

Fostering Quarter 4 Report

January - March 2023

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

The transformation plan of the fostering service has gathered momentum since January 2023. There has been a re structure awaiting full approval via workforce which proposes a new structure aligned to the Safeguarding Teams. This removes the Deputy Team Manager posts and creates two additional Team Manager posts, one for mainstream and one for permanence which provides greater management oversight. As such, we have two Interim Team Manager posts that have been recruited too. The staffing review of the fostering service has also considered how to best utilise resources across the teams to meet the priority of foster carer recruitment whilst ensuring that placement stability remains a priority.

In relation to the main Fostering Service Transformation Plan:

1. Digital Transformation Programme - is ongoing. All recruitment activity is planned to be digital by summer 2023, streamlining this process to ensure applicants are progressed through to assessment in a timely way reducing delay. All forms are now digital reducing the time of social workers and ensuring access to data when needed. The Fostering dashboard is in the process of being developed, again to reduce time of workers, stream line the service and provide accurate data. Foster carers have been engaged within this process to ensure a collaborative approach.
2. Recruitment and Links with the Communication Team- Recruitment has been a focus within this quarter with more oversight from senior leads. More creative digital recruitment methods are being implemented with the aim to target geographical areas where it is known that successful recruit has taken place previously.
3. Retention of Foster Carers/Allowances- A review of allowances has been undertaken and a final decision is to be made, this is to ensure that our foster carers have sufficient financial support to provide for the children they care for and to try to be as competitive as possible with our neighbouring local authorities in terms of recruitment.
4. Commissioning and Contract- A Standard Operating Procedure has been completed in relation to the Fostering Front Door role and with the Blackburn, Burnley, Cumbria and Lancashire (BBCL) framework to provide more oversight of placements, the referral system and commissioned placements. This is being reviewed 6 monthly as part of the BBCL contract.
5. Payments Panel/Governance- The Payments Policy and procedure are being updated to ensure that payments outside of typical allowances are reviewed through a more robust governance process.
6. Workforce Development- The councils TRACK values have been launched across the Fostering Service with positive feedback and investment from the teams.

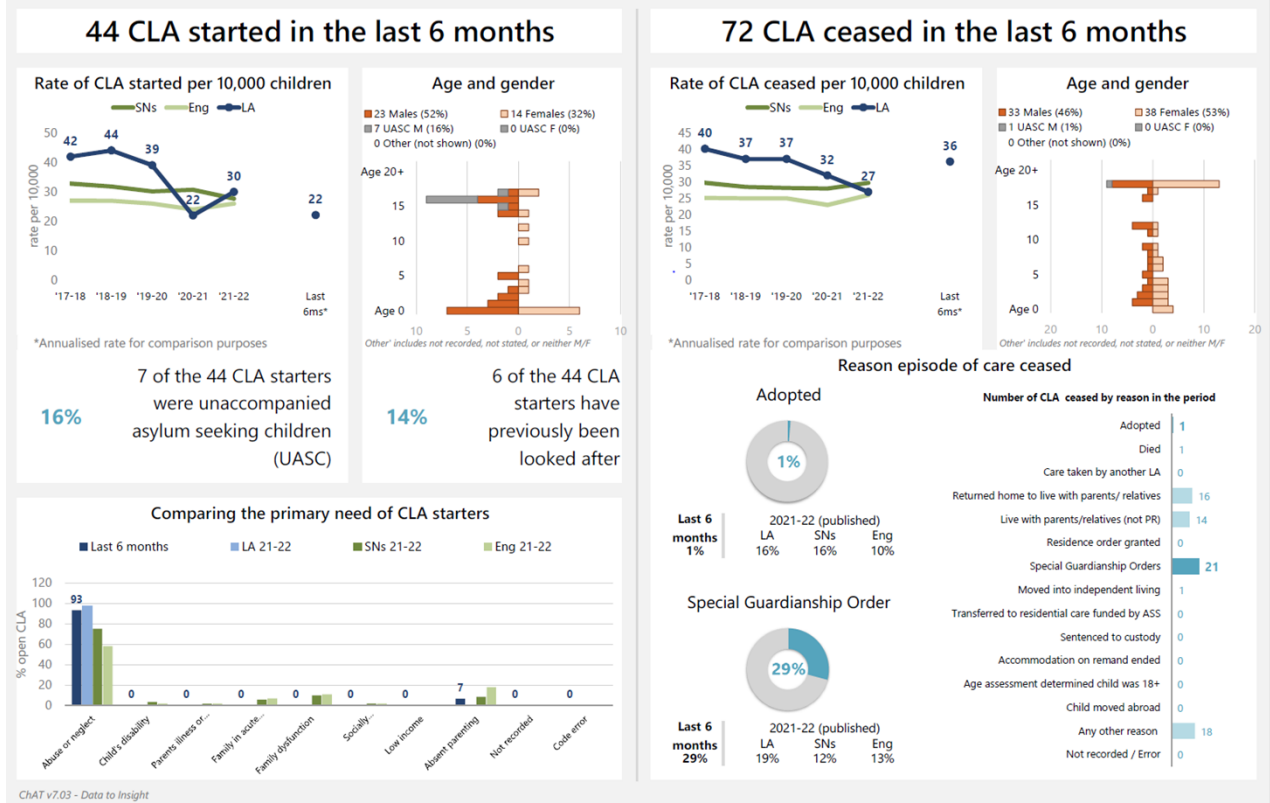
The aim of the plan continues to prioritise investment across the fostering service with strategic oversight and a focus on the above six key priority areas. This development plan has a focus on recruitment and retention of foster carers to provide more placements, to ensure our children are cared for with placements that are local and mainly in house, with highly trained foster carers who receive appropriate support from the local authority.

Children in our Care and Fostering Overview:

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 44 compared to the previous quarter where there were 49. The number of children being cared for in Blackburn with Darwen is above the average nationally. In the last 6 months 72 children left the care of the Local authority.

Children Looked After (CLA) started and ceased in the last 6 months

from 29/08/2022 to 28/02/2023



In this quarter, 7 children left care due to Special Guardianship Orders, taking the number of children leaving care due to SGO's over this financial year at 45.

The highest cohort of children and young people in our care who remain the most difficult to place children and young people are aged between 11-16. As with previous quarters, this is an ongoing, persistent trend both locally and nationally. Feedback from neighbouring local authorities and from Independent Fostering Agencies remains the same in that it is an increasing struggle to recruit foster carers for this age, meaning a lack of foster placements for this age range of children and young people. In BWD we have seen a number of large sibling groups needing to be placed in foster care, this presents as a challenge in trying to keep siblings together wherever possible, meaning there is a need for fostering exemptions.

Recruitment remains ongoing for foster carers to care for children with disabilities, primarily who are now 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 Team 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.

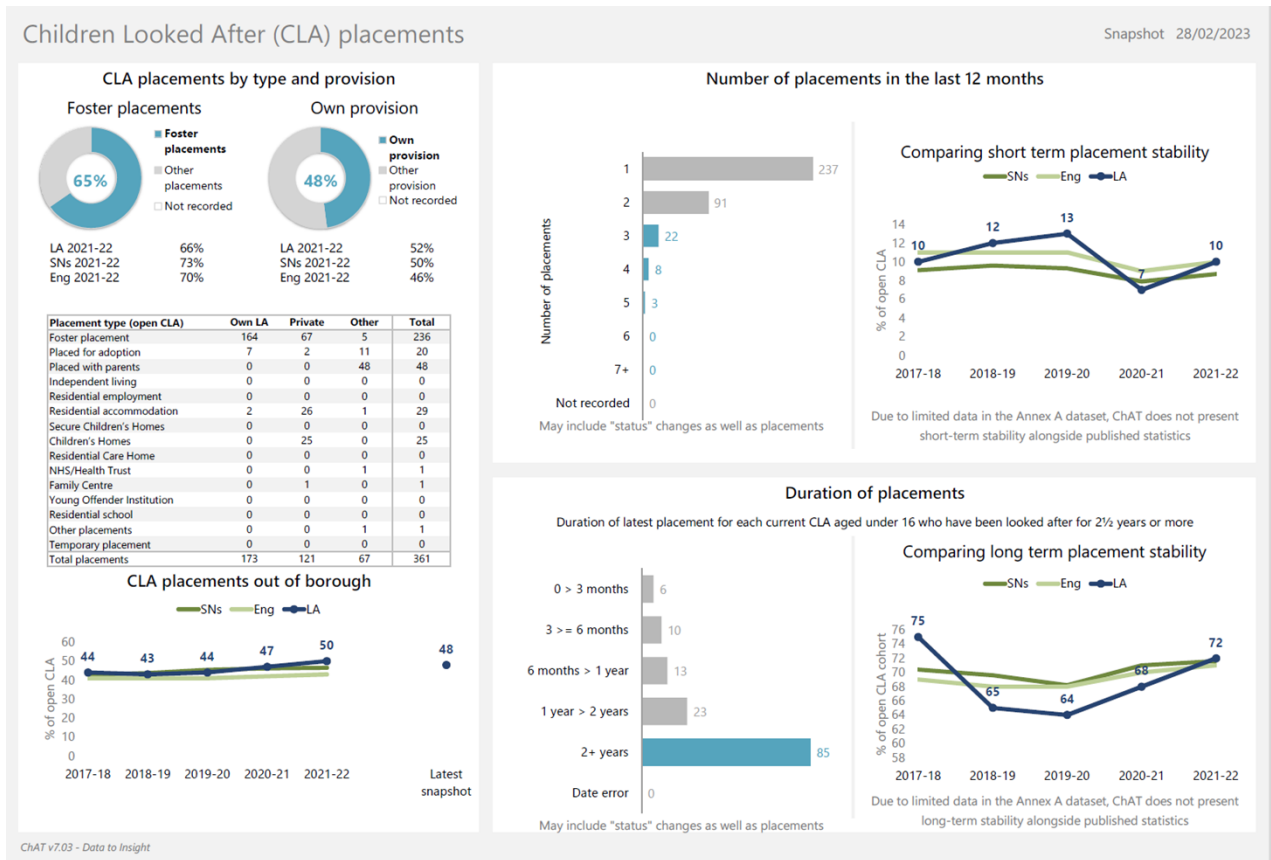
Despite these challenges, it remains positive that at the end of Quarter 4, that 164 children out of 236 children are placed with in house foster carers for Blackburn with Darwen.

The Foster Carer Register is produced weekly and Senior Managers meet with the Fostering Service to look at placement availability, data and vacancies. The 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 BBCL (BwD, Blackpool, LCC and Cumbria) collaborative sub-regional framework continues to be the

framework in which we source foster placements when we cannot provide our own in house foster carers. This framework has helped to generate some success with 'closer to home' placements in the Lancashire footprint. Work has been undertaken with Fostering Front Door to build and improve on relationships with providers. The Fostering Front Door worker is now undertaking quarterly meetings with providers to identify and pre-empt placements that will become available, to ensure that we are being prioritised with those independent fostering households that are local to us. A review of this framework is due to take place in August, which will include BBCL and over 30 IFA providers.

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 experienced young people to gather views, ideas and feedback. Young people and care experienced young people are regularly involved in the recruitment to social care posts and consist of a panel who feed into 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 experienced young people 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 4:

Male aged 8

'I enjoy going Rovers with the son of my Foster Carers, I enjoy going out places with my fostering family.'

Female aged 14

'I enjoy going on holiday with my Foster Family, this is always special and I have a good time'.

Female aged 14

'Everyone in the family have made me feel welcome'.

Female aged 15

'I feel safe and loved in my foster family.'

Female aged 16

What makes you happy in placement?

Being around everyone in our home, trying new foods, watching films, freedom and living with my brother.'

Feedback from family and friends foster carers regarding his experience of achieving Special

Guardianship Orders for his grandchildren.

'I am writing this email on behalf of myself, and the children in my care. - We would like to thank everyone involved in the transition from Friends and Family foster carer to the recently approved Special Guardianship Order.

I would like to draw particular attention to recently appointed CSW Melvis Akwanwi, who in a very short time, completed the work previously carried out by a succession of CSW & SSW in order to meet the Magistrates Court deadline for statements and reports and facilitating home visits and discussions regarding future contact with the children and their parents.

Melvis is credit to the profession and hopefully a long term member of your staffing provision. - Extremely good at her work !!

Please pass on my thanks to all involved at BwD, and hopefully one-day I can return and provide some further contribution to the needs of so many children within the Borough. - This has been one of the best

experiences of my life so far, a true roller coaster of a ride, with so much pleasure along the way. Still some way to go until they both reach the age of 18+ , but feel truly grateful to all your Staff / Foster Carers / FCA.

Please feel free to share this e-mail with all concerned - A really happy Special Guardian & Two very special children.'

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 are currently updating their 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. As part of the ongoing digital transformation plan for the service, feedback has been sent to carers to provide the opportunity to work collaboratively with the process. We also have some foster carers who to be part of the digital transformation.

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

Attendance at school of children in our care remained at 93% and is consistently above that national average for children who are looked after. This success is significantly contributed to due to the fantastic support of our foster carers.

New Directions continue to work with all children in our care from Year 9 and have supported all our Year 11's with applications to colleges and training providers.

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 4 show that 88% of all Children in our Care have an up to date health assessment. 85% of children who are looked after have had a dental check up in the last 12 months which a significant improvement on previous quarter which was 69% is demonstrating the work that has been undertaken across the service to improve in this area.

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 19 referrals to the Revive Service which is an increase from last quarter,

Interventions	Recorded contacts
Consultations	31
Face to face therapy	159
Therapeutic carer support	116
Staff drop ins	10
Psychological assessment	9
Reflective practice/training to teams	5

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.

The 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 family and friend 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

It has been a slow start in relation to recruitment in the New Year. This has been mirrored through feedback in recruitment groups across the country, which includes other local authorities and Independent Fostering Agencies. Digital recruitment has been a focus with the plan to go 'back to basics'. A digital post profiling teenagers created interest. This was seen by over 3 thousand people with 76 reactions and shares evidencing the scope of digital recruitment.

The Recruitment Strategy has been updated to include a new digital recruitment method aimed at specifically targeting areas where we have been previously successful in recruitment of foster carers. This type of digital recruitment will mean less wastage of recruitment resources. This recruitment method began in April 2023. Feedback tells us that applicants come forward to consider fostering from the use of digital recruitment and through word of mouth. Our 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 continue to be held on a monthly basis as well as other targeted face to face activities. The plan for Fostering Fortnight has been agreed, the theme this year is community. Over this two week period, the team, colleagues and partners will be undertaking events across Blackburn and Darwen, which include litter picking, family and pet friendly walks, and coffee mornings with articles in local newspapers and interviews with local radio stations. 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. 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,

Quarter 4 January – March 2023

2021/22	Enquires	IV	Approval	Conversion
Q1	16	6	1	38%
Q2	15	5	3	33%
Q3	19	5	1	26%
Q4	21	5	2	24%
Total	71	21	7	30%

In comparison, Quarter 4 from 2021/22

Q4	22	3	3	14%
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Enquiries to become a foster carer

Jan - 4

Feb - 9

March – 8

Assessment

9 households were being assessed during this quarter, 4 of which are due to be presented to May fostering panel. 2 households are waiting on fostering medicals before they can be presented to fostering panel. 1 household made the decision to be assessed with independent fostering agency, stating financial support as the reason, and one household withdrew from the assessment process stating that as a family they had made the decision to put their application on hold. We are hoping that these assessments will provide a minimum of 10 placements if they are successfully approved.

Fostering Panel

During this quarter we had 2 mainstream fostering households presented to panel, these are 2 couples approved to offer short term placements.

2 households have returned to panel for 1st annual review and 2 fostering households returned to panel following an allegation/concerns There has been 18 fostering households presented to panel for annual review.

7 households (11 children) were presented to panel with a recommendation for approval as family and friends carers.

In relation to feedback, forms are sent to all attendees and whilst the return rate is low, feedback is generally positive.

Panel have continue to provide positive feedback regarding the quality of assessments and verbal presentation of the social workers.

Events from January to March 2023.

In February the Fostering Team attended the 1Voice awards as the main award sponsor. This was a fantastic event to be part of and we aim to sponsor and present this award next year.

1Voice Awards Dinner



The Fostering Team also attended the Disability information day held at King Georges Hall. There were positive networks created from this evident and information was shared across our social media. There are further events planned for the next quarter.

Members of the Fostering Team participated on the One Voice Blackburn 'I'm not a Muslim but I will fast for a day' campaign.



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. There has been 15 fostering households presented to panel for annual review.

Training for Foster Carers:

During this Quarter period, our carers continue to access the online training offer through Me-Learning, The Scils and Eils online training continues to be offered, along with mandatory safeguarding training.

In January 2023, the team delivered Journey to Foster training, which is a two day course to 6 applicants (4 fostering households). The service received very positive feedback in regards to the content of the training and the delivery by the trainers. In March 2023, this training was again delivered to 7 applicants (4 fostering households). The applicants fed back they found real life experiences supported them to understand the role of a foster carer and they felt having a foster carer delivering was helpful in their learning.

Early Years Paediatric first aid, a two day course was offered to carers.

The Revive team began a six week foundations of attachment course to carers and kinship carers, this is currently ongoing. Feedback has so far been really positive.

In regards to the service training this has been reviewed and will be available to carers from May 2023 with a plan of both online and classroom 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.

Complaints

There have been 2 complaints received during this quarter. The first, a Foster carer sent a complaint regarding delay in providing a response to a discretionary payment. The 2nd complaint was from a foster carer who was not given an opportunity to undergo an adoption assessment for a child in their care.

Compliments

During this quarter we have received one compliment from a Connected Carer who had been supported to obtain Special Guardianship Orders for the children in his care.

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I would like to draw particular attention to recently appointed CSW, who in a very short time, completed the work previously carried out by a succession of CSW & SSW in order to meet the Magistrates Court deadline for statements and reports and facilitating home visits and discussions regarding future contact with the children and their parents.

SW is credit to the profession and hopefully a long term member of your staffing provision. - Extremely good at her work!!

Allegations

There have been no allegations during this quarter

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 4

Serious illness and accidents

There has been no serious illnesses or accidents during this quarter

Commissioned Placements and Budget

All children and young people placed in commissioned placements are part of the Case Tracking and Commissioning Panel which continues to have strategic oversight and monitoring of placements. This panel also provides oversight and planning to ensure 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.

There continues to be significant pressures due to challenge of recruiting and securing placements for teenagers and large sibling groups both in fostering and residential placements. The financial position across both of these areas is closely monitored throughout the year.

The local authority continues to take its quota of unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC) (up to 0.1% of the population). There are referrals at least bi-weekly, via the North West Regional Strategic Migration Partnership. We currently have 19 UASC cases open to Children in Our Care (CIOC), all of whom 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 – 79, this is a reduction of 6 placements from quarter 3.

- 55 x Non long term matched including

Information about some of these:

- 12 x children were under Interim Care Orders (ICO) in Q4 including 4 sets of 2 siblings and 4 individual children/young people) (Of these, 2 sets of 2 siblings ceased ICO's with 2 returning home and 2 being granted PO's in Q4)
- 2 x parent and child placements - under Section 20 (s20) and ICO;
- 1 x concurrency placement under ICO;
- 5 x Placements under Section 20 including 3 Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (USAC) (one which disrupted down in Q4);
- 5 x UASC's (3 x of these placements were under Section 20 & 2 x placements under a Care Order (CO)
- 6 x Placements under Placement Orders
- 2 placements of siblings groups of 2 and 4 children moved IFA placements in this period
- 31 x CO with around 13 of these waiting to be long term matched in coming months and one sibling pair hopefully proceeding to SGO with their IFA carers

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

- 1 x male teenager under S20 (1 UASC) (subsequently disrupted after a week)
- 1 x parent and child (S20)
- 1 x concurrency (ICO)
- 6 children from 2 families (CO's) who, as mentioned above, had moved between IFAs to new long term placements

Number of ended commissioned foster placements - 10

- 6 x CO's from 2 families moved to new long term placements (2 of these had been in a long term matched foster placement)
- 1 x CO turned 18 years old and then returned home as no longer LAC
- 1 x S20 (UASC) disrupted
- 2 x CO's moved home following care proceedings concluding

Number of long term matched commissioned foster placements used in Q4 – 24 x CO's;

- There were no new long term matches made within this period.
- 3 long term matches ceased (18 year old & 2 moved placements)

There are 48 ongoing non long term matched placements at the end of Q4:

- 31 x CO's
- 7 x ICO's
- 6 x PO's
- 4 x S20's

There are 21 ongoing CO's in long term matched placements at the end of Q4.

Service Priorities for the Next Quarter.

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.

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.

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.

Recruitment will focus upon our offer to potential foster carers in order for us 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.

There continues to be the need to recruit foster carers who can offer a Remand/PACE foster carer household.