

# **Walsall Children's Services- Fostering Service Six Month Report**

**April 2015 – September 2015**

## **Introduction**

This report will outline the activity of Walsall Children's Services Fostering Service for the six month period from April, to September, 2015. The report will cover the following areas:

National developments

Recruitment

De-registration of foster carers

Resource Maximisation

Fostering panel

Service Developments

## **National developments**

In 2011 new Fostering Service Regulations came into force in response to the consultations undertaken with children and young people. These regulations revoked and replaced the Fostering Service Regulations 2002.

In addition, new National Minimum standards were introduced in April 2011, which built upon the original standards introduced in 2009 and which underpin Ofsted inspections of fostering services. The new standards reflect key amendments to practices as a result of changes running through the new guidance and regulations.

The Care Planning and Fostering (Miscellaneous Amendments) (England) Regulations 2015.

## **Approval of foster carers**

The fostering regulations allow for a 'brief report' to be presented to a fostering panel if a fostering service considers during stage two of the assessment of an applicant to foster that they are unlikely to be suitable. The regulations have been amended to make clear that in such circumstances the fostering panel must either request the fostering service to complete the assessment and prepare a full report, or recommend that the person is not suitable to foster. Similarly the regulations relating to the IRM are amended to make clear that it may recommend that a full report be prepared if the brief report does not enable it to determine the applicant's suitability Regulations 2015

There is accompanying statutory guidance, *Permanence, long-term foster placements and ceasing to look after a child*; this amends various sections of the existing statutory guidance *Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 2: Care planning, placement and case review*. In view of the fact that Volume 2 was published in 2010 and has subsequently been amended and supplemented a number of times without being reissued in composite form, the guidance can be hard to follow!

## **Permanence**

The guidance provides a revised definition of permanence:

Permanence is the long term plan for the child's upbringing and provides an underpinning framework for all social work with children and families from family support through to adoption. The objective of planning for permanence is therefore to ensure that children have a secure, stable and loving family to support them through childhood and beyond and to give them a sense of security, continuity, commitment, identity and belonging.

It makes clear that there a variety of options for permanence, all of which can deliver good outcomes for individual children. For children who remain looked after, it emphasises that long-term foster care is an important route to permanence.

## **Long-term foster placements**

The regulations provide for the first time a definition of a long-term foster placement, being when all of the following conditions are met:

- the child's plan for permanence is foster care
- the foster carer has agreed to look after the child until they cease to be looked after, *and*
- the child's responsible authority has confirmed the arrangement to the foster carer, the child and their birth parents.

Before making a long-term foster placement the responsible authority must assess the ability of the foster carer to meet the child's needs now and in the future, and identify any support services that will be needed to achieve this. The child's wishes and feelings must be taken into consideration, it must be considered that the placement will safeguard and promote the child's welfare, the IRO must be consulted, the child's relatives must be consulted where appropriate, and a new placement plan must be prepared and signed by the foster carer. Local authorities are expected to have an agreed process for this matching consideration. To ensure that the requirements have been met, the decision to make a particular long-term foster placement must be discussed and recorded as part of the child's review process. The same process must be followed for assessing the suitability of all potential long-term placements whether this involves remaining with an existing carer or moving to a new family.

If the child's permanence plan is long-term foster care and their existing foster carer wishes to be considered to provide this, the responsible authority is expected to consider this in a reasonable timescale taking account of the existing relationship between the child and the foster carer, the length of time in placement, the child's relationships with the foster carer's wider family and community, and the progress of

the child in placement recorded through the review process. If the authority does not consider it appropriate to assess the ability of the current foster carer to become the long-term foster carer it should give the carer clear reasons in writing, and also communicate the decision to the child as appropriate to their age and understanding. The statutory guidance makes no reference to staying put, but in considering the suitability of the placement to meet the child's long-term needs it would be appropriate to discuss whether or not such an arrangement might be possible and appropriate when the child becomes 18.

## **Recruitment**

As at 31 September 2015 there were 271 households approved foster carers in the service. 113 Family and Friends foster carers including those approved under Regulation 24 of the Fostering Services (England) Act 2011, which allows children to be placed for a short period of time with people with whom they have a connection whilst the foster carer is fully assessed.

Despite the current climate and against national trends, Walsall Council continues to be successful in the recruitment of foster carers with 22 new households being approved to foster in the last 6 months, this includes 8 mainstream foster carers and 14 Family and Friends foster carer households. In addition 8 Regulation 24 assessments were completed on connected people who were in a position of caring for a child or young person.

A number of actions were taken in 2015 to support the higher level of recruitment activity and further increase capacity,

- Experienced Social Workers within the Fostering Team now have a specific role in recruitment, assessment and training of foster carers and have taken on responsibility for Family and Friends.
- A number of independent assessors mainly via SWAN assessments have been commissioned to undertake work on behalf of Walsall. This supports a flexible and speedy response to assessments, increasing the workforce at times of high demand
- The Fostering Service has introduced a new Fostering Network 'Skills to Foster' assessment tool.
- Assessments are quality assured by the workers respective line manager, and further scrutinised by the Agency Advisor to Panel prior to submission to panel.
- Feedback from the Fostering Panel chair (and panel members) has also been facilitated via a joint Fostering manager meeting. This has resulted in a gradual increase in overall standards.

## **De-registration of foster carers**

As in the previous year, carers who no longer met quality standards were deregistered from the service.

During this 6 month period 11 foster carer households were de-registered. The national average annual de-registration rate is 13% and this figure equates to 1.43% although below the national average this figure is worthy of further analysis at year end.

3 were of the Family and Friends foster carers who had approval for specific children and subsequently took out special guardianship orders. All these children would have been in the care of the local authority were it not for support to take out a special guardianship order. In addition 4 mainstream foster carers resigned 3 Family and Friends resigned and 1 a child was removed.

### **Resource Maximisation**

Due to the high volume of children coming into care, independent providers continue to provide a key resource. In addition, the needs of some children dictate the need to access solo or specialised placements. Wherever possible, placements are sought within or nearby to Walsall council and links with school, leisure activities and contact with family and friends maintained.

The fostering team liaises with the placement service daily. All resource requests for foster care placements are sent to the placements service. The placement service considers all internal placements in the first instance and then will go to our preferred providers if no suitable in house placement is available. Placement matching is taken seriously and children are not matched simply to a vacancy, however this approach ensures appropriate maximisation of in-house placement opportunities.

A full review of the sufficiency plan and needs analysis is in progress and this will ensure recruitment is effectively targeted to meet identified need.

### **Fostering panel**

Fostering Panel Meetings continue to take place with the Fostering Panel Chair, Panel Advisors to facilitate an overview of both panel and service activities and improvements. The Panel chair is annually appraised by the Assistant Director, Children in Care. Panel members are also appraised by the panel chair and panel advisor.

The Fostering Panel membership has remained very stable throughout 2015 although there has been additional membership in order to meet the demands of three fostering panels per month.

### **Service Developments**

#### **Staffing**

The service has had a reorganisation and incorporated three teams into two, with Family and Friends joining the Recruitment, Training and Assessment Team. The deletion of Senior Practitioner posts, the introduction of Practice Manager Post has placed the emphases on the new post holders being managers of both the staff and covering the service when the Team Manager is absent.

The team has a mixture of experienced fostering social workers and enthusiastic field social workers. They have risen well to the challenges of service improvement and remain positive and committed to the task.

There is a considerable level of expertise within the team and recruitment of Practice Managers and social workers are from within the Authority and external appointments. This has ensured stability and consistency at a time of great change at a service level.

The fostering staff team support service improvement and development in many ways. Several operational working groups have been established to drive service improvement including: improvements to foster carer supervision; development of a improved recruitment and selection procedures. Team meetings and development days provide further opportunities to develop and refine working practice. Individual staff members take on service leads in key areas, for example: training; further specialist leads will be developed.

This report gives a brief analysis of the current situation and a more robust analysis will be undertaken at the end of the financial year (This report will be available in August 2016).

Linda Franks

Professional Advisor Adoption and Fostering Panel

25 January 2016