

Fostering Quarter 3 Report

1st October – 31st December 2020

Executive Report



Quarterly reports to the Executive Board are a requirement of the Fostering Service to meet Standard 25.7 of the National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services. They are a key part of the documentation considered by OFSTED when conducting a Service inspection.

Introduction

Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council's Fostering Service aims to ensure that:

- The best foster carers are recruited for our children;
- All placements receive high quality support, effectively targeted according to need;
- Children are found permanent families without delay;
- Children and young people in foster care achieve the best possible outcomes.

This report will reflect how our practice and service support has been adapted in light of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Children in our Care in Foster Care

Children in our Care Teams, Fostering and Safeguarding Teams have continued to work collaboratively to 'RAG' rate placements in order of priority throughout Quarters 1, 2 and 3. The aim is to identify additional support needs and to offer enhanced communication with foster carers to promote placement stability during the pandemic. Priority risk assessments for children, young people, foster carers and residential carers has continued throughout the pandemic. The Independent Reviewing Officers also have had oversight and input into achieving placement stability, offering emotional support to our children and young people and working with Children's Social Care and Education to provide an enhanced support plan in this time of need. The RAG rating of children and foster carers has enabled the most vulnerable and fragile placements to be identified and continually supported, with intervention offered in a timely way.

Placement visits and assessment visits continued throughout the Tier 4 period and continue to be undertaken for the most vulnerable placements, alongside additional support from REVIVE from a therapeutic and emotional well-being perspective. A large proportion of virtual support visits and calls were maintained certainly for those foster carers who were shielding or at higher risk. The Fostering Service increased support calls for those who requested this, or were risk assessed as requiring this.

Quarter 2 saw the start of some placement instability and disruptions with both fostering and residential placements and this has been an ongoing area of vulnerability in Quarter 3. This was anticipated at the point of some children and young people returning to school, and also as a result of the longevity of the pandemic and its impact. There has been an steady increase of the need to commission Agency placements, but it is most important to note that the availability of foster placements saw a reduction possibly as a result of foster carers on a national scale isolating, feeling anxious about accepting new placements, and also the age of many of our foster carers placing them in the vulnerable category. It has been the case that due to Covid-19 and the impact upon Court timescales, some children have remained in foster placements longer than anticipated which has again impacted upon any movement with foster placements and availability to place new children and young people entering care. The table below reflects Quarter 3 data for children in our care who are in foster placements, and it is positive to note that the majority are placed with in-house placements as opposed to agencies.

Quarter 3 data Summary

	As at 31st Dec 2020
No of Children in Foster Care (All)	253
Placement Type	
No. children in Foster Placements (in-house)	129
No. children in Family and Friends placements	74
No. children in Foster Placements (agency)	50

The number of males in our care remains the highest gender group, with a consistent pattern each Quarter of the 11-15 years age group being the most significant and more challenging in terms of sufficiency to identify long-term placements. Teenage placements of both genders, as last Quarter, remain the most consistent in terms of challenging to place young people, and the most difficult to identify such placements within fostering both in-house and on a national scale. This has been a constant trend over the past 12 to 18 months.

Age breakdown for all CIOC Quarter 3	
0-2	39
3-6	39
7-10	45
11-15	92
16+	38

The White British ethnic group, at 82% have a significantly higher number of children in our care overall.

There are 8 children with disabilities in our care in Quarter 3, with one new placement made for this cohort of children over the past three months, which is a positive low figure and demonstrates the supportive Child in Need packages in place to prevent family placement breakdown. One child with disabilities was successfully moved from a residential placement into a long term foster placement which is a hugely positive outcome.

Placement Stability

The Department uses a definition of placement stability based on 3 or more placements in a 12 month period that is calculated on a cumulative basis over the year. The average for England is measured against the figures for 2013/14 when it was 10.7%; the comparable authority percentage for the same year was 10.1%. Since August 2017, placement stability has been deteriorating. This is not an issue specific to the Fostering Service but reflects instability for all types of placements and is an issue for Local Authorities overall. At the end of Quarter 2 the number of children and young people experiencing 3 or more placement moves was very low, at 1.8%. Quarter 3 has seen an increase month by month, with 5.8% having three plus moves at the end of December. This is still lower than the national average, but does reflect a steady increase. Reasons for this relate to parent and child assessment placements in Care Proceedings, with the child being removed and placed in foster care then eventually an adoptive placement or achieving a Special Guardianship Order for example. There has also been some more frequent movement for a number of teenagers with mental health needs

over Quarter 3, having seen several foster placement moves before they have perhaps moved into residential care due to their high level of need.

The Service works closely with our Psychologists and Mental Health Practitioner from REVIVE in order to assess and offer therapeutic support in a timely manner to this teenage cohort, and supporting foster carers and our in-house residential staff at the same time with practical strategies to try to prevent placement disruption. Having the support and intervention of REVIVE, with two newly appointed Psychologists, has been beneficial when accessing priority assessments and therapeutic support for teenagers without delay.

Table reflecting 3 or more placement moves:

Year to date	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
LAC with 3 or more placements (cumulative)	7	16	19	22
Total no. of LAC	394	380	380	377
% Stability of LAC placements 2020/21	1.8%	4.2%	5.0%	5.8%

Almost a year into the Covid-19 pandemic, it is more evident that placements are harder to identify for certain age groups. Our foster carers in the main have shown resilience and have been proactive in asking for, and accepting help, over the past 9 months.

Disruption meetings are held for any long term matched foster placement that breaks down, and learning taken from the findings. Teenagers are another high percentage group who have three or more placements, consistently due to behavioural needs and challenges for foster carers to manage in the longer term. Changes in educational placement also impact significantly upon placement stability. It can be challenging for the young person to emotionally invest in further foster placements when the first has disrupted. This is when the Service refers to REVIVE where consultations and assessments take place to support this group of young people and their carers.

There is a focus on establishing a support package for teenagers at the point of a new placement commencing, to try to reduce the likelihood of disruption. This support may come from The SEEDS Adolescent Support Unit, with Revive intervention.

Matching and Ethnicity

There has been one non-culturally matched placement this Quarter, the young person had a pre-established relationship with the foster carer and it was felt this was a positive match. During this Quarter, there was one referral received for an unaccompanied asylum seeker believed to have travelled from Afghanistan and who spoke only Pashto. The service was able to find a positive match in an agency placement who specifically cared for young people who spoke this language.

Engagement with Children & Young People and the VOICE Group

The impact of Covid-19 has had a significant impact upon the more typical methods of engagement and participation, towards virtual methods with children and young people. While this works for many, there is still a cohort of children and young people who prefer face to face interaction and feel virtual or telephone communication does not work for them. The VOICE group is taking place

virtually throughout Quarter 3. Young People met with senior leaders and discussions around corporate parenting took place, and they will also meet to discuss the Corporate Looked after Children's pledge in the coming weeks. Some small group meetings have taken place facilitated by the Fostering Support Officer and feedback has been positive at being able to hold these face to face groups to offer support and listen to young people's wishes and feelings. The Sons and Daughters Group is currently on hold due to the pandemic but will resume at the earliest opportunity.

Feedback from Children in Foster Care:

Children and young people, and foster carers, have made the following comments over Quarter 3:

'I am enjoying learning at home it is much more fun'

'We go for long walks and spend more time together at weekends'

'I preferred home schooling than being back in class!'

'I feel anxious about Covid, I just want things to be more normal again'

Foster Carer and their Birth Children:

'Family Time can be hard for us (foster carers) we worry that birth parents aren't being safe'

'S has really settled in since he came to live with us, he is like part of the family now'

'Family Time gets my mum stressed when it is face to face but we know it has to take place'

Birth Parents told us:

'Family Time is face to face again now, it was tough doing this over Skype'

'I feel like (she) is happy in her placement, she gets on well with her foster carers, they do lots of fun things'

'All the risk assessments drive me mad with Covid and seeing my son'

Promoting Children's Health, Emotional Development, Education and Leisure:

Looked After Children and young people are encouraged to participate in a variety of activities in which they can succeed and are supported in achieving better outcomes. All local Looked After Children and care leavers are provided with a Be Active card, which enables them to access free sport and leisure activities within the Borough, albeit this has been largely suspended during the pandemic. Foster carers are provided with a MAX Card, which offers heavily discounted access to a range of leisure parks and facilities around the North West. This is funded by the Fostering Service in partnership with the Foster Carer Association.

Children in foster care have regular medicals at the statutory frequency appropriate for their age. There is a Designated Nurse for Looked After Children, who takes an active role in following up health issues and assisting with health promotion work. Foster carers have a Health Passport for each child in their care, which is a record of all of the child's health details. LAC Medicals were impacted initially due to Covid-19 with some delay in Quarters 1 and 2, but there has been regular communication around this and in Quarter 3 this has started to see improvement. The impact on all medical appointments nationally has been affected. The Health Sub-Group meets bi-monthly and this enables both Health and Social Care professionals to discuss pathways and how to resolve any health related issues for looked after children and care leavers, as well as issues of concern for foster carers and also adopters. It is hoped that in Quarter 4 a foster carer representative will be identified to participate in the Health Sub-Group.

There are 8 Looked After Children in foster care, who are registered as having a disability. Foster carers are provided with the relevant training and support to meet the specific needs of the child in placement and they are able to access support from the Children with Disabilities Team with aids and adaptations, Disability Links registration and information and advice where needed.

In relation to emotional wellbeing, Looked After Children have access to Clinical Psychology and related services through REVIVE and the East Lancashire Child and Adolescent Service (ELCAS) also known as Children and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS). The REVIVE Service is a partnership between Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council's Children's Services and East Lancashire Hospital Trust to provide emotional health support for children known to the Local Authority and is based at Duke Street. REVIVE delivers consultation to Foster Carers, training and direct intervention for emotional health and well-being. There were a total of 31 recorded referrals to the Revive team received in the third quarter; 5 in October; 17 November; 9 in December and 11 of these were from the Assessment and Safeguarding Teams, 20 were referred from social workers working with Children in Our Care. Over this period Revive offered 37 consultations to professionals and carers.

In Quarter 4, the newly appointed Play Therapist will commence in post in January 2021.

In line with Standard 8 of the National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services, the Department implements a written education policy prepared in partnership with the Virtual Head Teacher and the Education Manager for Children in Our Care. The Virtual Head's role is to ensure that the educational needs of all Children in our Care are being met and that levels of achievement and aspiration among our children and young people are raised. Termly briefings are held with a group of social workers, managers and Designated Teachers and Head Teachers to consider ways to improve achievement and attainment.

The Pupil Premium allowance, previously paid to schools to support Children in our Care to achieve in school, is managed by the Virtual Head who has a system in place to administer and ensure the money is spent appropriately to enhance educational achievements. The Virtual Head quality assures all Personal Education Plans (PEPs). At the end of Quarter 2 and throughout Quarter 3, children and young people returned back into schools and this provided much needed 'normality' for many, but increased anxiety for some. There have been very close co-working relationships between the Virtual Head and the Children in our Care Teams to identify and support those vulnerable young people and their carers. RAG rating of children and placements has continued since March 2020 to help identify those who are 'red' and more vulnerable or at risk of support and intervention.

The Education Manager, where necessary, actively intervenes with Schools to promote the needs of children in Foster Care. As part of the preparation and assessment process and through the Foster Carer Agreement, Foster Carers are set a clear expectation that they will promote and support children's educational attainment. The ways in which Foster Carers meet children's educational needs are monitored through the foster carer review process and supervisory visits. Foster Carers regularly receive training around 'Promoting Educational Achievement for Children in Our Care'.

The Fostering Service send out communication to all foster carers to alert them to priority news and updates and this is done via SMS messaging and emails. The Fostering Team Manager and Senior Managers have been meeting monthly with the Foster Carer Association to ensure any concerns and queries are communicated to all.

In Quarter 3, Schools were open once more to all students and the Virtual School continued to monitor and support pupils when required. Attendance of Children in our Care continued to be very good

running at 94%. The main event during this Quarter was the Celebration of Achievement of Children in our Care and Care Leavers. Considering this was the first time the event was held virtually, it was proven to be very successful. Attendance was high and there were performances from 2 young people. All students received a £20 voucher and also meal vouchers to celebrate their successes. The event albeit different this year, was equally as well received and enjoyed by all.

Transitions

Children and young people in foster care are supported to make a positive transition to adult life and Foster Carers attend training on 'Transitions' which focuses on their role in developing young people's skills to live independently, as they progress towards adulthood. The Children in Our Care Team and the Fostering Service also encourage carers and young people to consider 'Staying Put' post 18 years. The Leaving Care Service attends Reviews to discuss Staying Put with foster carers for young people aged 17 years.

The Leaving Care Service has the Investing in Children Award, and the Service was rated as 'Good' by Ofsted from the last 2017 inspection. The Leaving Care Service has achieved one Staying Put placement this Quarter, and also continues to offer supported lodgings and supported accommodation which increases choice for young people leaving foster care and residential placements in favour of semi-independence. The Nightsafe at St Silas project continues to be a valuable resource for young people and referrals continue to be managed by the Leaving Care Team. The joint commission between Nightsafe and the Local Authority commenced in Quarter 3 with a post 16 provision being established at Whalley New Road to create further supported accommodation placements for this age group 16 plus. At the end of this Quarter there were three young people in placement and they had settled in well. This is another much needed provision for our post 16 group of looked after young people, with a commitment to keeping them in the Borough with a mix of independence and support in placement.

The Leaving Care Service has eight advisors. Three advisors are working with the 16 to 18 year old age group resolving issues with accommodation, education, training and employment and Staying Put. Five advisors are providing advice and guidance to the 21 to 25 year old age group, and in addition, all advisors have a caseload of at least twenty 18 to 21 year olds for whom they provide general support.

In December 2020, Leaving Care launched Christmas gift hampers for care leavers, requesting donations from Council employees and partner agencies to donate to this group of young people. The response was overwhelming and the hampers were extremely well received. Likewise, in partnership with Witton Park School, Christmas food parcels were also donated and gratefully received and enjoyed.

The Care Leavers Forum was also attended this Quarter by Councillor Gunn and our Head of Service for Corporate Parenting and this was well-attended virtually, encouraging young people to share their views and contribute towards service development.

Children and young people with disabilities who are in our care are also referred at 17 years of age to Adult Social Care for an assessment of need prior to turning 18 years, and there is a period of twelve months for planning to be undertaken around post 18 years provision. This process prevents any delay in identifying post 18 provision for young people with specific care needs and/or specific needs for their physical living arrangements with adaptations required.

Care Planning

The Care Planning and Fostering (Miscellaneous Amendments) (England) Regulations 2015 provide a revised definition of 'permanence' for Children Looked After, including for the first time the definition of a long term foster placement. The responsibilities of the Local Authority in assessing the ability of the foster carer to meet the needs of the child now and in the future, and identifying any support services needed to achieve this are also set out. Local Authorities are required to achieve long term matching within reasonable timescales. The Regulations introduce new duties for ceasing to look after a child.

The Fostering Service

The Fostering Service is structured into three teams, including the Permanence Team, which launched on 1st July 2018. The Team completes all assessments of family members/connected persons from Child Protection to Public Law Outline pre-proceedings, and Care Proceedings, as highlighted in the Ofsted Action Plan. There are four full time Social Workers and one working four days per week. The Special Guardianship Social Worker is part time and continues to experience capacity issues due to the increasing number of Special Guardianship applications, and a review of SGO support is currently underway.

A new Supervising Social Worker in the mainstream fostering team commenced a full-time position during Quarter 3. A part-time Supervising Social Worker commenced maternity leave and this is being covered by an experienced agency worker. The mainstream team has managed several staff absences this Quarter, 3 of which were a direct result of COVID 19.

One assessing social worker has been recruited into the Permanence Team, there are no vacancies currently. All of the Permanence social workers have been undertaking home visits throughout the pandemic due to the complex nature of the assessments being undertaken for Court and kinship placements. Assessments continue to be all over the UK with the social workers needing to complete home visits to South Wales and Scotland for example. The pandemic has not prevented any assessments of potential new foster carers, family and friends carers or proposed Special Guardianship carers from taking place and this has been 'business as usual' with risk assessments and PPE in place.

It is hugely positive that the number of Special Guardianship Order applications have been almost doubled over the past 18 months, achieving positive outcomes for children and young people and securing their permanence with kinship or connected carers.

Foster Carer Recruitment and Retention

Quarter 3, in the lead up to Christmas, is always a quieter time for recruitment and this has followed suit from previous years. There was 1 fostering household approval for this Quarter, taking the current total to an approval rate so far of 9 new fostering households for Quarters 1 to 3, with an aim of another 3 approvals in Quarter 4 to take the total for the year to 12.

The bus stop campaign was launched this Quarter and has had some success with the posters below, attracting enquiries alongside the more popular recruitment channels such as Facebook and Twitter, Google ads and the Heart Radio North West advertising campaign which continues to reach a growing audience. There are monthly online recruitment sessions held and advertised via social media, which has had a varying degree of interest from potential applicants. Last Quarter there were between 5-6 applicants dialling in for the sessions, this Quarter saw a reduction in the run up to the

Christmas period. Being visible on social media and also maintaining a presence in the community continues to be the aim, albeit with the shift being more towards digital recruitment this year as a result of the pandemic.

One example of Bus Stop advertising in the Borough:



Let's Make A Brighter Future

Foster
For Blackburn with Darwen

- Psychological Support
- Supplimentary Allowances
- Transfer Bonus for Existing Carers
- Great Local Offers for Foster Carers

  

The impact of Google Ads has increased our registrations of interest overall throughout the pandemic, alongside the continued advertising on Twitter, Facebook and our Let's Foster website. Promoting our foster carer support offer has been the aim so far this year alongside a pay rise for all foster carers awarded in Quarter 2.

Blackburn with Darwen are part of the North West collaboration with Outcomes UK, successfully being awarded phase 2 of the DfE SEED funding to undertake research into digital marketing campaigns, and a focus primarily upon those children who are more challenging to place such as teenagers and larger sibling groups. Lancashire County Council, Cumbria and Blackpool are also part of this collaboration. They too have seen a decline in fostering approvals over the past 6 months. UCLAN are supporting the initiative, undertaking research into marketing strategies and campaigns that are most successful from a digital perspective, which as a Local Authority we will be keen to implement new ideas and campaigns that are recommended as being more successful in attracting foster carers.

There are currently 71 mainstream foster carer households at present for Blackburn with Darwen which is on average the annual figure each year. The Service has seen some challenges in terms of foster carers becoming Shared Lives Carers or being assessed to adopt the child in their care, which is hugely positive for the child but does by default then reduce the number of foster carers available for placements.

Fostering Friendly Employer Status:

The Fostering Network host a programme to encourage employers to support fostering, in particular, foster carers and their rights. Nearly 40 percent of foster carers combine their role with other paid work, so having a supportive employer makes all the difference. The scheme supports employers to put in place a HR policy which includes flexible working, paid leave for training and panel attendance, and paid leave for settling a child into placement for example. This encourages

more employees to apply to become foster carers knowing that they have the support of their current employer, and also supports employers with an agreed programme for staff over the year as a planned approach.

Blackburn with Darwen Fostering Service are enthusiastic to apply for this initiative and roll this out across the Council. There is a HR policy which needs to be adopted in order to be signed up to the initiative, and going forward, Chief Executive and Council-wide sign up to this programme is the aim to promote fostering, and to encourage more of our employees to consider becoming foster carers. This process is in the early stages at present but is a key focus for 2021/22 to achieve this status.

Foster Carer Training

During this Quarter period, there has not been face to face foster carer training available due to the pandemic and the restrictions with indoor meetings. The Service liaised with work- force development and also responded to what the foster carers themselves have asked for in respect of specific subject training. This was opened up on a virtual platform and made available through 'Me Learning' for all foster carers to access, in order to offer a variety of mandatory and bespoke training courses to be accessed online.

From December 2020, foster carers started to access a more varied training programme. This included examples such as Safeguarding, Equality and Diversity, LGBT Awareness, Disability Awareness, Autism Awareness, Epilepsy Awareness, Diabetes Awareness, Understanding the Behaviours of Children and Young People, Eating disorders, Effective communication with Children and Families, Loss and Bereavement, Substance Misuse, Suicide prevention and Managing Continence.

Feedback received has been that foster carers are accessing these training programmes and finding the content useful, and this continues to be explored during their supervision. Foster carers have stated they are missing the face to face group sessions and completing training alongside others. Some foster carers continue to have anxieties around attending direct face to face training and prefer at this time to complete online training. The courses can be accessed at any time and are flexible.

In response to this, and for the next Quarter 4, the Service is offering virtual workshops and training sessions through MS Teams, which include; Attachment and Trauma delivered by the Psychologist from Revive, Pathway Plans; The role of a Leaving Care worker, PACE/Child Sexual Exploitation. Allegation training and a Tax workshop with The Fostering Network is also to be offered, alongside Education 'Question & Answer' sessions with the Virtual Schools Team being planned. The Fostering Service is also offering group support sessions which will take place on a monthly basis.

The Permanence Team are holding monthly support groups also for Special Guardians and family and friends carers, with guest speakers. Grandparents Plus membership is also in place until May 2021 which offers practical and emotional support to all.

Fostering Panel and Review Panel

During Quarter 3 there have been a total of 6 assessments presented to the main Fostering Panel to consider for approval. One mainstream assessment was approved and this has already provided an additional 2 placements for the service this Quarter. A further assessment was a reassessment to consider approval of a mainstream carer as a single applicant. A further 4 assessments were Regulation 24 for temporary approval of connected family and friends carers.

There were no evaluation forms received during this period and panel have considered whether alternative methods should be used to capture the feedback and experiences of attendees at panel since these have been held on a virtual platform. The panels are held via MS Teams and are now running smoothly, enabling panel to run with applicants in attendance.

The Annual Review Panel has been held due to COVID restrictions as a review of annual reports carried out by the Agency Decision Maker, as opposed to a virtual panel. Within this Quarter period, there has been a total of 24 annual reviews presented. In the next Quarter 4, it has been agreed that Annual Review Panel will resume being carried out on a virtual platform with a panel chair as per previous arrangements prior to the pandemic, to provide Supervising Social Workers and Foster Carers the opportunity to share their experiences of the last 12 months of their approval. It is not a requirement that Annual Reviews take place in panel format, but the Service wishes to continue with this format as it is not only good practice, but enables both fostering social workers and foster carers to reflect on the past year and discuss challenges, achievements and learning going forward.

Complaints

There have been no complaints during Quarter 3.

Compliments

There have been no compliments received during this Quarter 3 period.

Allegations

There has been one allegation made during this period from October to December, by a young person and this is currently still under investigation. The allegation was appropriately dealt with and the young person has since moved into an alternative placement. There has been LADO involvement.

Specific Incidents and Restraints

There have been 15 specific incident notifications received.

Bullying Reports

There has been 1 report of bullying this Quarter period. The young person placed in foster care confided in his carers that he had been a victim of bullying within school. Carers sought appropriate advice from the child's social worker and their allocated supervising social worker. Seeking further advice and guidance from the young person's school, resulted in a meeting being convened with school the young person was supported and safeguarded in school.

Serious illness and accidents

There have been 4 reports in Quarter 3, all resulted in attendance at A&E and were appropriately responded to and recorded. The children and young people were treated and have made a recovery.

Missing From Home

Quarter 3 saw 5 reports of Missing from Home involving 4 young people. All were appropriately recorded via Engage and interviews offered or had taken place with the young people safely located.

Exemptions

At the end of Quarter 3, no exemptions were in place and no new requests made.

Engagement with Foster Carers

Blackburn with Darwen has a Foster Carer Association (FCA), which did meet regularly, and has an Elected Committee. The Chair of the FCA sits on the Corporate Parenting Specialist Advisory Group. The FCA has its own website, which is used to communicate messages and news updates about events. The foster carer support group also meets regularly and is attended by the Children's Services Elected Member.

Since the pandemic in March 2020, all FCA face to face meetings have been suspended. The rising number of Covid-19 cases in the Borough, and the number of vulnerable foster carers due to health or age related reasons, has meant that support from the FCA is via phone calls, email and social media. New dates were set in Quarter 2 but the decision was made to postpone until further notice and this has been the case throughout Quarter 3 with support being via phone calls and email primarily.

The FCA have been attending virtual meetings with the Head of Service, Service Lead and Fostering Team Manager on a frequent basis to ensure any concerns and queries are addressed.

There remains a Local Authority commission in place with The Fostering Network, for advice and mediation support, which is readily accessible if and when needed by foster carers in the Borough.

There has been a need to increase communication during the pandemic on subjects such as education, school places and family time and regular SMS text message alerts and emails have been sent out to all on a frequent basis to maintain communication links in addition to what they will receive from their Supervising Social Worker. The Fostering Service also RAG rate foster carers in terms of red being those who are perhaps more vulnerable with health needs, or may require additional support.

Short Break Foster Care

There are currently 11 approved short break carers. Short break carers have been providing short term/long-term placements alongside short break support prior to the pandemic. All short breaks have been suspended, due to the carers' personal preferences and health needs of many of the short breaks carers, and there has been an understandable reluctance and anxiety about recommencing the provision of short breaks, certainly with local Covid-19 figures rising and many who are in the vulnerable category. One short break arrangement has recommenced following a robust plan. The Service continues to review short breaks provision to recommence this at the very earliest opportunity.

Commissioned Placements

There has been an increase in both Independent Foster Placements and Residential placement requests since Quarter 2 and throughout Quarter 3. The most significant challenge to date remains identifying placements for teenagers, and more specifically with mental health needs which has seen an increase once more in Quarter 3. It is evident that when placement requests are being sent out on the North West Framework for both Fostering and Residential, the number of placements being identified is at an all-time low with very little being identified. This undoubtedly creates a problem when trying to place teenagers and the Covid-19 pandemic has certainly had an impact with foster placements and carers feeling unable to accept new placements during these uncertain times. This Quarter saw the new Nightsafe at Whalley New Rd commission commence, offering greater placement choice in the Borough for young people over 16 years who require semi-independent living. There still remains a considerable number of our Looked after Children cohort placed within in-house foster placements at 129, with 50 placed with agency foster carers. The SEED funding collaboration with North West Local Authorities has enabled four Fostering Exchange Days to be held virtually, where the harder to place children and young people are presented as a profile to Independent

Fostering Agencies looking to identify long term placements. We have seen two young people placed successfully via this approach, one of whom moved from residential into a long term foster placement. Nightsafe at St Silas is also well utilised for the post 16 cohort with some positive placements and steps towards independent living made. The table below provides an overview of the type of placements commissioned at the end of Quarter 3.

Placement Type as of Dec 2020	
Adoptive Placements	19
Foster Placements (in-house)	129
Foster Placements (agency)	50
Friends & Family	74
Placed with Parents	61
Independent Living	0
Children's Homes (in-house)	5
Children's Homes (agency)	21
Secure	0
Prison/HMYOI	1
NHS	1
Residential Accom Not Subject to CH Regulations	11
Other	5
Residential School	0

Budget

Current placement pressures in-house and across the independent fostering agency landscape continue to place the commissioning budget under pressure. The Case Tracking and Commissioning Panel monitors placements and ensures that there are robust plans for those that could be brought back to in-house provision. The financial position across both of these areas is closely monitored throughout the year. Pressures for this financial year are due to the demands on the Service with the numbers of children in our care, placement sufficiency and stability. Placements for teenagers and those with complex needs are the most costly, and largely in residential or therapeutic placements.

The Local Authority are working in partnership with Health colleagues to negotiate joint funding of placements for those children and young people with significant needs, this continues on a monthly basis as part of the 0-25's commissioning panel.

New Service Priorities and Updates for 2020/21:

1. The management team will continue to monitor compliance with Fostering Regulations and National Minimum Standards and will increase the number of case file audits completed each month to support this.
2. Placement sufficiency and stability will continue to be a key area of focus, with areas for learning taken from disruption meetings and case auditing. Blackburn with Darwen are part of the cohort of North West Authorities collaboration for the DfE SEED funding and research project, which looks specifically at recruitment, retention, sufficiency and producing a Market Position Statement. The aim is to form a new local commissioning framework and hold regular Exchange Days to focus on long term matching opportunities. **Update Dec 2020: Virtual Exchange Days with three other North West Authorities will take place every 8 weeks and will place focus upon family finding. To date, three virtual events have taken place successfully. The local commissioning framework is currently an ongoing process.**
3. The Fostering Friendly Employer scheme will be outlined in Quarter 4 and presented for Chief Executive and Council-wide sign up in line with The Fostering Network programme recommendations, establishing a HR Policy that will support Council employees who are, or wish to become, foster carers. The HR Policy will be progressed for initial sign up by Council Leaders in Quarter 4.
4. Recruitment will focus upon emergency and short break foster carers, to respond to the increasing demand for urgent placements for teenagers. This will also enable a support package of short breaks to be considered for those young people who are more challenging to place and/or in fragile placements currently and will seek to assist with placement stability alongside our Revive offer. The recruitment of foster carers will continue to be a priority and given the current climate the focus is social media and digital recruitment campaigns as well as radio advertising. **Update: The DfE Seed funding project will assist BwD and other LA's with digital marketing and recruitment for harder to place children and young people, specifically teenagers.**
5. The delivery of a comprehensive training offer will be outlined and implemented online until face to face training can resume. This will be coordinated with ME-Learning and Foster Talk, along with Nurturing Attachments training from REVIVE Psychologists for foster carers. **Update Dec 2020: as outlined in the report, an extensive Me Learning offer is now in place. Face to face training will look to resume in line with Central Government Covid guidelines and restrictions.**
6. A review of short breaks fostering will commence in Quarter 4. Alongside this review, ongoing Covid risk assessments will be carried out to try to progress with the re-introduction of short breaks working collaboratively with short breaks carers.
7. A virtual Fostering Forum will take place in March 2021.

Pamela Price
Service Lead, Placements