

WEST BERKSHIRE FOSTERING SERVICE

Annual Report – April 2014 to March 2015

Introduction

This Annual report should be read in conjunction with the Fostering Service Statement of Purpose 2015 - 2016. The Statement of Purpose sets out the legislative and regulatory context under which West Berkshire Council carries out the functions of the fostering service.

This report provides details of activity over the financial year April 2014 - March 2015, and plans for the forthcoming year.

Fostering Panel

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 for whom they are approved. Approval can be as follows: Short Term, Long Term/Specific Respite, Relief Care, Short Breaks Care, Parent and Child 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 are kept up to date with relevant legislation and changes in practice. During the year we have considered, E smoking and paperless panels.

Looking to the future the Panel would benefit from further development through widening the experiences of panel members, for example having a more balanced gender membership, a health representative and someone with wider experience in diversity.

Panel Membership

Panel membership this year has been as follows:

Name	Role	Comment
Ros Whittaker	Independent Panel Chair	Current
David Allen	Elected Councillor Rep	Current
Sue Tarrant	Fostering Service Rep	Extended sick leave

Clare Minchin	Children and Families (inc Disabled Children) Rep	Current
Sarah Holderness	Children and Families Rep	Current
Kate Pike	Education Service Rep	Current
Keith Langley	Fostering service Rep	Current
Andreea Pop	Fostering service Rep	Current
Tina Williams	Fostering Service Rep	Current
Charlotte Inglis	Foster care experience	Current
Vikki	Foster carer	Current
June Kemp	Panel Adviser	Current
Helen Benn	Panel Administrator	Current

The 2011 Guidance and Regulations allow panel members to remain on the Panel with no maximum or minimum tenure. This enables those panel members who choose to remain on the panel the opportunity to do so. Fostering panels do not have fixed membership. Panel members are drawn from a 'central list' of people with the qualifications and experience to be a panel member although the ability of the panel to function cohesively and with a level of consistency must be taken into account. All panel members receive annual appraisals.

This year has seen a change in panel membership with one member resigning due to other duties and one who remained on long term sick leave. We have, however, recruited two new central list members with fostering/children and families experience.

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 BUSINESS

Summary of Panel Recommendations (April 14 to March 15)

There have been 11 panel meetings this year.

Fostering Panel Business	
Cases Heard	
New Approvals	5
New Short Breaks approvals	2
Full Approval Family Friends/Connected Person	5
Total Number of newly approved carers including Family, Friends and Connected Persons full approval	12
Temporary Approval of Connected Person	15
Temporary Approval that went on to SGO	6
Temporary Approval arrangements that ended	8
Temporary Approval extensions	9
First Reviews	6
Changes of Approval	6
Issues of Concern/CP	3
Updates	12

Private Fostering Arrangements	1
Exemptions	3
Qualifying Determinations	3
Cases Deferred	0
Resignations/Deregistration	8
Applicants not approved	0
Representations	0
Total number of items considered	92

Summary of Foster Carer Resignations and De-registrations (April 14 to March 15)

Resignations/De-registration		Reason
Change in carers' circumstances	2	Started their own business/ change in career
Retirement	1	
Moved out of area	1	Now with Swindon Long term children remain in placement
Approval Lapsed	2	Children moved out of placement
Transfer to adult services	1	Adult placement YP now 18
Special Guardianship		Orders granted
Total	1	History of concerns and following IRM recommendation
Total Number of Resignations and De-registrations	8	

Placement and Carer Information

Carers are often approved for one child or a sibling group of two or three children. Carers are not always used to their full approval numbers because consideration has to be given to the needs of the child already in placement when considering placing another child. Good matching of children with the right carer and family reduces the risk of disruption.

On 31st March 2015 we had a total of 136 fostering placements; this comprised of short term, long term, short breaks, Parent and Child and family, friend's placements. 108 of these placements were filled with 12 remaining vacant, four of which were for relief care only. Where carers are not full this was due to a discrepancy in the "fit" between carers' availability and the needs of children already placed as 24 foster carers are approved for multiple placement.

The number of the overall children/young people in placement within the fostering service including in-house foster care, IFAs, Family Friends and Connected Persons placements (excluding short breaks) at any point between 1st April 2013 and 31st March 2014 was 161

121 of these children were of compulsory school age. The number of children/young people with additional needs was 11. There were 24 permanent long term placements. 61 children were in short term care including pre-adoption and pre-permanence. We had 18 children in Family,

Friends and Connected Persons' placement and in a Parent and Child placement and there were four children currently in short breaks care.

During this period there were 26 sibling groups involving 54 children. Sixteen of the sibling groups were assessed as being placed together with their siblings and this was achieved in all cases. Two sibling groups were originally placed together but were subsequently separated. The remaining eight groups were placed in individual placements.

As of 31st March 2015 we had 35 children placed with Independent Fostering Agencies. This comprised of 30 fostering households. Two placements had a sibling group of two and one a sibling group of three. We also had a parent and child placement.

Sixteen young people reached the age of 18 years during with period with six remaining in foster care under the 'Staying Put' arrangements.

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 136 approved or temporary approved foster carers comprising of 94 fostering households of which 14 households were family and friend's carers with 11 households provided short breaks care and 5 households exclusively for short breaks. Of the 136 approved foster carers 135 are white British and one white Irish.

In the past year we received four complaints/representations from foster carers.

One regarding lack of support for a young person in placement.

One in relation to decision making.

One relating to the procedures for ending a placement and how this was communicated and managed.

One in relation to multiple issues around contact, communication, consultation, timely actions and aspects of children's services.

There has been one issue of concern regarding the registration of one foster carer whereby the fostering panel recommended de-registration; this matter went to the IRM who supported the Fostering Service decision to de-register

There were six allegations regarding foster carers two of which met the threshold to be investigated by the Local Authority Designated Officer. Both were unsubstantiated.

The remaining four were dealt with as standards of care.

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 an experienced dedicated worker from the Family Placement team to give increased independence and scrutiny to the process. All the completed reviews are further scrutinised by the Head of Service who monitors compliance with the regulations and scrutiny of the overall report before final sign off.

The total number of foster carers' reviews completed this year is 61, 29 of which were completed with 13 months and 8 of which were first reviews. 10 took place within 16 months, 6 within 19 months and 6 within 24 months, with a remaining 2 taking 30 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.

The appointment of a dedicated experienced social worker in the team to chair all foster carers reviews will help to achieve better outcomes in the timeliness of annual reviews.

Outcome of Ofsted inspection of the Fostering Service

Ofsted began inspecting local authority children's services under a new 'single' assessment framework in November 2013. This framework includes the inspection of services for children in need of help and protection; children looked after, care leavers, and a review of the Local Safeguarding Children Board.

West Berkshire Council was inspected by Ofsted under the new single assessment framework in March 2015. At the time of writing this report the Council were still waiting for the final judgment and completed report. Prior to the introduction of the single inspection framework the Fostering Service was last inspected, in January 2013. Ofsted 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. All the recommendations for this inspection have been addressed.

Recruitment

Recruitment of foster carers for 2015/16 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. The focus will continue to 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 short breaks foster carers. To facilitate the rapid and effective processing of enquirers a two stage process feeds interested parties into a monthly programme of information evenings, where the role and approval process of fostering will be explained in depth before ongoing assessment and training is scheduled in the preparation group

stage. A full listing of these information days is published on the website page westberks.gov.uk/fosternow.

The website resources (including an on-line response form) and targeted advertisements for information days are specifically aimed at including 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 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 social media advertising through Facebook and Google + has proven very effective and together with radio and press advertising will form the basis of ongoing campaigns together with a community based events programme run by volunteers and foster carers to ensure maximum exposure of the recruitment needs. For 2015 this events programme has been extended to cover the Crafty Craft Race, Hollybrook Festival, Newbury Carnival, Culture Fest, Newbury Agricultural Show and the Englefield Steam Rally, together with pop up stalls at various Newbury and Thatcham markets and events.

Possible collaboration with other Berkshire West authorities regarding both recruitment and advertising activities is being investigated at present and should produce increased availability, penetration, effectiveness and cost control in these areas.

In the past year (April 2014 to March 2015) we received 103 fostering enquiries. 63 did not progress due to family circumstances, failure to respond, unsuitable accommodation or personal reasons. 46 information packs were sent out. During that period 14 prospective foster carers requested an initial visit and 9 took place. The remaining 4 that didn't take place either withdrew or failed to respond; 5 foster carers have been assessed and were subsequently approved, two of which are short breaks carers. We also assessed 5 connected persons who went on to full approval. One assessment ceased due to change in care plan.

Two fostering preparation groups were organised over the year and we held nine recruitment information sessions.

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 (Data Zone), 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.

An innovative model of fostering that through individually tailored and structured approach to care planning, aims to bridge the gap in care resources between standard foster care and higher end services such as residential care, so as to meet the needs of a higher range of service users and prevent escalation through resources.

The Family Placement Team has been exploring an intensive fostering placement scheme, provided by an Independent Fostering Agency who recruit foster carers with specialist skills to meet the needs of the most challenging children. This involves a wrap around support network to ensure that a high level of placement support is available at all times.

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 has continued to increase due to the complex needs for children, as well as the need to keep some young people safe out of area.

There is an increased number of children placed with 'connected persons' resulting in the completion of more assessments of specific applicants for specific named children, many of which are progressing on to a Special Guardianship Orders. Twelve Special Guardianship Orders have been granted in the past year which is an increase of 58% since 2010/2011. There are another 18 children where Special Guardianship Orders are being progressed through an assessment or being considered as the most appropriate long term option.

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 therefore assists young people aged 18+ to 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 introduced 'Fostering Changes' to equip foster carers in their care of more challenging children/YP.

We have re-launched the COT (Carers of Tomorrow) group for foster carers' own children.

We have regular meetings with the West Berkshire Foster Carers' Association and use this as a forum for consultation to develop services.

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

The Family Placement Team continues to support and facilitate carers' relationships and networking links through hosting social evenings, such as the foster carers' award ceremony and the foster carers' Christmas party, a thank-you lunch during fostering fortnight and a bi-annual foster carers' celebration evening. The service also recognises the important role that foster carers' own children play in ensuring the stability of placements and positive outcomes for looked after children.

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/Future Challenges

The Department of Education statistical figures for Looked After Children in England year ending 31st March 2014 indicates that the number of looked after children continues to rise. There were 68,840 looked after children, an increase of 1% compared to 31 March 2013 and an increase of 7% compared to 31 March 2010.

These numbers have increased steadily over the past 5 years, with 30,430 children who started to be looked after during the year ending 31 March 2014, an increase of 5% from 2013 and an increase of 8% from 2010.

Over a third of looked after children are aged between 10 and 15 years old, which made up 37% in 31 March 2014. This trend has continued and we have seen a significant increase in the number of requests for placements for older children.

Consequently the rise in looked after children is leading to more children in foster care which accounts for three quarters of the looked after population so the number of children in foster care has continued to rise. Of children looked after at 31 March 2014, 51,340 were cared for in a foster placement. This represents an increase of 9% since 2010, a larger increase than the rise in overall numbers of looked after children.

The Fostering Service has, in line with the government's finding, had an increase in the number of children requiring foster care and an increase in the number of children needing long term or permanent placements.

The team has continued to work hard to find the most appropriate placement for those children and young people who are unable to remain in their family. We continue to work hard to keep young people in local, in-house foster placements thereby enabling them to maintain links with their families and communities.

The number of children requiring fostering placement has continued to rise. This significant increase puts a lot of pressure on placement availability and this puts additional pressure on current placements. In order to match the needs of children it has been necessary to place some with Independent Fostering Agencies.

It is predicted that external placements will continue to be required from time to time in the forthcoming year. In these instances we will continue to use placements within the South East Regional contact involving eleven local authorities, including West Berkshire, who have commissioned a contractual framework with preferred providers. This arrangement can help to reduce the cost of some independent agency charges and ensure that quality standards are maintained.

Implementing the 'Staying Put' policy has been a challenge, particularly in an arrangement where the young person has a disability. We have been working with our partner agencies to address this issue and amendments will be made to the policy so that it is clear how these arrangements work.

Overall the work of the Family Placement Team has increased significantly and brought with it the challenge of meeting the individual demands of the various timescales in different parts of the service. In addition to recruitment and supporting foster carers, the team also assesses complete connected persons assessments of potential permanent family members as foster carers, as well as family finding for long term fostering, short break care, private fostering and post adoption and SGO support.

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 recruitment of foster carers and increasing the number of placement for older children and mother and baby placements is a key challenge facing the service. Improving the quality of foster carers is also a key challenge for the team.

The team also provides a Duty Service each day to search for placements and respond to enquiries or the needs of foster carers when their supervising social worker is unavailable. Social Workers in the team provide regular training for foster carers both pre and post approval.

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 recommendations 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.

June Kemp
Family Placement Team Manager
Fostering Panel Adviser

March 2015