

TAMESIDE COUNCIL FOSTERING SERVICE ANNUAL REPORT 2020/21

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FOSTERING SERVICE
UNIT MANAGER
CARED FOR CHILDREN
SERVICE



REPORT OVERVIEW

Purpose of this Report

This annual Fostering Service Report meets the requirements of the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 (Regulation 35) and Fostering Service: National Minimum Standard 25.7 Regulation states that the 'executive side of the local authority;'

- Receive written reports on the management, outcomes and financial state of the agency every quarter
- Monitor the management and outcomes of the services in order to satisfy themselves that the service is effective and is achieving good outcomes for children and/or service users;
- Satisfy themselves that the agency is complying with the conditions of registration

Tameside Fostering Service

Tameside Fostering Service is based in the Denton Centre. The registered manager/agency decision maker continues to be Tracy Morris, Assistant Director Children Services. Agency decision maker in her absence is Gill Guy Edwards, IHead of Service Looked After Children. The Service Unit Manager continues to be Glen Perryman.

There has been no significant changes within the management structure of the fostering service during 2020/21. The permanent Team Manager was appointed and started in post June 2020. The three practice managers were all in post on a permanent basis at the start of April 2020. The management team has provided a positive foundation to improve the quality of practice across the fostering service, develop, and improve relationships with the foster carer community.

The Fostering Service has experienced improved stability in relation to social work posts during the period of 2020/21. There has been some minimal changes in the social work posts, however all posts are now appointed on a permanent basis. There has been no interim agency social workers since June 2020, providing better consistency to foster carers. The current staffing structure dated the July 2021 is attached below. (See Appendix A)

There are three distinctive teams within the Fostering Service; Connected Persons Assessment Team, Supervising Social Worker Team and Discharge/Special Guardians Support Team. A full time team manager is responsible for the four FTE practice managers across the three teams.

Within each of the teams, a practice manager is responsible for line management of the social workers, supervisions, allocation of work and developing practice across the teams. An additional practice manager is the dedicated panel advisor and takes a lead on compliance and quality assurance. This post also provides some direct management and support to social workers and family intervention workers.

In 2020/21, the discharge from care team/SGO support team was established and implemented. The SGO Support Team has been in the children services structure; however, it was agreed that this would be better suited to be in the fostering service with its close connection with foster carer becoming Special Guardians.

Connected Persons Assessment Team

- The connected Persons Assessment Team assesses Connected Person Foster Carers. These are carers who have a connection to a child either as a family member or a friend. These placements can be made in an emergency as an immediate placement situation under Regulation 24 (Regulation 24 is detailed in the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010) prior to be fully assessed with the child(ren) in placement or are assessed and approved prior to placement.
- The team undertake initial viability assessments, full connected person's assessments and including consideration for Special Guardianship Orders.
- The staff group comprises of a Practice Manager, 8 fostering social workers (7.5 FTE).

Supervising Social Work Team

- The team support both approved connected foster carers and recruited foster carers.
- Fostering Social Workers provide regular supervision to approved foster carers, match foster carers to children requiring a fostering placement and support with recruitment activity across the service.
- The average case load of FTE is 19.5 foster carers and an assessment of perspective foster carer.
- Recruited Foster carers who are approved for child(ren) who are unknown to them. These carers may also work full time/ part time or have both foster carers available to undertake the fostering task. The foster carer can be a single person or a couple. These carers provide short break, short and long term placements for children aged between 0-18 years.
- The staff group comprises of 2 FTE Practice Managers that includes the fostering panel advisor role, and 10 fostering social workers (8.5 FTE).

Discharge from Care/Special Guardianship Team

- The staff group comprises of 1 FTE Practice manager, 2 FTE Social Workers and 4 FTE Fostering Support Officers.
- The social workers prepare children and family assessments, discharge of care court statements and SGO assessments/Support Plans for children identified as appropriate for discharge from care. The social workers do not hold statutory cases providing dedicate capacity to prioritise work to safely discharge children from care and contributing to the reduction of cared for children.
- The Fostering Support Workers have a caseload of Special Guardians. They provide practical and emotional support to 175 Special Guardian on a needs based assessment. They also work across the fostering service providing support to foster carers where support is identified as being required, enhancing support to unstable placements and life story work where appropriate

Priorities for 2019/20 from Fostering Service Annual Report

Priority Identified in 2019/20 Year End Report	RAG Rating	Progress update
A review of offer to our current foster carers to be undertaken considering the fostering allowances and support.	Red	Currently being progressed through governance process following significant delay.
Permanent Recruitment to the post of marketing and recruitment officer.	Green	Completed and Gabrielle Sulek started in post in September 2020.
Develop a robust recruitment campaign to increase the numbers of foster carers being approved.	Green	Recruitment strategy signed off in January 2021
Consider the support and training needs of foster carers that look after children with SEND.	Green	Input from CWD team and health in the interim training programme that is being delivered to foster carers and in the two year plan from 2021/22.
2 year foster carer training programme to be launched for the start of 2021/22	Green	Programme being developed and task and finish group set up to monitor progress and implementation
Improved compliance and performance in respect to foster carer annual reviews.	Green	New fostering review process being implemented in LCS. SUM of QA and Fostering meet monthly to discuss data and resolve issues. IRO service providing performance data regularly
Foster carer annual review pathway to be added to LCS	Yellow	There is a local workaround, but ongoing discussions with LCS.
Develop and roll out a performance and compliance framework within the fostering service.	Green	Framework implemented and monthly performance meetings taking place focusing on KPI's and thematic themes
Understand reasons why foster carers resign in Tameside.	Green	Marketing and recruitment officer now undertakes exit interviews. Findings taken into the 2021/22 recruitment and retention strategy

Implement a file Audit programme in line with QA framework.		Fostering Leadership Team now undertake monthly audits of fostering files. Moderation of the audits to be resolved with HOS
Complete the review of fostering allowances.		Incorporated into the review of the fostering offer in priority 1
Increase the compliance of social work and IRO reports for foster carer annual reviews.		Work ongoing between the fostering and IRO service to address.
Introduction of an out of hours on call service for foster carers to offer a better service to foster carers, helping with recruitment and retention.		A recommendation in the review of the fostering review offer that is being taken through the governance process. This will be included in the foster carer new offer implementation across 2021/22.
Ensure all foster carers who take short term and emergency placements have an appropriate profile to share with children being placed.		This work has not yet started. Impacted of COVID has caused some delay and priority has been progressing permanence via SGO and Long Term Fostering. This will be a priority for 2021/22.
Develop and circulate an SGO information booklet to all carers.		Completed.

Response to Covid-19 Pandemic

This report reflects the activity of the fostering service during the COVID-19 pandemic. It feels inappropriate not to comment on how the Fostering Service has responded to these quite exceptional circumstances.

Overall Foster placements were more stable. Fostering households described a strengthening of relationships with children content and stable in their homes. Foster carers supported young people in maintaining their home schooling and in developing new home based activities to do together. There were difficult situations but again foster carers worked with challenging behaviours and supported young people. Foster Carers worked to support young people in maintaining the stability of placements. Foster Carers were provided with virtual support.

Our normal way of supporting foster carers, through home visits, needed to change and we saw that Social Workers embraced this and in many situations contact levels with Foster Carers actually increased with weekly phone calls or SKYPE calls being used much more. Supervising Social Workers were supported with clear guidance about how to respond during the pandemic. Staff were able to maintain the quality of relationships with Foster Carers, and to enhance and grow those relationships in many cases, whilst ensuring that our practice remained aligned with statutory expectations.

Fostering managers showed appropriate discretion in approving additional payments where appropriate to foster carers experiencing financial hardship. Some of our Foster Carers and children were in shielding categories and so we needed to work to support them in particular. We were able to provide additional assistance to families in shielding categories

The Local Authority also provided a £300 one off payment to all approved foster carers as a recognition and appreciation of the challenging circumstances that the foster carers were facing whilst providing care to our children. This was well received by all foster carers and feedback was positive.

Foster Household Profiles

At the 31st March 2021 there were a total of 182 fostering households; 81 of those were connected persons and 101 were recruited foster carers.

Table 1	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2021
Recruited Foster Carers	124	117	118	111	111	101
Connected Carers	60	64	78	103	86	81
Total FC households during the year 2019/20 (including reg 24)	223	232	258	288	264	263
Total FC households	184	181	198	214	197	182
Number of children in Tameside foster placements during the year of 2019/20 (including reg 24 placements)		356	399	450	440	389
Number of children in Tameside foster placements at 31 st March 2020		251	283	297	267	268

At the 31st March 2021 there were 682 looked after children in Tameside. 268 of those were in Tameside foster placements (39%). 124 children were placed in Independent Fostering Agency Placements (18%). This number of children cared for by Tameside Foster carers decreased by 1 compared to the 2019/20 reporting period. The number of children placed with an IFA's reduced by 21 in the same reporting period. At the 31st March there were a total of 114 children and young people in residential children's home. 17 children were within Tameside internal children's home and a further 97 in external private residential.

Fostering Service Recruitment, Retention and Marketing Strategy

The Marketing & Recruitment Strategy was agreed January 2021. The strategy outlines how internal growth of the service and increased retention of internal foster carers will be achieved over the next 3 years. This is closely aligned to the corporate plan and the review of the fostering offer and recommendation with the following objectives;

- To increase in-house placement sufficiency in Tameside by 34% over the next three years;
- To retain existing foster carers and through support and training, enable them to take on more challenging placements;
- To build a strong fostering brand identity that is recognisable and resonates with our carers and young people;
- To raise awareness & consideration for fostering in Tameside (long term).

A report by Fostering Futures in conjunction with The Fostering Network suggests that 85% internal foster placement availability produces the optimum benefits from a mixed economy of provision.

Previous year figures for Cared for Children in Tameside 2019/20 show:

- 51% of placements provided by Local Authority (110 children)
- 49% of placements provided by IFAs (106 children)

This means we need to increase in house placement provision by 34% We aim to achieve this over the next 3 years, assuming similar patterns continue.

This equates to approximately 70-80 foster carers net growth.

The key groups of cared for children in need of foster care identified were:

- All age groups, particularly 5+ (In 2019/20, 38% of children over 5 were placed with an IFA)
- BAME children (12% BAME children in foster care vs 4.4% BAME carers)
- SEND children (Children with an ECHP or disability more likely to be placed with an IFA than children without)
- Sibling groups (5 out of 47 sibling groups could not remain together due to lack of suitable in-house placements)
- Children placed in residential care with a permanence plan of fostering. A specific focus is on those children placed out of Borough.

Some of the techniques identified to achieve the objectives include:

- Working with digital Partner Local IQ – ongoing targeted campaign
- Streamlining of enquiry process
- New fostering brand
- Website refresh

- Targeted continuous digital campaign
- Clear marketing & communications plan
- Foster Carer retention strategy inc. comms plan e.g. newsletters
- Foster Carer Offer
- GMCA Project
- Enhanced focus on Foster Carer training, new programme launched
- Community engagement
- Constant evaluation & optimisation of approach

The marketing strategy has been live since January and continues to be implemented alongside the Marketing & Communications plan.

Recruitment and Retention

Approvals

During the reporting period households there were 7 approved as mainstream/recruited foster carers with a breakdown as shown below. 1 out of 7 approved households transferred from an Independent Fostering Agency. It is disappointing that the fostering service did not grow as anticipated in 2020/21, however the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the vacant recruitment officer till September 2020 and not having a recruitment and retention strategy has impacted on the service's ability to grow. It's a priority for 2021/22 that the fostering service reaches its target as set out in the fostering recruitment strategy.

Table 2	Recruited carers	IFA Transfers	Total
2018/19	9	Not recorded	9
2019/20	7	Not recorded	7
2020/21	6	1	7

Marketing and Recruitment Officer

The fostering service appointed a Marketing and Recruitment Officer who started in post in September 2021. The post holder has significant experience in the marketing field and her most recent position was as a Marketing Executive at Manchester Airport working across several worldwide airlines.

The post holder has brought a wealth of marketing and recruitment experience to the role, having worked within major corporate companies. This is an exciting appointment and has contributed to the significant performance improvement in relation to number of enquires and conversion through to approval. Having a dedicated post has provided the increased capacity to develop a three-year strategic recruitment, retention and marketing plan

Initial Enquiries

The below table shows a comparison of enquiry numbers over the past 5 years. The total number for 2020/21 of 249 enquiries shows that this has almost doubled in total compared to the previous year. The marketing section below will outline and explain how the increase in enquiries have been achieved and continue to grow as outlined in the strategy, through a combination of marketing & communications approaches.

Table 3	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
No. of enquires	87	122	157	125	249

The below table shows in full the data for the entire foster carer enquiry process including the existing foster carer cohort and also deregistration's when carers have either retired or resigned. There is more granular detail in the below sections which will give context to each part of the process.

Please note that limited data is available for April 2020 due to gaps in recording. The data for April is not thought to be accurate as a result, but this information is unfortunately not available. There is now a tracker system in place to record each initial enquiry as they come through to the fostering team.

Table 4	Apr-20	May-20	Jun-20	Jul-20	Aug-20	Sep-20	Oct-20	Nov-20	Dec-20	Jan-21	Feb-21	Mar-21	Total
1. Initial enquiries	1	22	35	5	28	13	11	10	10	47	34	33	249
2. Initial Visits	3	4	6	2	1	3	3	5	1	8	6	5	49
3. Applications	0	3	1	2	1	1	2	0	1	1	0	4	16
4. Assessment	2	5	6	7	8	8	9	8	6	3	3	7	N/A
5. Approvals	0	2	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	3	0	0	7
6. Carer Exits	0	0	3	2	2	3	0	0	3	1	3	3	20
7. Households	115	117	114	112	110	108	108	108	105	107	104	101	109 (rolling average)
8. Placements	152	151	151	153	154	156	159	160	153	159	154	150	154 (rolling average)

Marketing & Recruitment Activity

There is limited data and information available regarding marketing & recruitment activity in first part of the reporting period, as there was no recruitment officer in post during this time. The TMBC Communications team supported with social media posts, press releases and sharing foster carer stories through a variety of marketing channels to aid recruitment. However, during this time there was no clear marketing strategy in place.

The Communications team managed a marketing campaign for fostering that went live in August 2020 and there were 28 total enquiries throughout the month, significantly greater than August in the previous year which saw 8 total enquiries. The August campaign consisted of a £5,000 budget that was concentrated on Facebook Lead Generation, Online Display and Google Search Ad digital channels. As the Facebook and Google channels were seen to be most effective on evaluation, these formed a part of the Marketing & Recruitment Strategy moving forwards. The overall increase in August's figures highlight the importance of digital marketing and how it helps to produce a steady flow of enquiries month-to-month.

The Marketing & Recruitment Officer came into post in September and began to create a full 3-year Marketing & Recruitment strategy from October onwards. While budgets were being plotted and a marketing plan devised, a range of organic and some paid media were activated to support fostering recruitment throughout Q3, with the main campaign planned to go live from January when the website, online forms, enquiry process, information packs and strategy were finalised to allow for a successful campaign to take place. Another important part of Q3 was developing a foster carer communication strategy including planning quarterly meetings and the redesign & regular distribution of foster carer newsletters with important updates & engagement activities.

The marketing activity throughout Q3 is detailed below. This was largely based on improving visibility and engaging current foster carers while the strategy & planning for the main campaign was being planned for January.

1.Organic Social Media

Organic Social Media was utilised throughout October, with fostering graphics shared on both the Tameside MBC Facebook and Twitter channels. These graphics had pandemic-specific messaging to appeal to those people with a change in circumstance due to COVID-19 that as a result, may consider fostering. The posts received positive engagement from Tameside's large and engaged follower base.

1.Sons & Daughter's Campaign

October was sons & daughter's month in the care calendar and to celebrate, a video was created involving some of Tameside's foster families birth children, who answered the question 'What is the best thing about being a Foster sibling'. The video was shared across TMBC social media channels, via press release and on the website. The campaign received positive engagement from the public, with the video reaching 3,000 people on Facebook alone.

2.Cycling UK Article

The fostering service partnered with Cycling UK who were developing an article on encouraging foster families to get out and active throughout half term and beyond. The article also highlighted the positive relationships that cycling can offer between foster parent and child and was endorsed by a Tameside Foster Carer who promotes cycling to other foster families. The fostering team provided quotes and statistics for the article to raise awareness of the need for foster carers, and the article was shared across TMBC social media channels, and also Cycling UK's. It featured on their website and was promoted by their marketing team.

3.Radio

The fostering service worked with Quest media to produce a Radio Campaign that included a 2 week radio advertisement on Tameside Radio to appeal to those looking to foster. While radio is a notoriously difficult channel to measure in terms of success, it certainly supports the awareness aspect of the recruitment campaign and to target those at the awareness stage of their research. Some enquirers have mentioned the radio campaign so it is clear that radio as part of a wider strategy can be a successful tool to raise awareness and prompt potential applicants to take action when the time is right.

The launch of the new fostering design and digital marketing campaign took place in January, which coincided with the launch of the new website, with the TMBC social media ongoing campaign across Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. This was supported by coverage in Livewire and Chief Executive's weekly brief to raise awareness for the new fostering brand. The benefits of the marketing activity soon became apparent, with 47 enquiries across January 34 in February and 33 in March.

From these enquiries, 19 initial visits took place throughout Q4, with 13 households progressing to Skills to Foster, which was run in January/February with 7 households (all of whom completed) and again in March with 6 households (5 of whom completed). One household that attended the March sessions was deemed unsuitable for fostering by the fostering service, which is why they did not complete the course. The third Skills to Foster course is due to take place starting in April for a further 5 households

Marketing Methods Overview

Website

The website was redesigned and launched in January to coincide with the digital campaign. This has ensured that the journey from the digital ads to the site/online forms was as smooth and user-friendly as possible. It's reduced number of 8 web buttons which direct to pages now host only relevant content to direct those considering fostering to the pages they need. It is clearly signposted how to make an enquiry, with a click-through to the online form hosted on the top banner, which is visible at the top of each of the fostering we pages. Whether applicants choose to make an online enquiry, call or email the fostering service, this is made very clear through the website and the customer journey feels much simpler and easy-to-navigate. There are new case studies from foster carers so all information is up-to-date, engaging and relevant for anyone looking into fostering.

Information Packs

Information packs sent to prospective carers have been updated for Q4 and are now sent to all potential applicants after the initial phone call. These contain the most relevant and up to date information on fostering with Tameside and have been designed to be engaging and use friendly, in the new fostering design. Foster carer stories are also included to give a personal touch and so existing carers can advocate for the support on offer from the fostering service. The packs are available digitally for ease of access and can be posted on the request of the enquirer.

Digital Marketing Campaign

The digital marketing campaign for fostering went live in the first week January. This is an ongoing campaign encompassing both Google ads and Facebook Lead Generation. Using Mosaic targeting, the campaign specifically reaches those who are identified as most likely to foster through profiling. The Google ads allow us to reach people who are actively researching fostering and ready to make an enquiry. These are good quality leads as usually, the person has been researching for some time so by reaching them with the right message at the right time, we can encourage them to enquire with Tameside Council over competing IFA's. Enquirers can easily click through from the ad to the Tameside Council fostering page and fill in the online form.

The Facebook Lead generation adverts target those who are in a slightly earlier stage, in addition to those ready to take action. They work by appearing in the Facebook feeds of those identified through Mosaic profiling as having a higher propensity to become a foster carer. The messaging of the adverts is focused around finding out more about fostering and appealing to those from varying backgrounds to enquire. By encouraging the prospect to find out more, it gives us the chance to have an initial conversation about fostering and educate them on the benefits of fostering with Tameside Council vs. competitors.

Even if at this stage, the prospect is not ready to move forward, we are able to stay in contact via phone and email communications until the time may be right.

The Facebook Lead Generation campaign, 71 leads from Q4 January – March from this channel, 3 are now going into Skills to Foster Training.

From the 40 online form enquiries received between January and March, 5 completed the Skills to Foster training and 3 are currently in assessment.

Social Media Posts

Social media posts using the new fostering design are sent from the TMBC social channels several times weekly, to engage new followers with the fostering message and also encourage existing followers who may be considering fostering to take action. Messaging and imagery is updated regularly to ensure appeal to a diverse range of carers, and linked to current campaigns e.g. LGBT+ adoption and fostering week, Foster Care Fortnight etc. Engagement rates are high from the social media posts, with specific campaigns e.g. LGBT+ Gaydio Podcast campaign receiving exceptionally high numbers of engagement.

MEN Article

We had an article in the MEN in February, in which two fostering households shared their stories. The article was supported by social media and precision targeting, and also TMBC channels to gain maximum awareness. Following the article, several enquirers noted that they had seen the piece and it had prompted them to take action.

Initial Home Visits

As part of the GMCA initiative, the fostering service have implemented a new way of conducting Initial Home Visits with enquirers. Existing TMBC foster carers are now involved in the home visit stage and are included in the call so they can speak about their experiences of fostering for Tameside and provide enquirers with first-hand information and expertise.

A training session was held with the 10 volunteers and the process went live the following week. Feedback from both enquirers, foster carers and the wider fostering team has been positive, and the service will monitor conversion rates and whether this produces a positive impact on recruitment.

LGBT+ Fostering and Adoption Week Campaign

This campaign supported LGBT+ Fostering & Adoption Week. Tameside worked alongside four other LA's including Stockport, Oldham, Bolton & Bury to produce a podcast for Gaydio. Tameside Council Fostering Service Carers Katie and Joanne shared their experiences, alongside Kevin and Luke from Bury.

Working with other LA's was a cost effective way to create a bigger impact throughout Greater Manchester to 'Foster for your local authority'. The campaign went live across Gaydio and the website, with coverage on Gaydio and TMBC Social channels, press release, Chief Executives Weekly brief and was also picked up by BBC Radio.

Manchester who interviewed Tameside's Foster Carer couple, Katie and Joanne. The fostering service received 2 enquiries since from same-sex couples and will continue to appeal to the LGBT+ community as an inclusive fostering service. We received very high levels of engagement across social media channels and the campaign was positively received.

Other marketing opportunities have included a half-page advert in the Tameside Weekly news, and coverage in the Tameside Citizen Magazine, containing a case study of one Tameside

Skills to foster

During the reporting period Tameside Fostering Service ran the skills to foster preparation training on 3 occasions between July 2020 and March 2021.

In July 2020, there were 7 households in attendance at the skills to foster sessions, 3 households are now approved foster carers for Tameside and 4 withdrew from the process for various reasons:

- 1 due to finances
- 1 stayed with their IFA (also concerns over transparency in assessment)
- 1 felt he did not have the time to commit
- 1 withdrew due to the age of their own child

During the January 2020 preparation training, seven households attended and two households are currently in assessment. Of the other five, they have not progressed in the process for various reasons:

- 1 is presenting negatively in assessment
- 1 have care commitments to their family member (on hold)
- 1 had issues with visa that was previously undisclosed
- 2 did not feel they had the time to commit

In the February/March Skills sessions, there were five households in total complete training, all of whom are now in assessment with panel dates before September 2021.

Deregistration's:

1.Recruited Foster Carers

In this reporting period, there has been 20 mainstream fostering households that have left the service. The table below outlines the reasons for the foster carers.

Table No.	Number of Deregistration's	Reason for Deregistration's
	10	Foster Carer retired.
	2	Foster Carers unhappy with service provided.
	2	Carers felt unable to commit to fostering role.
	2	Relationship ended and no longer wished to Foster.
	1	Young person staying put. No longer have room to foster
	1	Foster Carer passed away.
	1	Additional caring commitments in the family.
	1	Moved away from local area
	20	Total

It's disappointing that the number of foster carers that have exited during this reporting year. Of the carers that have exited 50% have been through retirement due to age, health and family circumstances. To ensure that the fostering service fully understand the reasons for foster carers leaving the service, the marketing and recruitment now undertakes an exit interview for recruited foster carers. This enables us to learn from the foster carers experiences and to enable to consider how we better support foster carers.

1.Connected Carers

In this reporting period, there has been 26 connected carer households that have left the service. The table below outlines the reasons for the foster carers.

Table No.	Number of Deregistration's	Reason for Deregistration's
	15	Special Guardianship Order Granted
	5	Children Turned 18 and ceased to be cared for
	2	Change of Care plan for children
	4	Deregistration
	26	Total

It's pleasing that 15 fostering households were granted special guardianship orders for the children that they care for, enabling them to have legal permanence within a family setting. It is expected that the number of connected carers leaving the service will increase further in 2021/22 with the emergence of the Discharge from care service that sits within the fostering service.

Foster Carer Retention

From Q2 when the Marketing & Recruitment Officer came into post in September, one of the main focuses alongside recruitment has been retention and support of existing foster carers. While a number of retention initiatives are proposed in the foster carer offer, lots of progress has already been made through various activities put in place from September to the present day. Some of the key updates are detailed below:

Improved Foster Carer Communications

Significant improvements have been made to communication with foster carers, involving an audit of each individual foster carer's email address and preferences of how carers would like to be contacted noted. The fostering service now has an up to date mailing list of all foster carers (who wish to be contacted via email) which is used for regular service updates, COVID regulations, training updates and AOB. All aforementioned communications are typically sent by the Marketing & Recruitment Officer so that carers now have a singular point of contact for support in these areas. The feedback from foster carers is that this has been a very positive step in the right direction. They now feel informed and up to date with important service updates and also extracurricular & leisure opportunities that are shared with families to enjoy on a regular basis. This work is helping to build a supportive and transparent foster carer network where carers feel valued, updated and respected.

Foster Carer Newsletter

A newsletter is created by the Marketing & Recruitment Officer and sent to carers every 2-3 weeks. This contains information regarding COVID regulations e.g. holidays, service updates, retirement thank-you's, leisure and activity opportunities for young people and families to name a few. The newsletter has received a lot of praise from carers who enjoy receiving the newsletter and the format has been designed in the same style as the rebranded fostering design to be user-friendly and engaging for foster carers. The mailing list is updated regularly to reflect new additions and departures from the foster carer community.

Foster Carer Quarterly Meetings

Meetings with the fostering service and all carers are held each quarter. Both mainstream and connected carers are invited to attend and 2 dates per meeting are offered to carers; one morning and one evening. This ensures all carers, both working and at home are able to join and contribute in sessions. The meetings are supported by the Assistant Director for Children Services, who welcomes carers and gives an update to foster carers, throughout the reporting period this has typically focused on the foster carer offer. Different members of the fostering service will then speak to carers around other updates, for instance training, COVID regulations, the foster carer agreement and policies to name a few. There is always lots of opportunity for carers to ask questions, with time dedicated throughout for carers to input into the sessions and ask questions whenever they feel appropriate.

Detailed meeting notes and actions are sent to all carers following the sessions, with the responsible people putting those points into action thereafter. Feedback from carers regarding the meetings is that they feel that they are listened to and can talk openly in the sessions. They have commented that they feel that their voices are heard and resolutions put into action, and this is achieved through the presence of both the service and AD Tracy Morris at the meetings, which carers very much appreciate.

Working Groups/Foster Carer Handbook/Survey Monkey

Throughout 2020/21, emphasis has been placed on involving carers in new work streams that affect them, including producing resources such as the foster carer handbook and the new training programme. Carers are invited to join Zoom sessions where their opinions and recommendations are heard in various stages throughout the working process, which has not only helped to build relationships with carers, but meant that work such as the handbook has valuable input from those who have experienced the role first hand. While the handbook is being developed for carers, it is important to remember that the value and insight is so much greater through this being developed with carers.

Besides the foster carer handbook, which has been in development stages throughout Q3 and Q4, foster carers have also been consulted on key decisions such as the rebrand of the fostering visual identity. The service now uses Survey Monkey on a regular basis to allow foster carers to share their important views on key topics, and carers were asked for feedback regarding the new fostering brand through a survey. Different options were presented to carers and their comments carefully considered reaching the current branding, which is aimed to appeal to existing carers, prospective carers and young people alike.

Connected Person Foster Carers

Many children live with connected persons approved foster carers. Those carers are also assessed and approved as foster carers in line with the children's care plans.

There were 51 such approvals/regulation 24 placements made. In future reporting the actual number of approved connected foster carers will be recorded separately to those regulation 24 placements.

Table 3	Connected Persons Approvals/reg 24 placements
2016/17	38
2017/18	60
2018/19	84
2019/20	51
2020/21	46

There has been significant increase in the volume of work through connected person's team during the reporting year. There were 161 viability assessments undertaken during the reporting period. 105 viability assessments were deemed positive with 46 negative recommendations. The service started 74 connected persons fostering assessments to which of these assessments were started during the reporting year and 46 of these were approved at the fostering panel to become approved and registered foster carers. This is the first year that the fostering service have been able to provide detailed information on the performance of the connected persons team so therefore there is no accurate data to make any year on year comparisons with.

The connected persons team undertake viability assessments to consider children being placed with family or friends under regulation 24 of the 2010 Care Planning Regulations. The making of a placement under Regulation 24 will be appropriate where a Local Authority is satisfied that the immediate placement of a child is necessary and in that child's best interests. For this to be the case an evidence-based judgement will need to be made which identifies that the benefits and safeguards offered by the usual foster carer assessment process are outweighed by the benefits to a child of immediate or planned placement and/or the damage which may result from not making that placement. Intrinsic to this judgement will be the child's relationship with/to the proposed carer(s) and a placement under Regulation 24 can only be made with carers who are known or related to a child.

There were 47 Regulation 24 placements across the 2020/2021 reporting year. There is no accurate data for the previous year to make a comparison. A weekly report is made available to the fostering management team that identifies all the regulation 24 placements and number of weeks in progress. This allows management oversight to ensure that the placements remain in regulation and if they are to beyond 16 weeks. There is application to extend the assessment period can be made to panel under regulation 25 of the Care Planning Regulations. Due to COVID, it was difficult for the fostering service to obtain a foster carer medical for applicants due to the health service having to redeploy resources. This had an impact on being able to keep the placements within the 16 and 24 week timescales, and on occasions risk assessments had to be used. At the end of March 2021, the fostering service commissioned a private GP to undertake foster carer medicals to enable us to progress fostering assessment and ensure that we have compliance with review medicals for existing foster carers.

Its pleasing to report that 16 special guardianship orders were granted during the reporting period for children in regulation 24 placements, which enables children to have legal permanence.

During the reporting period, a leaflet has been created for perspective applications when considering becoming a connected carer. This is shared prior to assessments being completed and enables an informed decision to be made by applicants by fully understand what is involved before, during and after the assessment process. Throughout 2020/21, the Connected Person's Team has continued to be exceptionally busy and at times working at capacity. There has been a record high numbers of Viability Assessments and full connected persons assessments produced. There has been a small decrease in requests for Regulation 24 placements but this is only a minor decrease and emergency placements are still relatively high. There has been a decrease in cases requiring a Regulation 25. The staff have worked hard to try to secure stable regulated placements for children.

Further work across 2020/21 will focus on the system of application form completion and throughput to the Children's Business Link team. It's acknowledged that there needs to be more seamless approach to this and an introduction of timescales for completion at each stage would be beneficial. A Contract of Expectations / session plan needs to be developed for use with individuals entering into assessment and this is something that will be used across the post approval team.

There has been considerable work undertaken to develop the new viability and immediate placement (regulation 24) process. This has included developing the forms, an appropriate LCS pathway and implementation of a mandatory training programme for Social Worker colleagues. The new process is expected to go live during quarter 1 of the new reporting period.

Special Guardianship Orders/ Kinship Care

Supporting Children to grow up in permanent arrangements with families remains a core goal for children's social work services. Where appropriate, enabling children to be cared for through Special Guardianship Orders can provide significant benefits to the child's sense of belonging and security. Social Workers will continually assess and review children's plans for permanency and consider where appropriate and feasible how Special Guardianship applications can best be supported for children in Kinship and Foster Care arrangements.

As part of our response to achieving permanence for children an SGO support team was agreed as part of the structure in early 2019. This was not recruited at the time due to needing to prioritise the development and improvement of the wider Cared for Children service in a phased approach.

During the improvements and development of the service it was recognised that the SGO support team needed to evolve into a Discharge/SGO team in order to build resilience into the structure and progress the reduction of numbers over a sustained period of time. It was therefore agreed that the original SGO support team of 1x Practice Manager and 4x family intervention workers would also include 2 social work posts (moved from original resource from the Cared for Children Team).

The social workers will be secondary workers to the allocated social worker, and they will lead on updating assessments, court applications, statements and attendance in a task centred way. All posts are now recruited too and there continues to be an implementation plan for the team.

We have learnt from previous experience and we have audited all case records of children subject to a care order and who are placed with a parent in order to identify children ready for discharge. This has allowed us to review the length of time children have been in these set of arrangements, whether there is an up to date assessment and whether a review has identified that permanence should be to discharge the order. This work is complete and there is now a clear understanding of what gaps need to be addressed for children in order to progress.

Work was undertaken to review all the children who are placed with connected carers to establish which children are appropriate for a Special Guardianship Order. This was completed by the end of October 2020. We are reviewing our existing arrangements to, in some cases, continue to provide financial support to Special Guardianship arrangements where the young person reaches adulthood at 18. We know that for many children growing up in foster care the ability to 'stay put' beyond 18 is often dependent on continuing support, including financial support to the household. Our intention is that where an SGO is in place there is no financial or other disadvantage to the carers.

The family intervention workers in the SGO team will work across both the fostering service and SGO support team. The posts will be able to offer immediate support to any fostering placements that have been identified, as at risk of disruption, bespoke work with both foster carers and young people and life story work for those children in long-term placements and/or the plan is Special Guardianship.

Foster Carer Reviews

The approval of all foster carers must be reviewed annually and the first annual review must be presented to the fostering panel (regulation 28 of the fostering service 2011). Tameside Fostering Service have a set target of 100% of completing foster carer reviews on time and ensure compliance with fostering regulations and national minimum standards.

There are 2 FTE Fostering Independent Reviewing Officers employed by Tameside MBC and are situated in the Safeguarding and Quality Insurance Unit. They chair all foster carer reviews and provide a report with recommendations to be undertaken by the fostering service.

Foster carers have their annual reviews as set out in the Children Act 1989, the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and Fostering Services National Minimum Standards (2011). The foster carers' annual review determines their continued registration and approval as foster carers. It looks at the fostering household and if it remains suitable for the fostering task, the foster carers' practice and whether or not there should be any changes in the terms of approval if the carer is deemed suitable to continue fostering. In addition to the requirements to conduct annual reviews, the Local Authority procedure clearly sets out other situations in which completion of a foster care review would be appropriate, e.g. following a serious complaint or incident.

The review procedure focuses on the core competencies for foster carers and this includes an appraisal of training and development needs. It reflects the statute law, regulations, National Minimum Standards, good practice guidance. The Fostering Service Supervising Social Worker ensure that all statutory requirements are fulfilled and that foster carers have the opportunity to reflect in order to fully evaluate their practice and development. Health and Safety checks and the Safer Caring Policies are also reviewed yearly or as and when required, i.e. when new placements are made.

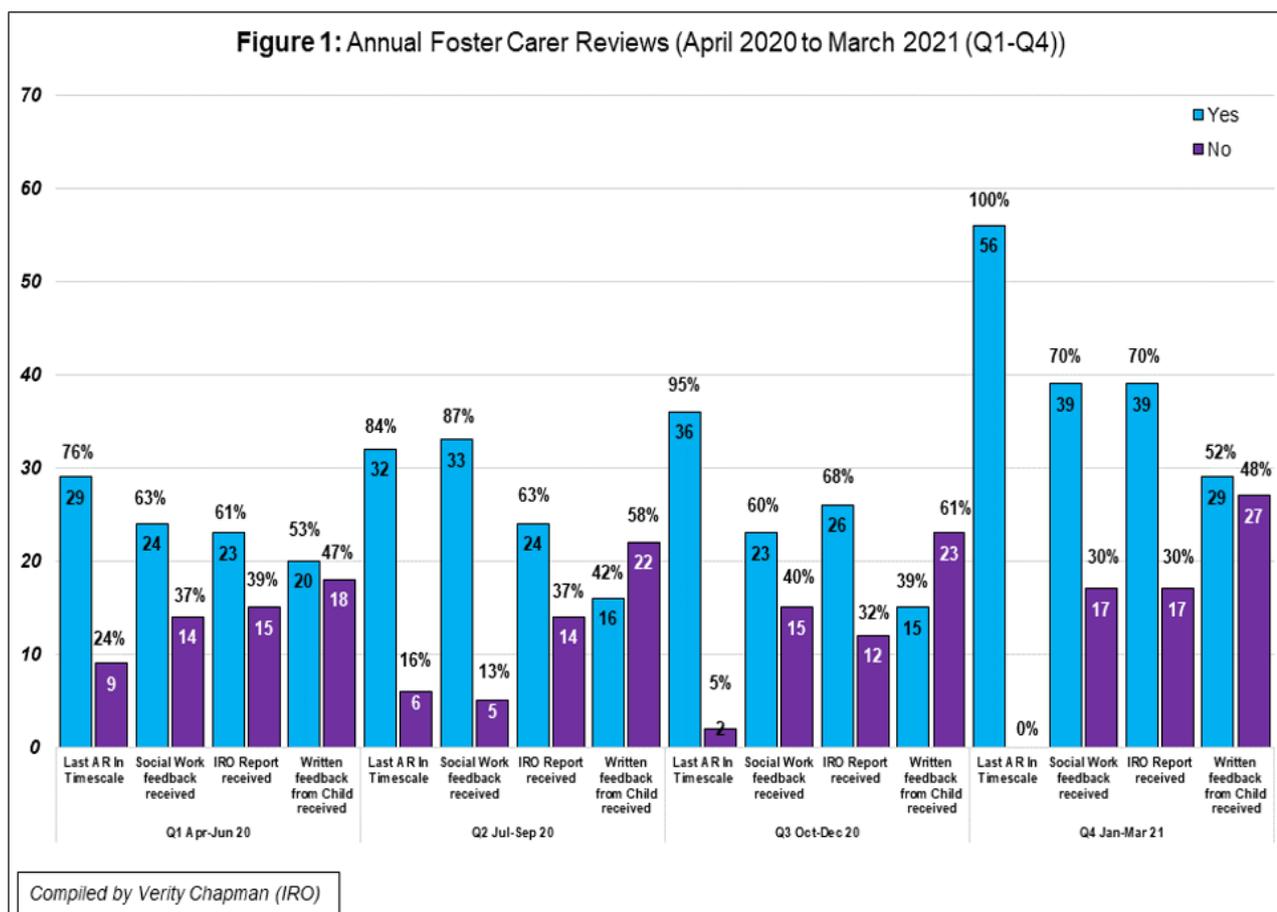
As well as being a central safeguarding mechanism, reviews offer the opportunity to make sure that all carers are meeting the child focused standards, and to focus on the development of a foster carer, and how the fostering service can support the foster carer's work as well as their development. The reviews offer the possibility through the evaluation of a foster carers practice to praise them for the good work undertaken and the considerable contribution they make.

It will make clear recommendations to ensure that all foster carers continue to meet the fostering standards. This forum is where goals and action plans for the following year are set.

The reviews are conducted by Fostering Independent Reviewing Officers (FIRO) who are based within the local safeguarding unit. The foster carer's review will include a written report from the carer's Supervising Social Worker, Foster Carers are to undertake a self-assessment, and the views of the children and other young people in placement, the child's social worker child's Independent Reviewing Officer and others where relevant are to be sought.

At the conclusion of the review the FIRO will set out a written report making recommendations about the carers continued suitability to foster, and whether their terms of approval continue to be suitable. The Fostering Regulations asks for the first review of foster carers to be referred to the Fostering Panel for consideration. Any subsequent reviews may be presented to the fostering panel at the recommendation of the FIRO or the discretion of the fostering service. After a review and taking into account any fostering panel recommendations, the fostering service decision-maker should notify in writing the foster carer of their approval and suitability to foster.

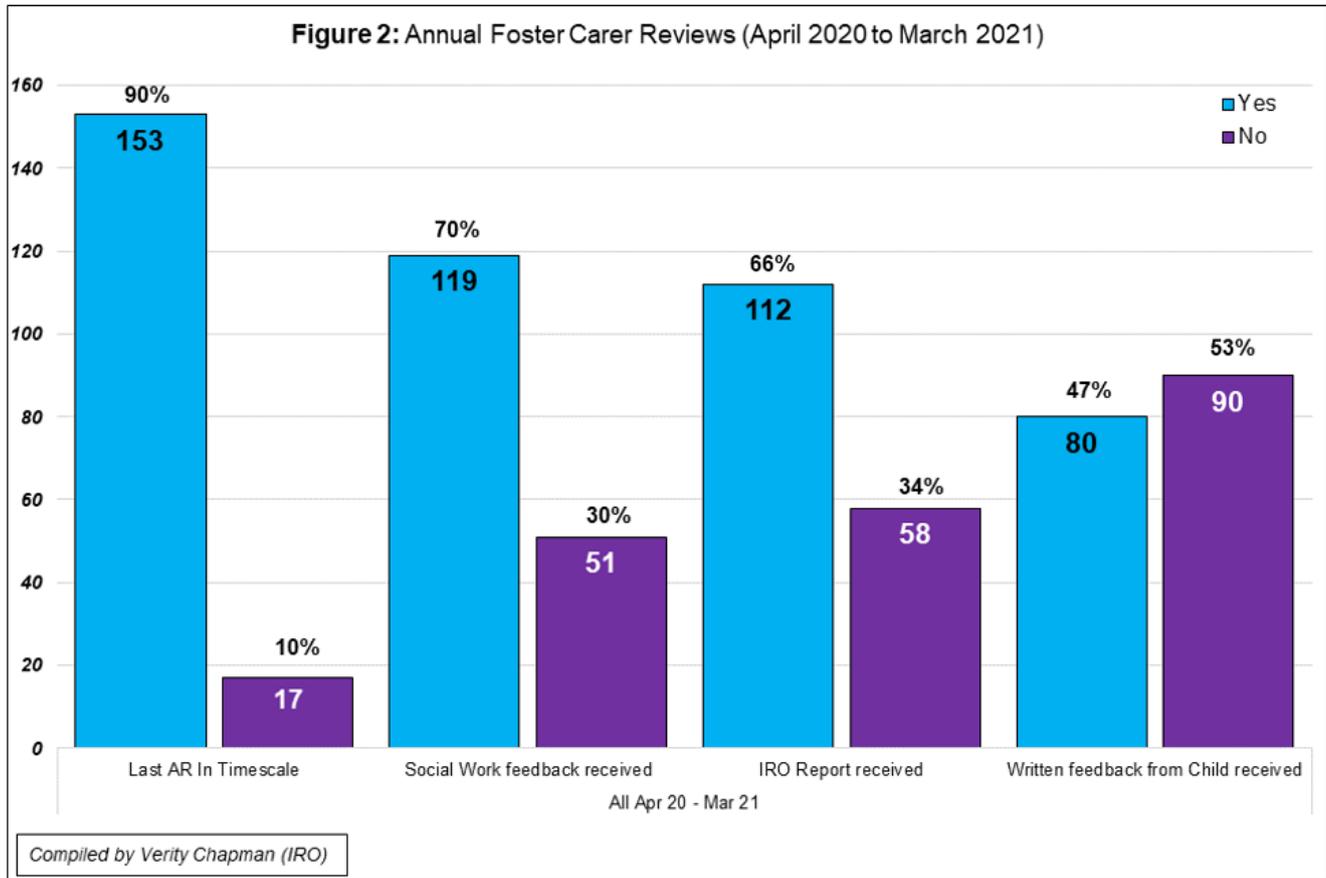
The charts that follow provide an overview of performance in relation to the 170 reviews undertaken during 2020/21.



- The measure for the 'Last Annual Review in timescales' improved from 76% in Quarter 1 to 100% by Quarter 4.
-
- The proportion of the social work feedback received improved from 63% in Quarter 1 to 70% in Quarter 4 although the best performance occurred during Quarter 2 with 87%.
-
- Overall improvement was also seen with regards to receiving IRO reports from 61% in the first quarter to 70% in the fourth.

- The proportion of receiving written feedback from children in Quarter 4 was similar to that for Quarter 1 – around 52% to 53%. It has become a standardised practice for a child's views to be sought by their social worker. Work is required in this area to improve performance.
- Improvements in the re-design of the FCR meeting form, allows for reports to be requested from more than one IRO or Social Worker. This should increase the percentage of those received.
- Improvements made are the alerts to inform the fostering IRO when a new carer has been approved in order for a review to be booked or a discussion with the fostering SW as to whether a review is required. The case may be being concluded by an SGO for example. The decision is recorded in a case note by the fostering IRO.
- Fostering IRO admin are sending carers invites to the reviews two months in advance; an evaluation questionnaire is attached to be completed by carers and returned by email to the IRO inbox. This will allow us to evaluate and review the standard of the reviews taking place.
- The new process allows for FCR meetings to be generated within the LCS system in a similar way to the child cared for process.
- Statistics will be able to be taken from the new process in the system but during the transfer to the new system the statistics will be manually taken for Q1
- The FIRO's have become part of the North West Fostering IRO forum, who continue to strive for high stands of Foster Carer Reviews and endeavour to work from the same practice standards. It is expected that each Local Authority will sign up to these in the coming year.
- In the review period FIRO's have devised and delivered briefing sessions to the fostering team and to foster carers. This will continue on a six monthly bases as part of training, development and communication.

Figure 2 below provides an overview of the 170 reviews undertaken during the year 2020/21 (1st April 2020 to 31st March 2021).



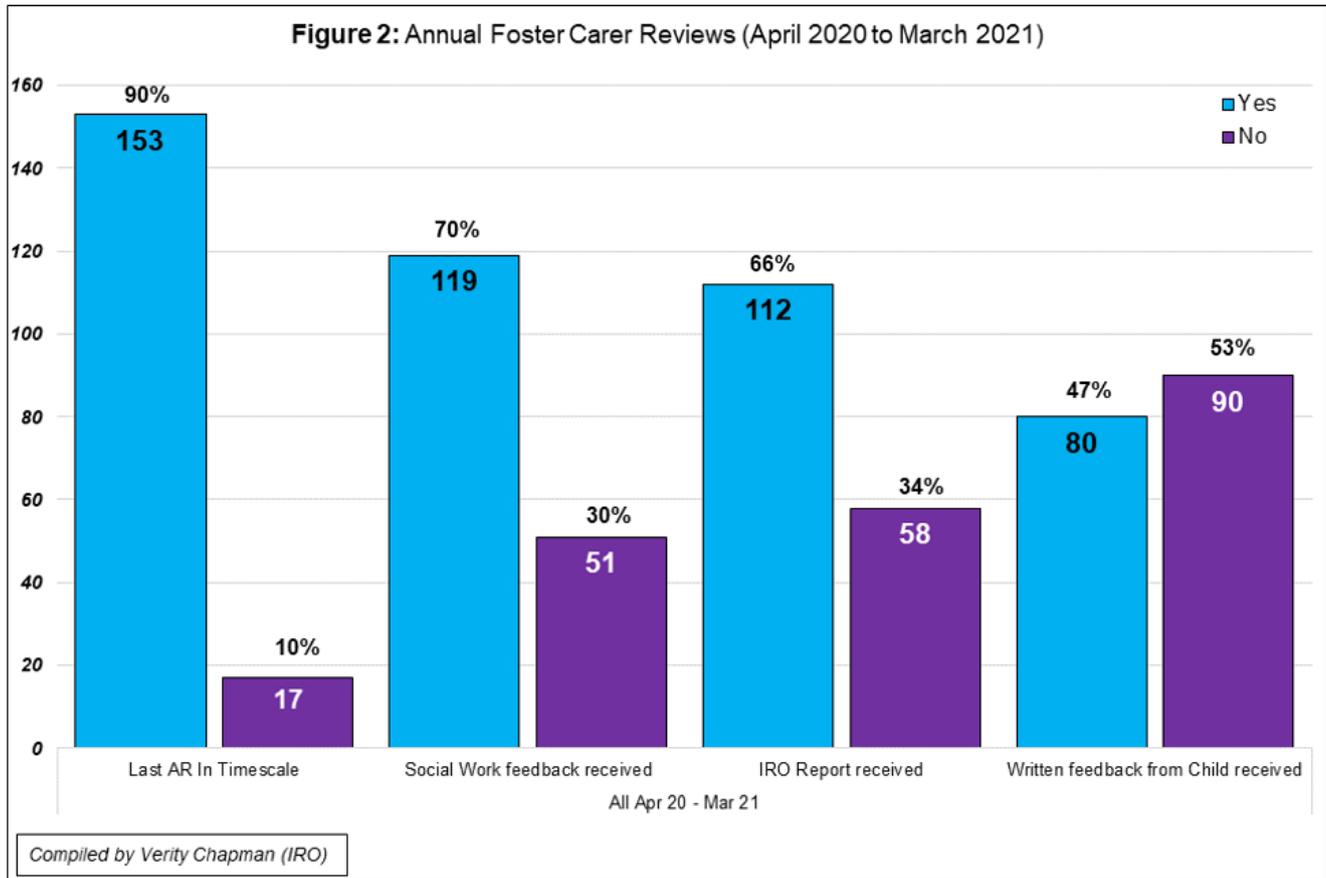
Fostering Panel Activity

Tameside Fostering Panel meets 3 times a month on a Wednesday with additional panels arranged as necessary. In this reporting period, 36 fostering panels have taken place and only one panel meeting had to be cancelled due to limited panel business being ready. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all panels in this reporting year have switched to being virtual.

A permanent practice manager with the role of panel advisor was recruited to in quarter one of 2020/21. This has significantly improved the quality of the work presented at the panel, the organisation and how the panel functions. The Childrens business link team took on responsibility for the administration of the panel, setting agenda and undertaking checks for assessments. This alongside the panel advisor has significantly improved the practice of the panel.

The table below outlines the panel business for those 36 panels

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The table below outlines the panel business for those 36 panels

Panel Business	2019/2020	2020/21
Full Connected Persons Assessments	23	89
Form F – Fostering Assessments	10	9
Foster Carer First Annual Review	10	17
Annual Review and Change of Approval	15	39
Resignation	24	47
De-registration	2	7
Regulation 25 application	13	30
Allegation/Complaint – Annual Review	1	4
Case Deferred	8	14
Other Cases - AOB	1	0
Total	107	256

The panel business has more than doubled from the previous reporting period. One of the contributing factors is the increased volume of connected person assessments that has increased by nearly 400% and the number of regulation 24 placements needing to be extended by a period of 8 weeks.

To ensure that panel runs efficiently weekly meetings take place to review the business scheduled for panel and have supported in identifying panel items that need to be prioritised, The meeting provides opportunity for the practice managers to take off items that are not 'panel ready' and replacing them with those that are. It's encouraging only one panel had to be cancelled, as there was more panels unable to go ahead in 2019/2020.

It is disappointing that 13 cases had to be deferred from the panel in this reporting period. Of the 13 deferred cases, 10 of these were connected persons assessment due to the CPA's panel requiring additional information and/or statutory checks not being completed. There were 3 cases were stood down and not heard by Panel. The children's social worker were absent and one of the items the applicants were not informed of the panel and therefore were not in attendance. One of the priorities for the 2021/22 is to again reduce the number of deferred items for the fostering panel.

Colleen Murphy - Independent Panel Chair Comments :

The Fostering Panel continues to meet an average of three times per month with each sitting lasting a half day. Generally this is sufficient to meet the needs of the service, however on occasions panel has, and will continue to sit for additional meetings at short notice if necessary to meet the extenuating needs of the service. The Panel has a long standing Chair with a change of Deputy Chair during this year. Both of whom have significant experience in children's services and specifically fostering and they work together to ensure a consistency of approach. Panel members have had an annual appraisal, without exception, the appraisals indicate a panel that are comfortable with their task, understand how to challenge respectfully and have confidence in the Chairs to manage the flow of the meeting.

The panel is structured each week from a central list of panel members to ensure compliance with National Minimum Standards. Panel members bring a wealth of experience in relation to social care, education, early years, residential care, children's mental health and youth justice. Some of the members have experience of being looked after as children themselves, and the panel membership includes foster carers who are both recruited and connected carers who bring an important perspective and balance to panel debate. The panel has a balance of gender, ethnicity and sexuality and through recruitment of new members seeks to replicate the makeup of the borough of Tameside.

The panel members all give a high level of commitment and flexibility and are committed to supporting the service to achieving the very best for children. The panel has an appropriately challenging and respectful relationship with the service, striving for excellence at all times. A large part of the work of panel originates from connected person, family and friend assessments which commonly has a level of risk not reflected in the recruited aspect of fostering. It is fair to say that the family and friends connected carer assessments provide some of the most challenging debates within the fostering panel. In line with Children Act 1989, the Panel is committed to supporting children to live within their family of origin where it is safe to do so and will look to the service to provide the support that family members may need to enable them to reach a position where this can be safely achieved. The panel is especially mindful that family and friends may need time to adjust to changes in their family and to absorb what can be quite shocking information, but will also give clear direction if they believe that a potential family members cannot reach a position of safe care. Collectively the panel has a good understanding of risk and clarity in applying a judgement. The Panel Chairs are able to hold difficult conversations confidently, ensuring that all applicants and carers have a courteous and dignified experience whatever the outcome of a meeting. Conversely, the panel also share many moments of joy when foster carers are approved, receive a good review or families are reunited through fostering.

The panel is planned with six members, as five are needed for quoracy this leaves some scope for last minute difficulties or unexpected conflicts of interest. Between April and September 2020 the Adoption and Children (coronavirus) (amendment) Regulations 2020 came into force and this allowed quoracy to reduce to three panel members at early stages of the pandemic. This helped to support the transition to virtual working and allowed for the impact of illness and isolation. From September 2020 quoracy returned to five members and the fostering panel has continued to operate virtually. The panel will move to physical meetings once health and safety assessments deem this to be safe and suitable.

Adapting to virtual Panel meetings was a significant challenge in the beginning; the panel is a busy meeting with people entering in and out and the flow of the meetings is germane to the experience of those attending. A lot of credit should be given to the Panel Advisor for supporting the development of virtual meetings, which over time has come to feel more natural than could have been anticipated. The panel has at all times upheld the principle that foster carers and applicants should be invited to attend panel meetings where they will be subject to any discussion, and that they have had sight of all reports available to panel with sufficient time to read and make any comment or representation. It is noticeable that whilst in the beginning many carers and applicants by necessity had to enter panel discussion by telephone, now, they are entering by the same media platform as the panel members which enables a visual presence. The panel members are clear that robust recommendations can only be made by good quality information and by being open to hearing all perspectives on an issue.

The Panel has had a consistent Panel Advisor who has maintained good order and planning to support the smooth running of panel. The administration of panel has had several changes, mainly this has impacted on the quality of the minutes which is addressed by the Chairs through completion, but also there has been some slippage in panel papers being ready five working days prior to the meeting. Over the past year, there has been a continued improvement in the quality of assessment and the panel has seen some exceptional pieces of work of late. Deferrals have reduced to what would be seen as an expected level and incidents of such are no longer related to substandard assessment. There has been some improvement in the quality of reviews but this is an area where there is still room for improvement and increased consistency in standards. There has been an improvement in the quality of complaints and investigations that have been referred to panel, whereas previously the Chair would often need to escalate gaps in information or analysis prior to a meeting, this is no longer a feature. The Assistant Director in the role of Agency Decision Maker has observed a panel meeting was reassured by the robust approach and depth of analysis given to each presentation.

Throughout this year, there have been exceptional difficulties to overcome, however the approach of the fostering Panel has been business as usual albeit conducting it differently. The calm support of the Panel Advisor and the enthusiasm of panel members has ensured that panel meetings have continued to function effectively and relatively smoothly. Indeed there will be some elements of what has been learnt that will be retained going forward, certainly carers from a long distance have been able to join meetings which may previously not have happened.

Fostering Allowances

The below table shows the pay for foster carers from 2020/21.

FOSTER CARER ALLOWANCES 2021/22

Age	Foster Carer Child Allowance rate (weekly)	Level 1 Skills Funding (weekly)	Holiday Allowance (Annually)	Birthday Allowance (Annually)	Festival Allowance (Annually)
0-2	£134		£264	£66	£132
3-4	£138		£270	£67.50	£135
5-10	£152		£298	£74.50	£149
11-15	£173		£340	£85	£170
16-17	£202		£396	£99	£198
Age	Foster Carer Child Allowance rate (weekly)	Level 2 Skills Funding (weekly)	Holiday Allowance (Annually)	Birthday Allowance (Annually)	Festival Allowance (Annually)
0-2	£134	£100	£264	£66	£132
3-4	£138	£100	£270	£67.50	£135
5-10	£152	£100	£298	£74.50	£149
11-15	£173	£100	£340	£85	£170
16-17	£202	£100	£396	£99	£198
Age	Foster Carer Child Allowance rate (weekly)	Level 3 Skills Funding (weekly)	Holiday Allowance (Annually)	Birthday Allowance (Annually)	Festival Allowance (Annually)
0-2	£134	£150	£264	£66	£132
3-4	£138	£150	£270	£67.50	£135
5-10	£152	£150	£298	£74.50	£149
11-15	£173	£150	£340	£85	£170
16-17	£202	£150	£396	£99	£198
Age	Foster Carer Child Allowance rate (weekly)	Level 4 Skills Funding (weekly)	Holiday Allowance (Annually)	Birthday Allowance (Annually)	Festival Allowance (Annually)
0-2	£134	£250	£264	£66	£132
3-4	£138	£250	£270	£67.50	£135
5-10	£152	£250	£298	£74.50	£149
11-15	£173	£250	£340	£85	£170
16-17	£202	£250	£396	£99	£198

Support Groups:

Foster Carers are expected to attend at least four Support Groups each year; they are scheduled to take place every 2 – 3 weeks. Support Groups are accessible to all Foster Carers, although there are specific groups for Connected Foster Carers and Foster Carers who care for children with Disabilities. Attendance at Support Groups is variable between 10 and 20 Foster Carers. The topics discussed at support group vary from service updates, changes in the service, discussions around what is going well for carers and what is not going well. There are guest speakers from time to time such as Greater Manchester Resilience Hub, Cared for Children's Nurse and Welfare Rights.

Training:

All training with the exception of First Aid has taken place virtually via Zoom. Foster Carers also have access to training via e learning and Research in Practice. There was a delay in launching Foster Carer training 2020/21; this did not take place until September 2020. In September, a 6-month programme went live with our partner agencies; training covered a range of topics such as talking about Sex, Substance Misuse, Working with Education and Promoting the Health of Cared for Children. Attendance at training was variable, the most attended was 25 households that is where the training is capped at and the least was six households. Feedback from Foster Carers at this time was positive around the areas covered although it was noted by some Foster Carers that they preferred face-to-face training.

In regards to training 2021/22 there has been significant work undertaken to develop a high quality training programme. The training programme consists of a wide range of courses from the introductory and mandatory training to more specialist training. We have sought to bring in expertise from professionals who work with vulnerable children to ensure the best possible training for our Foster Carers; this has ensured the Foster Carers feel not only supported but are able to develop their skills and knowledge and ultimately apply it in their role as a Foster Carer.

Whilst there is a range of courses available, we are continuously reviewing and assessing our training so that we can provide courses, which reflect the learning needs of carers, the legislative changes that affect our work and changes within Children's Services.

Fostering Service Development Day

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, a Fostering Service Development Day has not taken place. It's planned that as the government restrictions are reduced, that a fostering development day will take place in the autumn of 2021/2022.

Conclusion

It has been a challenging year due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has resulted in the fostering service having to adapt and change the way in which foster carers receive support and training. The foster carers have had to support cared for children during unprecedented times and have had to provide round the clock care to children, whilst education children at home where appropriate to do so.

The report highlights that there has been significant improvements across the fostering service in comparison to previous years. There has been stability across the management team and social work team that has contributed to an improved year. All vacant posts in the service have been successfully appointed too and there has been no requirement to use agency staff to support foster carers. There has been some turnover in staff, however this has been managed with recruiting in a timely manner and contingency planning to ensure carers receive support.

There has been a significant improvement in communication with foster carers which has developed a healthier relationship between foster carers and the fostering service. This has been enhanced by the recruitment to the post of the fostering recruitment and retention officer. Through the recruitment of this post there has been a focus on retention of our existing foster carer population whilst prioritising the need to grow the internal fostering service. There is a clear and agreed three-year strategy and marketing plan with a ambitious and achievable aim to grow the service and reduce the need to rely on the private sector. This will be complimented by an improved offer to foster carer offer that will be agreed through the governance process during 2021/22

The Panel Chairs' comments regarding improved quality of reports and reduction in deferments is pleasing to see. It's noted that there continues to be improvements required specifically around the annual review reports, but the quality assurance controls have made a significant improvement to the efficiency of the panel. This is as a result of having a dedicated panel advisor role within the structure.

The report outlines a number of key priorities for the forthcoming year. It is important that the improved foster carer offer is agreed and implemented. This is crucial to the growth of internal provision and retaining our foster carer population.

The recruitment and retention of foster carers and the development priorities of the fostering service will continue to be addressed in order to achieve a high quality service and best outcomes for children and young people cared for.

Tameside Fostering Service is a service in improvement but there are clear plans in place to take forward in 2021/20 to modernise and strengthen it and ultimately improve placements and stability for children.

Priorities for 2021/2022 for the Fostering Service

Priority Number	Details of Priority	Expected Date of competition
1.	Implementation of the new foster carer offer once agreed through the Local Authority Governance Process	December 2021
2.	All foster carers to sign an updated foster carer agreement	September 2021
3.	Launch refreshed foster carer handbook	September 2021
4.	Introduction of an out of hours on call service for foster carers to offer a better service to foster carers, helping with recruitment and retention. This is part of new foster carer offer	December 2021
5.	Review the 3-year recruitment and marketing strategy and adjust accordingly.	January 2022
6.	Ensure all foster carers who take short term and emergency placements have an appropriate profile to share with children being placed.	March 2022
7.	Review the function of the current support groups.	October 2021
8.	Review the 2 year training programme before the 2 nd year commences	January 2022
9.	Improve the payment systems for foster carers	March 2022
10.	Continue to consult and work with foster carers across all service developments.	N/A
11.	Review and update LCS documents for annual review process, fostering assessments and annual review pathways	January 2022
12.	Launch new LCS kinship pathway	October 2021
13.	Foster carer annual review pathway to be added to LCS	March 2022