

Fostering Quarter 1 and 2 Report

1st April – 30th September 2022

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

Children in our Care and Fostering Overview:

The number of children in our care saw a decrease from quarter 1 to 2, with young people leaving care due to reasons such as turning 18 years of age, being adopted, granted a Special Guardianship Order or proceedings ending with rehabilitation back to birth family to give some context to these figures.

It consistently remains the case that males, in the 11-16 age group and of White British ethnicity are the highest cohort of children and young people in our care. This has been a persistent trend over the years. In terms of placements and stability, consistently in quarters 1 and 2 the teenage age group are more challenging to identify placements for both fostering and residential in the current climate. Sibling groups also present a challenge in terms of identifying foster placements when the care plan is one of maintaining children together. It remains the case that children with disabilities primarily are placed in residential settings as opposed to fostering. There is an ongoing campaign to try to recruit foster carers for children with SEND but this remains a local and national challenge. The fostering and children with disabilities teams work closely to try to be creative and also look at how adaptations can be utilised to expand the choice of foster placements for example for children with physical needs.

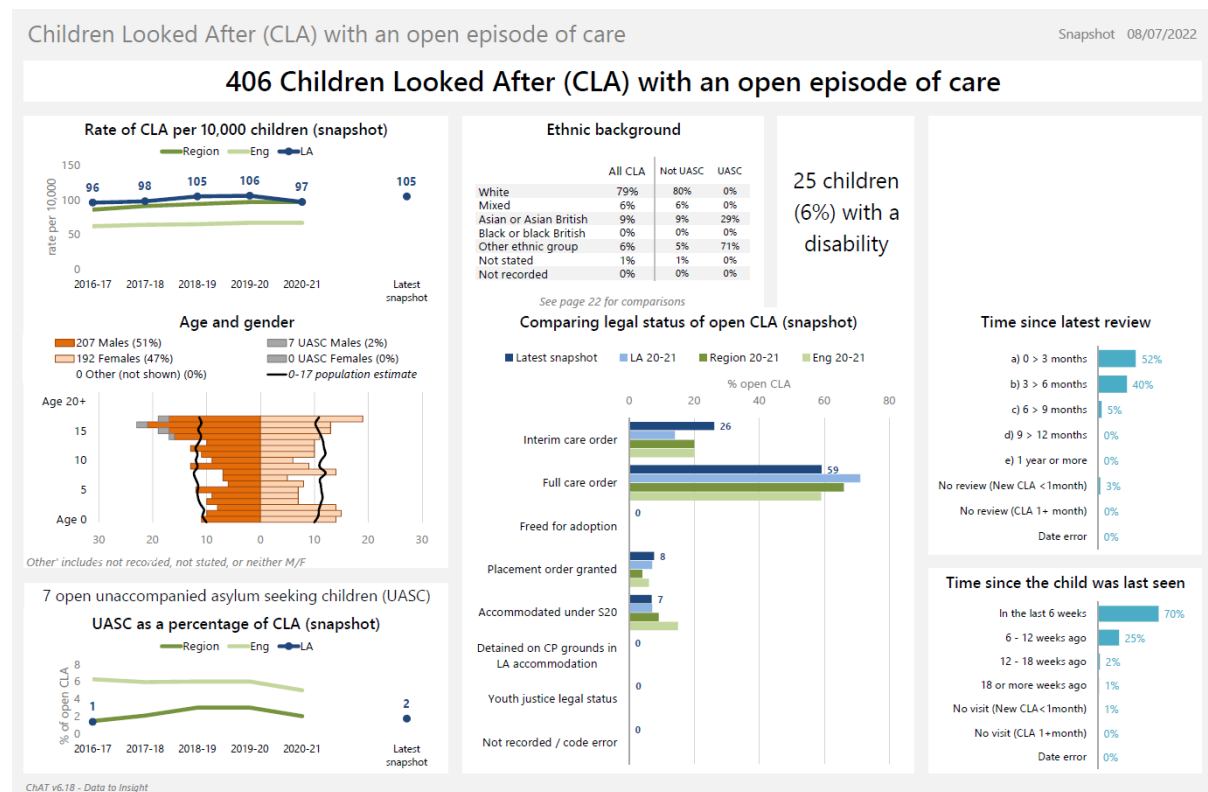
It is positive at the end of quarter 2 that the majority of children placed in foster placements are in our own, Blackburn with Darwen provision. The rate at which new foster carer applications is being received is another challenge, however the figures show that children in our care are primarily placed in-house, with 187 children and young people placed in-house fostering. There are 68 foster carers for our Local Authority.

The Foster Carer Register is produced weekly and Senior Managers meet with the Fostering Service to look at placement availability, data and vacancies. The figures can present as though there are vacancies in the Service, however it needs to be outlined that foster carers for a host of reasons often do not have full 'capacity' of their approval for 3 placements. Reasons include foster carer choice or their decision not to take a second or third placement, foster carer family or personal circumstances, or a conflict with matching more than one or two children together depending upon their needs.

The fostering service has had a revised 'fostering front door' offer whereby an experienced Social worker is supporting the Recruitment Officer with applications, but also coordinates placement searches both in-house and on the framework with Independent Fostering Agencies (IFA's). This remodel has been positive in that the Social Worker has a solid overview along with the Team Manager of the placement vacancies in the team and will liaise directly with foster carers, offering at times an enhanced support offer to them at the point of placement.

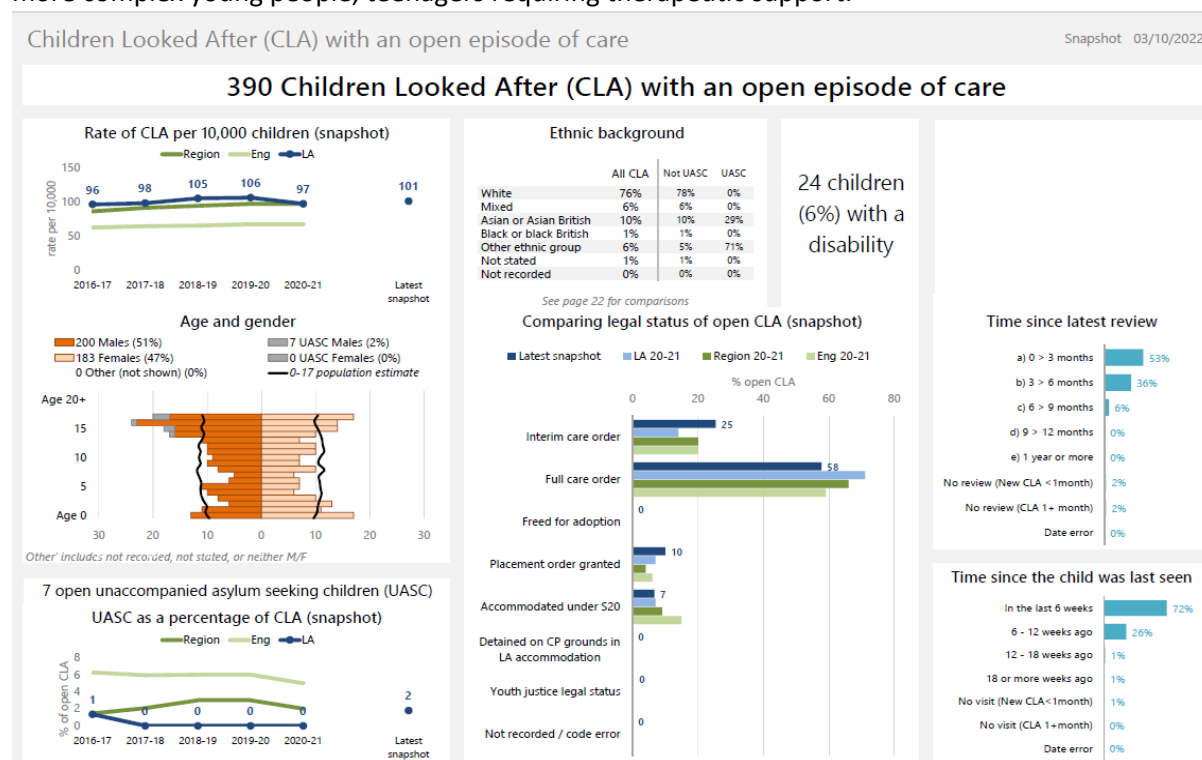
The introduction of the BBCL (BwD, Blackpool, LCC and Cumbria) collaborative sub regional framework has helped to generate some success with 'closer to home' in the Lancashire footprint placements, albeit this framework is new and the success of this in the longer term with placement sufficiency needs to be evaluated.

Quarter 1



Quarter 1 and 2 over the six month period saw 79 children enter our care, with 76 ceasing their period in care for the reasons outlined. The number of children who have remained in placement for 2 years or more remains the highest figure, despite a number of placements ending for some of the

more complex young people, teenagers requiring therapeutic support.



Placement Stability

The Department uses a definition of placement stability based on 3 or more placements in a 12 month period that is calculated on a cumulative basis over the year. The average for England is measured against the figures for 2013/14 when it was 10.7%; the comparable authority percentage for the same year was 10.1%. Since August 2017, placement stability has been deteriorating. This is not an issue specific to the Fostering Service but reflects instability for all types of placements and is an issue for Local Authorities overall.

Reasons for placement instability includes the disruption of placements for teenagers displaying challenging behaviours and missing from home episodes, and an influx of larger sibling groups. It remains the case that babies and under 2s are placed in parent and child assessment units and in foster placements for example for the duration of care proceedings, before settling into their permanent placement and this can impact upon the above figures. A robust support offer is always the response along with a review of foster carer training needs to try to prolong placements that are vulnerable. Disruption meetings are held for any long term matched foster placement that breaks down, and learning taken from the findings.

Teenagers are another high percentage group who have three or more placements, consistently due to behavioural needs and challenges for foster carers to manage in the longer term. Changes in educational placement also impact significantly upon placement stability. It can be challenging for the young person to emotionally invest in further foster placements when the first has disrupted. This is when the Service refers to REVIVE where consultations and assessments take place to support this group of young people and their carers. There is a focus on establishing a support package for teenagers at the point of a new placement commencing, to try to reduce the likelihood of disruption in the future.

Engagement with Children and Young People

The VOICE group meet both in person and virtually with children in our care and care leavers to gather views, ideas and feedback. For example, The Limes building in Darwen has recently opened up as a 'Hub' for children in our care, care leavers and foster carers and The VOICE group provided many ideas to assist with this project.

There is also feedback gathered from children in our foster placements as part of the foster carer annual review, and at fun day events feedback is gathered to assist with service delivery and to ensure children and young people have their voice and ideas heard.

Feedback from Children in Foster Care:

Children and young people, and foster carers, have made the following comments over Quarters 1-2:

'She makes me feel better when I am sad if I don't see my mum'

'I like drawing and going to theme parks with them, it's funny'

'I kind of like my placement, I want to live with my Dad but if I can't then this is the next best'

Feedback about fostering brothers and siblings:

'She is like my big sister' 'He plays football with me'

Engagement with Foster Carers

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

In Quarter 2 the FCA held for the second year running, a Foster Carer Summer Event at the Tipis at Riley Green which was supported by the Fostering Service and well attended. It is hoped this will be an annual event to enable foster carers, children in our care, care leavers and Children's Services staff to enjoy a day together to celebrate fostering and promote the service. In Quarter 1 there was also a fund raising event organised by the FCA in Blackburn which was again very well attended with numerous stalls, activities and raffles to raise money for FCA events.

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

Children and young people in our Care are encouraged to participate in a variety of activities in which they can succeed and are supported in achieving better outcomes. All local Children in our Care are given access to free sport and leisure activities within the Borough. 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.

Children in our Care have regular medicals at the statutory frequency appropriate for their age. There is a Designated Nurse, who takes an active role in following up health issues and assisting with health promotion work. Figures for Quarter 1 and 2 show that 90% of all Children in our Care have an up to date health assessment which is an increase from 2021/22. This figure is lower at 50% for

Children in our Care who have had a dental check up in the last 12 months. This is a focus of attention and promotion from Health and Social Care professionals to increase this data for dental checks.

Foster carers have a Health Passport for each child in their care, which is a record of all of the child's health details. There are 6% of Children in our care, who are registered as having a disability. Foster carers are provided with the relevant training and support to meet the specific needs of the child in placement and they are able to access support from the Children with Disabilities Team with aids and adaptations, Disability Links registration and information and advice where needed.

In relation to emotional wellbeing, Children in our Care have access to Clinical Psychology and related services through REVIVE and the East Lancashire Child and Adolescent Service (ELCAS) also known as Children and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS). The REVIVE Service is a partnership between Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council's Children's Services and East Lancashire Hospital Trust to provide emotional health support for children known to the Local Authority and is based at Duke Street. REVIVE delivers consultation to Foster Carers, training and direct intervention on emotional health and well-being. The Team consists of Clinical Psychologists, a Play Therapist and Mental Health Practitioners.

The Limes in Darwen as stated has now reopened and has a specific play therapy room and other therapy rooms to ensure our cared for children have a calm and pleasant environment to receive support. The building has been vacant but has now had a refurbishment and is to be used as a calming 'Hub' where our children and young people, and foster carers, can make use of the facilities.



Above – Play Therapy Room.



Above – Therapy Room and office space.

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 Pupil Premium allowance, previously paid to schools to support Children in our Care to achieve in school, is managed by the Virtual Head who has a system in place to administer and ensure the money is spent appropriately to enhance educational achievements. The Virtual Head quality assures all Personal Education Plans (PEPs).

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

Letterbox Club has continued over the past six months for all Children in our Care from Reception to Year 6, to encourage reading at home. Books and games are sent out on a monthly basis which are age appropriate. Again feedback has been very encouraging from the children who have stated that they enjoy receiving their parcels and carers have stated that they are definitely encouraging their children to read. Additional tuition is provided by Kip McGrath in English and Maths and this has been extended to our Years 5,6,9,10 and 11.

Nomination Forms for our annual Celebration of Achievement of Children in our Care and Care Leavers have been sent out to all Carers, Schools, Social Workers, Independent Reviewing Officers, Leaving Care PA's and other relevant professionals. The event will be held on 16th November at Ewood Park Premier Suite.

Overall attendance for the Virtual School was 91% in quarters 1 and 2, this is higher for our children/young people in foster care.

Transitions and Leaving Care

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

The Leaving Care Service has been through a whole service review with an increase in the number of Personal Advisors (PA's) on the team. There are now 12 PA's in the Leaving Care Service. The Leaving Care Service now has an additional Manager who started in post in Quarter 2. There is now a full time Manager and two Part-time managers, with a Leaving Care Service Personal Assistant Support Worker. The Care Leavers offer has been reviewed and Care Leavers entitlements have been increased.

Care Planning

The Care Planning and Fostering (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. There are Care Planning Meetings held with multi agency professionals for children and young people who require a robust plan around their placement support, to reduce the likelihood of disruption and also to identify appropriate placements to achieve permanence.

The Fostering Service

There are two teams within the Fostering Service, mainstream fostering and the permanence team. In the mainstream fostering team over the past 6 months the introduction of the 'fostering front door' has been a successful remodel to enhance creative solutions to placement sufficiency. There has been a steadily consistent number of enquiries from potential foster carers looking to be assessed. It is a local and national issue that the recruitment of foster carers continues to experience a huge challenge.

In the permanence team, the number of assessments for family and friends foster placements and Special Guardianship Orders has been an increase once again over the past 6 months. During this period Quarter 2 there have been 73 assessments undertaken which is a significant increase from the previous quarter of 43 assessments undertaken.

The Service coordinates two panels, main fostering panel and annual review panel. The Team and Deputy Managers act as Panel Advisor and maintain the panel members list along with training. The two panels are independently chaired. Feedback and evaluation is collated from both panels in order to inform service delivery.

The Service has permanent members of staff with only one agency worker this quarter, both teams have consistency of staff which is beneficial for foster carers and their support network.

Foster Carer Recruitment and Retention

The recruitment of foster carers remains a local and national challenge, and Blackburn with Darwen have responded by looking at branching out across our Local Authority border to target recruitment in areas such as Burnley, Accrington and other nearby towns. It is necessary to broaden our recruitment geographical area as many of our competitors have done trying to reach out to a wider audience. Quarter 1 and 2 saw 38 enquiries, but not all progress to Stage 1 assessment for a range of reasons. At the end of Quarter 2 there will be 6 new fostering households that have been assessed and approved. It remains the case that new applicants, and many of our existing foster carers are hesitant to foster teenagers. The foster carer support package is constantly reviewed and promoted and focus is given to providing a robust short break package at the start of placement as opposed to when foster carers reach crisis point.

During quarter 2 there have been a total of 2 resignations from mainstream foster carers presented to the fostering panel. One resignation was from mainstream foster carers who are moving to live in Australia. The second resignation came from a carer who has separated from his wife and wished to resign. Two resignations were also presented to panel from family and friends carers who had been granted a Special Guardianship Order which is a positive outcome.

There has been one fostering household that has left to move to an Independent Fostering Agency, and one household suspended due to an allegation and the need to return to panel.

The Service works closely with our FCA and take on board feedback to improve the service. In Quarter 2 there has been a review of our 'Out of Hours' support and how this can be improved using the skills and experience of our foster carers to help on a more formal and planned basis as opposed to ad hoc.

The recruitment efforts for Quarter 1 and 2 have included our Radio advertising campaigns, advertising at Blackburn Rovers, and a networking visit to Burnley Football Club to promote BwD fostering in this area. The Fostering Service have also sponsored an award at The One Voice Awards in the New Year.

There is also advertising at Blackburn Hawks Ice Rink and we are being promoted by the club in their supporters magazine and during game nights at home. We also have some opportunities for our looked after children and our foster carers to go and see some games and try out some hockey for themselves.

The Service also features on the NHS App homepage to have a more prominent visual for staff who may wish to explore fostering.

Training for Foster Carers:

During Quarters 1 and 2, foster carers accessed both online and group training offers. Over the past six months, The Revive Team have offered training to our foster carers around Attachment, Trauma and Therapeutic Parenting. Paediatric First Aid was also delivered in quarter 2 which is a mandatory course.

PACE (Parents against exploitation) was delivered to foster carers as was 'Promoting the Health and Wellbeing of Looked after children.' The mandatory TSD (Training, Skills and Development) training has been delivered.

Complaints

There have been no complaints during the last 6 months.

Compliments

Over Quarters 1 and 2 there have been 3 compliments received by the Service. Some examples of these compliments include Panel Chair complimenting Social Workers and the quality of their assessments being thorough. There has also been a compliment from a foster carer about the support received from their Supervising Social Worker.

Allegations

There have been two allegations in the last 6 months. One foster carer household resigned, the other is awaiting a review at Fostering Panel. Both cases have been appropriately dealt with and managed and support offered from Fostering Network/Foster Talk as an independent body.

There has been a new tender of the Independent Advice and Support contract and Foster Talk have been successful in securing this.

Specific Incidents and Restraints

There have been 3 incidents recorded over the past 6 months involving children in our care. These were overseen by Team Manager and Service Lead and appropriately managed and dealt with no further action.

Bullying Reports

There have been no reports of bullying over Quarters 1 and 2.

Serious illness and accidents

There have been 7 reports in Quarters 1 and 2 involving children in our care, and all have been appropriately managed and reported. There have been reports of foster carer serious illness involving three of our foster carers.

Missing from Home

Quarter 1 saw 5 reports of missing from home, and Quarter 2 had 8 reported incidences of missing from home. All were appropriately recorded via Engage and interviews offered or had taken place.

Commissioned Placements and Budget

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

Service Priorities for the Next Quarter.

1. The management team will continue to monitor compliance with Fostering Regulations and National Minimum Standards and will increase the number of case file audits completed each month to support this.

2. Placement sufficiency and stability will continue to be a key area of focus, with areas for learning taken from disruption meetings and case auditing. Blackburn with Darwen are part of the cohort of North West Authorities in collaboration under the BBCL sub-regional framework. The focus is always to place local children in local placements, with our in-house providers being the first preference. The objective is to 'grow more of our own' placements and also train those foster carers who wish to become more specialised for teenagers or children with complex needs for example. A review of the foster carer allowances is underway.

3. Recruitment will focus upon emergency and short break foster carers and foster carers who can support teenagers, to respond to the increasing demand for urgent placements. 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.

4. The Remand/PACE foster carer household has ended and there is a need to recruit other foster carers who can offer this specialist and niche placement for the Youth Offending Service. There are some ongoing discussions with an Independent Provider about the possibility of commissioning a service.

5. The Limes in Darwen which has now opened will be well utilised as a therapy provision for Revive, and a Hub for children in our care, alongside being a venue for independence support for care leavers and direct work sessions. This is a valuable provision which is now being used to its potential.