

Cabinet –14 September 2011

Walsall Fostering Service Annual Report

Portfolio: Councillor R. Andrew, Children's Services

Service: Children's Services

Wards: All

Key decision: No

Forward plan: No

1. Summary

- 1.1 The Fostering Service annual report, found at **Appendix 1**, highlights the success of the Fostering Service for the period April 2010 to March 2011. Under the Fostering Service Regulations 2011, which came into effect on 1 April 2011, the Fostering Service must provide the executive side of the Council written reports on the activities of the Fostering Service every three months. Prior to this, reporting to Cabinet was undertaken as good practice.
- 1.2 The Fostering Service was inspected by Ofsted in October 2010 and the judgement awarded was "Good".
- 1.3 Significant progress has been made in relation to the support and training provided to family and friend carers and those who offer short-term breaks for disabled children.
- 1.4 There have been significant increases in the number of foster carers approved as a result of effective marketing initiatives.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 That it is recommended that Cabinet note the good progress made particularly in relation to the 'Good' Ofsted rating in September 2010 for the Fostering Service.

3. Report detail

- 3.1 The report found at **Appendix 1** summarises the work of Walsall Children's Services Fostering Service from April 2010 to March 2011. Reference is made to the inspection of the Fostering Service by Ofsted in September 2010 when the judgement awarded was "Good". An overview of what the inspectors found during the inspection is as follows:
- 3.2 "The management, staff and foster carers demonstrate a commitment to the development of the service and providing good quality of care to Looked After Children. The service is due to enter phase two of a process of realignment.

This process resulted in the loss of posts and a review of the functions and operation of the services.

There are significant strengths in the service and considerable progress has been made in service delivery. Staff and foster carers highly value the Walsall Fostering Service and are well motivated and committed to providing good quality care to children and young people. Staff teams work well together and network closely with other professionals and agencies to provide therapeutic, educational and health support to children. Foster carers, family and friend carers, and short-term break carers all demonstrate a strong commitment to children and young people and their role as foster carers. Young people feel safe and well cared for; speak with confidence about the foster carers who look after them.”

- 3.3 The report shows success in the recruitment of foster carers through effective targeted marketing activity. Whilst there has been a marginal (8%) increase in the number of enquiries, and a slight reduction (16%) in the number of offers made, the conversion rate has remained the same at 15%. Of most significance is the total figure for mainstream carers, with an increase in approvals (17 compared with 16) and a decrease in deregistration (only 10 compared with 17 the previous year), giving a net gain of 7 households, therefore providing capacity for an additional 12 placements. Of the 17 households approved for mainstream and short term break care, 14 were white British, 1 African – Caribbean and 2 of dual heritage.
- 3.4 On 31 March 2011, there were 15 families in assessment who wished to be considered as mainstream carers; 3 of whom are currently registered with other agencies and 3 who wished to be approved as short term break carers.
- 3.5 The service is striving to meet targets to increase the number of local foster placements for Walsall children, which is helping to reduce the reliance on expensive Independent Fostering Agency (IFA) placements.
- 3.6 On March 2011, there were 233 fostering households offering 366 placements. Of the 518 children in care in Walsall on that date, 215 children were placed in internal foster placements, 88 in family and friend placements, and 119 in placements with Independent Fostering Agencies. There has been a 19% increase in the number of children placed with family and friend carers.
- 3.7 The Fostering Service is assisted in supporting carers through partnerships with the Education Service (the Virtual School) and Health (the dedicated team for Looked After Children). The Fostering Service commissions the services of an independent psychotherapist to provide support to carers through training, workshops, support groups and individual direct work with carers of children with attachment issues. Within Children’s Services, there are effective working relationships between the Looked After Children’s Teams and the Vulnerable Children’s Service.
- 3.8 Walsall Fostering Service has an effective partnership with Walsall Foster Carer Association (FCA). Carers are offered appropriate training and are supported in obtaining the new QCF award in caring for children and young people. The service has made an excellent start in supporting carers in evidencing their

competence to the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) training, support and development standards for foster carers. The supervision and review processes support carers and safeguard children placed.

- 3.9 The Fostering Panel and the Review and Skill Level Board meet regularly and are effective. The medical and legal advisors, although not panel members, support the workings of the panel to good effect.

4. Council priorities

Key Council priorities emerging from the report relate primarily to ensuring that more children are placed in local foster placements and the systematic reduction in the use of high cost Independent Fostering Agency (IFA) placements.

This priority will be met through the effective recruitment and retention of foster carers who are able to meet the diverse range of needs and outcomes of children cared for by the local authority.

Ensuring Walsall foster carers are appropriately supported, trained and skill matched to the right children is central to achieving the Council priorities in terms of quality care and value for money.

5. Risk management

The key risks emerging from the Fostering Service report (**Appendix 1**) that will require effective management are ensuring that more children are placed in local foster placements. Measures to respond positively to these needs and risk areas are integral to the Corporate Parenting Service plan, risk register, the Fostering Service action plan and the new Children's Services operation model.

6. Financial implications

The financial implications for the council for managing effective outcomes for children and the Fostering Service are considered during the annual budget setting process and are in line with the medium term financial plan. Cost reductions based on increasing the number of local foster placements and decreasing the number of Independent Fostering Agency placements are considerable and subject to key priorities within a new Children's Services operating model.

7. Legal implications

Under the Fostering Service Regulations 2011, which came into effect on 1 April 2011, the Fostering Service must provide the executive side of the Council written reports on the activities of the Fostering Service every three months. Prior to this, reporting to Cabinet was undertaken as good practice.

8. Property implications

None

9. Staffing implications

None

10. Equality implications

Continued improvements in securing local foster placements, placements for children from Black and ethnic minority communities, and for disabled children and their families, will ensure equality of access to services for all Walsall children who are Looked After by the local authority.

11. Consultation

This report has been informed by consultation and feedback from relevant stakeholders, fosters carers, children and young people, and panel members. The report is a public document, which can be accessed by anyone wishing to do so and will be available on the Council website

Background papers

Annual report (**Appendix 1**)


Author

Michelle Whiting
Assistant Director

☎ 652756

✉ whitingm@walsall.gov.uk


Pauline Pilkington
Executive Director
Date: 2 August 2011


Councillor Rachel Andrew
Portfolio holder
Date: 1 September 2011



Walsall Council

**WALSALL CHILDREN'S SERVICE
FOSTERING SERVICE REPORT
1 APRIL 2010 TO 31 MARCH 2011**

Author: Louise Watts
Operations Manager
Family Placement Service

Any Authorised User Page 1 07/09/2011

INTRODUCTION

This report sets out the activity of the Fostering Service from 1st April 2010 to 31st March 2011

1.1 The Fostering Service comprises the following:

- Operations 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.

- 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 and are responsible for the commissioning of the assessments of family and friends as carers, and Special Guardianship Order (SGO) assessments. The team provides supervision and support to carers until their first review.

One full-time senior practitioner post is responsible for commissioning independent assessments (family and friends and Special Guardianship Orders). The other half time senior practitioner post is responsible for managing the assessments of internal foster carers and private foster carers and lead on the introduction of the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) induction standards for carers.

A Family Support Officer Post (FSO) post is responsible for supporting carers in relation to the CWDC induction standards for carers and the other provides support to all marketing activity.

- Support and Development Team
This team is responsible for providing supervision and support to temporary carers, undertaking placement duty, family finding for permanent placements, and permanence assessments.

The senior practitioner post is responsible for the management of the duty system, and managing all permanent family finding and placement identification for the service.

- Permanence Support Team
This team is responsible for supervision and support of permanent and family and friend carers, undertaking placement duty, family finding for

permanent placements, back-up assessments, and providing post SGO support.

One senior practitioner post is responsible for the short-term break scheme and the other senior practitioner post takes a lead on the support to family and friends as carers and the 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.

1.2 The re-alignment of the Corporate Parenting Service, of which the Fostering Service is part, was undertaken in September 2010. This involved the functions of the Outreach team and therefore 3 members of staff being located within the Looked after Children's teams and one member of staff is now in the adoption team. As part of these teams the workers enhance the provision of quality care to children and young people "looked after" by the Local Authority. They work with foster carers and children and young people to promote their placement stability.

1.3 All parts of the service are based at the Offices at 106 Essington Road, Willenhall. These premises benefited from a substantial refurbishment in 2007.

1. INSPECTION OF THE FOSTERING SERVICE BY OFSTED

1.1 The major success of this year is the inspection of the fostering service by Ofsted in September 2010 when the judgement awarded was "good".

1.2 This is an overview of what the inspectors found during the inspection:-
"The management, staff and foster carers demonstrate a commitment to the development of the service and providing good quality of care to looked after children. The service is due to enter phase two of a process of realignment. This process resulted in the loss of posts and a review of the functions and operation of the services.

There are significant strengths in the service and considerable progress has been made in service delivery. Staff and foster carers highly value the Walsall fostering service and are well motivated and committed to providing good quality care to children and young people. Staff teams work well together and network closely with other professionals and agencies to provide therapeutic, educational and health support to children. Foster carers, family and friend carers, and short-term break carers all demonstrate a strong commitment to children and young people, and their role as foster carers. Young people feel safe and well cared for; speak with confidence about the foster carers who look after them."

1.3 Judgements in relation to the individual outcomes were as follows:-

Helping children to be healthy -outstanding

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them keep safe-good
 Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do-good
 Helping children make a positive contribution- good
 Achieving economic well being-satisfactory
 Organisation-good

1.4 The recommendations were as follows:-

To improve the quality and standards of care further the registered person should take account of the following recommendation(s):

- ensure if any of the events listed in column 1 of the table in Schedule 8 takes place, the registered person, shall without delay notify the persons indicated in respect of the event in column 2 of the table
- ensure notification of the instigation and outcome of any child protection enquiries involving a child placed by the fostering service provider to Ofsted
- ensure management systems are in place to collate and evaluate information on the circumstances, number and outcome of all allegations of neglect or abuse of a child in foster care. Scrutinise this information regularly.

1.5 All these actions were implemented immediately and the Ofsted inspector wrote to the service to confirm total compliance

2. RECRUITMENT

2.1 The marketing officer returned from maternity leave in August 2010 on a 3 day a week basis. She left the authority in November 2010. The work was initially covered by the team manager for the recruitment and assessment team, latterly with support from the central communications team. In line with our overall strategy the number of public recruitment events in the town centre has been maintained at 4 a year, with all staff from FPS taking part in one event each. We have continued to hold 4 information evenings a year at the Family placement Service Office at Essington, which have been very popular and well attended by potential applicants. The reduction in marketing activity has not affected the enquiry levels or the number of approvals.

2.2 During this period the recruitment activity has focused on two priority areas

1. Maintaining market /brand presence within the area of Walsall
2. Obtaining quality rather than quantity enquiries, thus streamlining the workload.

5.3 Enquiry levels

| Fostering | 2008/2009 | 2009/2010 | 2010/2011 | |
|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|--|
| Enquiries | 129 | 103 | 113 | |
| Offers | 80 | 74 | 62 | |
| Approvals | 13 | 16 | 17 | |
| Conversion rate | 10% | 15 % | 15% | |

2.3.1 From last year there has been a slight increase in the number of enquiries, a decrease in offers sent out and one more approval, the conversion rate has been maintained at a very efficient and healthy 15%. This demonstrates that we have been able to maintain service improvement levels and we are successful in continuing to focus on obtaining quality rather than quantity of enquiries, more robust initial visits to screen out inappropriate applicants at an early stage to maximise use of both financial and staff resources.

Total requests for Information and Enquiries

| Month | 2008-2009 | 2009-2010 | 2010-2011 |
|-----------|-----------|-----------|------------------|
| April | 15 | 16 | 17 |
| May | 20 | 34 | 16 |
| June | 31 | 27 | 19 |
| July | 14 | 21 | 26 |
| August | 15 | 11 | 16 |
| September | 22 | 24 | 21 |
| October | 31 | 21 | 20 |
| November | 26 | 16 | 19 |
| December | 15 | 3 | 6 |
| January | 22 | 8 | 19 |
| February | 41 | 8 | 17 |
| March | 22 | 9 | 20 |

2.3.2 The above figures demonstrate that enquiry rates picked up again after a slowdown at the end of 2009/2010. The enquiries continue to be spread evenly over the course of the year, which is reflective of the focus of our marketing strategy which covers the whole year rather than focusing primarily on fostering fortnight. This enables the work to be spread evenly and managed effectively throughout the whole 12 month period.

2.3.3 Ethnicity of enquirers

| Year | White | Mixed | Asian | Black | Chinese | Unknown |
|------------------|----------------------|--------------|-----------------------|---------------------|----------|-------------------|
| 2008/09 | 176 (64%) | 3 (1.1%) | 43 (15.7%) | 36 (13.1%) | 0 | 47 (17.2%) |
| 2009/10 | 143 (69%) | 2 (0.97%) | 23 (11.21%) | 21 (10.2%) | 0 | 17 (8.3%) |
| 2010/2011 | 154 (76%) | 0 | 23 (11.4%) | 20 (10%) | 0 | 4 (2%) |

Figures indicate that there has been an increase in the percentage of enquiries from white applicants, whilst enquiries from the minority ethnic communities have, been maintained at the same rate. However due to the number of “unknowns” markedly decreasing our ethnicity analysis is now

more accurate. This needs to be addressed by a more targeted approach to increasing carers from BME communities through marketing, recruitment and staffing over the short to medium term.

2.3.4 Enquiries by source of marketing methods

| | Magazine | Bus Ad | Newspaper | Events | Internet | leaflets | Directories | Family/friends | Switch board | N/k | other | radio |
|--------------|----------|----------|-----------|----------|-----------|----------|-------------|----------------|--------------|----------|-----------|----------|
| 08/09 | 12 | 16 | 38 | 34 | 61 | 6 | 13 | 35 | 7 | 15 | 54 | 2 |
| 09/10 | 5 | 4 | 31 | 12 | 86 | 2 | 8 | 39 | 2 | 9 | 25 | 0 |
| 10/11 | 4 | 2 | 16 | 3 | 98 | 3 | 6 | 36 | 10 | 3 | 24 | 0 |

2.3.5 The most effective marketing methods in terms of generation of enquiries and financially continue by a significant margin to be the internet and family and friends. The fact that the number of enquiries from newspapers has dropped is indicative of the fact that due to a financial error no adverts were placed for 4 months. This appears to demonstrate that newspaper adverts do generate enquiries, as the months when adverts were not placed is congruent with the months there were no enquiries resulting from that medium. It is crucial that we continue to present a positive public image of fostering for Walsall. In recognition of the continued and increasing role of the internet in generating enquiries, we have also invested this year in updating and improve the quality of the information presented on the council website.

2.3.6 We have discontinued advertising on the radio, on buses and in magazines, due to their previous ineffectiveness and ongoing financial constraints. Our enquiry at events has decreased due to a reduction in the number of events and the need to prioritise staff work. Interestingly this has not affected our number of enquiries or approvals. Our marketing strategy needs to continue to be both targeted and cost effective both in financial and staff resources.

3. TRAINING

3.1 Preparation and assessment Courses

3.1.1 Walsall continues to be part of the Black Country Consortium, along with Sandwell, Dudley and Wolverhampton. These authorities previously worked in partnership to jointly facilitate preparation courses for fostering at a minimum of 12 times per year. Each Local Authority was committed to hosting 3 courses. The training is evenly spread over the course of the year, and held at different times i.e. evenings, weekends or during the day. This offers maximum flexibility to enable applicants to attend at a time most convenient to themselves. More recently Wolverhampton's training has been provided by an independent agency and other local authorities have not to our knowledge been offered places.

3.1.2 The preparation and assessment course follows the “Skills to Foster” programme, devised by the Fostering Network. The course material has recently been updated and in Walsall the new programme was delivered from September 2010.

| Year | Number of courses run | Number of Walsall Households trained | Number continuing into assessment. |
|-----------|-----------------------|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 2008/9 | 12 | 32 | 13 |
| 2009/10 | 12 | 21 | 19 |
| 2010/2011 | 12 | 25 | 20 |

3.1.3 Of the 25 Walsall households who were trained 19 attended the Skills to Foster in Walsall, 1 in Wolverhampton, 4 in Dudley and 1 elected to attend the course in Sandwell. Those attending Walsall training from other authorities were 2 households from Wolverhampton, whilst 2 were nominated by Sandwell but did not attend.

3.1.4 There has been an increase in the number of households who have been trained and a slight increase going forward into assessment. 3 couples withdrew early on in the training, another couple withdrew at the start of the assessment process due to an unplanned pregnancy, and 2 were ruled out in the assessment stage

3.1.5 There has been a steady increase in the number of enquiries from applicants who are either currently foster carers with Independent agencies or who have been trained by Independent agencies and wish to transfer to Walsall for assessment and approval. This has resulted in the increase of applicants in assessment who have not been trained within the Black Country consortium

3.2 Post Approval

3.2.1 The delivery of post approval training has continued to be affected by the deletion of the Training officer post, and the vacancy of the senior Practitioner post responsible for implementation of the Children’s Workforce Development Council (CWDC) Training Support and development Standards for foster carers, due to the post holder acting up as team manager for the Recruitment and Assessment team

3.2.2 Since April 2010 there have been a further 2 CWDC induction workshops for foster carers, a workshop focusing in standard 2, and two large workshops attended by supervising social workers and foster carers focusing specifically on standards 3/4 and 5/6. Individual additional support continued to be provided by family support officers and via the foster carers association.

3.2.3 All short term break carers have completed their portfolios, 45 mainstream households and no family and friends carers, (an increase of 35 households on last year)

3.2.4 The timeframe for existing mainstream and short term break carers completing their CWDC portfolios was April and June 2011 respectively, whilst Family and Friends carers have until April 2012 to complete. It had been hoped that the CWDC would provide a different appropriate workbook tailored to the needs to Family and Friends carers as they had done for the STB carers and this eventually arrived in April 2011. The new national minimum standards have reinforced the compulsory nature of the CWDC TSD standards, for all foster carers, and FPS are working towards encouraging/enforcing compliance.

3.2.5 There was a comprehensive post approval training programme for all foster carers for 2010/2011. Unfortunately there was a low take up and the majority of courses were cancelled. This was due in part to the whole of the training programme being condensed into 7 months of the year, the lack of consistent administrative support from HRD and there being no training officer to encourage and enlist attendance. A scaled down training programme has been designed for 2011/2012 which is more manageable without a training officer, and reflective of the decreased finances available to commission courses. There is a focus on an increase of training being offered in house.

3.2.6 In contrast AKAMAS online training, continued to go from strength. All 100 course places were allocated, it has proved both popular, cost effective, and provided the opportunity for carers to access ongoing training at times suitable to themselves, from their own homes. This has been ably supported by a Family Support Officer who has been responsible for the practical implementation of the package. The AKAMAS package has again been purchased for 2011/2012, its success will continue provided there continues to be a dedicated person to oversee its implementation.

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.

3.3 NVQ

Between April 10 and March 2011, the final foster carer completed the Health and Social Care Caring for children and Young people NVQ level 3 awards. The new QCF award is now being run in conjunction with WACC, there are 8 foster carers currently registered with the college.

4. ASSESSMENTS AND APPROVALS

4.1 The majority of assessments of mainstream foster carers (15) were undertaken by the recruitment and assessment team, with 2 being

commissioned out to an independent agency but managed and quality assured by the team manager. This was necessary due to the continued increase in the number of assessments required and the staff vacancy rate in the team for part of this period.

4.2 The assessment of family and friend carers continues to be commissioned through independent workers but also managed and quality assured by the team manager and senior practitioner in the recruitment and assessment team

4.3 Approvals

| Type of carer | Approved | | | De registered /resigned | | | Net position | | |
|----------------|----------|----|-----------|-------------------------|----|-----------|--------------|------------|-----------|
| | 08 | 09 | 2010 | 08 | 09 | 10 | 08 | 09 | 2010 |
| Mainstream | 11 | 16 | 15 | 10 | 9 | 8 | + 1 | +7 | +7 |
| Family/Friend | 12 | 24 | 18 | 8 | 3 | 10 | + 4 | +21 | +8 |
| Back up carers | 2 | 3 | 7 | 0 | 2 | 1 | +2 | +1 | +6 |
| STB | 2 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | +1 | - 1 | +1 |

4.3.1 The most significant figure is the continued net increase of 7 mainstream households, providing capacity for an additional 12 placements. **In the last two years there has been a net gain of 14 mainstream fostering households, providing an additional 27 placements.** There has continued to be a net gain of family and friends carers although this has decreased, due in part to the conversion of some of the households to SGO's. 1 of the mainstream fostering households was approved after a successful appeal to the IRM, having initially not been approved by Walsall fostering panel, another of the approvals transferred to Walsall from an Independent agency.

4.3.2 Of the 17 households approved for mainstream and Short Term Break care 14 were white British, 1 African – Caribbean and 2 dual heritage.

4.3.3 On 31.3.11 there were 15 families in assessment who wished to be considered as mainstream carers, 3 of whom are currently registered with other agencies and 3 who wished to be approved as STB carers.

4.3.4 Research was undertaken in November 2010 to ascertain the reasons why people expressed an initial interest in fostering but then did not pursue their application. 80 households were written to, 18 households (22.5%) responded. The primary reasons stated for not pursuing were cited as: a change in personal circumstances (16%), an inability to give up work or reduce hours(16%) a change of mind (16%) not the right time but might consider in the future (11%) no spare bedroom (11%).

5 PRIVATE FOSTERING

5.1 There has continued to be an increasing demand on the recruitment and assessment team to provide assessments of Private Foster carers. The pilot inspection in May 2010 noted that the authority has significantly improved its response to private fostering since the previous inspection; the full inspection in February 2011 awarded a judgement of "Good". This is as a consequence of a great deal of hard work across children's services with all recommendations made during the previous inspection responded to positively. It was noted in both the pilot and full inspection reports that "There are very robust and thorough assessments of the suitability of carers, undertaken by social workers from the family placements team."

5.2 During the period 1st April 2010 – 31st March 2011, 25 Private Fostering assessments were allocated, an increase from 9 the previous year resulting in 12 being completed and brought to Acceptance panel, the other 11 being discontinued at various stages of the assessment, and 2 which are ongoing.

5.3 By its nature the number of Private Fostering assessments required is unpredictable, and all of the cases have been complex, requiring skilled assessment work. This is a **277% increase** which is not sustainable and is impacting on the team capacity to complete assessments of new foster carers. There are only 4.5 social workers in the team undertaking all assessment work, initial visits, recruitment activity and linking to new carers for the first year.

6. SUPERVISION, SUPPORT AND REVIEWING

6.1 Since the service was re-engineered in April 2008, the supervision and support of newly approved carers is undertaken by the assessing social worker in the recruitment and assessment team. Prior to this, once approved they were linked into the support or permanence teams. The benefit of this arrangement is that the carer has established a positive working relationship with the carer. The social worker knows the carers strengths and weaknesses which has improved placement matching, provided more effective support, decreased disruptions, increased placement stability and overall created more positive outcomes for children

6.2 This continues until after the first foster carer review (within 12 months of approval) and then they will be supported with the permanence or support teams.

6.9 Frequency of supervision

- For every new placement, a visit must take place within 7 working days (the post placement meeting would cover this, but if there has been a pre placement meeting, then another visit must be undertaken).

All carers – first year post approval

- For the first 3 months, formal supervision will take place **every month.**
- Remaining 9 months – the supervising link worker will undertake formal supervision **every other month,** but visit monthly in between to focus on the child.

All carers after first review

- Formal supervision will take place **every 3 months,** but the supervising link worker will visit in between (at a minimum every 4-6 weeks to focus on children placed).
This is a minimum frequency and if it felt by any party, including the IRO, panel, agency decision maker, carer, supervising link worker or manager then the frequency will be increased to meet the need of all concerned.

6.4 According to the fostering service regulations, at least one unannounced visit is undertaken to each fostering household each year, and there is an expectation that two will be undertaken in Walsall. These have been undertaken.

6.5 The roles of the family support officer (F.S.O.'s) have developed a different focus. They are now undertaking a variety of tasks which indirectly support carers. These include support in relation to the CWDC induction standards, health and safety assessments, family finding for permanence for children, placement duty.

6.10 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
- facilitates carer training
- runs coffee mornings and support groups
- organises social activities
- is involved in regular communication meetings with the service

The peer support co-ordinator works to support the FCA in their support networking.

6.7 Another aspect of foster carer support is the annual foster carer review process. The reviews are independently chaired by the Independent Reviewing Officer for foster carer reviews. The process is 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 (etc) change in terms of approval) or by the Review and Skills level board. Over this period, 94% of reviews have been held within the timescale of 12 months .This rate is an increase from 88% from the previous year. The reviewing officer is timely in chairing the reviews.

- 6.8 Foster carer Support groups continue to be held – either facilitated by the service (via the peer support co-ordinator or an independent social worker) or by the foster carers for the coffee mornings. The meetings have general agenda items and may sometimes have guest speakers. The Peer Support co-ordinator has been on maternity leave since October 2010 and in her absence the organisation of the mainstream Foster Carer Support groups has been undertaken by the FSW in the Permanence Team with support from the business support team
- 6.11 The fostering service had to cease to operate a dedicated out of hours support service for carers in March 2010.as there were no longer sufficient social worker volunteers from within the fostering service to run this service. This role has been successfully assumed by the Council's Emergency Response Service., and carers can access this service for advice and support.
- 6.10 One of the most significant aspects of support to foster carers is provided by the independent psychologist Peter Littleford .Peter's expertise is in the field of children who have attachment issues. He provides training for foster carers, runs practice development groups and also works directly with carers to enable them understand attachment issues and to develop and implement appropriate strategies in their care of the children. Carers find his involvement invaluable and there is no doubt that his interventions have prevented many placement disruptions.

7. FAMILY AND FRIENDS AS CARERS

- 7.1 It is a requirement of the Fostering Service Regulations and Fostering Service Regulations 2011, that family and friends as carers receive the same levels of support, supervision and training as that offered to non related foster carers.
- 7.2 As previously stated the assessments of family and friends as carers are undertaken by independent assessors. Their support and supervision is provided by the permanence support team. One of the statutory requirements of the Ofsted inspection of 2007 was that the

service “assessed the support and training needs of family and friends as carers and ensures their needs are met”.

- 7.3 The service responded by identifying a Senior Practitioner within the Permanence Support Team in the re-engineered service , who would have lead responsibility for developing the support, supervision and training offered to family and friends carers. An action plan was devised and as a result of implementing this action plan, family and friend carers now receive the same levels of support, supervision and training as that offered to non related foster carers.
- 7.4 Family and Friend Carers receive regular supervision at the same interval as non related foster carers
- 7.5 Supervision is undertaken by qualified social workers within the Permanence Support Team.
- 7.6 Support is provided as soon as the Permanence Support Team is notified of a child being placed with a family and friend carer and they are allocated a supervising social worker who will arrange to visit the carer
- 7.7 An Induction Training Programme was devised and delivered to all family and friend carers from January 2009. This is designed for the specific needs of family and friends carers. It is delivered 3 times a year and covers 3 main areas; The Child, The Carer and Legal Responsibilities and Requirements. It is offered as soon as the Fostering Service is informed of the placement of a child within the household. The carer's details are automatically placed on the next available training programme with the recommendation they attend at this point. If the carer is not available on the initial dates offered they are automatically included on the next available training programme.
- 7.8 Feedback from the carers is very positive and has also been instrumental in identifying other training they would benefit from, consisting of both specific and non related foster carer training courses. The evaluation process also informs our service of any further training which may be suitable for family and friend carers to attend and is included in our ongoing future training planning.
- 7.9 Further training needs already identified include issues in respect of Contact and Attachment and Men who Foster. A three day Attachment Training programme was run in March 2011. Training for Contact Issues and Men who Foster is scheduled for October 2011.
- 7.10 The carers receive a certificate in recognition of their attendance and completion of the 3 day Induction Training Programme and all other training attended.

- 7.11 The take up rate for the Induction Training Programme was extremely poor with the consequence that the scheduled date for the next course has been bought forward by one month from October to September. Conversely, the take up rate for the attachment training held in March 2011 was extremely high with the lowest participant number being 18 and highest being 19 for a course that has a maximum participation number of 20.

Family and friend carers are also offered other levels of training, some of which includes non related foster carer training provision within the Family Placement Service.

- 7.12 Coffee/information sharing meetings are held for family and friend Carers. A 'guest speaker' has been identified for each session to provide specific information for the carers. These occasions have been welcomed by the carers, as an additional form of advice and support. The family and friend carers who attend assist our service in identifying their 07/09/2011 training needs i.e. attachment and loss and contact issues.
- 7.13 A Buddy Support and an information/feedback letter was sent to all family and friend carers' asking if they may be prepared to be involved in this scheme. The scheme was also explained in more detail during their specific Induction Training. Although originally the carers were open to the idea, they have now stated they would prefer to continue to receive support from the coffee/information sharing meetings and training programme.
- 7.14 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.
- 7.15 A bench marking exercise has been undertaken to measure the services we currently offer and provide to family and friend carers, with other Local Authority's within the Black Country Consortium. From the information gathered to date it appears our service is way ahead of our neighbouring Local Authorities in the services we provide for our family and friend carers i.e. specific training, induction information, Family and Friend Foster Carer Handbook, coffee/information mornings, celebration event, and provision of a dedicated supervising social worker within the Permanence Support Team.
- 7.16 A Family and Friend Celebration Day took place in October 2010. Foster carers opted for an event for adults and children and the event took the form of a trip to Twycross Zoo. The event was very well attended with 50 children and carers participating. This year Family Placement Services are working with Walsall Foster Carer association to arrange a trip for all foster carers, mainstream and family and friends

carers, their own children as well as looked after children. The trip will take place in September and is likely to be to either Drayton Manor Park or Blackpool.

- 7.17 On 31.3.11 there were 63 family and friend carers caring for 88 compared with 56 family and friend carers caring for 71 children for the previous year. This represents representing an 11% increase in the number of carers and a 19 % increase in the number of children over this 12 month period.
- 7.18 Because of how family and friend arrangements are created, they are often very complex situations where there are concerns in relation to safeguarding. Also these individuals see themselves as family members not foster carers and require additional levels of support to understand the fostering task.
- 7.19 Over the past 2 years the number of family and friend carers has continued to increase but the number of staff within the permanence support team has remained the same. In order to absorb this increase the development work of the 2 senior practitioners in this team has had to be reduced in order that they can act as supervising social workers to family and friend carers. This will eventually impact upon the delivery of specialist support and development of services to family and friend carers, Special Guardians and their families and Short Term Break carers.

8. SPECIAL GUARDIANSHIP SUPPORT

- 8.1 The Senior Practitioner within the Permanence Support Team continues to provide support to Special Guardians and their families, both prior to (advice and support in respect of indirect contact – letter writing) and following the making of the Order, in relation to the review of the support plan, supporting contact (both direct and indirect), reviewing financial support arrangements etc. Currently, 24 families are receiving support which is an increase of 9 from last year.
- 8.2 As stated in 6.19, the senior practitioner responsible for Special guardianship support now has reduced capacity to provide this support and plans to develop these services to include support groups, specific training and newsletters have not progressed.

9. SHORT TERM BREAK SCHEME

- 9.1 On the 31st March 2011 there are 4 carers, providing 7 short term break placements for disabled children.
- 9.2 Over this period the service has received 6 enquiries from families interested in offering short term breaks. Two families were approved and three are currently being assessed.

- 9.3 Foster carers meet quarterly preferring to meet in the evening to enable working carers to attend. The meetings invite carers in the process of being approved to meet and ask questions about the scheme and to meet existing carers. This has proved very useful particularly at putting newer carers at ease.
- 9.4 Foster carers and the senior practitioner with responsibility for short term breaks have identified training specific to the needs of foster carers caring for children with disabilities, the emphasis has focused on developing ways of communicating with the children they care for.
- 9.5 The Shared Cared Network has provided quality training attended by several short term break carers who care for severely disabled and children and those with autism.
- 9.6 The scheme continues to try and attract specialist carers who are able to provide mixture of care to match the the growing number of children with complex needs.

10. ALLEGATIONS AND COMPLAINTS

10.1 Allegations /incidents of concern/complaints against carers

During this period there were 19 allegations/incidents of concern /complaints against foster carers which were investigated in line with procedures. Of these 19, 8 children were the subjects of child protection/ safeguarding enquiries. Of the 13 investigations, 11 resulted in a review of the approval of the foster carers.

7 foster carers were offered independent support during the investigations into the complaints /allegations -6 refused and 1 used the independent support offered

10.2 Complaints against the Service

During this period there were 6 complaints against the service which were investigated within timescales

11. PLACEMENT DUTY

- 11.1 The fostering service manages all requests for placements for children who are looked after by Walsall Children's Services. The manager of the support and development team is responsible for the single referral point duty system which identifies all placements – fostering and residential, internal and external provision. Every day there is a duty officer and a back up worker. The tasks that backup duty undertakes are those relating to placements e.g. pre and post placement meetings or planning /professional meetings in relation to placements.

- 11.2. The aim of the single referral point is to improve placement stability and continuity of placements by accurately matching placements to the individual needs of children and young people.
- 11.3 The single contact point provides a co-ordinated approach to placement identification for children requiring immediate, temporary placements. The senior practitioner within the support and development team manages placement duty and is responsible for co-ordinating the identification of permanent foster placements for all children aged 12 years and under for whom permanent fostering is the permanence option. This is in line with the current permanence policy. Each child is allocated a dedicated family finder.
- 11.4 The service created a Placement and Resource team on 1 April 2011, which will enhance arrangements for the commissioning of all foster placements, both internal and external and also provide ongoing quality assurance and monitoring of external placements. The local authority entered into a contractual arrangement with Independent Fostering service providers and established the fostering framework which forms the basis for the commissioning of these placements. This will fulfil the requirements of the local authority's sufficiency strategy, ensure children's needs are met and provide significant financial savings.

12. FOSTER CARE RESOURCE

- 12.1 On 31.3.11 there were **233** approved foster carers offering a total of **366** placements broken down as follows:-

183 temporary /respite
52 permanent /long term
88 family and friend placements
7 STB

- 12.2 On that date there were 20 vacant placements plus a further 23 that were on hold for various reasons.

- 12.3 On 31.3.11 there were **518** children looked after which was an increase of 7 from the previous year. Of these, **215** children were placed in internal foster placements and **119** in Independent Fostering Agencies (IFA) placements and **88** in family and friend placements.

In foster care by year

| Year | total number in foster carer |
|---------|------------------------------|
| 31.3.09 | 351 |
| 31.3.10 | 406 |
| 31.3.11 | 422 |

Local Authority foster care

| Year | numbers | as% of all children in foster care | as %of LAC |
|---------|---------|------------------------------------|------------|
| 31.3.09 | 207 | 59 | 44.8 |
| 31.3.10 | 213 | 52.5 | 42.52 |
| 31.3.11 | 215 | 50.9 | 41.5 |

IFA Placements

| Year | numbers | as% of all children in foster care | as% of LAC |
|---------|---------|------------------------------------|------------|
| 31.3.09 | 93 | 26.49 | 20.13 |
| 31.3.10 | 110 | 27.09 | 21.96 |
| 31.3.11 | 119 | 28.19 | 22.97 |

Family and friend carers

| Year | numbers | as% of all children in foster care | as %of ,LAC |
|---------|---------|------------------------------------|-------------|
| 31.3.09 | 51 | 14.5 | 14.5 |
| 31.3.10 | 71 | 17.9 | 14.17 |
| 31.3.11 | 88 | 20.85 | 16.9 |

12.4 From these figures it can be seen that the greatest percentage increase is for children placed with family and friend carers

12.5 The target is to reduce this number of IFA placements to **102** by 31.3.12. This is to be achieved by preventing further external placements through the use of local placements and to implement exit plans for a cohort of children whose care plans are either return home or permanence away from the birth family

12.6 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 or children aged 12 years and over with complex needs and children who were deemed to be at risk if placed locally and placements for parent and child assessments.

13. FOSTERING PANEL

13.1 Introduction

13.1.1As in the previous year, it has been a busy period for the fostering panel, with a steady flow of foster carer approvals and the departure of a number of carers. There has been a significant increase in the number of placements made with family and friend foster carers. Foster carer first annual reviews have been presented to panel, as have reviews requesting change of approval, and reviews following concerns or allegations. The panel has also considered a number of

permanent matches for children with Walsall approved carers and IFA approved carers. Information regarding variations of approval and exemptions has been presented to panel.

13.1.2 In order to respond to the increase in business being presented to panel, all day panels are now held each month, and half day panels are held on alternative months. Increasing panel capacity has been effective in terms of dealing with panel business in a timely way.

13.1.3 In order to respond to this increase in panel time the service will have to create additional support capacity to service the panel. An additional part time panel administrator post has been appointed to and the service has as one of it's priorities to create a full time panel advisor post for adoption and fostering.

13.2 Legal updates

The Fostering Services (Amendment) Regulations 2009 came into force on 1 April 2009, and this introduced the Independent Review Mechanism (IRM). During this reporting period, one family and friend carer who was approved under regulation 38(2) applied to have their appeal against the qualifying determination that the fostering service was not proposing to approve them as foster carers, considered by the Independent Review panel. The IRM panel upheld Walsall panel's recommendation and the decision was then made not to approve them. One set of applicants for mainstream foster care applied to the IRM who subsequently did not uphold Walsall panel's recommendation that the foster carers were not approved. The decision was then made that the foster carers were approved for Walsall Council, and they have since commenced fostering.

13.3 Panel membership

13.3.1 The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 came into force on 1 April 2011. In terms of the fostering panel, there is no requirement for a fostering panel to have a fixed membership, although the ability of the panel to function cohesively and with a level of consistency must be taken into account. The new regulations introduce the notion of a central list of potential panel members who can be drawn upon.

13.3.2 The new regulations state that there is no prescribed maximum or minimum tenure for panel members.

13.3.3 The panel has seen a change in its membership, with the Panel membership on 31 March 2011 as follows:

| | |
|--------------------|---|
| Jane Prashar | - Chair |
| Catherine Mitchley | - Vice Chair |
| Leah Arnold | - Children's Social Work Representative |
| Shauna Webster | - Independent Representative |
| Liz Day | - Independent Representative |
| Jayne Clarke | - Health |

| | |
|--------------|---------------------------------------|
| Tony Hall | - Foster Carer, other Local Authority |
| Alan Paul | - Councillor, Walsall Council |
| Jane Woodall | - Education |

Support to the panel:

| | |
|--------------------|-----------------------|
| Teresa Kean | - Panel Advisor |
| Sheila Perry-Jones | - Panel Administrator |

13.3.4 Walsall and Dudley Council continue to have a mutual arrangement for Chair of their Fostering panels.

13.3.5 Attendance has been good by panel members and the review of their membership was introduced from April 2008 to ensure best practice.

13.4 Foster Carers attending Panel

It is an expectation of the Fostering Service that applicant foster carers attend panel with the assessing social worker. All applicants attended panel, including the family and friend carers. It is also strongly encouraged that approved foster carers attend for the first foster carer review, or on occasions when the review is as a result in a change of circumstances or an allegation or complaint.

13.5 The Review and Skill Level Board

13.5.1 During this period there have been 3 Review and Skill Level Board meetings. The Board membership is as follows: Operations Manager, Family Placement Services, chairs the meetings (in the role of agency decision maker for the purpose of this Board); the Vice Chair of panel (to provide a link between fostering panel), and the Independent Reviewing Officer for foster carer reviews, and an Independent Reviewing Officer.

13.5.2 For those Foster Carer reviews where there are no changes of approval, these are presented to the Board (40 this period) and applications for Skill level progressions are presented (3 for this period).

13.6 The role of Medical Adviser

There is no statutory requirement for the medical advisor to sit on fostering panel. However, the completion of statutory medicals for foster carer applicants is a requirement. Dr Anand and Dr Rao have continued to complete and oversee fostering medicals, and their scrutiny in respect of GP medicals of foster carer applicants was invaluable. The service will continue to meet at regular intervals with the medical advisor in order to enable closer opportunities for assessors to liaise with the medical advisor for advice and clarity.

13.7 Legal Services

Again, whilst not a statutory requirement for a legal advisor to sit on panel, panel have accessed legal advice in relation to applicant foster carers where the recommendation of the Fostering Panel has been to make a qualifying determination, and as a result, the applicants have chosen the option of the Independent Review Mechanism (IRM).

13.8 Agency Decision maker

David Bovell, Head of Service Placement and Resources, Corporate Parenting, Children's Specialist Services, continues to act as the agency decision maker. In David's absence, Louise Watts, Operations Manager, Family Placement Services, will act in this role

14. NEW LEGISLATION

14.1 In April 2011 new regulations standards and guidance came into effect. These were:-

- Care Planning, placement and case review
- Regulations and Statutory Guidance 2010 securing Sufficiency (Statutory Guidance)
- Family and Friends (Statutory Guidance)
- National minimum standards on fostering 2011-07-07 The Fostering Service Regulations 2011
- Independent Reviewing Officer handbook and statutory guidance.
- Short breaks statutory guidance

14.2 The main themes running through all the guidance and regulations are as follows:

1. Making decisions through the child care review;
2. Making placement decisions for child – related not systems related reasons;
3. Using the care plan and placement plan to clarify arrangements
4. The explicit involvement of the Independent Reviewing Officer.

The main themes within the legislation are:

1. The foster carer as a parental figure
2. The child as an active agent of change
3. The importance of relationships.

14.3 All these impact upon the fostering service and policies, procedures and guidance have to be updated and staff and foster carers briefed

15. REGIONAL DEVELOPMENTS

- 15.1 Walsall continues to be a member of the West Midlands Regional Family Placement Consortium (WMRFPC), along with 13 other West Midlands Local Authorities and voluntary agencies

The Consortium meets bi-monthly. The Operations manager for the Family Placement Service attends. Discussions have centred on development of policy, procedural and practice issues, in respect of Special Guardianship Orders, Short Term Break schemes, "staying put" pilots, family and friends as carers, private fostering, panel processes, inspection updates and the new minimum standards for fostering.

- 15.2 There has been a project within the 4 Black Country Local authorities looking at all at the feasibility of cross authority joint working. One of the areas is aspects of fostering services, with a potential focus on marketing, post approval training, a payment scheme, independent commissioning of assessments, SGO's, CAMHS, foster care centres, and supported lodgings. The project is active and ongoing.

16. FUTURE SERVICE DEVELOPMENT/ CHALLENGES FOR THE NEXT 12 MONTHS

- 16.1 Implement the new Fostering Service Regulations and Minimum Standards, and the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations.
- 16.2 Implement the new commissioning arrangements in line with the new sufficiency requirements through the Placements and Resources Strategy.
- 16.3 Contribute to the reduction in the numbers of children who are looked after through increase in the numbers of permanence orders secured (adoption, special guardianship and Residence Orders), and by supporting children who leave care through return home, onto independence etc. This will also be supported through the re-launch of the permanence strategy, including the amended permanence financial support strategy.
- 16.4 Reduce the numbers of children placed in external foster care placements to 102 by 31.3.12. This will be achieved by increasing internal capacity by creating additional new placements (for new and existing carers) and "stretching" existing carers in terms of numbers of children placed, age and complexity of need.
- 16.5 Undertake stage 2 of the re-engineering of the Family Placement Service to ensure that the service structure is aligned to deliver on service targets and outcomes particularly the creation of a panel advisor for the fostering and adoption panels.

- 16.6 The service in conjunction with the Foster Care Association, will hold a foster carer recognition event for all foster carers ,their children and children placed with them ,in September 2011,as part of the retention strategy.
- 16.7 Implement a workload management tool that is specific to the particular requirements of the Family Placement Service by 1August 2011
- 16.8 Encourage foster carers to develop leisure pursuits for the children they care for.
- 16.9 Implement a policy which encourages carers not to take children out of school for holidays
- 16.10 Ensure the cultural, religious and linguistic needs of children are met through the recruitment of more local carers and carers from black and minority ethnic communities.
- 16.11 Implement PARIS within the Family Placement Service.
- 16.12 Utilise the monitoring tool in relation to placement disruptions to inform the development of support systems to reduce the number of disruptions thereby promoting placement stability.
- 16.13 Continue to raise awareness and understanding amongst carers about attachment issues, through regular training and practice development workshops run by Peter Littleford, the independent psychotherapist
- 16.14 Implement the project to provide support to the sons and daughters of foster carers