

Fostering Service Quarter 1 Report

1st April – 30th June 2021

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.

Overview:

The period of 2020/21 saw the impact of the Covid 19 pandemic and new ways of working virtually and creatively, while continuing to ensure that children and young people in our care are seen, safeguarded and our foster carers well supported during challenging times. The impact of the pandemic was felt in Quarters 3 and 4 of 2020/21 in terms of placement disruption and the emotional influence upon children, young people and their carers specifically. This has continued to present as a challenge during Quarter 1 of 2021/22. We continue to try

to ensure 'business as usual' whilst we are working in a more 'blended' manner with face to face and virtual communications and have a commitment to supporting placement stability and that education and health needs continue to be met.

Children in Our Care in Foster Care

The number of children in our care remains at the same figure of 374, as it was at the end of March 2021. As noted in the last quarterly report in terms of a comparison figure, back in April 2020 there were 411 children in our care, which shows a decrease of looked after children of 8%. There has been an increase in the number of children and young people in independent fostering placements. It is considered that this is due to the impact of COVID on the recruitment of foster carers and their availability due to wanting to reduce risk of transmission as well as wanting some stability in their own household during challenging times. However, the largest number of children continue to be being placed in-house which is positive. Over the past two years, the figure for family and friends placements has increased alongside Special Guardianship Orders made which have doubled over the past 18 months meaning that more children are exiting the care system and achieving permanence with connected carers. This trend continues.

Comparison Figures

	30 June 2018	30 June 2019	30 June 2020	30 June 2021
Number of Children in our Care	343	408	407	374
Number of CioC in Foster Care	209 (61%)	265 (64%)	255 (63%)	245 (65%)
Number of children in in-house foster care placements	120 (35%)	148 (36%)	138 (34%)	116 (31%)
Number of children in family and friends foster care	45 (13%)	50 (12%)	67 (17.9%)	63 (17%)
Number of children in independent fostering agency placements	44 (13%)	66 (16%)	54 (14%)	66 (18%)

Gender and Age Comparison

Age breakdown	
0-2	47
3-6	31
7-10	46
11-15	89
16+	32
Gender	
Female	109
Male	136

The age group with the highest proportion of our children in our care is 11-15 years. This is the age group for which the exit from care is less prominent. Children in the other age groups will exit more readily to return home, to family members, have Special Guardianship or Adoption Orders made. Clearly supporting the 11-15 year olds and their families is a key priority to ensure that the numbers of children who are able to return to their own families and communities or move to alternative arrangements on a permanent basis do so, whilst ensuring our children are safe and well. The gender ratio of children in our care remains higher for males which is a consistent pattern year on year, particularly in the 11 to 15 age group, which has been a consistent pattern.

	As at 30th June 2021
No. children in Foster Placements (in-house)	116
Age breakdown	
0-2	19
3-6	10
7-10	13
11-15	52
16+	22
Gender	
Female	53
Male	63

	As at 30th June 2021
No. of children in Family and Friends placements	63
Age breakdown	
0-2	16
3-6	14
7-10	15
11-15	15
16+	3
Gender	
Female	29
Male	34

	As at 30th June 2021
No. of children in Foster Placements (agency)	66
Age breakdown	
0-2	12
3-6	7
7-10	18
11-15	22
16+	7
Gender	
Female	27
Male	39

The teenage cohort remain the most challenging to place and the most costly in terms of placement commissioning. Blackburn with Darwen's short break offer alongside the therapeutic support from Revive, is key to identifying, sustaining and supporting foster placements for this group of young people if residential provision is to be reduced further. However, for some young people in the 11-15 age bracket, a residential placement is the preferable option for example those with more complex emotional and mental health/therapeutic needs, or children with complex health needs and disabilities. By the end of Quarter 1 there were 22 (almost 6%) children and young people placed in agency residential placements which again is a largely consistent figure over the previous year 2020/21.

Placement Type:

The vast majority of our cared for children are in foster care as the table below outlined:

Placement Type	April	May	June
Adoptive Placements	14	14	13
Foster Placements (in-house)	122	119	116
Foster Placements (agency)	58	60	66
Friends & Family	65	63	63
Placed with Parents	58	60	63
Independent Living	0	0	0
Children's Homes (in-house)	4	3	3
Children's Homes (agency)	24	24	22
Secure	1	1	1
Prison/HMYOI	1	1	1
NHS	1	1	1
Residential Accom Not Subject to CH Regulations	12	14	13
Other	9	11	9
Family Centre/Mother and Baby Unit	1	1	3

Family and Friends Carers

At the end of Quarter 1 there were 35 family and friends fostering households, this is higher than the previous quarter due to an increase in the number of family members being assessed. We are assessing a further 7 households where a child is placed with their family under private arrangements. We are now offering support to SGO placements. The number of households we are supporting where there is a Special Guardianship Order (SGO) is 22. There has been an increase in all these areas in comparison with the previous quarters.

During Quarter 1 there were 51 viability assessments completed, along with 34 full, combined assessments. These assessments included Regulation 24's placements, 38.6 placements and private SGO applications. The number of viabilities remains on par to the previous quarter whilst the number of combined assessments has increased by a significant amount. It is thought this increase in assessment is due to demand of the impact of COVID on family pressures as well as proactive social work by the Assessment and Social Work Teams who are identifying potential contingency options at an early stage than previously and making use of Family Group Conference to inform this, leading to better planning for our children.

Throughout the pandemic and lockdown periods, in line with the RAG rating risk assessment, our social workers have been undertaking face to face home visits due to the complex nature of the work and safeguarding duties being undertaken. Assessments continue to be all over the UK with the social workers needing to complete home visits to South Wales, Scotland, Hampshire and Stoke which places demand on the service.

Placement Stability/Disruption

During Quarter 1 2021/22 there have been 3 children who have had a placement disruption resulting in them having experienced 3 or more placements during the previous year despite attempts to stabilise and support them to remain. The impact of the pandemic cannot be underestimated a year down the line and the beginning of some return to the new 'normal', despite the resilience of our foster carers. The residential sector has also seen the impact resulting in placement disruptions for teenagers specifically. There is also competitive demand for fostering and residential placements with other Local Authorities. This can increase the pressure that can be placed on placements that are already disrupting given that an alternative plan can be difficult to prepare for.

Ethnicity of Children in our Care

Over the Quarter 1 period there have been 50 referrals for foster placements. The referrals consisted of individual children, young people, sibling groups and mother and baby. Out of the 50 referral received, 41 were of white British ethnicity, 1 was of Asian/Pakistan ethnicity, 5 were of white British/Asian ethnicity, 1 was of Hungarian/Czech ethnicity, 1 was of Afghanistan origin and 1 was of Asian/Sri Lankan origin.

During this period there has only been one short term transracial placement made with in-house carers whose ethnic background was different from that of the child. It was considered at the time of matching and in view of the wishes and feelings of the child's parents, coupled with the skills and experiences of the carers, and having a pre-established relationship with the child, this was positively matched.

Additionally, during this quarter there have been 13 referrals for mother and baby foster placement. 10 were of white British origin, 2 of Asian/Pakistan origin, 1 of Hungarian/Czech origin, there was 1 Asian/Pakistan who was placed with an agency mother and baby who was not a cultural match, however discussions took place between the Children's Social Worker and Fostering Agency and felt this was a positive match with the foster family.

There have been no other non-cultural matches made in this period.

Children with disabilities in Foster Care

There are 9 children and young people in our care who have disabilities; 6 who are cared for by our in-house foster carers and 3 in agency placements. There are no children in our care who have disabilities who are cared for by their own family members. The proportion of children in our care who have a disability is a low figure in comparison to our North West Local Authority neighbours, and is largely due to the supportive and preventative packages that Blackburn with Darwen provide for children with complex needs and disabilities. Short breaks, commissioned and our 'Local Offer' of the in house Apple Trees provision and with in-house carers, assists families to support their children within their own home as opposed to requiring alternative accommodation.

It remains a continual challenge for the Service to identify in-house or Independent Fostering Agency placements for children with disabilities specifically; largely due to the more complex needs of young people being referred for placements but also the practical and environmental factors impacting upon potential Foster Carers, where adaptations to accommodate the young person may be required. Foster carers are provided with the relevant training and support to meet the specific needs of the child they have in placement and are able to access support from the Children with Disabilities Team with aids and adaptations, Disability Links registration and information and advice where needed.

Placement Stability and Sufficiency.

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 with the average figure for England being 11% and North West average at 9%. The percentage for Blackburn with Darwen at the end of Quarter 4 is 8% so this is positive when compared to average figures for the region and nationally. The figure for Quarter 1 is 0.8% which is a little higher than it was during the same quarter last year and likely due to the impact of COVID strain.

The current North West placement framework is competitive for both fostering and residential provision, with Local Authorities competing for placements and both foster carers and Independent providers being able to 'take their pick' of referrals which is a challenge, especially when placing children who are in their teenage years with significant emotional or mental health needs.

Blackburn with Darwen have been involved in the DfE fostering Seed-funding partnership with Blackpool, Cumbria and Lancashire (Consortium known as BBCL), a partnership working together with Outcomes UK to improve commissioning and sufficiency planning. This is a feasibility study that aims to improve the fostering offer by looking at collaborative approaches to recruitment, training and commissioning. The Consortium of BBCL have been holding regular 6 weekly Fostering Exchange Days to promote children and young people requiring long term foster placements and good quality matching processes. This involves Independent Fostering Agencies attending virtual events which BwD host to hear profiles of children and young people who are hard to place requiring foster placements. We have had some great success with this process and over the 9 months BwD have identified placements for 6 young people, 1 of whom with disabilities being placed in a long term matched foster placement moving from residential provision.

One of the BBCL work streams is developing a sub regional framework contract for a Flexible Agreement for Independent Foster Care agencies. The flexible agreement will involve the commissioning of Independent Fostering Agencies to provide sufficiency of care for Blackburn with Darwen children for those organisations who meet the appropriate criteria, allowing access to the right offers of care for our children locally.

These arrangements are intended to improve sufficiency for our cared for children and allow for more co-ordinated and planned transitions into care arrangements for them. Currently there is high demand for the care offers which are made both inside and outside of the BBCL footprint which results in children from outside of the footprint being offered the care and children from within the BBCL footprint being offered care outside of the boundary. It is estimated that between 30 and 50% of the care offers in the BBCL footprint are made to children who ordinarily reside outside of the boundary. With the proposed arrangements there should be an improved offer. This should also strengthen the balance of the relationship between the Independent Fostering Agencies and Local Authorities in working together in a planned way to meet the needs of our children.

The development of a Fostering Front Door Worker is also being progressed, whereby an experienced Fostering Social Worker will be responsible for the front door taking in foster carer enquiries, supporting placement requests and matching. The service will develop closer working relationships with Independent Fostering Agencies and will establish a more personable and enthusiastic approach. The Front Door Worker will also be the gateway to accessing commissioned arrangements within the residential sector should a foster care placement not be able to be sourced. This means that from the outset of a request being made for a placement for any of our children the Front Door Worker is firmly hold of the child. This should ensure that the right placements are secured for the right children at the right time, meaning improved placement availability and stability.

Additionally, in promoting placement stability there are pre disruption meetings held and the expertise of the Fostering Support Worker and REVIVE colleagues are drawn upon.

Engagement with Children & Young People and the VOICE Group

Feedback is regularly sought from our cared for children from their Children in Our Care reviews and other sources such as:

- The Voice Group
- Participation in the recruitment of staff/interview process
- Support Groups for Children/Events
- Foster Carer Annual Review Feedback
- Feedback from Social Workers/Supervising Social Workers
- The Investors in Children process
- Participation activities such as the 'sons and daughter's' group, although this has been paused during COVID and is due to recommence in April 2022.

The arrangements for the Participation Lead have changed during Quarter 1 and the role moved over to Young Peoples Services. Our Fostering Support Worker has been tasked with supporting her in engaging our young people with co-design of their version of the Corporate Parenting Strategy. This was completed over a number of months with sessions that were held remotely via Microsoft Teams. Feedback from our children and young people and their input has been invaluable and their reporting in this document shows how their voices were captured. The young people are happy with the final draft of the young person's version. In undertaking this piece of work it is noted that they really 'put to task' some of our department leaders. They felt listened to and heard by staff and also felt they were talked with, rather than at. Children and young people informed adults of their key priorities.

Our cared for children in the Voice group shared that they were not fully aware of what the role was of a Looked After Children's nurse, so they were invited in to the Voice group meeting to explain their roles. This gave the children and young people understanding and knowledge of what the nurses supported them with and where they could access this support.

Barnardo's staff also joined the Voice group during Quarter 1, talking through the advocate and mentoring program as our cared for children had reported that they weren't clear regarding their role. Our Executive Member has been to chat with some of our young people, alongside some of the Children in Our Care and Fostering social workers.

Feedback from Children in Foster Care:

The following comments have been made by children and young people during the co-production of their Corporate Parenting Strategy:



"Without our contributions decisions may not hold the young person in mind." Senior Voice Member

"I like people to listen to what I am saying. This makes me feel happy, because I know I am being listened to." Junior Voice Member

"I am confident that young people will feel supported in placements" Junior Voice Member

"People need to know that we need supporting with our health and wellbeing. I think this is a good priority because our health is important" Junior Voice Member

"....we are supported with our identity and what we can achieve" Senior Voice Member

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. 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. There are two foster carer representatives identified to participate in the Health Sub-Group and they have already attended two sessions.

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 for children and young people via therapy and also supports life story work. The Team are proactive in early intervention work and their focus is supporting placement stability alongside emotional and psychological therapy and intervention. Blackburn with Darwen have called upon the support of the team over the past year to help children in our care and their carers to feel supported throughout the pandemic and to have strategies to assist them alongside training and consultation.

There were a total of 30 referrals to the REVIVE team received in the first quarter April to June 2021; 14 in April; 7 in May and 9 in June). 13 of these were from the Assessment and Safeguarding Teams and 15 were referred from social workers working with Children in Our Care one from Frontline Unit and one from Adoption. This is a similar number of referrals to Quarter 4 of 2020/21 although there is a slightly higher proportion of referral from the CIOC Social Workers which is a positive trend, as the primary aim of Revive is to work with this cohort of children. Referral reasons ranged from concerns about experiences of trauma, support for parents and carers to respond to children's distress and behaviours that challenge, and emotional support for young people in crisis.

In breaking down the age range, 3 referrals were made for children aged 5 or under, 11 referrals were for primary aged children 6-11 years and 11 referrals were for children aged between 12 and 15. Four referrals were received in this period for children aged 16-18 but there were no referrals made from the leaving care team. It is thought this might in part be due to this cohort of young people choosing to access services via other routes and the transition over into adult services.

The clinical contacts that have taken place are as follows:

- 46 new consultations were held in this period plus 23 review consultations where the team around the child are asked to formulate the current psychological and unmet needs.
- Clinical case supervision was offered to social workers for 9 young people.
- 165 sessions of Face to face therapy were delivered to 30 young people open to the team
- Only 14 sessions of online therapy were delivered to 6 young people in this quarter showing the move away from online working.
- Psychological assessments were offered to 11 children over 20 sessions.
- Carer support was often offered online or via telephone due to the preference of the carers and 107 sessions were offered in this quarter.

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. The working relationship between Children's Social Care and Education staff specifically has shown real commitment to ensuring that our children in care continue to receive education and meet their attainment targets. Attendance at school of the children in our care remained at 95% which is excellent taking into consideration that schools only reopened again in March. Foster Carers did a fantastic job supporting children back in to school. We had 39 Year 11's who were eligible to be entered for exams, schools and young people were busy getting evidence together to submit to Ofqual. New Directions worked with all our Year 11's supporting applications to colleges and training providers.

Transitions

The Leaving Care Service has the Investing in Children Award, and the Service was rated as 'Good' by Ofsted from the last 2017 inspection. A Leaving Care Personal Advisor will be allocated to a young person at 15 years and 3/4s. The Leaving Care Personal Advisor will then start to build a relationship with the young person and support them to achieve their Pathway plan, their goals and aspirations for their future and support them to develop their independence skills. The social worker should have the Pathway Plan completed together with the young person by their 16th Birthday along with the Pathway Plan 2, which looks at what and how the Pathway Plan will be achieved.

'Staying Put' for young people post 18 years with their foster carers is promoted by the Leaving Care Team and the young person's Personal Advisors and their Social Worker at an early stage, foster carers also receive information on the 'Staying Put' arrangements. There have been no new Staying Put referrals during this Quarter whereby 2 of our young people have turned 18, however it remains an area that Personal Advisors and Social Workers are working on with our young people and their foster carers.

The Leaving Care Team continues to offer supported lodgings and supported accommodation and Accommodation with floating support which increases the choices 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 of 2020/21 with a post 16 provision being established at Whalley New Road to create 4 further supported accommodation placements for this age group 16 plus. At the end of this Quarter there are four young people in placement and they have 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.

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 Permanence Tracking Panel meets frequently to discuss and monitor progress for Care Orders at Home, Special Guardianship Orders, Section 20 Accommodated and both non-matched and long term matched placements. There is an emphasis given to achieving a formal matching decision for those children and young people in long-term foster placements, to promote their emotional stability and achieve a permanence plan.

The Fostering Service

The Fostering Service is fully resourced. During Quarter 1 2021/22 period within the Mainstream fostering team there has been a member of staff returned from maternity leave fulfilling their part-time Supervising Social Worker role. Another member of staff continues to remain on long-term absence which is being managed accordingly. The Mainstream Fostering Team Manager has resigned from their position and within Quarter 1 interviews were undertaken and a successful candidate has been appointed to fulfil the position from the 12th July 2021, ensuring that there is handover and continuity of this role. The Service Leader has also started a period of maternity leave and her position has been filled through a secondment opportunity. The previous Head of Service retired at the end of the last Quarter of 2020/21 and is succeeded by the new Head of Service for Children in Our Care and Permanence who was promoted from a Service Leader role. All 3 of these new members of the management structure have most recently worked in the Safeguarding part of the service and bring the experience of that part of our children's journey into their work. This has also allowed for there to be a handover over period to try to ensure seamless transitions.

A Special Guardianship Order (SGO) Support Worker has joined the team on a full time basis in recognition of the need to support the increasing number of SGO's being issued and to ensure the offer of support to SGO carers is on par to family and friends foster carers. Currently the SGO Support Worker is being trained to offer therapeutic life story work to families who care for children under SGOs.

The focus of the service is foster carer recruitment, retention and sufficiency of our carers. The addition of Exchange Days for family finding has been a huge success, even though held via a virtual platform. The continued work with the BBCL in relation to a flexible agreement with Independent Fostering Agencies continues and should be ready for full implementation in May 2022. One of our children has been matched with a foster family using this arrangement. This has allowed for a plan to be agreed for them to step down from residential care and be brought back into the BwD footprint, thus allowing them to be closer to their friends, family, education and the services that are best placed to support them within this context.

Foster Carer Recruitment

2018/19	Enquiries	ROI	Conversion
Q1	34	11	32%
2019/20	Enquiries	ROI	Conversion
Q1	39	6	15%
2020/21	Enquiries	ROI	Conversion
Q1	40	8	20%
2021/22	Enquiries	ROI	Conversion
Q1	29	16	55%

During Quarter 1 there were a total of 29 enquiries and 16 Initial Visits (IV) which is a solid conversation of 55% the quarter. May was the best performing May over the last 4 years. Although the overall enquiries are down for the quarter the number of Registrations of Interest (ROI)/IVs have increased suggesting a much more productive conversion.

Below is a breakdown of where prospective carers shared that they found out about us:

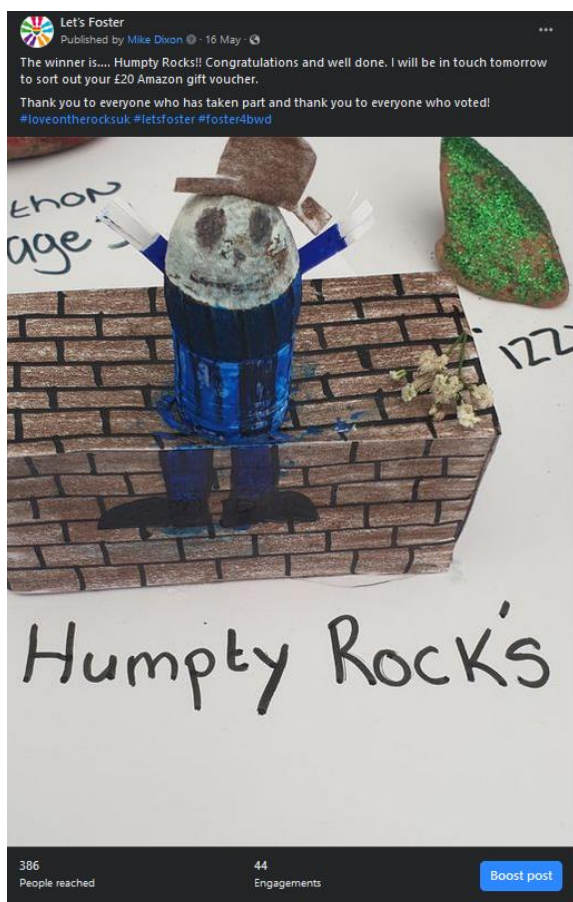
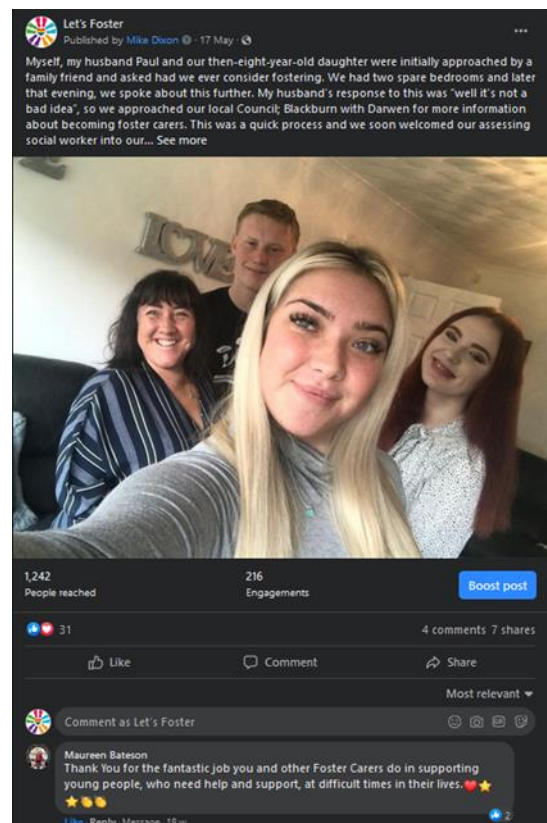
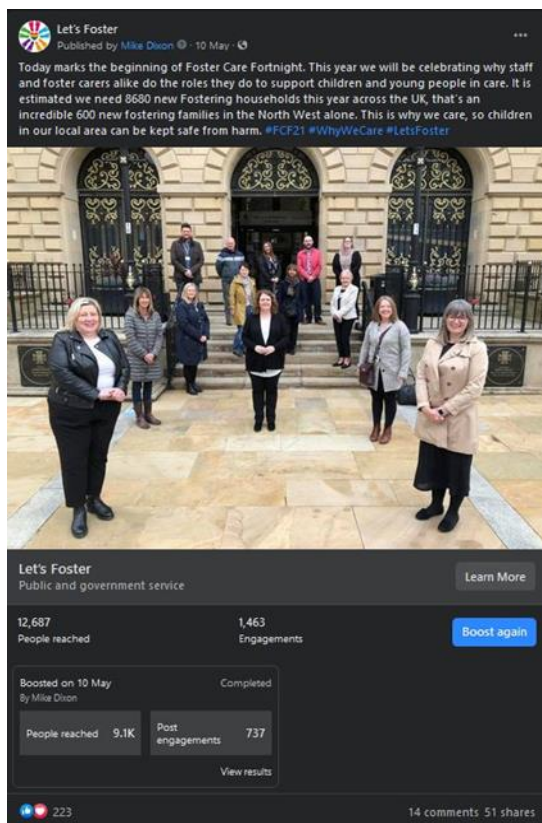
Google	9
Web Ads	4
Facebook	4
Radio	1
Other/Event	6
Recommend A Friend	2
Phone	3

Google is still our strongest channel along with the web ads and Facebook ads that are targeted each month. This month saw an uplift in other/event as we held 2 community events on each Wednesday of Fostering Fortnight. Leaflets were handed out during these events that included the website address and the phone number. It has been positive to see people mentioning the leaflets when enquiring. We had one that mirrored the website imagery and the other was targeted at Sibling foster carers.

During the events people recognised the brand and said they had heard us on the Radio. This channel is still supporting Google and Facebook and has worked really well at keeping a constant message in people's minds.

Fostering Fortnight – weeks of 10 and 17 May 2021

We have had Fostering Fortnight during Quarter 1. This was a little different this year. We made use of some free space in the market at Blackburn and in Darwen and spoke to people as they returned to the shops after lockdown.



The theme this year was #WhyWeCare and we had photos and posts from across children's services from staff and carers giving their reasons why they do the job they do. We had a fantastic response over social media and it was really nice to see how much positivity came from the fortnight. The number of enquiries were not as high as expected but this true of the comparison across the country.

Our posts had a reach on Facebook for the quarter of over 54,000 which was up 21% on the previous quarter and we are keen to look at the impact on the figures in the next Quarter.

We also held foster carer walks and a rock painting competition for all the children. We shared all the photos we received and put them all out across social media and the one with the most likes and shares won.

Over the course of the fortnight we had Social Workers and Foster Carers leafleting and this appeared to have a positive impact on enquiries as we saw phone calls the same week from people who had them pushed through the doors, something we hadn't seen in previous years. We have done this since using a distribution company and hope to see the same responses moving forwards.

The overall brand of 'Lets Foster' which is used by Blackburn with Darwen will be reviewed to look towards a more personalised 'BwD' brand which identifies us

as a Local Authority. Research has told us that 'Let's Foster' could be confused with Independent Fostering Agencies' branding so this is an area of focus for 2021/22. This will coincide with our Front Door Worker role being developed so that we are giving a clear message about the positive developments of our Service and our commitment to progressing.

Foster Carer Retention and Fostering Panel

During Quarter 1, there have been a total of 8 resignations presented to the fostering panel. 2 resignations received was a result of carers making the decision to retire from the fostering service following a considerable length of service and COVID considerations. 1 further resignation was received due to the approved carers being successful in their adoption assessment of a child that they had fostered and no longer having the capacity to foster alongside this decision. A further 4 resignations received were due to the carers being granted Special Guardianship orders and no longer being required to remain as connected carers. An additional resignation was as a result of approved connected carers caring for a young person who turned 18 years and supporting the young person under staying put arrangement.

During Quarter 1, there have been a total of 8 assessment presented to the main fostering panel for panel to consider their approval and a further 2 reviews following allegations/concerns. Within the assessments presented to panel there were 2 mainstream fostering households, 4 family and friends and 2 regulation 24 placements. There was 1 regulation 24 assessment extension request, which was supported. There were a further 3 regulation 24 assessments for noting for the panel to oversee. There were a further 7 first annual reviews presented to the panel for consideration for re-approval following a review of the last 12 months of fostering which were supported.

During Quarter 1 there was only 1 evaluation form received, which did not highlight any area of concern.

There are currently 8 approved carers who can offer short breaks, although the offer and their availability during COVID restrictions has been impacted given concerns regarding the spread of the virus and the inevitable increased risk of exposure. Short break carers are providing short term/long-term placements alongside short break support. Short break carers continue to buddy up and provide day care and emergency support to other short break carers.

Short Breaks

Short break carers ordinarily attend support groups every 3 months. Please note the last support group was held on 10 March 2020. Discussions have taken place about having support groups via zoom, however some carers have been reluctant because they are not technologically skilled. This has been addressed with them during supervision and the COVID pandemic situation has further hindered them obtaining access to attend computer course.

We have lost some bedroom space due to foster carers who have provided short breaks now being approved as shared lives carers. There is, however, a real benefit of this as whilst the young person transitions into adult services, it provides them with continued support into adulthood with the same carer.

During the ROI process, information about short breaks continues to be discussed with potential applicants. Now that lock down measures are more relaxed, initial visits are being conducted within the home environment to allow the opportunity to connect with our potential foster carers and build up a positive working relationship.

Regular planned short breaks were on hold due to COVID 19 lockdown measures in situ since 23 March 2020. However, short breaks plans were reviewed and have been reinstated. During this quarter a further 5 new short break requests were supported within the service with 4 remaining in situ. In addition to this, 5 long standing short breaks arrangements have been reinstated. Our short break foster carers have been advised to continue having lateral flow tests and where appropriate to do so the children who are receiving short breaks are also having lateral flow tests

Foster Carer Training

During the COVID 19 pandemic, there have not been face to face foster carer training sessions provided due to the restrictions with indoor meetings. The Service liaised with workforce 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. This has continued through Quarter 1, however, First aid training resumed in May 2021 in smaller groups and some of our foster carers have attended this training. This training will remain face to face with further dates available to carers until October 2021 to ensure that all of our foster carers have this.

The foster carers have continued to access the online offer for training which was made available in December 2020. The Training Support Development Standards (TSD) for foster carers continues to be offered. This is for newly approved carers and is completed in the first 12 months to evidence they meet Standards. There has also been an online offer for Social Care Information and Learning service (SCILS) and Education and Information and Learning (EILS), along with mandatory safeguarding training. There has been positive feedback from carers who report the online offer is varied and has been enjoyable to complete.

Over the last quarter, the TSD training has continued to be delivered over Microsoft Teams. The first group (4 fostering households) successfully completed this and there was positive feedback received on how the group ran and also participation between the attendees. Group 2 consisted of 3 households who successfully completed this at the end of May. Group 3 were continuing to be working through the programme which consists of 4 fostering households at the end of Quarter 1. Further TSD training has been planned for September 2021 in which 5 fostering households have been booked on.

In April, Parents Against Criminal Exploitation (PACE) delivered a full day training to carers on PACE/Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE)/Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) and grooming this was available to 12 carers who all attended. Due to this being delivered on Microsoft Teams there had to be smaller group numbers attending. This will be a rolling programme offered through PACE.

The fostering support groups continued during this quarter, this has seen attendance grow in numbers over the months and have included again service updates with guest speaker from Foster Talk, Nichola Mendez who provided updates about membership, the carers offer of support, and a Tax workshop of how to complete this for their role.

The service will continue over the next quarter offering monthly carer support groups, with guest speakers attending, moving to a more blended approach in regards to delivering training, both online and face to face, in line with current Government guidelines and restrictions being taken into account. Journey to Foster will commence over the next review period, this will be delivered in smaller groups enabling applicants to attend face to face.

The counselling concept and communication training continues to be on hold due to the pandemic. This eclectic training will look at various theories and will be tailor made; the objective of this training is to explore strategies of communication, applying counselling skills and being more self-aware. This is work in progress.

In September 2021, the service is delivering a health and wellbeing fortnight, this will commence on the 20th September 2021. Over the course of the two weeks, carers will be able to join in, drop in workshops, live videos and online training.

From September 2021, a training programme will be available to carers for all training offers over the next academic year. Feedback from our carers state they are looking forward to face to face training sessions and others continue to have some anxieties around attending direct face to face training and prefer at this time to complete online training.

Fostering Managers meet monthly with the Foster Carer Association to discuss issues and feedback and to promote service development.

Review Panel

During this Quarter period, the annual review panel has resumed but remains delivered as a virtual panel with the use of Microsoft teams. This is received positively by staff and carers and enhanced carer's skills using online platforms. There have been 23 annual reviews presented within this Quarter period, with the review panel seeing 14 of those with carers in attendance for their review virtually which has been a positive transition and adjustment to the new world of working. There has been a total of 1 evaluation forms received providing positive feedback.

Complaints

During Quarter 1 there were 2 complaints reported. 1 was made in respect to a foster carers daughter sharing a photograph and confidential information in respect of a previous child fostered which resulted in a follow up home visit being conducted by the carers SSW and the Fostering Team Manager. This has resulted in further training and ongoing support being identified.

A further complaint received was made on behalf of a previous child placed mother who has complained about her daughter's previous foster carers sharing historic information. This complaint was managed appropriately and the complaint was closed after there was no evidence to support the complaint and the mother of the child did not wish to pursue this further.

Compliments

Within Quarter 1 a compliment has been received in respect of long-standing foster carers on behalf of the children's allocated social worker who commended the carers support provided to the children placed who have experienced significant trauma and as a result the children are thriving in the carers care.

Allegations

During Quarter 1, 1 allegation has been made in respect of foster carers on behalf of a child placed alleging physical assault. The investigation is ongoing with a referral made to LADO the carers remain suspended and it resulted in 3 children having to move to alternative foster placements within in-house provision.

Specific Incidents and Restraints

During Quarter 1, there have been 25 specific incidents recorded. Specific incidents that were recorded consisted of children and Young people who had A & E attendances, self-harm incidents, missing from home periods, displaying sexualised behaviours including having inappropriate images on their phone, smoking E-Cigarettes and one incident included an assault between two young people.

Serious Illness and Accidents

During this quarter, there have been no reports of accidents. The service has been supporting a carer who is awaiting a significant operation. The carer is fully supported and the young people in her care are attending short breaks with another carer on a fortnightly basis.

Missing from Home

During Quarter 1, there has been a total of 31 incidences of missing from home. Missing from Home protocol is followed and return interviews offered and/or carried out primarily by the ENGAGE service unless it is considered more appropriate for another colleague to undertake this.

Bullying

During Quarter 1, there was 1 reported incident of bullying on behalf of a young person. They confided in their carers that there had been repeated incidences of bullying on behalf of another young person when in attendance at school. This was highlighted to the carers Supervising Social Worker, Child's Social Worker and school who were notified of the individuals to address the matter further. No further incidences were reported after this.

Exemptions

There have been no new exemptions made during Quarter 1.

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 the senior managers and since the pandemic this has been at least a monthly basis. The Chair of the FCA sits on the Corporate Parenting Specialist Advisory Group. 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 the team to drive recruitment forward and are involved with planning events.

Part of the role of our Fostering Support Officer has been to support friends and family placements which are assessed by the Permanence Team. She holds monthly Fostering Support Sessions. These sessions are also held alongside the assessment sessions, where we have a member of the legal team come and discuss the assessment process and timescales. Mainstream foster carers also have a monthly support session. This is delivered by our Deputy Team Manager, and staff from various departments come and talk them through developments in the Local Authority and specifically their part of the service. Both mainstream and permanence teams have coordinated support group meetings for carers which are held 4-6 weekly and these are facilitated by staff.

In terms of future plans, it is intended that once the renovations are completed The Limes Hub can be used for coffee mornings and drop ins that can be offered for all of our foster carers. A 'Lets Get back Together at the Tipis' event has been arranged by the FCA and fostering service to celebrate coming out of COVID restrictions. This will be reported on in the next quarterly report.

Budget

Current placement pressures in-house and across the independent fostering agency landscape continue to place the commissioning budget under pressure, as increasingly adolescents and children with disabilities are placed in costly residential placements due to the lack of foster placements across the region and at a national level. There is an increase in the number of children and young people placed in-house and this is positive. However, there are still complex young people who require specific, therapeutic and residential provision and this understandably proves more costly and impacts upon the commissioning budget. A step-down approach is always considered for such placements, and since their introduction the success of the fostering exchange days has assisted in placing 5 children in long term placements, one of whom moved from a costly residential provision into a foster family. The Special Guardianship figures impact upon the budget overall, but on a positive note the increase in achieving SGO's is a reflection upon securing permanence in their own families/support network for our looked after children in the longer term.

Commissioned Placements

As was the case in Quarter 4 of 2020/21, the pressure and challenge upon the Local Authority to identify foster placements and in-house residential provision has remained significant during Quarter 1. The disruption of placements for teenagers for example both in fostering and residential care has been seen and it appears as though the impact of the pandemic has been becoming more evident as time has progressed. The service continues to try to be as creative as possible and offering short breaks to maintain existing placements and prevent disruption where this is achievable. However, it is worth noting that the impact of Covid-19 on the availability of short break carers and the availability of foster placements has been seen greatly making it difficult to create and offer such packages of support. The Local Authority are privileged to have our own Revive Psychology Team for Children in Our Care and children on the edge of care and this is utilised as early as possible to try to reduce placement disruption and to ensure early assessment and intervention both for foster placements and our in-house Lytham Road and Seeds provision.

The following is a break down of our foster placements commissioned from Independent Fostering Agencies.

Total number of commissioned foster placements in this period - 66

- 25 LT matched foster placements;
- 41 non LT matched including:

4 concurrency placements under Interim Care Orders;

4 children under Interim Care Orders including 2 sets of siblings;

6 parent and child placements of which 3 were Interim Care Orders and 3 Section 20 placements;

14 Care Orders;

7 Section 20 placements including 1 unaccompanied asylum seeking child;

6 Placement Orders

Number of new commissioned foster placements made in this period – 13

- 3 parent and child placements
- 10 others:-

1 teenager aged 15 under Section 20;

2 concurrency under Interim Care Orders;

1 Placement Order following adoptive placement breakdown;

4 Interim Care Orders (2 sets of siblings)

2 Care Orders as possible long term placements

Number of ended commissioned foster placements - 2

- 1 changed to adoptive from concurrency following adoptive match
- 1 disrupted

Requests for parent and child placements and assessment units, placing sibling groups and the age group 11-15 years, remain the most challenging for the service. Lytham Road Residential Children's Home (BwD) makes best use of its full capacity, with 4 young people in placement consistently. Nightsafe at St Silas has also been well utilised for post 16 young people and the referral process overseen by Leaving Care Manager and the Commissioning Panel, and the newly commissioned Gatehouse at Whalley New Rd (Nightsafe) has also been frequently accessed for post 16 placements. There has been use of the Sails framework via commissioning for our post 16 placements as appropriate and required.

New Service Priorities for 2021/22 going forward

Given that the vast majority of our cared for children are looked after by family and friends carers and our foster carers it is vital that the development of the fostering service is placed front and centre of the offer to our communities. The provision of well trained, experienced, valued and support carers who can respond to the

needs of our children is key. The vision is that in developing our service we allow for our children to be looked after, locally, with minimal disruption to their lives with continuity in their family relationships, friendship groups, activities, school and their key relationships in the professional networking supporting them.

Our key priorities are as follows:

1. The Service has a target of recruiting 20 new fostering households through 2021/22.
2. A Team Development Day will be an annual event to value and support the staff, and ensure specific training and development areas are actioned.
3. Foster Carer training will continue to develop, led by a Fostering Team/Deputy Manager. The Service will focus on the continued development of online training and the return of face to face training in the current climate. The overall training offer will be in line with Foster Carer requests and Minimum Standards. Nurturing Attachment sessions will continue to be delivered by Revive with the aim to enable all newly approved foster carers to access this early in their fostering journey.
4. The management team will continue to monitor compliance with Fostering Regulations and National Minimum Standards and will complete case file audits each month to support this.
5. Placement sufficiency and stability will continue to be a key area of focus, with areas for learning taken from disruption meetings and case auditing. The BBCL work will continue looking at recruitment, retention, sufficiency, and producing a Market Position Statement. The aim is to form a new local commissioning agreement and to continue to hold regular Exchange Days to focus on long term matching opportunities. The Exchange Days are going ahead 6 weekly and will continue to do so.
6. The Fostering Front Door will be a key priority. An experienced fostering Social Worker will be responsible for the front door taking in foster carer enquiries, supporting placement requests and matching. The service will develop closer working relationships with Independent Fostering Agencies and will establish a more personable and enthusiastic approach.
7. Recruitment will focus upon emergency and short break foster carers, alongside general recruitment for 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.
8. The recruitment of foster carers will become a team and service approach; recruitment will be promoted by fostering staff and foster carers alike with more robust campaigns taking on board recommendations from the DfE Seed funding research and reviewing our fostering 'brand' of 'Let's Foster' making this more Blackburn with Darwen Council focused.

Helen Kane
Service Leader, Permanence

