gone ahead with the placement if they had known the significant needs of the child beforehand. This causes

Std No	Standard	Percentage meeting or exceeding standard 2004/05		Key points
		Council agencies	Independent agencies	
24	Case records	55%	61%	The fostering service ensures that an up-to-date, comprehensive case record is maintained for each child or young person in foster care which details the nature and quality of care provided and contributes to an understanding of her/his life events.

17. Children's Rights Director (2005). *Being Fostered: A National Survey of the Views of Foster Children, Foster Carers, and Birth Parents about Foster Care*. London: Commission for Social Care Inspection.

an atmosphere of distrust, which can only serve to weaken placements in which this has occurred, or thought to have occurred.

8.4 Maintaining important relationships

Most looked after children want to have regular contact with their families, but not all do. Some want contact with some relatives, but not others. For some children, contact is unwanted and, whether wanted or not, may be distressing and even harmful. Decisions about contact need to be carefully reached, carefully monitored, and adequately resourced.

Generally, though, contact is thought to be important. Family relationships are amongst the most important emotional ties a child has. A child's own family is central to their identity. The family home may be important for other reasons, such as maintaining links with friends and community. Pets may have been left behind.

Relationships with the family will influence how the child sees his or her placement,

and whether or not they want it to work – an important factor in placement stability.¹⁸ Securing and maintaining contact, and managing it well, can therefore be key to placement stability. If not managed well, contact with families – of the lack of it – can cause a great deal of conflict.

The majority of agencies work hard to ensure that children can maintain important links, in whatever ways are most appropriate.

However, the focus of this standard is primarily around processes. These are important, and are designed to ensure that the agency is equipped to facilitate contact, but it does not deal directly with outcomes such as making sure that contact, where appropriate, occurs.

8.5 Providing specialist support for carers and children

Fostering is a challenging task, and carers need a variety of forms of support in order to manage it successfully. These include:

18. Sinclair, I., Wilson, K. and Gibbs, I. (2004). *Foster Placements: Why They Succeed and Why They Fail*. London: Jessica Kingsley.

Walker, M., Hill, M. and Triseliotis, J. (2002). *Testing the Limits of Foster Care: Fostering as an Alternative to Secure Accommodation*. London: British Association for Adoption & Fostering.

Std No	Standard	Percentage meeting or exceeding standard 2004/05		Percentage meeting or exceeding standard 2004/05
		Council agencies	Independent agencies	
10	Promoting contact	83%	86%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The fostering service makes sure that each child or young person in foster care is encouraged to maintain and develop family contacts and friendships as set out in her/his care plan and/or foster placement agreement. There are clear procedures setting out how appropriate contact arrangements for each child in foster care are to be established, maintained, monitored and reviewed.

- Training to provide them with appropriate knowledge, skills and confidence.
- Professional support, including effective management and professional supervision.
- Access to specialist services.
- Appropriate pay and remuneration.

Std No	Standard	Percentage meeting or exceeding standard 2004/05		Key points
		Council agency	Independent agency	
19	Training of carers	69%	69%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The fostering service ensures that foster carers are trained in the skills required to provide high quality care and meet the needs of each child/young person placed in their care. • All new foster carers receive induction training. Where two adults in one household are approved as joint carers, both successfully complete all training.
21	Management and support of carers¹⁹	67%	71%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The fostering service has a clear strategy for working with and supporting carers. • The role of the supervising social worker is clear to both the worker and the carer. • There is a good system of communication between the fostering service social workers and the child's social worker.
22	Supervision of carers	53%	61%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The fostering service is a managed one which provides supervision for foster carers and helps them to develop their skills. • Each approved foster carer is supervised by a named, appropriately qualified social worker and has access to adequate social work and other professional support and information. • There is a system of practical support for carers.
29	Payment to carers	81%	95%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Each foster carer receives an allowance and agreed expenses, which cover the full cost of caring for each child or young person placed with him or her. • Payments are made promptly and at the agreed time. Allowances and fees are reviewed annually. • There is a written policy on fostering allowances. This and the current allowance levels are well publicised and provided annually to each carer.

19. This standard is about the agency's strategy for working with carers, and the extent to which this is documented and understood. It captures a range of issues that carers say are important to them, many of which are discussed in this report, eg information and advice, support services, self-help groups and out-of-hours support.

Support, training and an appropriate level of remuneration are all important for retaining foster carers. Nearly 70% of foster agencies are doing well in terms of providing training and support. Over two thirds provide training, effective management and support. Agencies do less well in relation to 'supervision'.

Supervision provides carers with tailored opportunities for support and training that is more tailored to the needs of particular children and to the things they need to deal with 'now'. One of the key factors in assessing the extent to which carers receive adequate supervision is assessing whether an agency is providing them with 'a named, appropriately qualified social worker and access to adequate social work and other professional support, information and advice to enable her or him to provide consistent, high quality care for a child'.²⁰

Recruitment and retention problems within social work probably contribute to the fact that 53% of council agencies and 61% independent fostering agencies are failing to provide adequate supervision for carers. This is an important issue on which agencies need to focus.

In the survey conducted by the Children's Rights Director, one in six foster carers said they thought there should be better payment for foster carers. In addition, CSCI has found that actual practice in fostering services with regard to the process for paying foster carers is variable. Inspection findings suggest that there is a lack of understanding by some foster carers about some aspects of the payment systems. Some are unaware, for example, of the additional allowances and expenses that they could claim. A key theme identified through CSCI's inspections was that delays and inconsistencies were apparent in some payment systems, highlighting the need for greater consistency and transparency in the authorisation of allowances. There is still considerable variation in the level of allowances local councils pay to carers, and 'fewer than 50% of foster carers receive any fee on top of their fostering allowance'.²¹

The Government is currently consulting on proposals for a national minimum allowance for foster carers as well as a framework for good practice in payment systems for foster carers. The Government intends to announce the national minimum allowance in July 2006, accompanied by guidance on good practice in payment systems.

20. Department of Health (2002). *Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards*.

21. Tapsfield, R. and Collier, F. (2005). *The Cost of Foster care: Investing in our Children's Future*. London: British Association for Adoption & Fostering.



Although nearly 70% of fostering agencies are deemed to provide training that meets the National Minimum Standards, there are indications that ‘many foster carers lack the training and support to address the complex needs of children in their care’.²¹

8.6 Promoting educational achievement

In 2005, of those children in England leaving care aged 16 or over, only 51.5% had at least one GCSE with grade A* to G, or a GNVQ. This is substantially lower than the percentage of all GCSE entrants leaving school with at least one GCSE with grades A* to G (97.6%).²² This relative underachievement is the likely result of a number of factors, including changes of school, problems that interfere with concentration, and days lost at school through non-attendance or exclusion. It is important to recognise that children come into care with difficulties that have already

put them at a disadvantage in the education system.

The Government is determined to narrow the gap in educational achievement between looked after children and their peers. In terms of promoting educational achievement, around four fifths of all fostering agencies now meet the relevant standard *Promoting Educational Achievement* (83% council and 78% independent agencies). This represents a significant improvement on the part of councils (see the Appendix).

To meet the standard, agencies need to demonstrate that they:

- Help foster carers to help children achieve.
- Are clear about the foster carer’s role in school contact.
- Ensure that foster carers provide an environment in which education and learning are valued and regular school attendance is expected.

Std No	Standard	Percentage meeting or exceeding standard 2004/05		Key points
		Council agencies	Independent agencies	
13	Promoting educational achievement	83%	78%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The fostering service gives a high priority to meeting the educational needs of each child or young person in foster care and ensures that she/he is encouraged to attain her/his full potential. • The foster carer’s role in school contact, e.g. parents’ evenings, open days, discussions with teachers, in conjunction with the birth parent where appropriate and in line with the care plan, is clearly laid out in the placement agreement.

22. Joint Council for Qualifications (www.jcq.org.uk)

All these things help to promote educational achievement. Agencies also have to make clear the arrangements that will be put in place if any child is not in school. These arrangements include structured occupation during school hours. Structure, predictability and expectations are important for children. They lay the foundations for work and achieving economic well-being, and in this regard are perhaps as important as academic achievement. In addition, school can provide the basis for a sense of 'normality'. It can be the place where children keep in touch with friends. In this respect, schools are as important for children's happiness and social development as they are for academic achievement, however important the latter.²³

Improvements in the performance against this standard have yet to translate into better educational outcomes for children and young people. This reinforces the importance of a more outcome-focused approach to inspection, target setting and, most importantly, practice, commissioning and performance management.

8.7 Keeping children in their communities

When made purposefully and in the child's best interest, placements away from a child's home can be entirely appropriate for a minority of children. For example, some children need to be removed from a range of 'local' adverse influences. But when this happens solely because the number of

potential placements is limited, children can find themselves placed a long way from home for no good reason. Distance can make it difficult to maintain links with family, friends, hobbies, education and activities. This is, in many cases, undesirable in and of itself, but the distress that arises from such losses can also create tensions that may result in the disruption of the placement, and another move for the child.

Placements a long way from home may result in a change of school. Once again, for a minority of children, such moves may be beneficial. For example, in their foster home they may be able to attend a better performing school, or a school which is more suited to their individual needs. But for most children, moving school can mean significant loss of educational progress. If it happens during the years leading to public examinations it can result in lower educational qualifications and underachievement generally.

The majority of children are placed within their local council, which increases the likelihood that a child can remain with their original school (see the table below). Of the children being newly accommodated in 2004-05 who were still accommodated at the end of March 2005, 11% were placed with foster carers (who were not family or friends) who lived more than 20 miles from the child's home. The Department of Education and Skills (DfES) has encouraged councils to reduce the number of children placed a long way away from home, defined as further than 20 miles away.

23. Sinclair, I. (2005). *Fostering Now: Messages from Research*. London: Jessica Kingsley.

Neither the DfES nor CSCI advocate that, in order to meet this recommendation, councils remove children who are happily settled in secure placements. The advice is designed to ensure that newly accommodated children are not placed a long way from home without good reason. Another caution to following this advice in practice is that it does not account for the differences between council areas. The table below shows that children placed less than 20 miles away may still be placed outside their council area. This is the case for 20% of all newly accommodated children placed with foster carers within 15 miles of their home address. Some councils, such as those in the more rural areas, do not perform well on this indicator because foster homes and families are very dispersed around the council area. Therefore, the closest foster home the child could be placed in may be more than 20 miles away from their family home.

Some councils may place children just outside of their council area, if a foster home in a neighbouring council provides the best match for a child. Whilst this may be

desirable, particularly in terms of distance away from home, it may be problematic in other respects. The impact this has on the child’s familial and social relationships has to be assessed on a case-by-case basis, as some children may benefit from new opportunities and others need the support their local community provides. Councils have less control or influence over resources in neighbouring councils. Moving across a council boundary might mean a change of school and healthcare services, and might result in difficulties in securing appropriate support for a child.

Distance of newly accommodated children placed with foster carers who are not with family or friends²⁴

	Distance in miles from home address					Placements by council boundary
	0-15	16-20	21-25	26-30	30+	
Within council area	6300	400	230	140	220	7290 (77%)
Outside council area	1550	190	120	90	280	2230 (23%)
Total number by distance	7850	590	350	230	500	9520 (100%)
% by distance	82%	6%	4%	2%	5%	100%

24. Department for Education and Skills (2005). SSDA903.

Section 3

Ways to improve placement stability



25. Sinclair, I. (2005). *Fostering Now: Messages from Research*. London: Jessica Kingsley.

Held, J. (2005). *Qualitative Study: The Placement Stability of Looked After Children*. London: DfES.

The following are derived from factors that have an impact on placement stability and would be helpful in developing strategic planning and practice. They are drawn from our experiences of regulating and inspecting fostering agencies and from the body of literature examined during the development of this report. The practice points provide

information to fostering agencies, councils and professionals. They are organised around the same points discussed in Section 2 of this bulletin.

9 Find and keep enough carers to support choice

Effective recruitment and retention

A number of overviews of research have identified what works in promoting recruitment and retention.²⁵ There is no 'one-size-fits-all' fix, and the first step needs to be an analysis of what the obstacles are for particular fostering agencies. Solutions that have helped include paying foster carers for introducing another carer, prompt payments to carers, various approaches to marketing, targeted recruitment (for example of black and minority ethnic carers) and providing



“Placements are where there’s a space.”

Child in foster care

carers with what they perceive to be adequate remuneration and support.

Research in Scotland suggests that effective recruitment policies include:

- Undertaking good needs analysis of the area.
- Promoting a positive image of foster care in the area.
- Working closely with experienced carers.
- Establishing efficient and effective systems for dealing with enquiries, with follow-up visits where necessary.
- Involving social workers and their managers.
- Using the local media.
- Implementing steady and consistent promotion.²⁶

This research suggested that these characteristics were not often in evidence, and that there was scope for recruitment to be better planned, better targeted and better managed.

With a sufficient pool of foster carers it becomes easier to develop innovative approaches for particular groups of children and to make choice and effective matching a reality.

Good Practice

'Single placement schemes' are one example of an approach to improve placement stability for children with particularly challenging behaviour. Specially trained carers are ring-fenced to take more challenging children into their homes, so that there is less chance of the placement being ended in an unplanned way. Such schemes depend on a sufficiency of carers to work. Without this, placements are used for children who do not really need them, resulting in those who do need the placements having nowhere to go.

Some fostering agencies have responded to the recruitment and retention challenge by providing enhanced remuneration to carers, and support to both carers and children. They often employ psychologists and educational assistants, whom they can deploy when the need arises, rather than being subject to waiting lists for services such as Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). They often have more staff who can support carers. These staff are themselves better supported and have smaller caseloads of carers with whom they work, making them better able to provide support to both foster carers and foster children. Effective support is highly valued by carers.

26. Triseliotis, J., Borland, M., Hil, M. *Fostering Good Relations: A Study of Foster Care and Foster Carers in Scotland*. Social Work Research Findings No. 34. Edinburgh: Scottish Executive.

Good Practice

Cheshire County Council has created 'wraparound' services to support foster carers and the foster placement. This involves working across traditional professional boundaries, ensuring that carers have access to support from health improvement teams, social inclusion teams or looked after children's nurses if they or the children need that input. They also run an out-of-hours helpline which is operated by foster carers, a respite scheme and a foster care support unit with two residential places.

Good Practice

Birmingham's fostering agency has opened a recruitment centre in the heart of the city. The 'shop' handles personal callers and telephone enquiries from the general public about fostering. Staff members are available during usual working hours, maintaining a presence when the city is at its busiest – including late opening on Thursday evenings and on Saturday mornings.²⁷

27. Social Care Institute for Excellence (2004). Practice Guide 3: *Fostering*.

28. Commission for Social Care Inspection (2005). *Making Every Child Matter*

Effective commissioning

Councils have a strategic role in ensuring that appropriate placements are available. Commissioning arrangements for children's services are currently under-developed, with councils frequently taking a reactive

approach to finding placements. As well as being expensive, this can result in some children, especially those with special needs, being placed far from home.

Good Practice

Durham County Council has a commissioning strategy for children's social services. Using data on the need for services and identifying service gaps have been key drivers in the council's 'invest to save' initiative. This seeks to improve the quality of local residential care, strengthen in-house fostering services, build up preventative services and gate-keep the use of external placements more effectively. This is designed to rebalance spending away from high cost, low volume services such as out of county residential placements. Implementation of the strategy, due over several years, is progressing successfully.²⁸

Some councils have implemented funding models that pool funding for children with complex needs. They could benefit from extending this approach and taking a more strategic approach to working in partnership with other councils, and also with the independent sector. In doing so, they would be better able to develop a range of services that meet children's needs.

There is scope for councils to join together regionally or locally to commission

independent fostering services for children, using block contracts. The advantages include:

- Children get a local service, with improved access to their families and friends, and continuity of health and education.
- Councils have more oversight of quality and better cost control.
- Service providers have some medium-term stability, providing a basis for developing quality services.

Good Practice

Groups of local councils are getting together to create buying consortia for care services. Recently, 15 councils in the South West announced that they are adopting a similar approach. This will bring together health, education and social care professionals, as well as public and independent sector providers, in a bid to improve commissioning arrangements.



10 Improve the matching of children with carers

“When a placement is just because you have a bed it does not always work.”

Inspector

Consulting with children and listening to what they say are amongst the most important things for fostering agency staff to do when seeking the right carer.

Recent research has found that too often matching decisions are made using ‘rigid rules of thumb’ on what works,²⁹ with professionals overly relying on matching the backgrounds and experiences of children and potential carers. Attending to whether or not foster carers have their own or other children, what the age gaps are between the child to be placed and other children already in the home, or whether or not to place children with or without siblings — are all important factors to consider. As well as minimising the trauma inherent in a move, factors such as ethnicity and religion may be central to a child’s identity and approach to life. However, as with any relationship, what matters most about ‘matching’ is whether children and carers will get on.

Although it can be very hard to find a good match, particularly given the shortage of carers, there are many examples of

successful practice. Agencies that perform well in matching (broadly defined):

- Take steps to ensure a range of carers from a variety of backgrounds is available.
- Ensure that accurate information about children and foster carers is available, so that appropriate placements can be identified.
- Make effective use of tools to aid their decision making.
- Listen to what children, carers and their families say about the proposed placement.
- Avoid a rigid ‘rule of thumb’ approach to matching, but make decisions on the basis of a careful assessment of a child’s needs, taking into account what the child says he or she wants.
- Routinely conduct a risk assessment as part of the matching process.
- Provide their staff and carers with appropriate training and relevant information to assist.
- Introduce the child over a period of time, giving the child an opportunity to say ‘no’.

Good Practice

Families for children employ a referrals officer whose role is to co-ordinate referrals and ensure that all children are placed in services which value diversity and equality as well as their individual need. Gender, religion, language and ethnic matters are all considered.

29. See Sinclair, I. (2005). *Fostering Now: Messages from Research*. London: Jessica Kingsley.

11 Provide information to children and carers

Information, both from social workers and from carers, can help lessen the apprehension that most children will feel when moving to a new home. Research indicates that when carers know what to expect, they are more likely to persist when a placement becomes difficult than if they feel they have been misled and are accordingly unprepared.³⁰ Children also want good information, time to absorb it and find out what it ‘means’, and then an opportunity to make a choice (see above).

Adults could do more to put themselves in the shoes of those they are seeking to place, giving more thought to the experiences that children who get to the point of needing foster care may have had and how they may be feeling. Children worry about what has happened to them, why it has happened and what it means. Are they responsible? Will their brothers and sisters be alright? Will mum be alright? It is with these concerns, and others, that children are often placed amongst strangers.

Most families operate with some ‘unwritten rules’. Most of us have our own way of doing things. No one finds it easy living in someone else’s home, not knowing how things ‘work’, what is expected, and so on. There are ways of making such moves easier than they sometimes are, even for emergency placements, and certainly for longer-term ones.

“We’re not a pass the parcel, just a number, just go where we say.”

Child in foster care

It is important that the foster carers and the foster child have the required information about each other. It is also important that the child understands exactly why they have been placed in foster care. Trying to produce an account as to why they are in care, in case anyone should ask, is very time-consuming and may preoccupy the child.³¹

Good Practice

One fostering service uses preparation days to ensure that information is shared when a child moves into a long-term foster placement. The preparation day consists of inviting the child, all the significant people in a child’s life and the prospective carers to ensure that all information is shared, but also to assist with understanding what is important to the child. This is likely to increase stability as the carers will be more aware of the child’s needs and networks and will be able to respond appropriately.

30. Farmer, E., Moyers, S. and Lipscombe, J. (2004) *Fostering Adolescents*. Chichester: John Wiley.

31. Cleaver, H. (2000). *Fostering Family Contact*. London: The Stationery Office. Also note that SCIE has been doing some work in the area of contact with birth families and the findings will be incorporated into the SCIE online guide (Practice Guide 3: *Fostering*) when it is revised.

12 Maintain important relationships

“[Foster care] is lots of moving about – different sets of rules, never knew where I stood no control over my life – everyone making decisions without me.”

Child in foster care

With family and friends

Making contact work for looked after children, so that they can stay in contact with family and friends, is complex and an area where more research is needed.

It is not always possible to ‘get it right’ first time, and assessments of what is appropriate may need to be revised. Contact arrangements therefore need to be kept under review and adjustments made where necessary. For some children ‘indirect’ forms of contact may be most appropriate.

Evidence from children points to the importance of contact with siblings, something which is not always addressed in contact arrangements.

Some children may need therapeutic help to work through the issues that can arise in contact arrangements. Involving carers in this process can also be helpful.

Some children may find contact with family members reassuring. It lets them know what is going on at home, even though they aren’t there. It may also help them understand more about what is happening at home and why they are in foster care.

Good Practice

Current best evidence suggests that effective contact arrangements are underpinned by:

- A realistic assessment of the attachment between a parent and child.
- A through assessment of the potential benefits and risks of contact with a wider range of relatives.
- Clarity about the purpose of contact, desired frequency, and who needs to be involved.
- Discussions with children and parents about contact arrangements.
- Agreement about the venue.
- A risk assessment of the practical and other barriers to successful contact and plans to minimise these.³²

32. Sinclair, I. (2005). *Fostering Now: Messages from Research*. London: Jessica Kingsley.

With carers and professionals

Looked after children are often expected to establish relationships with adults that would not be expected of other children. One of the things that looked after children sometimes tell us they are unhappy about is the number of times they have to tell their story, although some prefer to do this than to rely on others. In particular, children are critical of the high rate of turnover of social workers in their lives. This can be problematic even when children are settled, but the trauma of changes of placement can make it all the more important that relationships with key adults in their lives outlive changes in placement.

Wherever possible, agencies should take steps to minimise disruption to important relationships with professionals or carers. This means keeping a child at his or her school, enabling them to continue receiving advice and help from counsellors or mental health professionals (rather than finding a 'nearer' one), and – wherever possible – facilitating continuity of contact with social workers whom children have come to see as trusted allies.

This is not straightforward. Staff change employers; children leave care, and it is important that social workers and foster carers are aware of, and respect, professional boundaries. It also presents practical challenges in managing resources, including professional time. But some changes of professionals, including social workers, are brought about by organisational structures,

organisational procedures, and by placing children a long way from home. In these circumstances, there are steps that services can take to ensure that decisions remain child-centred and that, where appropriate and avoidable, children do not lose contact with people that matter to them.

It is also important that the foster carer maintains important relationships with the child's social worker. This will help to keep the social worker well-informed of any issues or concerns the child has, which may affect that placement or later placements. Maintaining this communication may also help the foster carer feel more involved in the caring process.

“If a placement isn't 'working out' then there needs to be someone outside the family (like a social worker) that you can tell.”

Child in foster care

13 Establish good training models for carers

“At present we know quite a lot about the practice of successful carers. We know rather less about how to teach it. This, however, should not prevent efforts to do so.”

Sinclair 2005: 116

There is currently uncertainty about what sort of training is most effective for foster carers. What is certain, however, is that carers want, expect, and need training that supports them to do a good job. In his overview of fostering research, Sinclair summarises the sorts of issues that appear to be important. These include how to manage contact, handle attachment problems and challenging behaviour (at school as well as in the home), identity, the need for carers to respond to a child’s emotional age, to encourage children to develop age-appropriate behaviours and to monitor adolescents’ behaviour outside the home.

Good Practice

The London Borough of Southwark has piloted the ‘Fostering Changes’ training programme. This involves 10 weekly sessions which focus on helping carers find strategies for coping with more challenging behaviour. Following an evaluation of the programme, it has been found that this helps carers with the practical day-to-day care, helps build carers’ self-esteem, and provides opportunities for peer learning and support.

In inspections, agencies commended for their performance in relation to training included those who:

- Had well thought-out preparation training and a full programme of post-approach training at accessible times and places.
- Provide a crèche to enable carers to attend training.
- Provide a wide range of relevant training throughout the year.

-
- Linked the payment of foster carers fees with the expectation that they will attend mandatory training.
 - Provide a programme of support and activities for foster carers' own children.
 - Link training with NVQ qualifications.

Skills for Care have a 'foster care map' to assist managers of fostering agencies link the National Minimum Standards for Foster Care and the National Occupational Standards contained in *Caring for Children and Young People (Level 3)*.³³ The downloadable guide explains the two sets of standards and gives a full breakdown of how the units in each set of standards for foster care relate to each other.

Good Practice

There have been some innovative developments in foster care training. Akamas Ltd has developed 'Advanced skills for foster carers', which is delivered and assessed online (www.akamas.co.uk). The course focuses on the day-to-day work of foster carers and the skills the need to work with traumatised children, and includes public and private forums where students can share support, experience and insights. At the time of this publication, 29 agencies were using this training.

33. Available from the Skills for Care website (www.skillsforcare.org.uk)

14 Provide specialist support for carers and children

Many children in foster care have been traumatised by difficult histories, by separation and by loss. The security of a good placement may be sufficient for some children to recover from these experiences and move forward. Many will need help from other sources, including therapeutic help. These experiences can also manifest themselves in a range of ways that present challenges to foster carers. Some foster carers are caring for children with special needs, complex health needs or disabilities.

Carers in these situations need additional support. The evidence about how effective such support is in foster care is also inconclusive, but this is perhaps because of the very high eligibility thresholds for some services. For example, the threshold for accessing CAMHS is often so high that children often have to wait for assistance, at the risk of problems becoming entrenched. Some agencies have used their fees or *Choice Protects* funding to overcome these difficulties by employing therapists or educational support workers, for example, or commissioning dedicated services for looked-after children from relevant agencies.

One thing foster carers often report is that there needs to be a more collaborative approach between carers and professionals, providing children with more opportunities to work through their feelings.³⁴

Good Practice

One provider has monthly planning meetings between reviews to consider the tasks of the placement. This helps keep the focus on the placement, and addresses any pressures or stress on the placement before they become more detrimental. As the meeting is informal and involves the carers, social worker, link worker and the child, there is a high level of communication, and the child is able to have a greater input.

34. Farmer, E. and Pollock, S. (1998). *Sexually Abused and Sexually Abusing Children in Substitute Care*. Chichester: John Wiley.

15 Promote educational achievement

The relationship between education and stability is two way. Stability is likely to improve educational outcomes, and the right educational experience at the right time for the right child is likely to improve placement stability. Agencies and councils need to ensure that both carers and social workers recognise the importance of school and education in terms of their wider impact on other outcomes for children and young people. It is important for a child to have a champion – someone who shows an interest in their education and celebrates their achievements.

Good Practice

Barnet Council has been running an Education Champions Scheme for the last two years. This involves the heads of all services across the council, senior officers from the voluntary sector, colleges, schools and careers agencies being matched with a child or young person from year 5 up to university level. The adult then adopts the role of a 'good' parent or a 'pushy' parent, to help the child meet their personal goals in education. This may involve attending certain schools or colleges, or receiving extra tuition, having access to a computer, etc. Due to the success of this scheme in its first year, more people are volunteering to become champions for children, and the scheme has been extended to cover more children of different ages and across the council.

"I've been to more schools than a supply teacher."

Child in foster care

Foster carers need to be clear about their role in relation to schools. Inspection and research findings have highlighted confusion about whether the carer's role involves liaising with the school or whether this is the role of the social worker. This is exacerbated when either the foster carer or the social worker – or both – fails to attribute importance to the child's schooling.

"Keeping us busy keeps us out of trouble."

Child in foster care

Advocating academic achievement, or the importance of school attendance, needs to be backed by support to help children attend and achieve.

Good Practice

In the research reviewed by Sinclair, the following issues were significant:

- Given the low starting points of many children in foster care, considerable energy should be invested in ensuring that they achieve success, on the grounds that 'success breeds success'.
- Professionals and carers should take a broad view of the role of schools. A child's happiness is an important aspect of his or her well-being.
- Where a child has done well at a particular school, every effort should be made to enable them to stay there. Sometimes, a 'fresh start' may be more important.
- When a child is reluctant to attend, the strategy to encourage attendance should be anchored in a careful assessment of why the child is not attending. Is he being bullied? Does she not have any friends? Is the taxi journey just 'too embarrassing'? Does he have the right kit?
- Regular contact between the carer and the school is often essential in developing strategies for managing difficulties that arise within school.
- Getting expert help from an educational psychologist may be essential for some children. Much will depend on the approach taken and the reasons for the child's difficulties.

These issues need to be reflected in the training and support available to foster carers who, unless they can demonstrate existing knowledge and competence, should be expected to take advantage of it.

Good Practice

One fostering agency has a business arrangement with the national Teaching Advisory Service and each child placed has a dedicated teacher. Staff assist and support carers and young people in a variety of ways to improve their educational outcomes.

A project has been run with the Children in Care Team and the Family Placement Team to develop reading and writing materials for children aged 7 to 11 years. Carers were consulted about how they would use this resource and the impact of it.

Southwark Council has an Education Support Team, consisting of teachers and education professionals who work with individual children and carers to promote a good school experience.

16 Maintain a child-centred focus

“Don’t dump us with strangers.”

Child in foster care

Children want to be consulted and should be consulted. They also want choices. In consultations conducted by the Children’s Rights Director³⁵, the formula children themselves have set out for getting placements right is that there should be a wide enough range of placements to support a choice of two options at each decision point, with a second suitable placement available as backup if the first does not work out. Even if this is not achievable, agencies can seek to meet the concerns that drive such suggestions.

Real choices allow one to say ‘no thank you’. Children often feel they cannot say no and say that the pressures on them are to ‘go along’ with proposals, particularly when there is no real alternative. These pressures should not be underestimated, and may contribute to placements not working well:

“Feel like you have to say yes when asked ‘Are you all right with that?’”

“If you don’t like the trial weekend you feel you can’t tell anyone because you’d feel guilty, scared, and don’t want to upset them.”

Child in foster care

Processes and arrangements should be such that children feel able to say when they are not entirely happy with what is happening, and know that another opportunity will be made available to them.

Children are clear that placement stability also rests on a gradual introduction to the placement, information to the child about the carers and their household before placement, full consultation with the child before and through placement, close monitoring after placement while it is still new, and accessibility of social work support for the child independently of the foster carers.

35. Children’s Rights Director (2005). *Being Fostered: A National Survey of the Views of Foster Children, Foster Carers, and Birth Parents about Foster Care*. London: Commission for Social Care Inspection.

Conclusion

While there is evidence that fostering agencies have largely strengthened their performance against standards that impact on placement stability, these standards are biased towards the processes required for running this service rather than towards outcomes for children. It is clear that more needs to be done to recruit and retain local carers and to better support children and their carers once the placement is established.

There is a need for better information for understanding when a placement move is a positive step towards stability for the child, or when the move continues the pattern of instability for the child. A better understanding of the outcomes for children who are placed in foster care is also needed.

Establishing and maintaining a sizeable pool of carers and minimising the number of moves a child has to make is contingent on collaborative working between social services, education and mental health systems. This is because the resources required to make placements last - and work well - are not within the domain of foster agencies alone.

Recent work by CSCI indicates that many councils have some way to go in conducting systematic and useful needs analyses upon which to base a strategic approach to commissioning.

There is some evidence that councils are beginning to work collaboratively with other councils and with health, education and social care providers to commission

services to support foster carers and looked after children. Much more needs to be done. Individual social workers frequently find that they do not have the level of influence needed to secure the support of services within the mental health and education systems. Evidence of a supportive system may help attract carers who are interested but lack confidence.

A critical part of a supportive system is the availability of appropriate training programmes and accessible supervision. One essential ingredient in securing placement stability is the ability to maintain relationships through what is a demanding and challenging job. Training programmes and supervision are the vehicles for learning and developing these skills. Managing contact between the child and their family, handling attachment problems and challenging behaviour, and supporting educational achievement become rewarding tasks when professionals, carers, and children have the communication skills to work through problems and find solutions.

Checklist for managers and staff of foster care agencies

The following checklist is designed to assist managers and staff of foster care agencies to respond to the following challenges:

How to recruit and retain foster carers

1. Have you established an action plan as a result of a needs analysis, which includes an assessment of the:
 - number and types of carers needed to ensure a sufficient pool and variety of available carers
 - resources available to support carers, including training, financial support, practical support and specialist service support
 - administrative systems to ensure that cases are well managed
 - training required for fostering agency staff
 - relationships and agreements required to foster collaboration with mental health and education services
 - public perception of foster care in your area
 - opportunities available in your area to promote foster care?

How best to support them

2. Is accurate information about the child and foster carers available to all parties?
3. Do you have a clear understanding of the views of the child and those of the foster carer and does the care plan consider these views?

4. Are there regular planning meetings that involve the carer, social worker, link worker and the child, and any other significant party?
5. Are the carer and the social worker clear about who is the key liaison person with the school and how issues that relate to the school system are managed?
6. Are there specialist support services in place for both the child and the carer to deal with any behavioural or emotional issues?
7. Does the training available to carers and foster agency staff address the skills and competencies needed to support the needs of the range of children in your care?
8. Is contact with family and friends monitored and managed according to what works best for the child?

How to minimise the number of moves a child has to make

9. Is there a range of carers from a variety of backgrounds available?
10. Have you developed tools to assist carers and children with their decision-making regarding which placement will work best for them?
11. Have the risks or potential difficulties with the placement been identified and plans put in place to manage these difficulties?
12. Is the placement developed in a planned and staged way that is responsive to the pace that both the child and the carer feel comfortable with?

Appendix

Performance table

Table of standards relating to fostering and the percentage of all fostering agencies/service providers meeting the standards for 2002-03 and 2004-05, and the percentage increase or decrease from 2002-03 to 2004-05 for each fostering agency type.

Standard	Local Authority		Independent	
	2002-03	2004-05	2002-03	2004-05
1 Statement of Purpose	18%	64%	30%	65%
2 Skills to Manage	64%	90%	84%	78%
3 Suitability to Manage	42%	77%	66%	84%
4 Monitoring and Control	58%	65%	61%	61%
5 Managing Effectively and Efficiently	86%	87%	77%	81%
6 Providing Suitable Foster Carers	61%	67%	66%	76%
7 Valuing Diversity	61%	76%	82%	89%
8 Matching	41%	52%	59%	60%
9 Protecting from Abuse and Neglect	41%	61%	61%	61%
10 Promoting Contact	61%	83%	73%	86%
11 Consultation	58%	77%	66%	79%
12 Promoting Development and Health	61%	71%	66%	64%
13 Promoting Educational Achievement	62%	83%	75%	78%
14 Preparing for Adulthood	65%	74%	43%	74%
15 Suitability to Work with Children	32%	61%	43%	62%
16 Organisation and Management of Staff	56%	66%	64%	72%
17 Sufficient Staff/Carers with the Right Skills/ Experience	52%	70%	80%	73%
18 Fair and Competent Employer	51%	76%	61%	80%
19 Training	69%	86%	57%	73%
20 Accountability and Support	77%	88%	70%	78%
21 Management and Support of Carers	51%	67%	66%	79%
22 Supervision of Carers	31%	53%	50%	61%
23 Training of Carers	65%	69%	66%	69%

Standard	Local Authority		Independent	
	2002-03	2004-05	2002-03	2004-05
24 Case Records for Children	41%	55%	55%	61%
25 Administrative Records	42%	59%	50%	59%
26 Premises	68%	75%	77%	82%
27 Financial Viability	100%	100%	100%	96%
28 Financial Processes	97%	98%	84%	93%
29 Payment to Carers	68%	81%	89%	95%
30 Fostering Panels	39%	66%	55%	59%
31 Short-Term Breaks	73%	85%	69%	88%
32 Family and Friends as Carers	66%	72%	100%	100%

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