



Better Together for Children

Walsall Council Annual Fostering Service Report April 2014 – March 2015

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1. OVERVIEW

This report sets out the activity of the Fostering Service from 1st April 2014 to 31st March 2015. It will analyse activity in relation to the recruitment, assessment and approval of foster carers and also the effective support and training provided to carers. Reference will be made to private fostering, family and friends as carers, permanence and Special Guardianship support.

This period was both a busy and challenging time for the Fostering Service, mainly as a result of a service re-design, a change in the management structure and the need to continue to provide high quality placements for Walsall's looked after population. Louise Watts, Operational Manager for the Family Placement Service retired in June 2014 and Lisa Preston was appointed to the Group Manager position for Provider Services in September 2014. The post of professional advisor was made into a full time position and Linda Franks was appointed to this role and joined the service in November 2014.

The Fostering service reduced down from three teams to two with the loss of the dedicated Family and Friends team resulting in the responsibilities for that team being split between the Recruitment & Assessment team and the Support & Development Team. There was an overall improvement in the number of newly approved foster carers and all carers were consulted on significant changes to service delivery.

2. THE STRUCTURE OF THE FOSTERING SERVICE

The Fostering Service continues to be based at the offices at 106 Essington Road, Willenhall, during 2014/15 the service comprised of the following:

Group Manager Family Placement Service

The primary objectives of this role are to be

- responsible for the service planning and management of all local authority fostering and adoption services
- Registered Manager of the Fostering and the Adoption Service.

Recruitment and Assessment Team

This team is responsible for all marketing, recruitment, training and assessing activities. They undertake the assessments of mainstream and private foster carers. During this period, one senior practitioner post was responsible for the short-term break scheme. The second part time senior practitioner post was responsible for training, delivering the KEEP training and implementing the Training, Support and Development Induction (TSD), induction standards for foster carers. KEEP is a positive parenting training programme for foster carers developed from the Multi-dimensional Treatment Foster Care Programme (MTFC). The team provides supervision and support to carers until their first review, undertakes back up

placement duty and permanence assessments. A full time customer services officer responds to all enquiries from adults considering becoming foster carers or adopters.

Support and Development Team

This team is responsible for providing supervision and support to temporary and permanent carers, undertaking back up placement duty, family finding for permanent placements and permanence assessments. During this time period, the team manager and the senior practitioner post were responsible for permanent family finding, the management of front line duty/placement identification until September 2014 when this part of the service moved to Stroud Avenue.

Family and Friends Team

This team was responsible for supervision and support of family and friend carers, undertaking back up duty and providing post Special Guardianship Order (SGO) support. One senior practitioner was responsible for commissioning independent assessments, (family and friends and Special Guardianship) and the other senior practitioner post took a lead on the support to family and friends carers and post SGO support.

The Independent Reviewing Officer for foster carers undertakes all reviews of foster carers and is involved in aspects of service development and the delivery of some training.

The post continues is located in the Family Placement Service and the post is supervised by the group Manager for the Family Placement Service.

3. SERVICE DEVELOPMENT

A planned re-structure of Specialist Children's Services in April 2015 changed a number of aspects of service delivery. Firstly, as mentioned above, the Family and Friends team was deleted and the social workers from that team were re-distributed across the remaining family placements teams' dependent on their skill and experience. The issues of continuity of worker for children for whom adoption is the plan was addressed and now all care planning for adoption remains in the Safeguarding and Family support team until the final adoption order is granted and a proposal to create a "work stream" within the adoption team for family finding for adoption and permanent fostering was introduced which will provide equity for all children with a care plan of permanence away from the birth parents

4. RECRUITMENT

During this period of time, responsibility for all marketing activity for the Fostering Service was located in the Central Communications team. They offered some support for recruitment and retention activity, but much less than was possible when the Family Placement Service had their own Recruitment officer. The Team Manager

for the recruitment and assessment team had regular meetings with Central Communications (approximately every 6 weeks) to discuss recruitment ideas, events and the overall recruitment strategy.

A Foster Care Recruitment Working Party was formed in 2014. It was attended by members of Central Communications, the Recruitment & Assessment Team and foster carers. The Team Manager, in association with Central Communications and the working party coordinated our recruitment events

The team has hosted 3 public information events during the year; one was at the Walsall Foster Carer Association's Office in Ryecroft, the others were at the Family Placement Services office at Essington.

A "Foster Carer Recruitment and Retention Strategy" was produced during the year and this is now regularly reviewed. The objectives include:-

- Continuing with our inclusive recruitment campaigns
- Reviewing our branding
- Benchmarking with other Fostering Services
- The effective implementation of new guidance

In December 2012 we opened a "Fostering in Walsall" face book page and a twitter account. Currently 228 people "like" the face book page and we have 182 twitter followers.

Walsall took a lead role in the West Midlands Fostering Group which set up a regional website, with its own brand. The website directs enquirers to their own local authority website. The group lost its momentum when a couple of key workers members of the group left their posts. There are plans to review it in 2015-16.

During the year the team continued to work alongside the Fostering Network and the Department for Education on the "Supporting fostering services to recruit more foster carers" project. We worked through our action plan to improve our foster care recruitment and retention, namely to:-

- Enable foster carers and care leavers to support and be fully integrated into the fostering service's recruitment activity
- Tailor messaging to attract prospective foster carers from all values modes groups with a specific focus on pioneers.
- Evaluate resource allocation to respond quickly to requests for initial visit

Enquiry levels

Fostering	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15
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Enquiries	113	149 (114 excluding radio)	105	120	109
Offers	63	69	62	74	68
Initial visits	47	43	34	71	67
Approvals	17	22	8	9	17
Conversion rate	15%	15% (19% excluding radio)	8%	7.5%	15.6%

If you discount 2011-12's radio campaign, enquiries have remained steady in the last 5 years, between 105 and 120. Approvals however have increased significantly back to the levels we were at in 2011-12.

Total requests for information and enquiries

Month	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15
April	17	20	11	6	14
May	16	119	28	8	35
June	19	21	12	19	14
July	26	26	17	26	13
August	16	10	8	15	8
September	21	16	17	30	10
October	20	13	8	15	12
November	19	10	13	24	5
December	6	12	7	9	6
January	19	35	17	26	26
February	17	14	16	20	18
March	20	20	13	15	15
Total	216	316	167	213	176

There has been a fall in the numbers of enquiries however the conversion rate has been greater. This would suggest the information provided has been clearer and applicants have been able to make an informed choice regarding their decision to pursue fostering.

Ethnicity of people requesting for information only and enquirers

Year	White	Dual Heritage	Asian	Black/AC	Chinese	Unknown
2008/09	176 (64%)	3 (1%)	43 (16%)	36 (13%)	0	47 (17%)
2009/10	143 (69%)	2 (1%)	23 (11%)	21 (10%)	0	17 (8%)
2010/11	154 (76%)	0	23 (11%)	20 (10%)	0	4 (2%)
2011/12	161 (51%)	1 (0%)	50 (16%)	11 (3%)	2 (1%)	89 (79 from radio ad)

						(28%)
2012/13	103 (63%)	2 (1%)	36 (22%)	20 (12%)	0	2 (1%)
2013/14	153 (72%)	4 (2%)	30 (14%)	23 (11%)	0	3 (1%)
2014/15	114 (65%)	9 (5%)	25 (14%)	21 (12%)	0 (0)	7 (4%)

There has been a significant increase in interest from the white community; interest from other ethnic groups has been steady, with a slight decrease from the Asian community.

Information requests and enquiries by source of marketing methods

	Magazine	Bus Ad	News - paper	Events	Internet	Leaflets	Directories	Family / Friends	Switch board	N/ k	other	radio
10/11	4	2	16	3	98	3	6	36	10	3	24	0
11/12	0	2	8	6	118	1	5	28	18	1	16	113
12/13	0	0	10	2	60	0	2	21	6	0	5	0
13/14	1	0	6	0	71	0	2	26	7	1	6	0
14/15	0	0	3	27	91	1	4	41	0	0	9	0

Until last year there was a steady reduction in approaches from family and friends of existing foster carers. It was suggested that this was due to Walsall having a surplus of foster carers 2 years previously, so current carers were less likely to recommend us to their friends and families. Numbers went up last year; this may also have been due to the ending of the £500 incentive scheme to introduce a friend or family member at the end of March 2014. The scheme has now been replaced by a scheme which pays £100 to the foster carer association for all the foster carers that they (and the foster carers) help us recruit. As this number has increased to 41, it may suggest the new scheme has been successful.

Of the 17 families approved, the source of their initial enquires was as follows: Internet (6 of which 2 mentioned Google), Friends and family (8), one approached reception at the Civic Centre, one was a previous foster carer and one was not recorded.

In order to improve on-going service delivery and to provide a strategic focus on foster care recruitment, the Group Manager put together a "Spend to Save" proposal to recruit a Recruitment and Promotions worker based in the Fostering Service. This was successful and the recruitment to this post commenced towards the end of March 2015.

5. ASSESSMENTS AND APPROVALS

Of the assessments which led to the 17 approvals, 14 were undertaken by social workers in the Recruitment and Assessment team, 3 were commissioned from SWAN (an independent agency) and were undertaken by someone who had previously been a member of the Recruitment & Assessment Team. The average timescale of the recruitment process from receiving the prospective applicants offer, to panel date was 352 days; this is an improvement from last year's 383 days. We are aiming to approve the majority of our approvals within 8 months by 2015-16, although the changes in the team structure and workload might make this less likely. Only one of the approvals in 2014-5 was completed within this timescale

Approvals

Type of carers	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15
Mainstream approvals	15	20	8	9	15
Mainstream de-reg & resignations	8	17	10	12	15
Mainstream gain/loss	+7	+5	-2	-3	0
Short-Term Breaks (STB) approvals	2	2	0	0	2
STB de-reg & resignations	2	0	0	2	1
STB gain/loss	0	+2	0	-2	+1
Overall gain/loss	+7	+7	-2	-5	+1

Due to the increasing numbers of looked after children and a net loss of foster carers over the last 3 years; new carers are currently required for children of all ages. Although carers for teenagers and sibling groups are always prized, anecdotal evidence suggests that foster carers for teenagers often begin their career fostering younger children.

Our campaign will therefore remain inclusive, engaging all aspects of the community, but focusing on key target audiences when appropriate.

The target for 2015-16 is to assess and approve an additional 20 new foster carer households. On 31st March 2015 there were 18 families in assessment.

The assessment of family and friends carers during this period continued to be commissioned, managed and quality assured by the senior practitioner in the Friends and Families team and team manager. The proposed re-structure means that this process changed and this work is now undertaken by the Recruitment & Assessment Team. These assessments will continue to be commissioned out, although there are plans to assess some of these carers within the Fostering Service in the future.

There were 16 resignations/de-registrations during the year of Mainstream/STB carers; 3 because of changes in household circumstances, 2

retirements, 7 resignations, 2 became adopters/SGO, 1 because of a concern/complaint/allegation and 1 for another reason.

6. TRAINING

Preparation and Assessment Courses

The Black Country Skills to Foster Training Consortium was re – established in January 2014, increasing the opportunities for applicants to be trained at a variety of times and venues at their convenience. There is now at least 1 Skills to Foster course run each month across the consortium (except August and December), with the opportunity for each local authority to nominate 1 household (2 people) to a course being run by the host authority.

The preparation and assessment course devised by the Fostering Network follows the Skills to Foster programme which then directly links to and provides evidence for the skills assessment, and then the Training Support and Development standards. A 3rd edition has now been produced, which we began using in 2014-15.

Year	Number of courses run	Number of Walsall Households trained	Number continuing into assessment	Number of carers approved
2009/2010	12	21	19	16
2010/2011	12	25	20	17
2011/2012	3	16	12	22
2012/2013	3	11	10	8
2013/2014	5	19	17	9
2014/2015	4	22	19	17

We have trained more people in skills to foster over the last year, than any other in the last 4. Our assessments usually start after the training, and as our assessments usually take 254 days, so you would expect many of the foster carers who were trained this year to be approved next year. It should be noted that there is not always a direct correlation between the numbers trained and approvals, but these figures suggest that we should expect to get near to our target of 20 approved foster carers in 2015-16. We do not expect foster carers who transfer in from another agency to repeat the Skills to Foster training with us unless there has been a significant gap in their learning and development history.

Induction training programme

The induction programme is designed to be completed by foster carers partially whilst they are in assessment and partially in their first year of fostering, to help enhance their basic information and skills required to foster in Walsall and to underpin the Training, Support and Development Induction standards. Workshops delivered are: supervision, safeguarding, recording, health of children and young people, payments for carers, disability awareness, equality and diversity, promoting the mental health of children and young people and complaints / compliments. A new course on the practical care of Muslim children was introduced and well attended.

These courses were also promoted to Family and Friends carers, and open to more longstanding carers who wish to refresh their skills/ knowledge, or to progress to skill level 3 and have not previously attended some of these courses.

Post Approval.

Induction, Children and Young People's Workforce Diploma level 3 (CYPW level 3) ,KEEP and post approval training for foster carers were managed by the senior practitioner for the Recruitment and Assessment team, in liaison with the central workforce development team for the post approval training. On 31st March 2015, a total of 200 mainstream foster carers, and 6 STB carers of our current foster carers had completed the Training Support and Development Standards.

The foster carers training programme is designed to cover the areas outlined in the National Minimum Standards. The following courses were delivered exclusively to foster carers, both mainstream, STB and family and friends:

Paediatric first aid, Allegations, Positive handling, Education and children and young people, Combating Extremism, Sex and Sexuality, Men who Foster, Contact, Moving onto Adoption, Domestic Abuse, Life Story work, Supporting children through the Primary and Secondary school Curriculum, Health and LAC, Attachment, Preparation for Independence, Autism. We also introduced a new updated safer caring course, and reinstated the Childrens wishes and feelings course, and Basic health and safety/food hygiene course.

Foster carers were also encouraged to attend courses provided by the Walsall Safeguarding Board which included training on anti – bullying, safeguarding children and young people at risk of sexual exploitation, forced marriages and honour based violence and working with children who are being or have been emotionally abused.

Alongside the above, a suite of 28 different online training courses provided by AC Education (this used to be called AKAMAS) continued to be offered. These courses are particularly suitable for carers who are unable to attend training during the daytime, or for those who have an identified need which our delivered courses do not cover.

The training needs of carers continue to be explored and agreed within the supervision process, recorded on personal Development Plans and discussed at the annual review. Up until recently, the service facilitated foster carers obtaining The Children and Young People's Workforce level 3 award. Funding for this was limited but two carers did complete the course. Unfortunately due to the availability of continued funding from the community college, this award is no longer available.

Carers were consulted with in March 2015 regarding the on-going training available; this information was passed to workforce development and has been used to determine the training programme for the coming year.

KEEP

KEEP is a licensed positive parenting training for foster carers developed from the Multi-dimensional Treatment Foster Care programme (MTFC). The programme aims to improve the skills and resilience of those who are caring for children who are presenting challenging behaviours.

During this period of time, the lead facilitator continued to be accredited.

The fourth group began in September 2014 with 8 participants and finished in January 2015. Feedback from the group was very positive with carers scoring both the support received and satisfaction with the facilitators at the top end of the range required by Oregon state learning college (OSLC). Top ratings were also scored from carers on how much they perceived they had learnt of the curriculum and from group discussions.

The KEEP programme was initially set up with grant funding from the Department of Education. Our funding ended in March 2015. It was decided not to continue with KEEP as there were not the finances to continue to fund it. However, an alternative model of therapeutic intervention was identified 'The Solihull Approach', plans are underway to train two social workers and two foster carers in the spring of 2015. Once trained, they will then roll out the training to other foster carers.

7. PRIVATE FOSTERING

There were 10 private fostering notifications in 2014/15 compared to 7 in 2013/14, 5 in 2012/13, 13 in 2011/12 and 25 in 2010/11.

There were 8 ongoing private foster arrangements at the end of the year.

The assessments used to be presented to the Scrutiny Panel which reported to the Quality and Performance Committee which in turn reported to the Walsall Safeguarding Children Board. However the Scrutiny Panel stopped meeting in 2014. The Private Fostering Steering Group which was organised by Operations Manager of the Review & Child Protection Unit has also ceased meeting. The monitoring of private fostering arrangements is now undertaken by the Group Manager for the Safeguarding and Family Service in conjunction with the Head of Service for Safeguarding.

8. SHORT TERM BREAK SCHEME

Short Breaks carers provide regular stimulating breaks for young people away from their home; usually one weekend per month.

Between April 2014 and March 2015 the recruitment of carers ran parallel with that of mainstream foster carers.

Enquiry Levels:

	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15
Enquiries	6	3	1	4	1
Offers	2	2	1	4	0
Approvals	2	2	1	0	2
In Assessment	3	1	0	1	0

We have continued to work with the Children with Disabilities Team to better match the children's needs with the carers' abilities; however, there have been a limited number of referrals.

Although the majority of families work full time, there is attendance at training and the support group (which meets 4 times a year).

As of March 2015 Walsall Short Term Breaks Scheme had 7 families providing a service to 7 children and young people. However, neither of the newest 2 carers had placements.

The Complex Needs & Short Breaks Panel meets once a month. The panel receives reports from social workers and health representatives of children whose families are requesting support packages whether delivered by a commissioned service or Direct Payment.

In the re-structure, the Senior Practitioner post for Short Term Breaks carers was deleted. The supervision of these carers has been allocated to different social workers across the teams. There was concern that with its responsibilities split between different workers, the scheme would lose its

focus, this has so far not proved to be the case. However, liaison meetings with the disabled children's team need to be set up to ensure service provision is maintained.

9. SUPERVISION, SUPPORT AND REVIEWING

The fostering service delivers effective regular supervision to all foster carers in line with their need for support, supervision and personal development, as detailed in the policy for foster carer supervision. The service has reviewed the broad training and development needs of foster carers as a consequence of feedback from supervision, and provided training opportunities to meet identified gaps; for example, the courses on looking after Muslim children and combating extremism.

According to the fostering service regulations, at least one unannounced visit is undertaken to each fostering household each year. The frequency of unannounced visits is recorded and monitored via the foster carer annual review process. The service has consistently maintained a 100% target for the completion of all unannounced visits, and in this financial year the percentage of unannounced visits completed on time was 98%. The frequency of unannounced visits may be increased when there are identified concerns with a foster carer.

The Walsall Foster Care Association (FCA) provides support to carers through a variety of activities:

- distributes a quarterly newsletter
- offers a buddy scheme to carers
- assists in recruitment activity
- participates with the service in developing and reviewing policies and procedures
- supports carer training
- runs coffee mornings and support groups
- organises social activities
- is involved in regular communication meetings with the service

Overall, when asked about support at the time of annual reviews, foster carers are aware of the FCA. Carers report positively upon the use of the buddy scheme and social activities. Of particular value, the facilities offered at the accommodation resource, and support to complete the training and development standard are rated highly by foster carers.

A very successful foster carer recognition event (trip to a West Midland safari park) was held in September 2014 for foster carers, including family and friend carers, their children and the children placed with them. It was funded by the fostering service with match funding from private providers and organised by the FCA.

Another aspect of foster carer support is the annual foster carer review process. The reviews are independently chaired by the Independent Reviewing Officer. This is a specialist process designed to look at the strengths and development needs of carers and to assess their ongoing suitability to be foster carers. It explores any changes in the carers terms of approval i.e. category, numbers, ages and gender of children to be placed. The reviews are considered by either the fostering panel (first review or after an allegation, major change in circumstances or significant change in terms of approval/matching preferences) or by the Review Meeting. Over this period, 95 % of all reviews have been held within the timescale of 12 months –the figure is 100% for mainstream and 85% for family and friend carers. The reviewing officer is timely in chairing the reviews.

The service has undertaken an analysis of foster carer reviews conducted over a three month period; we continue to be concerned at the relatively low level of feed-back from children and their allocated Social Workers. All Social Worker are asked for comments for the reviews in a timely way, we anticipate that the implementation of the electronic Mosaic system across children's services will greatly improved the process for completion of feedback reports. In the sample reports, there was good evidence that supervising social workers are seeing children when they visit, with comments, for example, as to the child's well being, their demeanour, attachment to their carers, presentation and appearance; supervising social worker reports are provided for 100% of all foster carer reviews.

Foster carer support groups and consultation events continue to be held – either facilitated by the service or by the foster carers for the coffee mornings. The meetings have general agenda items and sometimes have guest speakers. Feedback is positive about the groups, reporting that carers enjoy meeting their peers and sharing common experiences, whilst also seeking guidance and advice with difficulties which they have encountered.

Foster carers can access support and advice out of hours via the Council's Emergency Response Team (ERT). All foster carers have the contact details for the ERT and reports from carers who have used the service are positive. Carers most usually use the service to report significant events and to seek guidance. On occasions Social Workers have visited carer's homes out of hours, most usually in response to children exhibiting disruptive behaviour.

10. ENHANCING CHILDREN'S WELL BEING

The fostering service works effectively with other partner agencies to enhance the well being of all children placed in foster care. The spectrum of the definition of a child's well being is extensive and includes their physical emotional and psychological health.

Looked after Children's health team

NHS Walsall Community Health funds a Looked after Children's Service which consists of three full-time posts which contribute to meeting the health needs of children and young people in care, (CYP), by offering an enhanced health service and reducing health inequalities in line with ECM outcomes. These posts include a Designated Nurse and Named Nurse for Looked After Children and Young People, and Health Advisor for Transition and Care (TLC). This ensures that all children in care, (excluding those on the short term breaks scheme) are receiving health assessments within statutory timescales and that any health needs identified at assessment (or at any other time) are addressed. The Named Nurse has responsibility for co-ordinating the health assessments and where necessary to liaise with health providers in other parts of the country to ensure that those CYP placed out of borough have their health needs met in a timely fashion. The Named Nurse supports further initiatives such as the health fax, delivering foster care training (incorporating the Healthy Care Standards) and close working with the Virtual School for Looked after CYP supporting those CYP with complex needs. The health advisor for TLC supports young people in their move towards independence and ensures they have the appropriate information to take responsibility for their health needs and to make healthy lifestyle choices particularly around substance misuse and sexual health issues.

The Designated Nurse (Health Co-ordinator for Looked After Children) has the responsibility for ensuring the service meets the health needs identified by audit and review and meets strategic targets both locally and nationally. Leading on a wide range of initiatives to further enhance and improve the health needs and outcomes for looked after children and young people who are the responsibility of Walsall where ever they be placed.

CAMHS

The service works with the local CAMHS service which provides assessments and direct work with children and young people with mental health difficulties. Children in care are also one of three priority areas for CAHMS. The amount of direct work with foster carers undertaken is limited, and the fostering service has commissioned an independent psychotherapist to supplement the service.

Foster carers are expected to complete the "Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire" (SDQ) as and when required. This ensures that children and young people showing signs of difficulties are identified and an appropriate response offered promptly. The child's social worker will unpick the responses further with the child to ascertain what if any intervention is needed. Completion rates for SDQ's has been low compared to national averages, this has mainly been due to process issues and also foster carers not really understanding the purpose and function of them. The expectation is the child's main carer will complete the SDQ and will if needed seek support from either the child's social worker or their supervising social worker. Consultation is due to take place with carers soon regarding their understanding of SDQ's

and the Group Manager for Looked after Children is working on ways to streamline the collation of the completed SDQ's, both of these measures should impact on our overall completion rate.

Psychological support

The provision of independent psychotherapeutic support to foster carers, adopters and special guardians was the subject of a tendering exercise in March 2014 and a new provider was commissioned. This provider began to deliver a service during the summer. The effectiveness of the service was reviewed in March 2015 and has not been as successful as hoped due to lack of referrals and the provider being a much larger organisation therefore less personable. As a result of this, further effort was put into promoting the service with the carers and as a result, the usage improved. Those carers receiving a service reported positive feedback.

11. EDUCATION

During this period, 9 children changed their educational provision because of a change in placement which is a slight increase on the previous year (7 last year). 1 young person attended alternative education provision; there were no children without any educational provision and 9 were persistently absent from school which is slightly below last year's figure of 10.

The Virtual School for Looked After Children works in partnership with the fostering service to support foster carers and young people themselves to achieve at school. Robust systems are in place to track and monitor educational achievement and progress and attendance of all looked after children.

The Virtual School delivers 3 relevant training sessions to foster carers each year and submits information to the foster carers' newsletter on a regular basis. Foster carers also receive an invite to all training delivered by The Virtual School. Foster carers are offered the opportunity to attend 1:1 training sessions on how to effectively contribute to a Personal Education Plan meeting. carers are expected and do contribute to these plans, work to implement the agreed actions and contribute to their review. The Virtual School provides Family Placement Service with information about parents/carers attendance at PEP meetings and updates on projects.

The fostering service supports the Virtual School to deliver projects aimed at enhancing educational attainment and encouraging children and young people to be ambitious in terms of educational attainment. Examples are the recent GCSE revision week held at a local secondary school; the Queen Mary's High school for primary aged boys and girls, The Early Years Enrichment Project for

nursery and Reception children, Extra 1-1 tuition and Year 4 & 5 Reading Project.

The Virtual School also provides advice and guidance to foster carers about educational issues, academic levels, career pathways and have produced and distributed to parents/carers a copy of their Special Educational Need Policy. The Virtual School works with parents/carers to identify new schools and support midyear admission process where needed. They also support parents/carers with transition process between Key Stages and provide additional support for identified looked after children who would benefit from additional support between Key Stage 2 & 3. If required, the Virtual School also offer individual support for parents/carers in the home to enable them to effectively support children/young people with their homework.

The Virtual School News Letter is sent to parent/carers every school term.

In the 2013/4 cohort of year 11 pupils, 14 were placed with Walsall carers and of those 14:

- 3 achieved 5 A*-C including English & Maths.
- 3 achieved 5 A*-C
- 7 achieved 5 A*-G
- 10 achieved 1 A*-G

In the 2013/4 cohort of year 6 pupils, 12 were placed with Walsall carers and of those 12:

- 8 achieved level 4 or above in maths
- 8 achieved level 4 or above in reading
- 8 achieved level 4 or above in writing
- 8 achieved level 4 in all 3 subjects

12. PERMANENCE

It is essential that all children who become Looked After have a plan for permanence which is agreed by the first or second Looked after Children's Statutory Review at one month and four months respectively. This plan must then be implemented in a timely manner. The Fostering Service continues to support planning for permanence in the following way:

- Ensuring temporary foster carers are aware of the care plan and permanence option, and have the necessary skills and support to achieve this for the children in their care.
- Ensuring that there are sufficient carers who are able to provide permanence directly – through fostering, adoption or special guardianship.

Analysis of Permanence Orders achieved over the past 3 years:

Year	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15
Adoption Orders	26	25	38
Special Guardianship & Residence Orders	23	36	42
Total	49	61	80

Analysis of the numbers of children matched permanently with their foster carers:

Year	11/12	12/13	13/14	14/15
Internal foster carers	2	9	13	10
Agency foster carers	1	2	3	0
Totals	3	11	16	10

As can be seen, there has been an improvement over the last two years in the numbers of children whose placements have been confirmed as permanent with their foster carers and more importantly with internal foster carers.

The process for family finding is now aligned with that where the plan for a child is adoption in that when the plan for permanent fostering is agreed at the child's LAC review, the IRO makes a referral to the responsible team manager, who then allocates a family finder. A spread sheet has been developed to track the identification of the permanent foster carers and confirmation of this as a permanent placement either by fostering panel or by the LAC review. The team manager of the support team is responsible for monitoring these processes but in the longer term, this will transfer to the Adoption and Permanency Team. On the 31st March 2015, all children with a care plan of permanent fostering were allocated a family finder. However, the service re-design is likely to impact on the capacity to undertake family finding as tasks are moved between the two remaining teams. However, more needs to be done to progress permanency for a wider range of Looked after Children; service planning for 2015-16 will provide a clear focus on this service priority.

13. FAMILY AND FRIENDS AS CARERS AND SPECIAL GUARDIANSHIP SUPPORT

Introduction

The Family & Friends Team, responsible for the assessment and support of Family & Friend Foster Carers and Special Guardianship Order (SGO) holders was formed in September 2012. As of 1st April 2015 the team is to be dissolved and the duties dispersed across the service. During this period the team was still in operation and comprised of the following:

- One team manager.
Two senior practitioners:
- One senior practitioner with the lead responsibility for the commissioning and coordination of Family & Friend fostering and SGO assessments. (Assessments Coordinator)
- The other senior practitioner with the lead responsibility for the specific training and support of Family & Friend foster carers and who provides support to families who have taken out Special Guardianship Orders (SGO). (SGO Coordinator)
- Five and a half supervising social workers.

The volume of work in relation to these two areas of work has continued to steadily increase. Between 01/04/14–31/03/15, 180 Family & Friends Foster Carer assessment referrals were made. 90 of the fostering assessments were in respect of carers who had children placed with them under Reg 24 involving a total of 112 children and 25 fostering assessments were planned assessments in regards to 32 children.

On 31.03.15 there were 96 Family and Friends carer households caring for 142 children and young people.

Year	Number of children placed	Number of carers
13/14	138	90
12/13	122	76
11/12	101	65
10/11	88	63
9/10	71	56

During 2014/15, notices of intention to apply for SGO's were received from 33 households. The notices received related to 49 children, 40 of whom were in respect of looked after children. During this period 15 children, 3 who were not previously looked after, became subject to SGO's and one child was adopted by her Family & Friend Foster Carers.

Family and Friend arrangements are often very complex situations with families struggling to come to terms with the reasons why the children have become looked after. These carers come from a very diverse range of backgrounds and with various levels of understanding of the children's needs for care and protection and there are often significant issues in relation to safeguarding. Some Family & Friend foster carers see themselves as family members not foster carers and require additional levels of support to understand and comply to a satisfactory standard with the fostering task.

Walsall Foster Carer Association (WFCA) positively includes Family & Friend foster carers in their newsletter funded by the Family Placement Services. The WFCA have a designated newsletter specifically for Family & Friend foster carers with the involvement of the Family & Friends Team. A family and friend carer has recently been elected as a member of the WFCA forum specifically to represent Family & Friend carers.

Family and Friends as Carers

As previously stated the assessments of Family and Friends as carers are undertaken by independent assessors who are provided with case supervision and consultation by the Assessment Coordinator (Senior Practitioner). The assessments are conducted in accordance with the same regulations applicable to main stream carers.

The Family and Friends team supported and supervised all Family and Friend carers. Supervision was held at the same frequency as for non-related foster carers and undertaken by a qualified social worker. Support was provided as soon as the Family & Friends Team were notified of a child being placed with a Family and Friend carer and they are allocated a supervising social worker who would arrange to visit the carer

Specific training for family and friend carers was previously devised and delivered. However, take up of this was very low and courses were being cancelled due to carers not taking up the opportunity. In order to try and identify what training family and friend carers would like, they were offered the opportunity to attend a consultation event. Unfortunately, no one attended so their views were not obtained. Regrettably, specific training for family and friend carers is no longer facilitated, all carers, related and non-related are now offered the opportunity to attend the foster carer training programme.

Due to the poor take up by both mainstream and Family & Friend carers of the support available from the WFCA, letters have been sent to all carers saying that unless they "opt out" their contact details will be provided to the WFCA who will approach them to offer a range of services including Buddy Support, CWDC support, information help line, newsletter and to invite them to events and trips organised by the WFCA in conjunction with the Family Placement Service. Many Family & Friend carers have accessed the services WFCA provide although only one Family & Friend carer has as yet chosen to become a committee member.

All Family and Friend carers receive a Family and Friend Foster Carer's Handbook/Induction Booklet and Induction. This has been written in conjunction with the relevant information included in the foster carer hand book and is therefore pertinent to the needs of the Family and Friend carers. It is anticipated that the handbook will be updated within the next year. In

addition booklets explaining the assessment process for Family & Friend applicants are now available and given to all family and friend foster carers.

Special Guardianship support

- 12.3.1 As previously stated the Senior Practitioner leading on SGOs continued to provide support to Special Guardians and their families, both prior to and following the making of the Order. In April 2015, the support for special guardians moved to the Adoption and Permanency team and will now sit alongside the provision of adoption support. Currently, 55 families are receiving support which is an increase of 6 from last year.

The main support themes for SGO holders continue to be review of financial support and support with managing contact. Contact support needs are often complex and range from requests for help with the mere practicalities of contact arrangements to the need for mediation or assessment of contact needs. Family Placement Services is fortunate in being able to access Children's Services Contact Coordination Services to help us to manage the practicalities of supervised contacts in neutral venues. This can also provide some consistency for children and parents as they can often retain the same contact support workers with whom they were familiar when they were looked after.

14. Placement and Resources Team

The Placement and Resource team was reorganised to manage all requests for placements for children and young people who are looked after by Walsall Children's Services. The Placement and Resource team is responsible for the single referral point which identifies all internal and external placements which includes fostering, residential and supported accommodation.

The aim of the single referral point is to improve placement choice, stability and continuity of placements by accurately matching placements to the individual needs of children and young people.

The benefits of this was for a team to manage all referrals for placements, internally, or externally, which will promote effective communication, as well as the management of information, particularly in terms of planning admissions and discharges of placements

The Placements and Resources team is managed by a Team Manager with Placement and Resource officers that undertake a number of duties which includes and supports the placements of children and young people. They also have the benefits of experienced supervising social workers from the fostering service to undertake the review of the internal foster carers and queries

relating to respite, internal foster placements, including family and friend placements. They will also attend post placement planning meetings.

The single contact point provides a co-ordinated approach to placement identification for children requiring immediate and temporary placements in conjunction with the commissioning.

The Placement and Resources Team commissions all external fostering and residential placements, when our internal provisions are exhausted/ not available. Then go out to IFAs with or without a contract and consider the fees subject to solo or siblings depending on profile and any issues. Costs are always negotiated subject to contracts / when the LA is working off contracts for spot purchasing. However they can be set subject to Service agreements. The team provides the monitoring of external placements as part of the quality assurance at an external placement panel with senior managers and partners that reviews external residential places.

15. FOSTER CARE RESOURCE

The primary focus for the fostering service for this period has continued to be the maximum utilisation of the internal foster care resource. It is essential that the correct placement mix for children who are Looked After is achieved in order to make the required financial savings, which then enables further investment in preventative services.

14.2 Placements

Year	Temporary	Permanent	Family and friends	STB	Total
12/13	194	40	122	8	364
13/14	184	61	124	6	375
14/15	180	45	122	9	356

- 14.3 On 31.3.15 there were 607 children Looked After which was a decrease of 22 from the previous year's number of 629.

In foster care by year

Year	total number in foster carer	As % of LAC
31.3.12	382	78.1
31.3.13	455	78.7
31.3.14	470	75.6
31.3.15	485	80.1

Local Authority foster care (mainstream)

Year	numbers	as% of all children in foster care	as %of LAC
31.3.12	187	48.9	38.2

31.3.13	217	47.7	37.4
31.3.14	230	48.9	36.9
31.3.15	225	46.4	37.2

Family and friend carers

Year	numbers	as% of all children in foster care	as %of ,LAC
31.3.12	101	26.4	20.6
31.3.12	122	26.8	21.0
31.3.14	124	27.0	19.9
31.3.15	122	25.2	20.2

Mainstream and family and friend carers combined

Year	Numbers	As %of all children in foster care	As %of LAC
31.3.12	308	73.8	63.0
31.3.13	339	74.5	58.4
31.3.14	354	75.3	56.9
31.3.15	347	71.5	57.4

IFA and other LA Placements

Year	numbers	as% of all children in foster care	as% of LAC
31.3.12	94 (includes 7 in other LA placements)	24.6	19.2
31.3.13	116 (includes 2 in other LA placements)	25.5	20.00
31.3.14	121(includes 8 in other LA placements)	25.7	19.4
31.3.15	138 (includes 5 in other LA placements)	28.5	22.8

From these figures it can be seen that the total numbers of children in foster care as a % of total numbers of children who are Looked After, has increased. Within these figures the numbers of children in mainstream foster care has decreased by 17, the reasons for this are that some placements have been miscoded and are in actual fact in internal provision, this is being addressed

by the performance team. However, is it also because of the complexity of some of the children requiring placements and the lack of internal placement options to meet the needs of our changing looked after population. In order to address this, one of the key drivers for change for the coming year will be to focus on the recruitment of foster carers who can meet the needs of a wider range of children.

Those children placed with family and friend carers decreased by 2, and represent a decrease (0.3%) in the total numbers of children who are Looked After.

There was a slight increase in numbers (17) in IFA and other Local Authority placements and represented a 3.4% increase in the % of children Looked After.

Of the children placed in IFA'S during this period, the reasons for having to utilize an external resource were for sibling groups of 2 + children who needed to be placed together; children aged 12 years and over with complex needs; children with significant disabilities and/or associated health needs; children who were deemed to be at risk if placed locally; and placements for parent and child assessments.

During this period 22 sibling groups, (47 children), were assessed to be placed together and were placed together; 8 sibling groups, (17 children), were assessed to be placed together and were placed separately, and 15 sibling groups, (30 children), were assessed to be placed separately and were placed separately. This meant that there were 8 sibling groups (17 children) who were not placed together as consistent with their care plan.

During this period there were 27 unplanned endings to placements which is a decrease of 1 from last year. The service needs to continue to undertake further analysis around the reasons for these endings in order to improve placement stability. Work will be undertaken on how disruption meetings are convened and conducted with a view to increasing placement support to prevent a placement breakdown or by learning from disruptions to support future placements.

Unfortunately the information system in use during this time did not provide information on performance indicators for internal foster placements –only the total LAC. These 2 indicators have shown improvement this year. The indicator for the long term stability of Looked after Children has slightly improved from 67% in March 2014 to 68.5% in March 2015. There needs to be a more significant sustained improvement. The % of children who have had 3 or more placements has decreased by 1% since March 2014 (11%) to 10% in March 2015.

Only 3 exemptions to the usual fostering limit were agreed during this period; 1 less than last year.

16. Complaints, allegations and children missing from care.

These were the complaints received during the year across the whole of children services.

Who made the statutory complaints?

Of the 146 complaints made, the majority were made by relatives of service users with 16% of the complaints coming directly from service users themselves. Some service users ask family, friends, staff or an advocate to assist them in submitting their complaints, (79%). The Customer Care Team ensures all complaints not made directly by the service user are made in their best interests and gain their permission to disclose information to the complainant.

COMPLAINANT	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
Young person	24	16.4%
Parent	85	58.2%
Grandparent	17	11.6%
Other relative	7	4.7%
Foster carer	5	3.4%
Solicitor	2	1.3%
Advocate	2	1.3%
Staff	4	2.7%

Which service areas did the complaints relate to?

The nature of the type of service delivered can predict where complaints are going to be more common. This chart shows that more complaints relate to the Protection and Assessment Team Initial Response Service) than to the other service areas. This area has been used by a larger number of service users than other areas, which may explain the larger volume of complaints.

SERVICE AREA	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
Protection and Assessment	44	30.1%
Looked after children	33	22.6%
Childrens residential	4	2.7%
Permanence	31	21.2%
Children with disabilities	16	10.9%
Family placements	3	2.0%
Transition and leaving care	6	4.1%
Universal services	9	6.1%

What types of issues were complained about?

From the 146 complaints made the issues were varied in nature with some complaints containing 4 or more issues. The following is a breakdown of the

243 issues that were complained about.

COMPLAINT ISSUE	NUMBER OF COMPLAINT ISSUES	PERCENTAGE
Finance	4	1.6%
Service issues	65	26.7%
Communication	70	28.8%
Lack of support	26	10.6%
Staff conduct	31	12.7%
Delay with service/information	41	16.8%
Safeguarding	6	2.4%

2% of the overall complaints pertained to the fostering service which is an improvement on the previous year. We make every effort to provide a professional service and continue to learn from the feedback we receive.

Regulation 36, Schedule 7 of the Fostering Service Regulations 2011

During this period 22 Notifiable Events occurred. The majority pertained to accidents within the foster home and did not require any additional investigation. Two necessitated calling the police and 1 where a young person went missing.

Allegations

There were 27 allegations against the Local Authority Foster Carers. These are under the category of Physical 18 Emotional 5 Sexual 1 and Neglect 3. Of these 17 was No further action. 5 were substantiated, and 5 were unsubstantiated. 10 of the 27 were allegations/ concerns that progressed to a POT meeting the rest were for advice and guidance.

Missing from care

The children missing from care are linked to 'Street Teams' for intensive therapeutic 1:1 support, Small group workshops and practical life skills sessions, Support in accessing other local services, Training for professionals and parents. The street teams are notified when a child/young person goes missing and on their return will undertake an interview.

Table of child /young person having gone missing.

Month	Number of episodes missing	Number of children
April 2014	3	1
May 2014	15	3
June 2014	6	2
July 2014	34	2
August 2014	16	4

September 2014	117	6
October 2014	97	4
November 2014	16	3
December 2014	16	5
January 2015	81	5
February 2015	521	6
March 2015	735	4
Total	1544	45

Street teams Mission is to equip children with the knowledge and support they require to avoid, reduce the risk of, and break free from sexual exploitation, grooming and trafficking.

17.. FOSTERING PANEL

Panel Membership

Names of Panel Members at 31/03/15

Chris Dennison - (Independent Chair)
Catherine Mitchley - (Independent Vice- Chair)
Bob Heighway - (Independent Member)
Maria Hadley - (Health Representative)
Shauna Webster - (Independent Member)
Alan Paul - (Independent Member)
Surinder Kumari - (Independent Member)
Helen Winter - (Independent Member)
Liz Day - (Social Worker)
Leah Arnold - (Social Worker)

The new members of the Central List during this period were Chris Dennison, Sian Wiseman and Pavandeep Singh.

Helen Winter left the Central List during this period.

Five appraisals were completed from the Central List panel members. The overall theme was panel members felt the fostering panel needed a permanent chair and panel advisor and since this had been put in place the members felt better supported to have their views heard. They also requested training on legislation and any other relevant topics.

Panel Business

- ❖ 20 Panels were held
- ❖ 17 mainstream approvals were recommended.
- ❖ 28 Connected persons approvals were recommended

- ❖ 30 reviews were presented to Panel of the 184 reviews that were completed.
- ❖ 2 mainstream carers had their approval terminated
- ❖ 14 mainstream carers resigned
- ❖ 6 Family and friend carers had their approval terminated
- ❖ 11 Family and friend carers resigned as the children they were caring for were made the subjects of permanence orders
- ❖ 14 requests were presented under Regulation 25 of The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010, to extend the temporary approval of a Family and Friend placement.
- ❖ 9 items were deferred

Panel Staffing

Panel Adviser: Karen Wareing became the Interim Panel Advisor until end of May 2014 and the role was shared between team managers until Linda Franks came into post November 2014. Dave Crewe was an Interim Panel Advisor for the 26.06.14 Foster Panel.

Panel Administration: The panel has been supported by Sheila Perry-Jones and Carmel Yates.

Quality Assurance

A quality assurance tool is sent to all panel members to comment on the reports presented to panel. The form is completed by panel members. The Panel Adviser collates the feedback on the quality of assessments and reports back to their manager.

Some common themes that have emerged during the year are:

- ❖ Family and friends carer assessments presented to panel with lack of analyse and triangulation to corroborate evidence.
- ❖ Reviews presented with no feedback from the child/children in placement, carers, children of carers and social workers.

The Panel Adviser meets with the Agency Decision maker following panel to assist her/him with any queries regarding paperwork and panel presentations. This is working well.

Training

A full days training occurred on the 11December 2014 'To further develop team working between panel members' and a full days training on 'Effective Panels'. These development topics were chosen as both the panel chair and advisor were new in post. This enabled the panel members to gel as we undertook Team building exercises within the training days.

Future Challenges

The high number of family and friends carer assessments completed has put pressure on panels to keep up with the volume of work. This puts pressure on panel members when they are asked to consider a large number of assessments in one day. This also impacts on administration and costs. The primary means of easing this pressure is to reduce the numbers of assessments that are considered by panel which is unrealistic with the number of looked after children. The service has added to the central list and there has been an increase to two panels per month in order to meet demand. The use of electronic methods for circulating panel papers and have the minutes typed in draft in the panel meeting is being pursued.

The Family Rights Group tool for completion of assessments is a relatively new tool for panel members and it will take time to get used to a different format, style of report and length of the documents. The Service is continually communicating with the agencies that undertake these assessments to ensure they fit with the requirements of the panel. There is also a high likelihood that the format for the reports will once again change as the local authority considers the implementation of a new IT system for the management of case information.

The process for completing checks and references for family and friends carers has been addressed through improved co-ordinated and monitored processes. However, there can still be some delay when family and friends struggle to provide adequate sources of identification in order to process statutory checks.

The timescales for submitting papers for quality assurance by the panel advisor is set out a year in advance. Each panel has a submission date to the Line manager, Panel Advisor and panel admin we all work with flexibility in order to not delay applicant's approval.

There have been several changes in Panel Adviser and a permanent appointment was needed to give some consistency. The post has been appointed to on a permanent basis, to start in November 2014.

The service has recruited a foster care and a care leaver to the Central List. It is hoped that by increasing central list membership in this way that recommendations are made from a multi-agency perspective.

18. STANDARDS AND REGULATIONS

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

Introduction

This briefing note highlights the key issues arising from amendments to the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010 and the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011, which were made by these new regulations and which came into force on 1 April 2015.

There is accompanying statutory guidance, *Permanence, long-term foster placements and ceasing to look after a child*, which can be found at:

[www.gov.uk/government/publications/children-act-1989-care-planning-placement-](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/children-act-1989-care-planning-placement-and-case-review)

And-case-review This amends various sections of the existing statutory guidance *Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 2: Care planning, placement And case review*.

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.

Visits by the child's social worker

Notwithstanding that the frequency of visits to the child by their social worker should always be determined by individual needs and circumstances, and that a visit must be made whenever reasonably requested by the child or the foster carer, there is a change to the minimum frequency of visits to a child in a long-term foster placement as defined by the regulations. The child must be visited within a week of the start of the long-term placement, at least six-weekly during the first year of placement, and subsequently at least six monthly providing the child (being of sufficient age and understanding) agrees to these less frequent visits.

Case reviews

A looked after case review must always take place at least six-monthly, whatever the child's placement. However, once the child has been in a long-term placement for more than a year there is no requirement to hold a

meeting as part of the review process every six months, and the social worker should consult the IRO and the child in reaching a decision about whether or not to hold a meeting as part of each review. There must however be a meeting at least once a year. Any decision not to hold meetings every six months should be recorded in the child's care plan, and the IRO must ensure that there is full consultation with the child and all relevant individuals.

The revised care planning regulations make explicit that the IRO has a duty to ensure that the wishes and feelings of the child's current carer are taken into account as part of the child's case review process. In the event that it is decided that the carer should not be involved in all or part of the review meeting, the reasons should be recorded and alternative arrangements made to ensure that they are still able to contribute to the decision-making process.

The revised care planning regulations require that every looked after case review must include consideration as to whether the arrangements for delegation of authority to the child's carer remain appropriate and in the child's best interests. This may be particularly important when a long-term placement is being made.

Ceasing to look after a child

There are new duties when consideration is being given to ceasing to look after a child who is being accommodated. Before the local authority makes such a decision it must:

- carry out an assessment of the suitability of the proposed arrangements for the child's accommodation and maintenance
 - assess what services and support the child and, where applicable, their parents might need
 - ensure that the child's wishes and feelings have been given due consideration, *and*
 - consider whether, in all the circumstances, ceasing to look after the child will safeguard and promote their welfare.
-
- The child's care plan must detail the advice, assistance and support that will be provided to the child when they cease to be looked after.
 - In the case of a child who has been looked after for at least 20 working days, the decision to cease doing so must be approved by a designated nominated officer. In the event that the child is aged 16 or 17 the existing requirement that the Director of Children's Services approve such a decision remains, as do the requirements for assessing the needs of care leavers who are 'eligible children'.

None of this affects a parent's ability to remove a child from accommodation under section 20 of the Children Act 1989. Children who are the subject of a care order cannot be discharged from care unless a court discharges the order.

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. The implications for the service is less social work hours spent on bringing an assessment report to panel because it had progressed to stage 2 even though the evidence gathered clearly renders the applicants unsuitable to foster. The amendment now allows for a 'brief report' to be tabled at Fostering Panel to highlight the probable unsuitability and concerns of applicants in relevant cases. The service has devised a report template, this will enable panel to make a recommendation than to request a full assessment be undertaken. This process should free up more availability within foster panels.

19. Concluding comments

During this period of time, the fostering service had a busy but steady year. The successes have been the increase in foster carer approvals in a reduced timescale, the involvement of the service in regional recruitment work, the appointment of a permanent panel advisor and overall improvements in panel functions and the improving foot print of the fostering service in care planning for children and young people. The challenges were the implications of the re-structure on future service delivery, the establishment of the single referral point, the change in senior management and the loss of some long standing members of staff and the need to continue to develop and deliver effective services for all Looked after Children.

It has become increasingly evident that the fostering service is critical in ensuring placement sufficiency for an increasing number of Looked after Children. Whilst we started the year with a reduction in the numbers of Looked after Children, towards the latter part of the year, the number of Looked after Children had increased and as such there is an on-going need to ensure that our foster carer recruitment strategy is inclusive and effective in increasing our internal carer capacity.

20. Future Service Delivery

The key priorities for 2015-16 are as follows:

- To implement and embed the re-structure of specialist children's services, which will commence on the 1st April 2015 and will involve the movement of

staff to different parts of the service. The work of the family and friends team is to be de-distributed amongst the remaining fostering teams.

- To provide a clear and robust focus on foster care recruitment by ensuring that the service is equipped with the adequate resources to increase foster carer approvals. The timeliness for the completion of assessments will also be a key service priority.
- To consider how the service can better manage the identification, assessment, approval and support of family and friend carers. This is likely to mean consideration of the assessment function for this being bought back in-house.
- To ensure that the single referral point is effective in identifying suitable and robust placements for Looked after Children.
- To ensure that there is a system in place to consult with foster carers on key service developments.
- To embed a culture of 'permanence' across children's services by ensuring that the expertise within the family placement service is shared with wider children's services so that more children have a plan of permanence agreed at the earliest opportunity.
- The Family Placement Service will be the first service area to 'go live' with 'Mosaic' Walsall's new data management system for children's services and adult social care. This will involve extensive work for the service and will have to be completed alongside other key service priorities.

