

WEST BERKSHIRE FOSTERING SERVICE

Annual Report – April 2013 to March 2014

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
Kate Pike	Education Service Rep	Jan 2009	Continuing
Keith Langley	Fostering Service Rep Central List from June 2012	Sept 2008	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.

We have lost a panel member who was able to provide ethnicity and diversity expertise. We have a panel member with care experience. Recruitment to the panel is ongoing with an emphasis on recruiting an independent foster carer, a member to provide ethnicity and diversity and a health representative.

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/training meeting this 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 13 to March 14)

There have been 11 panel meetings this year.

Fostering Panel Business	
Cases Heard	
Short term approval	7
Short Breaks approval	2 (1 S/T approval also)
Full Approval Family Friends/Connected Person	5
Temporary Approval of Connected Person	14
Temporary Approval that went on to SGO	6
Temporary Approval that went on to RO	1
Temporary Approval arrangements that ended	8
Temporary Approval extensions	6
Long Term Matches non Kinship	3
Long Term Connected Person	3
First or Subsequent Reviews	13
Changes of Approval	5
Issues of Concern/CP	1
Updates	2
Private Fostering Arrangements	2
Relief Carers	2
Exemptions	2

Qualifying Determinations	5
Cases Deferred	1
Resignations	8
Applicants not approved	0
Representations	1
Total Number of newly approved carers including Family, Friends and Connected persons full approval	12
Total number of items considered	97

Summary of Foster Carer Resignations and De-registrations (April 13 to March 14)

Number of Resignations and De-registrations	11	
Temporary approval placements became permanent	3	Special Guardianship Orders granted
Change in carers' circumstances	8	Separation/resigned to devote time to family/placements ended

Placement and carer Information

On 31st March 2014 we had a total of 131 fostering placements. 99 of these placements were filled with four remaining vacant. Where carers are not full this was due to discrepancy in the "fit" between carers' availability and the needs of children already placed. 11 placements were not available due the current needs of the children already in placement. An additional 17 placements were unavailable due to the personal; circumstances of the foster carers. The number of the overall children/young people in placement within the fostering service (excluding short breaks) at any point between 1st April 2013 and 31st March 2014 was 181.

114 of these children were of compulsory school age. The number of children/young people with a disability was 11.

There were 23 permanent long term placements. 57 children were in short term care including pre-adoption and pre-permanence. We had 18 Family, Friends and Connected persons placement and one Parent and child placement and there were five children currently in short breaks care.

During this period there were nine sibling groups involving 17 children. Eight of the sibling groups were assessed as being placed together with their siblings and this was achieved in all cases. One sibling group of five was assessed as being placed separately or with one of their siblings and this was also achieved.

Nine young people reached the age of 18 years during with period with four remaining in foster care under the 'Staying Put' arrangements. One young person remained in foster post 19 although this was only for a short period.

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.

Fostering Household Information

On 31st March 2014 we had 142 approved foster carers of which 13 households were family and friends carers with 16 households provided short breaks care and 4 households exclusively for short breaks. Of the 142 carers 139 were white British, with one Irish and two Black African.

The 142 carers comprised of 62 fostering households, eight of which were family and friends households assessed under the fostering services regulation. There were also 6 Connected Persons households who had children places under regulation 24 of the Care Planning Regulations 2010. Six of these households were specifically for short breaks.

There were eight complaints received from foster carers within the last year.

One in relation to lack of communication, poor organisation and delay in paperwork from the children's team. This complaint was justified.

One in relation to lack of involvement of the foster carer in decision making and planning. This complaint was partially upheld.

One in relation to payments for a placement post 18 years which was partly justified.

One in relation to the complexities of an adoption breakdown and access to funds. This was addressed by a meeting with the foster carer and the children's team.

One in relation to the attitude of the child's social worker and lack of support. This was addressed by a meeting with the foster carer and the children's team followed by an apology letter.

One in relation to the professionalism of the child's social worker and contact issues. This was addressed by a meeting with the foster carer and the children's team and a response letter.

One in relation to confidential information being shared at training. This was addressed with the parties involved.

One in relation to communication regarding a child protection investigation, lack of social visits and staffing issues. This complaint is still in process.

We had one complaint about a foster carer from a young person around issues of contact which was upheld.

There has been one issue of concern regarding the registration of one foster care whereby the fostering panel recommended de-registration; this matter has yet to be concluded.

There were two allegations regarding foster carers that met the threshold to be investigated by the Local Authority Designated Officer. Both were 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 72, 19 of which were completed with 13 months and 12 of which were first reviews. Six took place within 14 months and four within 15 months. Ten took 20 months with a remaining 5 taking 26 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 2013, 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. We now have a monitoring system to ensure health checks are maintained.

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.

A letter went out to all foster carers reminding them that the TSD standards are a requirement and need for them to be completed by each foster carer. The standards have been included in the annual foster carer's review paperwork and it is now monitored by the fostering panel.

However this is still an area requiring further work; despite holding regular workshops there are a number of carers who have still not completed their training.

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. Carers have the opportunity to attend Research in Practice training by attending training sessions or via the website.

Recruitment

Recruitment of foster carers will continue to be 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. With a new West Berkshire web site facility live on the 19th May 2014 the focus will be very much on generating web and telephone based enquiries driven by radio, press and social media based advertising activities, covering all fostering requirements including an extended campaign on the recruitment of intensive foster carers. To facilitate the rapid and effective processing of enquirers a new two stage process, mapping the updated regulations, will feed interested parties into a monthly programme of information days, where the role and approval process of fostering will be explained in depth before ongoing assessment and training is scheduled in the second stage. A full listing of these information days is published on the new web-site facility.

The new web site resources (including an on-line response form) and targeted newspaper advertisements for information days are specifically aimed at including Intensive fostering, Long term fostering, Teenage fostering and 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 and these campaigns will continue to be run throughout the coming timescales.

County wide collaboration on fostering advertising has ceased for the moment as providers refocus on the challenges of the new regulatory framework but communications are still ongoing around future opportunities to collaborate.

In the past year (April 2013 to March 2014) 85 fostering enquiries were received with 60 information packs sent out. During that period 31 prospective foster carers requested an initial visit and 27 took place. 4 who requested a visit that didn't take place either withdrew or failed to respond; 13 carers were assessed and subsequently approved

Two 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 with the Governments time scales of eight months.

There is a need to recruit foster carers to meet the needs of separated children who are currently arriving from areas such as Albania, Ethiopia, Syria and 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. 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.

The Family Placement Team proposes to recruit an additional six foster carers for an intensive fostering placement scheme, based on a '3 tier' foster carer model. This will involve intensively trained foster carers, who would be retained by the Council, together with a wrap around support network to ensure that a high level of placement support is available at all times. The 3 tier method is tried and tested and the work represents a major investment in the support of the most vulnerable children currently placed outside of our community.

Recruiting more foster carers with these specialist skills to meet the needs of the most challenging children will help to place more children locally and enable them to stay in contact with their family and friends.

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. The Parent and Child Placement Policy has been designed and written to ensure that all foster carers, Family Placement Social Workers, Parents and Child's Social Workers receive the same information about the placement task they are going to undertake. The policy provides clear guidance and synopsis for each professional / individual involved and enables guidelines for co-ordinating such placements.

West Berkshire Council is committed to improving outcomes for care leavers and to prevent them from experiencing social exclusion; it has therefore developed the a policy in order to ensure that young people 18+ can have the opportunity to 'Stay Put' in their foster placement thus providing them with continuity of support to improve their life chances.

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

We are introducing induction training for newly approved foster carers and we run workshops for carers to complete their TSD standards training.

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.

Summary

The Government's programme of reform for fostering and adoption aims to address key issues such as the shortage of foster carers. Given that more than two-thirds of looked-after children (71%) are now placed with foster carers, ensuring that these placements offer the very best possible opportunities for children to thrive is critical and we are doing our best to achieve this. However finding suitable foster carers to look after older children particularly teenagers is proving difficult and it is with this in mind that West Berkshire Council is looking to recruit intensive foster carers to meet the needs of these children.

In July 2013 the Department of Education published amendment to the Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations volume 4 of the Fostering Service regarding the assessment and approval of foster carers. It outlined the move to a new two stage assessment process for assessing a person's suitability to foster. Stage 1 of the assessment process is intended to provide the decision maker with basic information about the applicant to enable clearly unsuitable applicants to be sifted out without unnecessary bureaucracy or expenditure of time and resource by the fostering service or the applicant. More detailed information is collected in stage 2 of the assessment.

The Children's Minister, Edward Timpson MP, wrote to all foster carers in February this year in regards to proposals relating to the arrangements for 'Staying Put', Pupil Premium for children in care, their role with regards to Delegated Authority, the Housing Reform, and a New Statutory Framework for Long Term Foster Care.

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 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 households 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. We are pleased to have recruited a foster carer from a neighbouring authority as an independent panel member.

The Family Placement Team continues to remain busy in terms of placements for Looked After Children. There continues to be an increase in the number of Connected Persons Assessments and a rise in Special Guardianship Orders. 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.

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

June Kemp
Family Placement Team Manager
Fostering Panel Adviser

10 May 2014