

WEST BERKSHIRE FOSTERING SERVICE

Annual Report – April 2012 to March 2013

Introduction

Membership of panels and their functions in respect of approving, reviewing and terminating approvals are now set out in the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the Children Act Guidance Volume 4 Fostering Services 2011. Fostering panels have a crucial role in the provision and monitoring of foster care for children.

The Fostering Panel has various functions, including responsibility for approving foster carers and the numbers and ages of children they are approved for. Approval can be as follows: Short Term, Long Term/Specific Respite, Relief Care, Short Breaks Care, Mother and Baby Placements, Supported Lodging, Emergency Placements as well as Temporary Approvals. Panel oversees the foster carers' first reviews and any subsequent reviews that may need panel's consideration. Panel also has a role in permanency planning where long term fostering is considered the best option.

The panel has continued to meet on a monthly basis, usually on the second Thursday morning of each month. Eleven panels were held throughout the year dealing with a variety of business with one Training/Business panel taking place.

Panel Membership

Panel membership this year has been as follows:

Name	Role	Start date	Resignation Date
Ros Whittaker	Independent Panel Chair	Oct 2008	Continuing
Gwen Mason	Elected Councillor Rep	July 1012	Continuing
Sue Tarrant	Fostering Service Rep	June 2012	Continuing
Clare Minchin	Children and Families (inc Disabled Children) Rep	May 2003	Continuing
Sarah Holderness	Children and Families Rep	Feb 2011	Continuing
Maxine Slade	Education Service Rep		Continuing
Waheeda Soomro	Community and Diversity Rep (Independent)	Oct 2009	Continuing
Charlotte Inglis	Care Leaver	Oct 2012	
June Kemp	Panel Adviser	Oct 2009	Continuing
Helen Benn	Panel Administrator	Feb 2003	Continuing

There is no requirement for the fostering panel to have a fixed membership, although the ability of the panel to function cohesively and with a level of consistency must be taken into account. This is best achieved by having core membership. The new guidance and regulations allow panel members to

remain on the panel with no maximum or minimum tenure. This will enable those panel members who choose to remain on the panel the opportunity to do so. Panel members are drawn from a 'central list' maintained by the fostering service of people who have the appropriate qualifications and/or skills to serve as panel members. All panel members receive annual appraisals.

The panel membership continues to meet the requirements of the Fostering Regulations 2002 and 2011. Changes to panel procedures are now in place to meet the new Fostering Service National Minimum Standards 2011.

A social work representative resigned from the panel in November 2012. We have a panel member who is able to provide ethnicity and diversity expertise. We also have a panel member with care experience. Recruitment to the panel is ongoing with an emphasis on recruiting an independent and health member.

All panel members approach the task conscientiously, studying the papers in advance and preparing thoroughly for the meetings. The proceedings are ably chaired by Ros Whittaker and excellently organised and recorded by Helen Benn.

Panel members attended one business meeting this year and panel members generally attend one training session once a year. Panel members also have the opportunity to access social care training and attend lunchtime seminars or conferences run by the department.

PANEL BUSINESS

Summary of Panel Recommendations (April 12 to March 13)

There have been 11 panel meetings this year.

Fostering Panel Business	
Cases Heard	
Short term approval	7
Short Breaks approval	0
Full Approval Family Friends/Connected Person	3
Temporary Approval of Connected Person	13
Temporary Approval that went on to SGO	5
Temporary Approval with an SGO in progress	3
Temporary Approval arrangements that ended	2
Temporary Approval extensions	4
Long Term Matches non Kinship	7
Long Term Connected Person	3
First or Subsequent Reviews	19
Changes of Approval	7
Temporary Change of Approval	2
Issues of Concern/CP	1
Updates	12
Private Fostering Arrangements	2

Relief Carers	1
Approved for specific child	1
Safeguarding and Support	0
Exemptions	3
Qualifying Determinations	9
Cases Deferred	0
Resignations	4
Applicants not approved	0
Representations	1
Total Number of newly approved carers	14
Total number of temporary approval of connected persons reported	13
Total number of items considered	111

Summary of Foster Carer Resignations and De-registrations (April 12 to March 13)

Number of Resignations and De-registrations	9	
Temporary approval placements became permanent	5	Special Guardianship Orders granted
Change in carers' circumstances	4	Separation/resigned to devote time to family

Total of Approved Fostering Households <i>(NB: several households approved for more than one group) Total number of placements managed by the Fostering Service</i>	84	
Type of placement	Available	In use
Number of short term placements	90	62
• Short term placements on hold		11
Number of family friends and connected persons placements	20	20
Number of long term placements (non kinship)	23	23
Number of short breaks placements	12	12
Number of supported lodgings placements	1	1
Mother and baby placements	1	1
Relief care placements	12	12
Total	159	142

Additional Information

- Carers are often approved for one or a sibling group of two or three children. We currently have 23 fostering household who are able to take a sibling group of two children, twenty of which are in use. We also have seven households who are able to take up to three children, three of which are full. Where carers are not full this is usually due to discrepancy in the "fit" between carers' availability and the needs of

children already placed. We also have three carers who are currently on hold due to their family circumstances.

- We have seven fostering household on hold who provide 11 placements. This is generally due to a change in the personal circumstances of the carers. Although it can also be used to secure a placement for a child who is likely to come into care.
- The number of children requiring fostering placement has continued to increase. This significant increase is putting a lot of pressure on placement availability and this will put additional pressure on current placements.
- At the time of writing this report there is one foster carer with a temporary change to their terms of approval.
- There have been no complaints made by a foster carer in this period
- There has been one issue of concern regarding the conduct of one foster carer. The investigation concluded that the carer's behaviour fell short of the expected conduct appropriate to their role as an approved foster carer.
- There was one allegation regarding foster carers that met the threshold to be investigated by the Local Authority Designated Officer. This was unsubstantiated.

Fostering Reviews

The foster carer's annual review of approval addresses all relevant aspects of the Minimum Fostering Standards and Regulations. The reviews are chaired by the off-line Family Placement Assistant Team Manager to give increased independence and scrutiny to the process. All the completed reviews are further scrutinised by the Team Manager who monitors compliance with the regulations via both monthly spreadsheets and scrutiny of the overall report before final sign off.

The total number of foster carers' reviews completed this year is 51, 30 of which were completed within 13 months and nine of which were first reviews. Five took place within 14 months and three within 15 months. Where there was a delay these related to specific issues within the foster care household which needed to be resolved in order to offer a meaningful review eg change of household composition, medical issues and addressing issues of concern.

Outcome of OFSTED inspection of the Fostering Service

The Fostering Service is inspected by Ofsted. The most recent inspection, in January 2011, rated the overall effectiveness of the service as "Good". The outcome for Children and Young People was "Outstanding" and we were rated "Good" for the Quality of the Service, Safeguarding Children and Young People, Leadership and Management.

To improve the quality and standard of care further Ofsted made the following recommendations:

Children have prompt access to doctors and other health professionals, including specialist services (in conjunction with the responsible authority), when they need these services. Standard 6.4

In the foster home, each child over the age of three should have their own bedroom. If this is not possible, the sharing of a bedroom is agreed by each child's responsible authority and each child has their own area within the bedroom. Before seeking agreement for the sharing of a bedroom, the fostering service provider takes into account any potential for bullying, any history of abuse or abusive behaviour, the wishes of the children concerned and all other pertinent facts. The decision making process and outcome of the assessment are recorded in writing where bedroom sharing is agreed. Standard 10.6

Foster carers are able to evidence that the Training, Support and Development Standards have been attained within 12 months of approval (or within 18 months for family and friends foster carers). For foster carers who were approved as such before April 2008, the Standards are attained by April 2011 (or by April 2012 for family and friends foster carers). Fostering households may use the same evidence workbook. Standard 20.3

Support and training is made available to foster carers, including hard to reach carers, to assist them in meeting the specific needs of the children they are caring for or are expected to care for. Standard 20.8

The inspection report is available upon request from the Family Placement Team. It is also available on the Ofsted website.

Steps have already been taken to ensure that the above recommendations are addressed.

WEST BERKSHIRE CHILDREN'S SERVICES DATA

Number of Children Looked After by West Berkshire (as at 31 March 2013)

Total number of Looked after Children	145	
Total number of Looked After Children placed with West Berkshire carers	94	This does not include short breaks, relief care, supported lodgings, adult placements or children placed from another local authority using our placements.
Males	55	
Females	39	
Percentage aged 9 and over	64%	
Percentage from black and minority ethnic groups	8.5 %	

Number in West Berkshire placements	94	
Number placed with independent fostering agency carers	21	Two of these are young people are UASC, one has a disability.
Number placed with other local authority carers	2	
Number in fostering placements	89	

Summary of relevant Indicators data for March 2013

- Percentage of looked after children with three or more placement moves in the last year is 3.7%.
- Percentage of children adopted (and Special Guardianship Orders) from the Authority in the last year is 8.6% (PAF C23).

Short Breaks Care

The authority has eight carers approved specifically for short breaks care for children with disabilities as well as four foster carers who offer short breaks care in addition to foster care.

Recruitment

Recruitment of foster carers has, this year, been targeted at those able to consider taking placements of children across all age ranges and across varying timescales with specific consideration to the availability of placement choice. In particular a specific campaign of radio advertisements aimed at recruiting long term carers for older children requiring stable placements has been used to good effect. The use of an online web enquiry form together with targeted advertising promotions has continued to be highly successful in producing a regular level of enquiries for filtering into the preparation and assessment training processes.

Short Breaks Care – we have continued our publicity and advertising activity for specific Short Breaks radio advertisements across West Berkshire. The revamped web site resources (including an on-line response form) and targeted newspaper advertisements for information events are specifically aimed at including Short Breaks Carers. Short Breaks Care is an integral part of the overall Fostering Advertising and Promotional Plan for the period and the foreseeable future and continues to produce a regular number of enquiries.

Recruitment activity has also been used to produce enquiries for Supportive Lodgings Placement Hosts in conjunction with our service provider Step by Step. This has involved minimal extra effort and cost but has greatly added to the number of hosts available to add to the leaving care and vulnerable young person accommodation options.

Advertising continues to be targeted throughout West Berkshire with particular attention paid to the different requirements of the eastern and central/west

regions of the area. Specific radio and press advertising for the eastern region has been run with Reading based resources; this campaign ran until the end of March 2012 and continued through to the end of March 2013.

During the later part of the 2012/2013 year activity aimed at generating a county wide collaboration on recruitment activities and resources was started and is anticipated to start producing results from May 2012 onwards. These activities and resources are planned to be supplemental to, rather than replace, existing recruitment plans and activities.

In the past year (April 2012 to March 2013) 115 fostering enquiries were received with 57 information packs sent out. During that period 22 prospective foster carers requested an initial visit and 16 took place. 5 who requested a visit that didn't take place either withdrew or failed to respond. 12 carers were assessed and subsequently approved

Three fostering preparation groups were organised over the year and we held three recruitment information evenings.

The average time taken for a fostering assessment, from formal application to approval following consideration by Fostering Panel, is approximately six months which compares favourably nationally.

Currently there are no foster carers from ethnic backgrounds other than white European. There is a need to recruit foster carers to meet the needs of separated children who are currently arriving from areas such as Afghanistan. We engage with members of the local Black and Minority Ethnic Forum who provide mentors for foster carers who look after children who are a different ethnicity from themselves.

The Fostering Service operates an equal opportunities policy in relation to all its work with carers, children and their families. Matching procedures attempt first to meet as many of a child's needs as possible and second to identify any unmet needs and to put in place measures to address any shortfall in provision. Carers are strongly encouraged to attend training on valuing diversity and there has also been specific training for male carers. As part of preparation for the foster carers' annual reviews we always seek the views of the foster carers, the children in placement, their parents, and foster carers' own children, regarding the service provided by the Fostering Service and ways that the Service can improve further.

Performance of the team is monitored in a variety of ways, via departmental management information (The Red Book), via team generated spreadsheets and databases which are updated and circulated on a monthly basis, through staff supervision and regular file audits, in addition to the foster carers' annual reviews mentioned above.

Placement Factors

Our placement stability figures continue to be exceptionally good.

We are continuing to concert our efforts on keeping all young people needing placements 'in house' and living close to where their birth families live but this

is becoming increasingly challenging given the number of children and young people requiring placements. Our use of independent fostering providers is steadily increasing.

The Temporary Approval of Connected Persons has increased, many of which are progressing on to a Special Guardianship Orders. Five Special Guardianship Orders have been granted with eight still in proceedings.

Parent and child placements are continuing to be considered a safe setting for both mother and baby to assess and support them in care. We now have a policy and procedures to meet the requirement of these placements.

Fostering Support

The Life Chances Team of workers from different disciplines (education, education welfare, educational psychology, youth work, health and early intervention) continues to have a key impact both on the recruitment of more locally based carers for formerly 'hard to place' young people. This multi-agency team focuses on improving the life chances of looked after and adopted children and has collectively been very successful in supporting both the young people and their foster carers.

The Life Chances Team focuses on the needs of the looked after child and is a very important aspect of the fostering services support strategy. All carers have direct access to members of this team.

We have recently launched a home study handbook for foster carers who are in the assessment stage of the process.

We currently run a mentoring scheme for foster carers in the east and west of the area. The purpose of this group is to support carers who are situated out of the immediate areas.

We are introducing induction training for newly approved foster carers and setting up workshops for carers to complete their CWDC standards.

We have an established working relationship with the West Berkshire Foster Carers' Association and use this as a forum for consultation and working collaboratively to develop the service.

Foster carers are involved with the preparation training and where possible we link new carers at an early stage with more experienced foster carers.

Panel continues to seek and receive feedback from panel users, both carers and staff, on the panel process and how it is experienced by users, together with suggestions for improvement.

The general feedback is good in relation to the quality of information provided about panel; applicants felt welcomed and they felt that questions were relevant and important issues were considered. Applicants are also invited to make positive suggestions on how fostering applications are processed or how the panel process can be improved.

Summary

Foster carers play an extremely important role, providing much needed support and security for often very vulnerable children and enabling their successful transition into independent adult life. Fostering is a challenging role and requires skills and dedication. We want to encourage more people to become foster carers and make sure that they have the support and skills to meet the varied and complex needs of looked after children.

The Children's Minister, Edward Timpson, has written to foster carers about the valuable role they play in supporting the children they care for, and sets out what the Government will be doing to support them over the coming year which includes:

- The recruitment and retention of foster carers
- The assessment and approval of foster carers
- Giving better support to foster carers, children and their families when children return home from care
- Increasing the status, security and stability of long term foster care
- Training and support for foster carers and the social workers who work with them and their foster children.

The fostering panel continues to have a crucial role in the provision and monitoring of foster carers for children. The panel also has responsibility for making decisions about approval and terms of approval and assessing the continuing ability of foster carers and their household to meet the complex needs of children. The Fostering Service has an efficient and effective fostering panel that ensures that good quality decisions are made about the approval of foster carers, in line with the overriding objective to promote and safeguard the welfare of Looked After Children.

This has been another busy year for the Family Placement Team in terms of placements. There has been an increase in the number of siblings requiring foster care, an increase in Connected Persons Assessments, and a significant increase in the number of older children needing long term placements as well as referrals for family finding for adoption. The team has worked hard to keep young people in local, in-house placements thereby enabling them to maintain the links with their families and communities.

June Kemp
Family Placement Team Manager
Fostering Panel Adviser

31 March 2013