

Fostering Service Quarter 4 Report

1st January to 31st March 2018

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; and
- Children and young people in foster care achieve the best possible outcomes.

Children in our Care in Foster Care

The number of children in our care decreased in Quarter 4 but figures for the year show that there has been an overall increase from 363 children and young people to 377. The number peaked in Quarter 3 when 384 children and young people were in our care. In 2016 numbers started to rise significantly and have remained high.

	31st March 2015	31st March 2016	31st March 2017	31st March 2018
Number of Children in our Care	316	346	375	377
Number of CiOC in Foster Care	213 (67%)	243 (70%)	248 (66%)	215(57%)
Number of children in in-house foster care placements	138 (44%)	147 (42%)	153 (41%)	118(31%)
Number of children in family and friends foster care	28(9%)	41 (12%)	49 (13%)	48(13%)
Number of children in independent fostering agency placements	47(15%)	55(16%)	46(12%)	49(13%)

The availability of foster placements both in-house and through independent agencies has become increasingly challenging throughout the year particularly for older children and sibling groups. Compared to previous years, the percentage of children in foster care, particularly in in-house placements has reduced significantly. In 2016, 70% of children were looked after in foster care compared to 57% currently.

In House and Agency Placements

	In house	Family and Friends	Independent Fostering Agency
Male	76	27	33
Female	42	21	16

Age break down of children in foster placements

Age	Mainstream	Family and Friends	Independent Fostering Agency
0 to 2	18	13	4
3 to 6 years	9	19	4
7 to 10 years	28	3	11
11 to 15 years	44	11	25
16 and 17 years	19	2	5
Total	118	48	49

New Referrals in Quarter 4

There were 48 new referrals in Quarter 4, however following court decisions the majority of these (30) did not come into care. Of the 18 that did come in, 11 were placed in-house. During the year, the Service has taken 177 new referrals and begun the process of searching for placements for the majority. 71 of these referrals did not convert to placements because of court decisions.

	No of children	Sibling Groups	Age 0 - 5	Age 6 - 11	Age 12+	Children placed in-house	Fostering Agency	Residential placements	Short Break	Children didn't come in
January	22	3	6	6	10	6	0	6	0	10
February	14	1	5	5	4	4	0	0	0	10
March	12	2	2	3	7	1	0	1	0	10
Quarter 4 total	48	6	13	14	21	11	0	7	0	30

Feedback from children in Foster Care

The feedback received from children in foster care is generally positive. Their views are obtained from:

- Participation in the VOICE and Junior VOICE groups;
- The work of the Participation Champions in the Service;
- The Investing in Children assessment process;
- Participation in staff recruitment (interviews) and foster carer training;
- Contributing to the annual review report of the foster carers looking after them;
- A support group for birth children and grandchildren; and
- Social worker feedback for foster carer reviews.

Children, young people and their social workers made the following comments about placements when contributing to foster carer reviews in Quarter 4:

Children and young people said:

'F my foster carer is funny, loving and supportive. She is the best foster carer in the astronomy'.

'Me and T's relationship is strong and happy but the odd couple of times we may fall out'.

'Me and my foster carers get on great because they always listen to me and help me in every way possible'.

Social workers said:

'Carers are proactive in promoting birth ties. Their home is the boys' home and often birth siblings are invited into the home and they have been on outings together. This has stabilised the placement.'

'Mum reports that she has a lot of respect for B and they have a caring relationship with each other'.

Birth Children said:

'It's gone good up to the last few weeks. My mood has changed and I have been upset due to D's actions, but it is all under control now'.

'It's been ok. L has been annoying and noisy and can't sleep since he started at High School.

Promoting Children's Health, Emotional Development, Education & Leisure

Foster families are provided with pre and post-approval preparation and training on the importance and availability of health, education and leisure services to enable them to help children achieve their potential and enhance their emotional wellbeing.

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. Foster carers are also 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 they care for in which they or the child records all of the child's health details. Public Health funding for 18 months has enabled the appointment of a specialist nurse to work with 'hard to reach' Looked After Children and care leavers.

There are currently 15 Looked After Children registered as having a disability in foster care. Foster carers are provided with the relevant training and support to meet the specific needs of the child they have in placement.

In relation to emotional wellbeing, Looked After Children have access to Clinical Psychology and related services through 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 on emotional health and well-being. Feedback from foster carers following consultation is very positive. The Revive Service has delivered training to foster carers on self-harm and on attachments.

As well as mandatory First Aid training, foster carers also receive training on a variety of health-related issues including 'Infectious Diseases in Childhood' and 'Managing Medicine.' Phase 1 of a 'Healthy Homes' training package for carers has been developed.

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 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 now managed by the Virtual Head with a system in place to administer and ensure the money is spent appropriately to further their educational achievements. The Virtual Head quality assures all Personal Education Plans (PEPs).

The Virtual School is in place and the governing body has been established. 2 hours a week of additional tuition is offered to all young people in Year 11 via Kip McGrath to promote G.C.S.E. improvements and this has now been extended to Year 10 pupils. 7 young people are currently benefitting from this offer, which will be extended again for Year 6 SATs pupils after Easter by way of a six week programme of booster sessions.

Young people's feedback from these sessions:

'has really helped me with my maths and English. I feel more confident for my GCSE's now'.

'Kip McGrath has helped me so much, they can make things more understandable for me. I have learnt a lot, they are very good teachers'.

The Education Manager sits within the Children in our Care Social Work Service and, 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 'Promoting Educational Achievement for Children in Our Care' and this course was delivered in January 2018.

Recently a KETSO session designed to consider how the PEP system could be improved was held. It was attended by a group of young people and foster carers who worked with a group of designated teachers and generated some good ideas for improvement.

Engagement with Children & Young People

During Quarter 4, the Fostering Service was reassessed for their annual renewal of the Investing in Children Award. As part of the process, the Service submitted evidence of the ways in which dialogue with children and young people in foster care has led to change. The evidence included:

- A care leaver now sits on the Fostering Panel;
- A young person created a PowerPoint presentation on self-harm for a foster carer training event on this topic;
- 3 young people now help to deliver the Skills to Foster training for prospective carers;
- The Voice Group requested more fun activities and during the year have been taken bowling, on a trip to Lytham, enjoyed T-shirt making and printing, and were taken to a regional conference in Blackpool with 160 young people across the North West;
- The Saturday Club for younger children is now well-established and well-attended;
- 6 young people have been involved in staff recruitment and selection.

As part of the process, issues raised by young people during the 2017 assessment process were revisited. Investing in Children discussed the issues with a group of younger children, an older group and a group of foster carers. Comments included:

From young people

"I think things have changed a lot. I go to speak to children of foster carers and act as a champion for them, I raise their views and concerns, and this is my role. We meet as a group as well, this is a big change."

"Over the past year things have got better, they listen to us and we are involved in discussions to improve things. Sometimes when things don't change it is not the fault of the fostering team."

"I can only speak of my own experience, I am always involved and listened to and TM treats me with respect."

"I am more confident when I go to my review."

"I play the ukulele and I play it in front of everyone at my review."

"I have made friends and I really like arts and crafts."

From younger children

"I like playing and arts and crafts."

"The activities are good; I really liked the summer barbecue."

"We had a Christmas Disco and I saw Santa."

"I get to see my sisters when I want."

"I see my mummy when I ask to see her."

"They let me visit my Grandad; it took a while but I now see him."

“I can now see my younger brother.”

“TM is kind and is a good listener and you can speak to her on the phone.”

“We have a big say in what activities we do, I like ‘slime’ and we did that.”

From foster carers

T is amazing; I can't imagine this service working without her. She is so dedicated to these kids and so hard working.”

“She is there any time you need her, always available and helpful. She knows the names of all my children and never forgets them.”

At the end of the process a report is provided which concluded:

‘Everything I learned convinces me that the Fostering Service has continued the excellent work, outlined in a previous evaluation, to place children and young people at the heart of the decision making process. TM and her team have carefully listened to recommendations made previously; making changes that carry the endorsement of the young people themselves. I also heard about plans and ideas for the future, which underlines the commitment to continually change and improve the service.

For continuing to respect the human rights of children and young people to be involved in decisions affecting their lives, I wholeheartedly recommend that Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council Fostering Service be awarded Investing in Children Membership Award™ status for a further year.’

VOICE Group

The VOICE group meets every month at Knott Street Community Centre and the majority of children who attend are in foster care. This venue was chosen as the facilities allow part of each session to be activity-based. The members of the group have been involved in a number of consultation activities to inform and shape services. They have also been involved in a research project with Lancaster University to design tools to improve how adults communicate with children and young people. VOICE members continue to attend Children & Young People Scrutiny Committee and Corporate Parenting Specialist Advisory Group, when appropriate.

The Participation Strategic Framework has been published, which covers all young people, not just vulnerable children and young people. The priorities are linked to the Looked After Children Strategy.

Some children in foster care are trained to interview as part of the staff recruitment process, giving them the skills and confidence to interview two children in foster care and for two Care Leavers to attend The Collaborate Project, to influence the Centre for Children & Young People's Participation Seminar Series.

There is a Care Leavers Forum that is well attended. A number of young people have undertaken Peer Mentoring training and are mentoring others through the ‘Getting Ready for Adult Life’ pack. Additionally, a Young Advisors Group which a number of care leavers attend has been working on a project on the impact of social media on young people. Members of the group have delivered Total Respect training to a multiagency audience of practitioners, Councillors and foster carers.

Transitions

Children and young people in foster care are supported to make a positive transition to adult life so 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 Team encourage carers and young people to consider ‘staying put’ and the Leaving Care Service also delivers courses for foster carers to develop their understanding of this. The training has been positively evaluated by carers and most indicate a willingness to work with ‘staying put’. Although finance causes carers the most concern, some are willing to receive housing benefit as part of their financial package and will consider changing their status to

landlord. The Leaving Care Service attend Reviews to discuss Staying Put with foster carers for young people aged 17 years, who will turn 18 in 2018. The Service has also started some work to develop a 'staying close' option, which may be more suitable for a number of care leavers.

The Leaving Care Service is currently in the process of being reassessed for the Investing in Children award. The service is also working hard to encourage and support care leavers into apprenticeships. A recent session at the library about apprenticeships was attended by 15 young people who all expressed an interest. The service is also working in partnership with the Blackburn Rovers Community Trust to develop a 'Get Ready for Work' course aimed specifically at care leavers.

The Leaving Care Service has achieved an increase in the number of supported lodgings providers this year, which increases choice for young people leaving foster care and residential placements in favour of semi-independence. Participation levels continue to be good with young people delivering the Total Respect training and training for foster carers.

Young people are allocated a Leaving Care Worker at the age of 15½ years. The service is currently making contact with care leavers in the 21 to 25 year old age bracket in order to offer them an advice and guidance service in line with new legislation.

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

During Quarter 4, the Fostering Service successfully recruited two permanent supervising social workers who will be undertaking viability assessments and family and friends assessments when they take up their posts.

There are currently two supervising social workers on maternity leave and a further two on long term sickness, which has had a significant impact on the team's ability to manage the demands of the Service. The long term sickness is being managed with HR following the sickness policy of the local authority and agency social workers have been used to ensure the continued functioning of the Service to a good standard. One of the 2 team managers has also been off long term and the role has been covered by the acting up of the Advanced Practitioner (AP) temporarily, which has left the team without an AP to provide consultations and advice to other teams. This has also had an impact on family and friends fostering work.

Foster Carer Resource

	Total number of foster carers	Mainstream	Short breaks carers	Family and Friends carers
Quarter 1 2017/18	131	81	15	35
Quarter 2 2017/18	112	78	14	20
Quarter 3 2017/18	139	80	12	47
Quarter 4	123	82	12	29

The total number of foster carers has fluctuated over the year, dipping significantly in Quarter 2 but recovering in Quarter 3 and dipping again in Quarter 4. This is largely due to the fluctuations in family and friends foster care as the number of mainstream foster carers has remained fairly static. 12 months ago at year end there were 136 carers including 90 mainstream carers, 13 short breaks carers and 33 family and friends. The service lost 9 sets of carers in Quarter 1, who have proved very difficult to replace.

At the end of the year, there were 16 sets of foster carers in assessment which is the highest number the Service has experienced for some time. If these all achieve approval within the next six months, the picture will be much more positive in 2018/19.

Matching and Ethnicity

In this Quarter, two Polish siblings were placed with Asian foster carers. This placement is very positive with the carers meeting the children's cultural and identity needs. The carers have received support from the social worker and supervising social worker as well as the parents. The parents are very positive about the placement.

Two further transracial placements continue for a sibling group of five. The children are White British and placed with Asian carers who have previous experience of caring for White British children and these children are progressing extremely well. The placement continues from the previous Quarter.

Foster Carer Recruitment

Initial enquiries

49 enquiries were made in Quarter 4, slightly down on Quarter 3 due to a dip after Christmas. The conversion rate remained stable at 22% for the Quarter.

26 of these enquires came through You Can Foster of which 11 were website enquiries and 11 telephone enquiries. You Can Foster experienced most of the traffic as that is where the Service has been sending all of our marketing materials, with the website and the phone number being used in messaging. There should be a change in trend for the next Quarter as our own website will be back up and running, having been closed for redesign. Radio advertising has also started to generate some interest and enquiries.

Assessments and Approvals

At the end of Quarter 4, there were 16 sets of prospective carers in assessment:

- 5 at Initial Visit
- 3 at Stage 1
- 8 at Stage 2

3 new mainstream foster carer households and 2 sets of family and friends carers were approved in Quarter 4.

Over the full year, 25 foster carer households were approved. This included 6 mainstream and 19 sets of family and friends carers. The number of mainstream approvals is lower than anticipated and does not meet the current demand for placements. However, the appointment of a specialist Recruitment and Marketing Officer, who came into post in September 2017, is already increasing the number of enquiries and assessments and the Service has set a target of recruiting 15 new sets of mainstream foster carer households for the coming year. The current level of interest suggests that this is achievable. In the last 12 months, the demand for family and friends assessments has taken priority due to court deadlines and this has in part compromised the capacity of the Service to prioritise mainstream.

Regional Campaign

The regional 'You Can Foster' recruitment campaign has been live since September 2016 and has helped generate enquiries via the You Can Foster website.

Fostering Service Managers and the new Recruitment and Marketing Officer have been involved in the development of this campaign to ensure that Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council derives full benefit. The campaign is prioritising recruitment at a local level through the targeting of P.R., digital marketing and additional local activity. Discussions are currently taking place to further develop this campaign dependent on collaborative funding and working from Local Authorities.

The focus of regional meetings in Quarter 4 has been preparation for Fostering Fortnight, which takes place in May.

Foster Carer Retention

In Quarter 4, there was one resignation and no de-registrations. During the year, there were 18 resignations and 1 de-registration. Foster carers have resigned for a variety of reasons including changes in family circumstances, health and following an allegation.

Assessment

Statutory guidance for fostering assessments is that they should be completed within 8 months, a timescale that is generally achieved. The quality of assessments remains good and is monitored by the Fostering Panel.

Foster Carer Training

The Foster Carer training programme currently provides a range of training courses covering the Mandatory Fostering Standards, specialist training on relevant topics, safeguarding training, Health and Safety training and Support Groups for carers.

The new conference-style training is delivering more focused learning for carers, specifically tailored to their requirements and allows them to attend one training day and cover multiple topics.

In Quarter 4, there were 3 Paediatric First Aid courses, a Fostering Forum, a Support Group and a 0 to 8 years Conference.

Feedback from the Fostering Forum, which was very well attended, was as follows:

“It was good hearing about carers’ experiences – ups and downs.”

“Worthwhile – lots of information regarding future changes and new ideas being implemented.”

“Good turnout, good company, good information, best one to date.”

Fostering Panel

Panel business has increased as Special Guardianship Order (S.G.O.) reports are currently presented to Panel. In addition to the continued high numbers of family and friends assessments, this has resulted in very long panel days with too many items on the agenda. As a way of addressing this, it is being considered to hold the Panel every three weeks instead of monthly.

Two sets of carers were approved by the main Panel in March and this is set to increase in coming months due to the high number of applicants currently in assessment.

Two additional emergency Panels were held in Quarter 4 due to the courts requiring Fostering Panel decisions on family and friends assessments in very short timescales.

The central list of Fostering Panel members still requires development, as social work members as well as independent members are required.

The quality assurance of reports presented to the Panel has continued to be good. Social workers are given feedback on their presentation and assessment/report, and any areas of improvement are addressed with individual social workers.

Review Panel

There have been 22 items presented to the Review Panel and all resulted in recommendations to continue approval. Out of the 22 fostering households, 13 attended Panel.

The reviews have been on the whole very positive though there has been a theme around foster carer training needing to be more organised. The Service is responding to this feedback and the next foster carers’ training schedule is reflective of this. There have been two occasions where there has been a recommendation to return to the main Fostering Panel and this was in line with regulations associated with allegations.

Some comments from Reviews are as follows,

“Both children are doing exceptionally well at school, both 100% attendance, S’s self-harming has dramatically reduced, and after 6 years she has been discharged from ELCAS. We are so proud of her.”

Quote from a foster carers comments regarding their Supervising Social Worker:

“B has been very supportive and understanding of our family from the start, we couldn’t be happier and he is an asset to the department.”

Complaints

There were four complaints in Quarter 4 and 7 complaints over the year that have all been dealt with through the complaints procedure. All complaints have been recorded with the Customer Care Manager and three remain ongoing, with one progressing to an independent investigation.

Compliments

The Fostering Support Worker received several compliments during Quarter 4 from young people and from foster carers through her work on the Investing in Children Award. The Fostering Duty Officer received a compliment over her quick response and how quickly a situation was sorted. There were 5 additional compliments during the year.

Allegations

There was one allegation in Quarter 4, which continues to go through the process. The carers are being supported by an independent worker from the Fostering Network. A further allegation was made by a young person and has been investigated but not taken any further following discussions with the carers, young person, social worker and LADO. Over the year there have been 10 allegations; all of which have been dealt with in line with policies and procedures.

Specific Incidents and Restraints (including Bullying, Serious Illnesses and Accidents)

There have been four minor accidents this Quarter. A fall in school was reported for one child, a further fall was reported in a contact session with parents, and a child was hospitalised due to a chest infection and later discharged with a prescription for an inhaler. One child received a slight burn on the tummy area following an accident; this was fully explored and appropriate action was taken by the foster carer.

One incident where a foster carer was charged with a serious offence has resulted in the information being presented to the Fostering Panel. Although the carers resigned, the Fostering Panel noted that they would have deregistered them from the information received.

There has been one bullying incident reported which was explored with the school and dealt with appropriately. This information came through in the carers’ Review. Throughout the year, there were 16 specific incidents, the majority of which have been minor accidents and illnesses.

Missing From Home

Over the Quarter, a total of seven young people went missing from in-house foster placements with the majority returning within 24 hours. A risk management meeting was held to look at how best to support one young person and the carers and a risk management plan was put in place which has helped. Another young person who had had several missing from home episodes is being supported with a planned move to supported accommodation.

Over the year, there were 38 missing from home episodes, all of which have been managed in line with the correct procedures.

Exemptions

There has been one agency exemption over the Quarter, which remains in place as a sibling group of four are to be matched long term with their current foster carers. A further two exemptions have ended. Over the year, there were 12 exemptions in total. These were managed with extra visits and support to carers.

Engagement with Foster Carers

Blackburn with Darwen has a Foster Carer Association (FCA), which meets regularly and has an Elected Committee. Members of the Committee meet senior managers and the Executive Member on a quarterly basis. The Chair of the FCA sits on the Corporate Parenting Specialist Advisory Group. The FCA has its own website, which has been increasingly used to communicate messages and news. A forum to consult foster carers on a range of issues is held twice a year. A forum was scheduled in Quarter 3 but unfortunately had to be cancelled due to sickness so was rescheduled for March.

All foster carers are provided with membership of the Fostering Network and foster carers also have access to independent support commissioned from the Fostering Network to provide support and advocacy services in the event of complaints or allegations.

A small group of foster carers are recruitment champions, who help to drive recruitment forward and are involved with the planning of events, Skills to Foster preparation training, and manning recruitment stands and events.

The Fostering Service holds a foster carer forum every six months, the most recent in March 2018 when more than 30 carers attended. The event offers carers the opportunity to present their views about a range of issues related to fostering and to be involved in the future development of the Service. On this occasion, Councillor Bateson also attended to present long service awards to carers and to thank a number of carers retiring after many years of service. It was a very positive event and involved supervising social workers and managers working together to develop the Service and resolve issues.

Family and Friends Foster Care

During this Quarter, there were 5 new approvals of family and friends foster carers, increasing the total to 29 fostering households.

20 combined family and friends / SGO assessments were completed during the Quarter, a reduction from the previous Quarter but a significant increase over the year compared to the previous year. The Fostering Service is now completing more of these assessments to relieve some of the pressure on the Safeguarding Teams. Two full time, permanent supervising social workers have been recruited to the Family and Friends team and hope to join the Service in the next 2 months. These post-holders will undertake all of the Public Law Outline (PLO) family and friends work including viability assessments and combined assessments currently being undertaken by the Assessment and Safeguarding Teams. The plan is to create a Family and Friends/Permanence team which will undertake all PLO and all combined assessments. The team and management structure along with the processes involved are currently at the development stage. It is hoped that this team will be able to take on all of the family and friends work which will free up the mainstream fostering team to enable them to complete recruitment and assessment of foster carers.

In this Quarter, one Fostering Team Manager has been on sick leave and the Advanced Practitioner has covered the role meaning the Advanced Practitioner role has not been covered since October. The reduction in AP support for teams has resulted in an increase in negative and unnecessary assessments, less collaborative work, a dip in the timeliness of assessments and some assessment work not being to the same high standard. Whilst the team managers have offered some consultation for staff, they have been unable to fully meet the demand for this service.

Short Break Foster Care

There are 12 foster carers providing short break resources to a variety of children, from children who have complex health needs to supporting long term placements and emergency placements for young people experiencing difficulties. The Service is increasing this resource and has four households currently in assessment to provide short breaks for young people, teenagers and emergency placements.

Training / Staff

All staff members have individual training and a development plan, which is linked to their annual appraisal and monitored during monthly supervision.

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 and during Quarter 4 compared to the previous 12 months. However, placement stability remains better than the national average for England and with the comparable local authority average.

	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
LAC with 3 or more placements	0	0	8	9	16	16	22	26	24	34	37	40
Total number of LAC	367	370	363	375	371	380	394	395	384	388	382	377
% Stability of LAC placements 2017/18	0%	0%	2.2%	2.4%	4.3%	4.2%	5.6%	6.6%	6.3%	7.5%	8.1%	8.8%
% Stability of LAC placements 2016/17	1.4%	1.4%	2.3%	2.6%	3.1%	3.3%	3.8%	4.1%	4.4%	5.6%	5.9%	6.4%

The dip in placement stability performance is largely accounted for by teenage placement disruptions. There are approximately 15 teenagers in care whose placements have disrupted due to their complex needs and behaviours. Performance has also been affected by the disruption of two sibling adoptive placements involving 4 children.

Disruption meetings are held in order to identify learning and inform future planning for any child whose placement has been disrupted. A number of managers across Children's Services have been trained to chair these meetings.

Fostering Support

There were three new referrals for Fostering Support in Quarter 4. Short break support was required for all three, alongside an individual package of support. One young person needed an intensive support package to minimise the impact of a placement breakdown on their emotional wellbeing. The support was made up of extended short breaks, daily evening one to one support and additional support for a transition to a new placement. There was one closure this Quarter.

The Saturday Club remains well attended, with all the young people giving positive feedback. There were several enquiries from social workers with regards to new attendees for this, who are due to start in the next few weeks.

"I really enjoyed everything, the helpers and everyone who attends are really nice. There is nothing I don't like at Saturday Club."

"I was finding it difficult in placement, I wanted to give myself and my carers some space. I became more relaxed, it was a place to go instead of my placement."

"Lytham Road helped our foster child through a difficult period, it gave us a rest and it was a place for him away from home."

Commissioned Placements

The number of fostering and residential commissioned placements decreased overall by 5 placements from Quarter 3 to Quarter 4. However, as there was a significant increase during Quarter 2, the numbers remain relatively high.

End of Quarter 1	End of Quarter 2	End of Quarter 3	End of Quarter 4
Independent Agency Residential Placements 18	Independent Agency Residential Placements 25	Independent Agency Residential Placements 24	Independent Agency Residential Placements 24
Independent Agency Fostering Placements 49	Independent Agency Fostering Placements 52	Independent Agency Fostering Placements 54	Independent Agency Fostering Placements 49

The numbers of children in care, though slightly less in Quarter 4, remains high and has continued to create placement pressures. This is a pressure across the North West Region, and the independent sector is struggling to keep up with the demand particularly for harder to place children such as those in sibling groups, adolescents and those with complex health needs.

Budget

Current placement pressures in-house and across the independent fostering agency landscape continued to place the commissioning budget under great pressure as increasingly adolescents are pushed into costly residential placements due to the lack of foster placements across the region. The additional cost pressures that materialised within the commissioned placements budget this year were managed across the portfolio as a whole. The Fostering Service operated within budget for the year.

Priorities for 2017/18 Updated

1. To recruit to the new Recruitment and Marketing Officer role and develop a new recruitment strategy for the year ahead. The recruitment of carers for older children, complex needs and parent-child placements remains the priority.

End of year update – The Recruitment and Marketing Officer has now been in post for 6 months. During this time, he has intensified social media activity, worked on the development of the Lets Foster website and re-engaged the Service with the regional recruitment campaign. As a result of this work, the number of prospective carers in assessment and due to be approved in the first six months of the year is greater than it has been for several years.

2. Team development – The team has a number of new Supervising Social Workers. The nature of the work in Fostering has changed significantly from that of assessing and supervising mainstream carers to Family and Friends work.

Quarter 4 Update - There have been a number of new staff in the Service with another two new social workers due to join imminently in order to increase the capacity of the Service to undertake viability assessments, which currently sit with other social work teams. The volume of Family and Friends work has increased over the year and the whole team has become more skilled in this area. A team development day will take place once the new social workers join the Service.

3. Engaging with foster carers – Whilst the FCA is an active body, there are a large number of additional carers with whom the service needs to engage and communicate. The service needs to develop a more effective communication strategy for ensuring that all carers can be kept up to date with developments, messages and opportunities to be more involved with the service. This will include the further development of the regular Fostering Forum.

Quarter 4 Update – The Director of Children’s Services, Executive Member and Service Leader met with the FCA Committee during Quarter 4 and a Fostering Forum which was well attended was held in March. The Service sent out a questionnaire to all carers in Quarter 4 requesting information about online facilities. The Service is increasingly using e-mail to communicate with carers on a range of issues. There is more work to do on this priority including further development of the FCA website as a communication tool.

4. Continue to meet the training needs of all foster carers ensuring that all carers attend mandatory training in particular.

Quarter 4 update - Work was undertaken to review mandatory training and further develop e learning programmes for foster carers. It was agreed to re-establish the foster carer training steering group to support changes to the programme for 2018/19. This work is ongoing.

5. To continue to develop the Fostering Support Service to help maintain good placement stability rates. This will include the recruitment of additional short breaks foster carers who can also contribute to keeping the number of children and young people entering the care system as low as possible.

Quarter 4 Update - The Fostering Support Service continues to support fragile placements with activities and short breaks for a number of young people, and consultation and advice for carers via Revive, ASU, supervising social workers and other professionals. Recruitment of short breaks carers is ongoing.

6. Link fostering into the Adolescent Strategy alongside residential services and consider creative ways to improve placement sufficiency for adolescents.

Quarter 4 Update – A review of adolescent services is ongoing.

7. Continue to monitor compliance with Fostering Regulations and Standards.

Quarter 4 Update – Monthly auditing of case files continues and the Fostering Service managers quality assure Panel reports, assessments and reviews.

New Priorities for 2018/19

1. The Service has set a target of recruiting 15 new sets of foster carers in 2018/19. The Service will also undertake some targeted recruitment for individual children in need of long term placements. The Service will also undertake some innovative recruitment including some specialist carers to work alongside residential units and some short breaks carers to work alongside ASU in offering emergency placements.
2. A team development day will be held in July 2018 once the two new social workers for viability assessments are in post.
3. The Fostering Service will restructure to take account of increased demand from family and friends, SGO and viability assessments.
4. The Fostering Support Worker will work more closely with the Revive Service in the coming year in order to develop a more cohesive approach to supporting children, young people and foster carers, and to achieve improvements in placement stability rates. Fostering Support will continue to work closely with the Adolescent Support Unit so that young people can access short breaks and a wide range of activities. Fostering Support will continue to develop the Saturday Club for younger children in foster care.
5. The Service will develop a communication and engagement strategy using the FCA website as a focal point for communication. A focus group will be developed including foster carers to consider the potential for innovation as outlined above.
6. Foster carer training will continue to develop but with less input from the Workforce Development Team. The Service will focus on the development of online training.
7. 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.
8. The Fostering Service will review the foster carer payment package by June 2018 and submit a report for consideration by the Senior Leadership Team. The review will consider whether the current level of payments is able to compete with that offered by neighbouring authorities and independent agencies based in the locality. The foster carer lease car scheme will form part of this review.
9. Panel development – The independent panel chair contract will go out to tender. This will take account of the need for Panel to sit more frequently (every 3 weeks instead of monthly). The membership list will be developed to address difficulties in sustaining the pool of independent and social work members. A panel member training day will be held with a focus on family and friends fostering.

**Alyson Hanson
Service Leader, Placement Services
3rd May 2018**