

Fostering Quarter 3 Report

October- December 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.

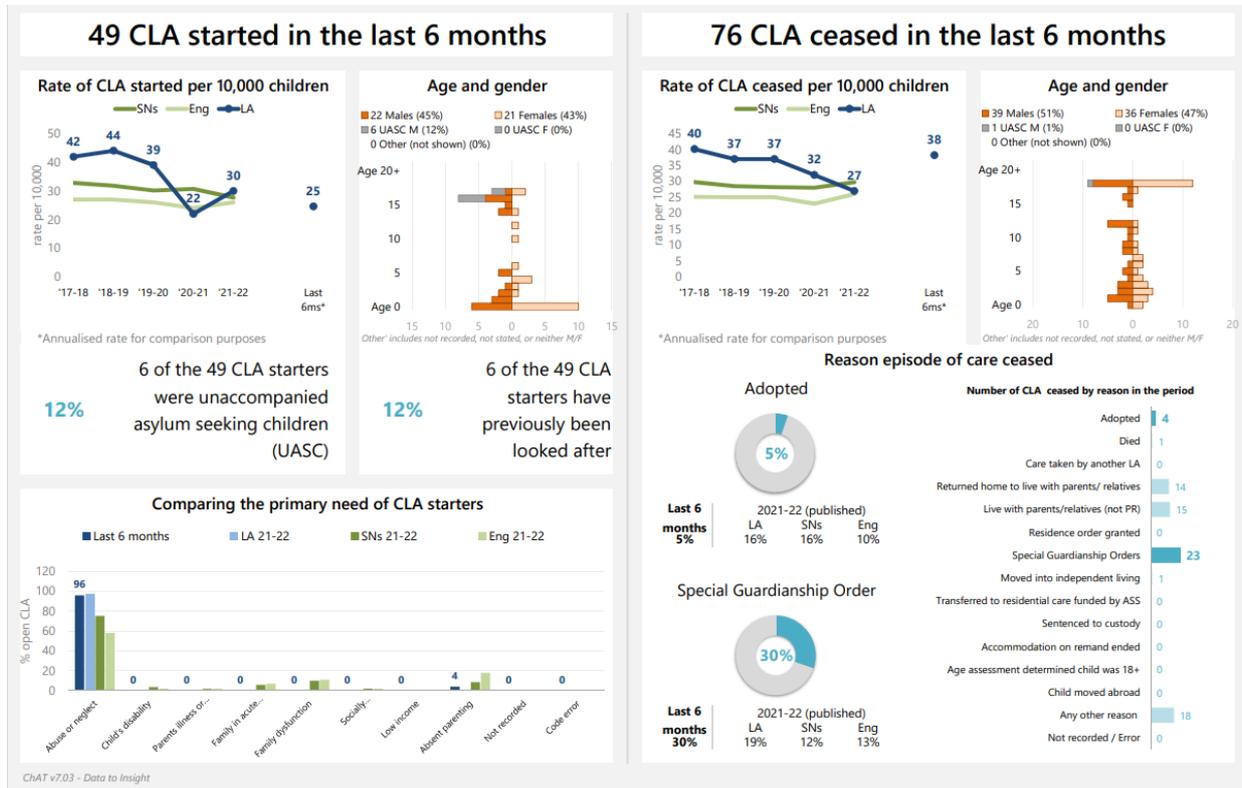
Introduction

In December 2022, a new interim Head of Service for Corporate Parenting and Permanence, as well as a new Service Lead for fostering have been appointed. Further to this, there has been the development of a significant Transformation Plan which considers all areas of the fostering service. The Transformation Plan includes 6 main areas which are:-

1. Digital Transformation Programme
2. Recruitment and Links with Communication Team
3. Retention of Foster Carers/Allowances
4. Commissioning and Contracts
5. Payments Panel/Governance
6. Workforce Development

The aim of the plan is to ensure the fostering service receives adequate investment and strategic oversight to meet the needs of the service with a focus on the above six areas. This development plan will aim to ensure that our children who are cared for are provided with placements that are local and mainly in house, with highly trained foster carers who receive appropriate support from the local authority. In addition, placements can provide long term, permanent care without delay and where the children and young people in these placements achieve the best possible outcomes and live life to their full potential.

Children in our Care and Fostering Overview: Quarter 3



There continues to be a decrease in the number of children who are looked after by the local authority. In the last 6 months the number of children becoming cared for by the local authority is 49 compared to the previous quarter where there were 76. The number of children being cared for in Blackburn with Darwen is above the average nationally. In this quarter 23 children left care due to Special Guardianship Orders, 5 children due to adoption orders, 29 children were rehabilitated back into the care of their parents and 18 children left care due to reaching the age of 18.

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 and remain the most difficult to place children and young people. This has been a persistent trend over the years and is consistent with figures nationally for identifying both fostering and residential placements. 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 Special Educational Need and Disability (SEND) but this remains a local and national challenge. The Fostering Team are working in collaboration with the Children with Disabilities Teams to be creative and solution focussed and to also look at how adaptations can be utilised to expand the choice of foster placements, for example for children with physical needs.

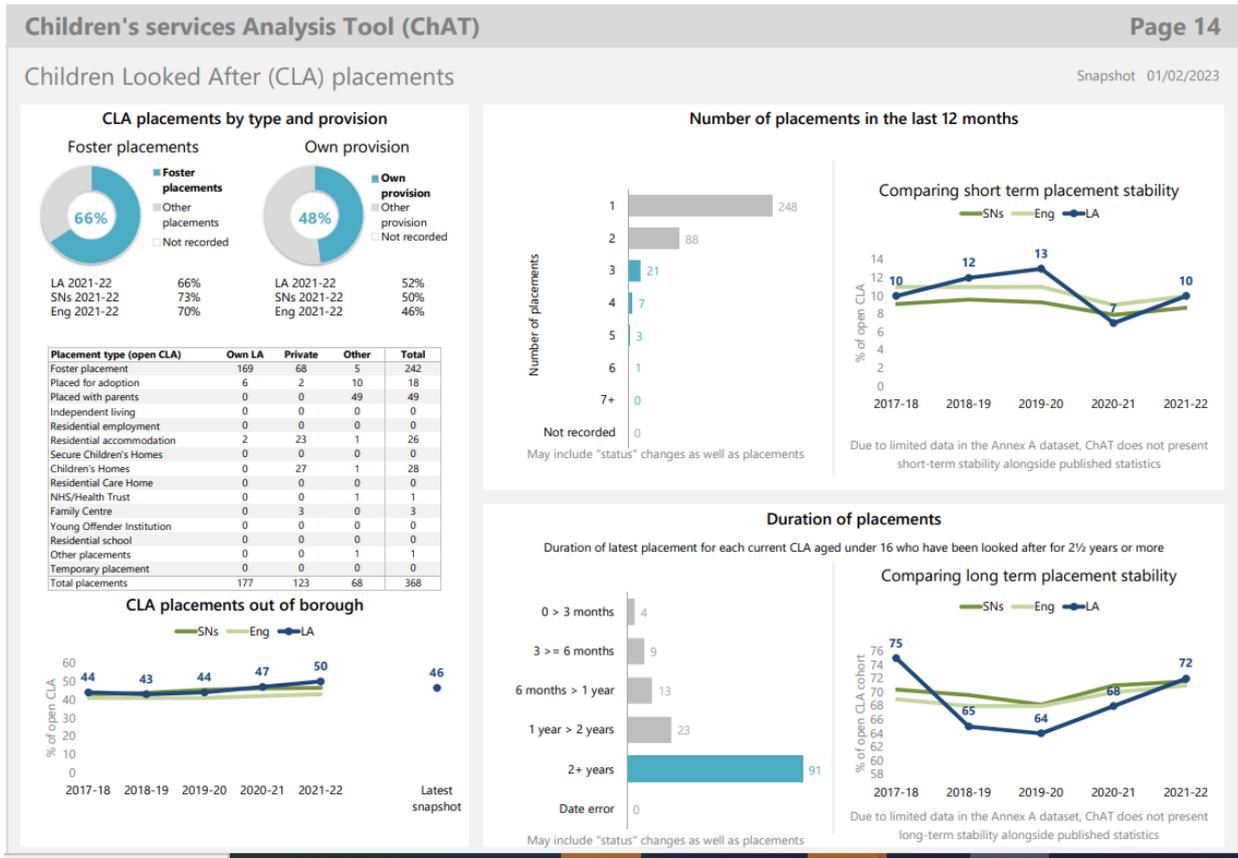
Despite these challenges, it remains positive that at the end of Quarter 3, that 169 children out of 242 children are placed with in house foster carers for Blackburn with Darwen.

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 continues to utilise the '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' placements in the Lancashire footprint. A review of this framework was undertaken in February 2023, which included BBCL and over 30 IFA providers. Since this framework began in June 2022, we have been able to place 17 children and young people within the BBCL framework, keeping children placed locally, with reduced costings. Learning was taken from this review meeting with the recognised need, to further strengthen our relationships with IFA providers to ensure Blackburn with Darwen is seen as a priority within our area. Monthly meetings with Tier 1 (preferred IFA providers) are to be facilitated by the fostering team with a further review of the BBCL framework taking place in 6 month's time.

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. Placement stability has been increasing since 2019-2020 and is the same when compared to national statistics.

Reasons for placement instability remain the same as in previous quarters and includes the disruption of placements for teenagers displaying challenging behaviours, missing from home episodes and an influx of larger sibling groups all posing challenges for foster carers to manage in the longer term. 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. The support offer to these placements is intensive and includes foster carer training as an integral element, alongside timely, collaborative disruption meetings.

Changes in educational placements also impact significantly upon placement stability, this is mainly due to the child investing in secure teacher and peer relationships and then suffering the loss of these. It can also 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 the REVIVE service where consultations and assessments take place to support this group of young people and their carers to offer therapeutic interventions.

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. Young people and care leavers are regularly involved in the recruitment to social care posts and consist of a panel which provides information to the interview and recruitment process. Young people are involved in the 'Journey to Foster' training and there are plans to introduce visits with young people to potential foster carers to inform the assessment process. There are also plans to recruit care leavers to the fostering panel.

Feedback is gathered from children in our foster placements regularly as part of the foster carer annual review, and at other events. Feedback is gathered to support the co-design of service delivery and to ensure children and young people with lived experience help shape services now and in the future, that services are fit for purpose and appropriately meet need.

Feedback from Children in Foster Care:

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

You Said
BB was very unhappy at his high school. He wanted to move to a high school in the area that he lived where his neighbourhood friends attended.
We Did
Respected his wishes and under the concept of THE VOICE OF THE CHILD. The team around the child took on board what he said and following a series of meetings, consultation with the virtual school, ensured a smooth transition to a new high school in his local area where his friends attended.
YP Feedback
BB states he is happy, settled, and grateful for listening to him and taking action.
Outcome
The YP's voice was heard, listened to and appropriate action taken.

'I have been here since I was 6, I have learnt a lot of things whilst living here. I am going to continue staying here until I am 18. Aunty and Uncle have done everything for me'.

What makes you happy in placement?

'Everything, I have foster carers who are more like my mum and dad.'

Feedback from foster carers regarding fostering support worker:

'Debbie has been visiting me for well over 6 weeks now, during that time I have found Debbie to be a great listener, taking my feelings into consideration, the way she communicates with me is sensitive and respectful. Debbie always does her plans for us in advance, and will often send me emails with things to go through, which. Debbie has helped and supported me when I didn't understand certain things, she has a great way of explaining things which is a great help. I find Debbie is very professional and genuine and

doesn't make me feel inferior to her, this helps make me feel relaxed when talking to her. I would certainly recommend Debbie as she has taught me to understand a lot of things'.

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 3 there was a Christmas Fun Day to raise funds for the FCA and also a Christmas party event also held by the FCA.

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

Thanks to the efforts of carers, attendance at school continues to be good for children in our care. Overall attendance last term was 93%. The annual Celebration of Achievement Event took place at Ewood Park on the 16th November. Children and young people in care and care leavers who attended were nominated for awards by their carers, schools and Children's Services staff in the categories of, Academic achievement/progress, attendance, behaviour, sport, arts, resilience and determination and making a positive contribution. In addition, there were a number of special awards for those who have particularly excelled in these areas. University students were also celebrated as well as those who have gained apprenticeships including within the council.

The event was in The Premier Suite at Blackburn Rovers Football Club and was a well-attended event with over 135 people comprising of children and young people in care and care leavers, foster carers, parents, school staff, the Mayor and Consort, the Leader of the Council, the Chief Executive, the Acting Director of Children's Services and a range of practitioners from Children's Services Department. There was a special guest for the evening, comedian and Britain's Got Talent Finalist Steve Royle who presented the awards and provided some great entertainment, the whole event was great fun. During the evening there was a very special singing performance from one of our young people. The John Bury Trust kindly sponsored one of the special awards and all of the award winners received a certificate and gift voucher.

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 3 show that 87% of all Children in our Care have an up to date health assessment. 69% of children who are looked after have had a dental check up in the last 12 months which is a significant improvement on previous quarters though remains an ongoing concern.

Foster carers have a Health Passport for each child in their care, which is a record of all of the child's health details. 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.

During this quarter there were 15 referrals to the REVIVE service. 46 consultations were offered to carers. 170 face to face therapy sessions took place and there were 120 carer support sessions. REVIVE attend meetings relating to carers and children and provide specific training to foster carers and Special Guardians around attachment. The Limes in Darwen continues to be used to provide therapy and is now a hub which is used by foster carers along with children and young people.

Fostering Service

There are two teams within the Fostering Service, the mainstream fostering and the permanence team.

In the mainstream fostering team over the past 6 months there has been significant plans for transformation of the service. This is a 12 month Transformation Plan and the team structure will be considered to ensure this adequately meets the ongoing needs of the service. Currently the team is fully staffed with no sickness.

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

During this quarter, there has been two new social work appointments in the permanence team. One social worker returning back to the team and one social worker who is new to the team, but returning to BWD following a lengthy period working in other boroughs and independent agencies.

At the end of this quarter, there were 28 family and friend fostering households, with a further 11 households approved under Regulation 24. There have been 41 referrals and initial assessments completed within this quarter with 19 progressing to full combined assessment. This is a decrease from the previous quarter however, is on par with past quarters. Assessments continue to take place all over the UK for e.g. Preston, Watford, and London. 4 assessment have been presented to fostering panel and been approved as full family and friends fostering households. There have been 4 resignations in the same quarter due to the carers becoming Special Guardians. There have been 23 SGO's issued within this quarter.

The SGO panel is held every fortnight to consider all assessments where the permanence plan is that of SGO. This includes assessments during care proceedings, the PLO process and for children placed under a care order. The Permanence Team Manager attends this panel and the Service Lead for Fostering and Resources chairs the panel which is also made up of other professionals from children's social care including the IRO Service Manager and a legal representative.

Foster Carer Recruitment and Retention

A 12 month Recruitment Strategy has been developed incorporating digital and face to face activities. This recruitment activity includes constant, targeted advertising on Google Ads and Facebook. Posts are updated on all social media accounts including Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. The Lets Foster website continues to be the area in which most enquires are received, which can be accessed through Google and Social Media.

Information Evenings are held on a monthly basis as well as other targeted face to face activities. Community partnerships continue with Blackburn Rovers, Burnley Football Club and the Hawks Ice Hockey Team to promote and embed the sense of the importance of community and the need for local carers for our children. Let's Foster has recently been featured in Police Life, The Shuttle and Pigeon Carrier with a new advert to target teenagers. Currently, planning is underway to consider Fostering Fortnight in May 2023. There is partnership working between BWD Corporate Communication Team and the Recruitment Officer to ensure a targeted and collaborative approach to recruitment.

There continues to be a focus on recruitment for teenagers, sibling groups, children with disabilities, Pace and short breaks.

This quarter there has been,

- 4 Registrations of Interest of prospective foster carers
- 6 households moving into assessment
- 3 households currently in assessment

During this quarter we had 3 mainstream fostering households presented to fostering panel. 2 couples approved to offer short term placements and 1 re-assessment of a foster carer who had separated from her partner. 5 households were presented to panel with a recommendation for approval as family and friends carers and 4 fostering household presented for their first annual review. There has been 15 fostering households presented to panel for annual review.

In relation to feedback, forms are sent to all attendees and whilst the return rate is low, feedback is generally positive. Panel have provided positive feedback regarding the quality of assessments and verbal presentation of the social workers.

Training for Foster Carers:

During this Quarter period, our carers continue to access the online training offer through Me-Learning, as well as the Social Care information and Learning Service (The Social Care Institute for Excellence Scils), along with mandatory safeguarding training.

In October 2022, Youth Mental Health First Aid (YMHFA) was offered to carers, this is an accredited programme and throughout 2023 the plan is for this to become mandatory for all foster carers. This will not only have a positive impact on the carers Personal Development Plan (PDP) but may also support placement disruption and breakdown for our older adolescent young people.

In November 2022, the Revive team offered a follow up reflection session to carers who completed the attachment, trauma and therapeutic parenting. The aim of this training was to put their learning into practice and evaluate if this has been successful and to gain feedback through role play and scenarios that the carers may be faced with in caring for our children. This session was positively attended by a high number of carers. This training continues to be offered and is a popular course.

In December 2022, no face to face training was offered due to the Christmas holidays. Online training is always available to our carers. In regards to the service training offer, this will be reviewed before the start of the financial year in April 2023, with a plan of both online and face to face training sessions offered to our carers. This will include conference style days where carers can attend and be offered training by a number of services in one day. Foster carers feel this would be very beneficial to those who work alongside their fostering role. Over this quarter, the service continued to offer a carer support group in November 2022, this was well attended.

Complaints

There have been no complaints during the last 6 months.

Compliments

During this quarter we have had 2 compliments. A compliment was received from an IRO regarding

the approach from a foster carer with a young person and the positive impact this has upon him. A further compliment related to the support to a carer from their supervising social worker.

'They have supported us through the whole process, answering all of our questions and going above and beyond to ensure we were informed. They have kept our lovely niece at the centre of everything.

They are both truly amazing and have made this process bearable. Having worked for LA's previously and in my current role, I know how hard social work can be and they get very little recognition so wanted to ensure you got this.'

Allegations

During this quarter, two allegations has been made in respect of foster carers. The LADO was informed and Strategy Discussions held to explore the possibility of whether the child had suffered physical harm, and subsequently the child was removed to an alternative placement. The outcome of the investigation were substantiated and the carers have since resigned. The second incident relates to an allegation of inappropriate touching, the LADO was informed and the concern was unsubstantiated with no further action taken.

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 0 incidents recorded over the past 6 months involving children in our care.

Bullying Reports

There have been no reports of bullying over Quarter 3

Serious illness and accidents

During this quarter, 1 foster carer suffered a heart attack, he underwent emergency surgery and is recovering well. All appropriate support has been offered.

Commissioned Placements and Budget

The Case Tracking and Commissioning Panel continues to have strategic oversight and monitoring of placements and ensures that there are robust plans for those children and young people that could be brought back to in-house provision, as well as ensuring timely decision making to achieve permanence.

The financial position across both of these areas is closely monitored throughout the year. Pressures for this financial year are due to the demands on the Service with the numbers of children in our care, placement sufficiency and stability. Placements for teenagers and those with complex needs are the most costly, and largely in residential or therapeutic placements.

The local authority continues to take its quota of unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC) (0.1% of the population). There are referrals at least bi-weekly, via the North West Regional Strategic Migration Partnership. We currently have 20 UASC cases open to Children in Our Care (CIOC), all of who are living

in appropriate accommodation. Predominantly these children are placed with IFA and residential placements due to there not being enough foster care placements in house. Although the local authority receive funding for UASC, this does not cover the weekly costings of their placements and places additional financial pressure on the commissioning budget.

Total number of commissioned foster placements used in this period – 86

- **64 x** Non long term matched including:
 - 22 x children under ICO's including 5 sets of siblings (group of 4, 6, 2, 2 and 2)
 - 1 x parent and child placement ongoing which is under ICO's;
 - 1 x concurrency placements under ICO's;
 - 27 x FCO's of which 3 were previously ICO in the same period (sib group of 2 and 1)
 - 8 x Section 20's including 6 UASCs;
 - 5 x Placement Orders

Number of new commissioned foster placements made in this period – 9

- **3 x** male teenagers under S20 (2 UASC);
- **6 x** ICO's (inc 2 sib groups of 2, one pair who are from a wider group of 6 sibs under ICO who are in 3 IFAs)

Number of ended commissioned foster placements - 15

- 1 x moved to adoptive from concurrency following adoptive match (AC)
- 2 x disrupted (moved to supported acc and residential)
- 3 x UASC – 1 planned move to relative & 2 to supported accommodation
- 1 x turned 18 (Staying Put with same carer)
- 3 x ICO (sib group of 3 rehabbed to parents)
- 1 x FCO (child with disability unfortunately deceased)
- 1 x FCO (placement used for respite whilst carer away)
- 3 x FCO (monthly respite used by a group of siblings on a care order at home)

4 of the new placements in Q3 ended by the end of the Q3 period.

Number of long term matched commissioned foster placements – 22 x FCO's; **2 x** new LT matches made within that period for a set of siblings under an FCO

- **49** ongoing non long term matched placements at the end of Q3
 - 21 x FCO
 - 21 x ICO
 - 4 x PO
 - 3 x S20
- **22** ongoing FCO's in long term matched placements at the end of Q3

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. The Transformation Plan for the fostering service will be the priority. This plan and the key priorities will drive forward placement sufficiency and stability as well as recruitment and quality assurance.
3. A Review of Foster Carer Allowances will take place in readiness for the new financial year and will support the Recruitment Strategy.
4. Placement sufficiency and stability will continue to be a key area of focus. The relationships with independent fostering providers is the key element which will be the area of development in the next quarter to ensure that we are able to provide local placements to our children and young people within this framework.
5. Recruitment will focus upon our offer to potential foster carers in order to be competitive. The recruitment drive will focus on 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.
6. There continues to be the need to recruit foster carers who can offer a Remand/PACE foster carer household.