

**Report of: Director of Children’s Services**

**Report to: Executive Board**

**Date: June 25<sup>th</sup> 2014**

**Subject: Fostering Service Annual Report**



Are specific electoral Wards affected? If relevant, name(s) of Ward(s):	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Are there implications for equality and diversity and cohesion and integration?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Is the decision eligible for Call-In?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Does the report contain confidential or exempt information? If relevant, Access to Information Procedure Rule number: Appendix number:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No

**Summary of main issues**

1. It is a requirement of the Fostering Minimum Standards 2011, that the Executive Board of the council receives written reports on the management and outcomes of the fostering service. This report provides an overview of the fostering service activity from April 2013 to March 2014.
  - 1.1 The fostering service was inspected by OFSED in June 2010 and was rated as 'good.' The new single inspection regime of looked after children and safeguarding services for children that came into force in April 2014 will include the fostering service.

**Recommendations**

2. That the Executive Board receive this report and continues to support the work of the fostering service.

## 1. Purpose of this report

1.2 The purpose of the report as set out in regulation is to inform the Executive Board about the work undertaken by the fostering service between April 2013 and March 2014. The report provides the Executive Board with information on the work of the service; its compliance with the national minimum standards, the services offered to foster carers and outcomes for children. It updates the Board on activity in relation to the recruitment and retention of foster carers, fostering panel activity and developments within the service.

## 2 Background information

2.1 A key priority for the Leeds City Council as a child friendly city is to ensure that children can be brought up safely with their birth parents or within their wider extended family network. The fostering service contributes to empowering outcomes for the most vulnerable children and young people in the city.

2.2 In Leeds the number of children who are looked after has stabilised since the last OFSTED inspection of the service in June 2010. The age profile of children becoming looked after has changed, with larger numbers of younger children under 4 years old entering care.

### 2.3 Graph number 1: Number of looked after children

Numbers of looked after children by age group from 2011- 2014				
Age Group	0-4	5-10	11-15	16-17
Jan-2011	344 (24%)	359 (25%)	459 (32%)	272 (19%)
Nov-2011	429 (30%)	371 (26%)	396 (28%)	211 (18%)
Mar-2012	447 (31%)	385 (26%)	357 (25%)	203 (14%)
Oct-2012	458 (32%)	379 (27%)	382 (27%)	200 (14%)
Mar-2013	432 (32%)	382 (28%)	361 (26%)	202 (14%)
Feb-2014	378 (28%)	396 (29%)	384 (28%)	193 (14%)

## 3 Main issues

3.1 A key component of the vision for children who are looked after in Leeds is to ensure that they are in stable and supportive placements and wherever possible within the local community. Central to the placements strategy and sufficiency action plan is to increase the number of 'in house' foster carer placements, improving the recruitment and retention of foster carers meets the aspiration to be the UK's most Child Friendly City.

3.2 Whilst the strategy is aimed at reducing the dependence on expensive out of city placements some children will always benefit from highly specialist resources and require placements other than in Leeds.

### 3.3 Fostering service

3.3.1 The fostering service in Leeds has grown in 2013 with the development of a second Kinship Care Team to provide support services for kinship carers and special guardians. There are currently 52 full time qualified social workers across the service (including managers) with different responsibilities. The fostering services comprises of 6 fostering teams: Recruitment and Assessment Team, two Supervisory Teams, two Kinship Care Teams and a Specialist family placement team for children with a disability.

3.3.2 The fostering service manager provides professional supervision to the manager of the placement service, a multi-disciplinary placement team managed within Commissioning Services. The placement service finds foster placements, residential placements and supported accommodation for young people leaving care.

### 3.4 Recruitment of foster carers

3.4.1 The service aims to provide a prompt response to all enquiries about fostering and if fostering assessments are not progressed, letters are sent at the initial contact stage or after the home visit stage to confirm the reason why.

3.4.2 In addition to the two fostering officers who specifically undertake enquiries and home visits a third fostering officer has been recruited to provide intensive support to newly registered foster carers with their first placements (in addition to the generic support provided by their supervising social worker). The team is made up of a team manager, 1 advanced practitioner (who manages up to 10 independent social workers) 3.5 supervising social workers, 3 fostering advisors and a business development officer.

3.4.3 The Recruitment Team continued to broaden its remit through 2013 and into 2014 into foster carer retention. One of the fostering advisors works closely with the business development officer to develop foster carer offers, discounts and events for foster carers and their families

### 3.5 Marketing and Advertising

3.5.1 The service continues to recognise the importance of advertising and marketing to attract local carers. The established 'foster4Leeds' brand is displayed in adverts, publicity material, and leaflets. The updated foster4Leeds/ adopt4Leeds website is operational and was brought back in-house in March this year.

3.5.2 The marketing strategy involves the use of various mediums, including the use of social media (Google and Twitter) alongside radio, bus campaigns and bill boards.

3.5.3 There continues to be extensive media promotion by a number of independent fostering agencies which compete with one another and other local authorities for carers. A joint initiative with 4 West Yorkshire authorities launched a radio

campaign: foster4yorkshire.org. The key message in the campaign highlighted the advantages of fostering for local authorities namely training and support, regular placement and access to a network of carers.

3.5.4 In addition to raising the general awareness about fostering for Leeds the team are specifically looking to recruit carers for children and young people aged 8 - 18 (short and long term) sibling groups (for carers with a minimum of 2 bedrooms available for fostering) and children with complex needs including disability. The team has launched a specific campaign for teenagers based on a peer support model and are participating in a DfE project with a consortium of other agencies, including Calderdale and two Independent Fostering Agencies. The focus of this project is to look at innovative ways to recruit and retain foster carers.

3.5.5 The team holds regular open evenings/ information events throughout the year, including attendance at shopping centres and local venues and fetes throughout the city. The need to continue to develop the marketing and advertising is very important to ensure the service remains competitive with independent fostering providers.

### 3.6 Business Partnership Developments

3.6.1 The service has developed relationships with businesses and other council departments in aiming to recruit local foster carers and to provide a core offer in attracting carers to the service. A part time Business Development Officer has been appointed to develop this work and works closely with the Leeds 'child friendly city' initiative.

3.6.2 The corporate offer promoting sport and active life styles was launched in September offering free bodyline gym and swim cards for fostering households and free junior bodyline cards and swimming lessons for all looked after children. Carers have also been advised of the Leeds cards extra and discounts at a range of retail, entertainment and food outlets across the city.

3.6.3 A number of events and arrangements are in place including discounted/ free tickets to Leeds Rhinos, Leeds United, Leeds museum, Northern Ballet and carriage works theatre. Activities have included a free cinema event at Cottage Road cinema, Leeds Rhinos summer camp and events at Herd farm and Skelton grange environment centre and Armley mills.

3.6.4 A key Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) event was held at the FD Arena in November, which resulted in many offers of support for Leeds Fostering and Adoption Services from a number of businesses and organisations.

3.6.5 The corporate offer and CSR promotions aim to assist carers in their role and helps to promote positive outcomes for children and young people within their households (including foster carers birth children)

### 3.7 Review of fees and allowances

3.7.1 A review of fees and allowances has been undertaken to support the retention of existing carers and the recruitment of new carers. The Executive Board agreed to

increase the fostering allowances to 90% of the fostering network recommended, rates from October 2013 and to 100% in April 2014. Fee increases for payment for skills (pfs) levels 2, 3 and 4 carers were implemented in October 2013. Together with the corporate offer, these increases represent a significantly improved package of support to foster carers. Following the increase in fee levels a stakeholder group has been reviewing the terms and conditions associated with the fees. This work is due to conclude at the end of May following a consultation process with all foster carers.

### 3.7.2 Staying Put

At a national level the government is keen to support young people remaining with their foster carers until the age of 21 years. The fostering service already has a policy but this has been heavily weighted in supporting foster carers where young people stay in education. However, the outcomes for children moving successfully into adulthood are vastly improved if young people are supported at home with their main carers. Therefore, alongside the review of the terms and conditions of fee paid carers, the service has reviewed Staying Put arrangements.

This policy has been out for consultation with foster carers, young people and social workers and this work will be completed by the end of May 2014.

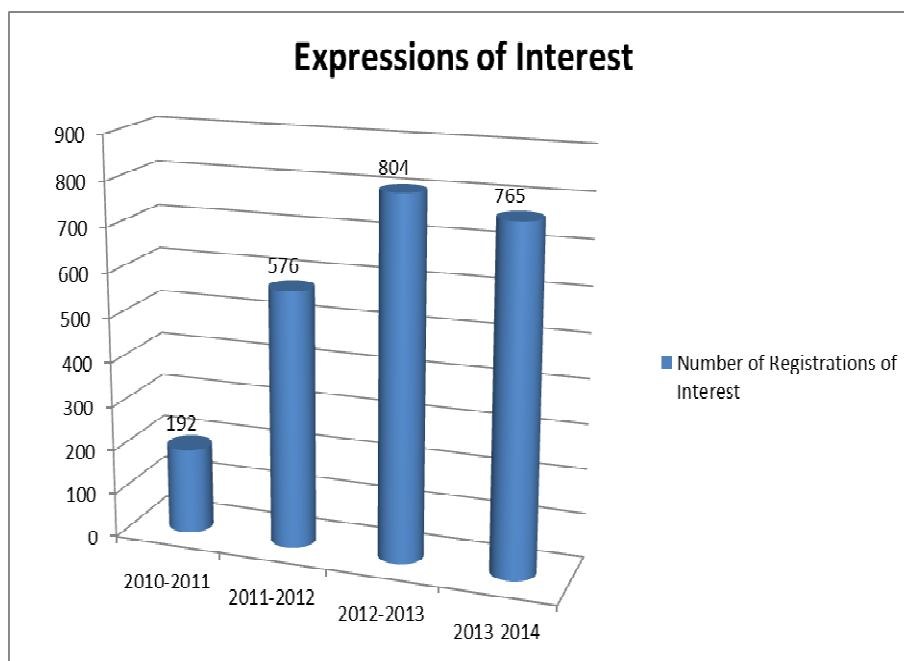
### 3.8 Expressions of interest

3.8.1 The service has embedded a clear and consistent response for all expressions of interest in fostering, offering a prompt response and initial visit within 7 days.

3.8.2 Research by fostering network suggests that there is a high dropout rate from initial expression of interest to approval, reflecting the fact that the decision to foster is a significant one, and understanding the implications fully can lead to a number of people withdrawing their interest.

3.8.3 Whilst there has been a slight decline in the average number of expressions of interest this year 765 compared to 804 in 2012 – 2013 the recruitment team have achieved the highest rate of approvals of mainstream carers in the last 10 years.

#### 3.8.4 **Graph number 2: Expressions of Interest**



### 3.9 Timely assessments

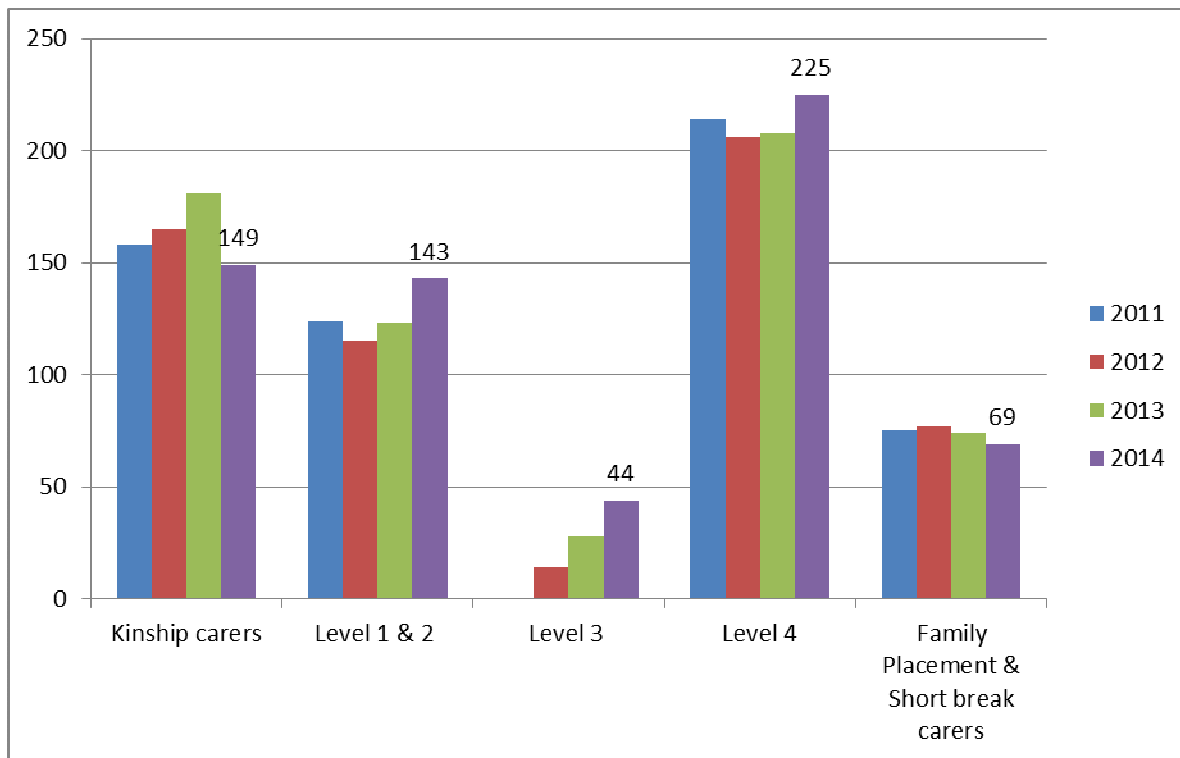
- 3.9.1 Assessments are offered to prospective foster carers through dedicated social workers from the recruitment team. To increase capacity the team use 10 independent social workers on a sessional basis. This is both cost effective and a flexible means of ensuring a quick response to all expressions of interest which progress to an assessment.
- 3.9.2 This has resulted in a 3 month target for completing assessments for mainstream carers and 4 months for a recommendation for approval from the fostering panel. The approval timescales for mainstream approvals were met in 94% of cases (59 carers) 6% of cases (4 carers) approval time scales were not met. This was due to issues relating to the carers circumstances and was outside the control of the fostering service.
- 3.9.3 The kinship care team has experienced some delays in meeting the timescales and 50% were met. The reasons have usually been awaiting medical reports or DBS checks. Some delays have also been due to additional information being required by the fostering panels. In order to address the issues the service is moving over to the online DBS service to reduce time delays in presenting completed assessments at fostering panel.

Additionally, the service now sends medicals to the agency medical advisor via secure emails, which has improved the speed of return for medicals.

### 3.10 Approval and Deregistration of carers

- 3.10.1 In the last year 76 mainstream/family placement carers and 42 kinship carers were approved as suitable to foster. There has been a net gain of 44 mainstream/family placement carers. A number of carers approved at level 3 and level 4 have come across from Independent Fostering agencies to be approved by Leeds. Retention of carers is important and the Local Authority is required to report any carers leaving the service to a fostering panel. Following consideration of the reasons, the panel formally removes the names of carers from the register.
- 3.10.2 In 2013/ 2014 there were 74 de-registrations of kinship carers and 32 from mainstream/family placement carers. These figures include 20 carers retiring from the service. 1 carer moved to an independent fostering agency and 2 carers resigned as they moved to other authorities. 18 carers resigned due to other circumstances. 4 carer's registrations were terminated because they were unsuitable or inactive. A further 4 registrations were terminated due to carers ill health or death.
- 3.10.3 12 kinship carers were de-registered as children had returned home (to birth parents) a further 30 carers were de registered because their carers continued to care for a child but under a different order. These latter figures represent positive outcomes for children, with children achieving permanency through other orders and ensuring the service is safely and appropriately reducing numbers of children who are looked after.

### 3.11 Foster carer register



3.11.2 There are currently 412 mainstream and family placement carers looking after children on a short term or long term basis. This figure excludes short break carers and kinship carers.

3.11.3 The number of short break carers (now referred to as the 'Support Care' scheme) has remained static at 36 carers, we are anticipating expanding this service within the coming year.

3.11.4 There are 45 carers linked to specific foster carers to provide holiday care for these children only. This enables children to remain with their extended family network and community whilst carers take a break from the caring role.

### 3.12 Kinship Care Team

3.12.1 The use of kinship care is consistent with the aim of keeping children placed with their family and community wherever possible. As such a number of assessments are often undertaken in relation to each child placed. The kinship care service was expanded into two dedicated teams in November 2013. One team deals with the majority of assessments as well as private fostering. The other with support to kinship carers and those with Special Guardianship Orders (SGO's).

3.12.2 A duty service has been established across the 2 teams to enable viability assessments to be undertaken by a kinship care supervising social worker and the referring social worker for the child. This has improved practice in this area of work across the city to ensure that fuller assessments are appropriate in likely to be able to meet children's needs.

- 3.12.3 A concise assessment process has been developed which produces reports in reduced timescales as directed by the courts. Assessments are completed in 8 - 12 weeks, although the regulations allow up to 16 weeks and in exceptional circumstances 24 weeks. Delays in assessments being recommended at panel have generally been caused by delays in DBS checks and medical reports being returned. Meeting the reduced timescales directed by the courts to undertake assessments promptly for example within 8 weeks. These shortened timescales also present a challenge in relation to prospective carers having less time to process the information and make informed choices. This is particularly pertinent in helping carers understand their responsibilities to children up to the age of 18 years and beyond.
- 3.12.4 A kinship care policy has been created; the focus of the kinship assessment work is beginning to move towards carers applying for more Special Guardianship Orders, thus reducing the number of children remaining in care.
- 3.12.5 A communication plan is in place to raise awareness about private fostering arrangements amongst colleagues, other professionals and the public. Clear data regarding private fostering is collated and there are 2 (half time) private fostering officers within the team.
- 3.12.6 The second kinship care team provides support to both kinship carers and family members who care for children under Special Guardianship Orders. There are 5 social workers and 2 social work assistants in the support team and a designated Special Guardianship social worker post (which is being recruited for) A Special Guardianship policy is being devised, however, arrangements are already in place to ensure a minimum of one year post order support is available to all Special Guardians. There are now over 400 children on Special Guardianship Orders.
- 3.12.7 All kinship foster carers have an allocated supervising social worker; there are two well attended support groups (one for special guardians and one for kinship carer) which run on a monthly basis. Kinship carers can also access their local fostering support groups.
- 3.12.8 A six week training development and support course is offered to all new kinship carers. The teams also promote support to kinship carers via voluntary agencies (e.g. the Grandparents Association and Home Start) with whom the teams are establishing close links.
- 3.13 Disabled children's family placement service
- 3.13.1 The Disabled Children's Family Service comprises of three parts; The Fostering overnight Short Breaks and Home Based Service provides a range of services to disabled children both in the child's home and in the homes of family placement carers. The service promotes the social model of disability and the inclusion of disabled children in all aspects of family and community life.
- 3.13.2 The service promotes the development of carers throughout the scheme, with short breaks and home based carers often progressing to the longer term fostering service, being equipped and experienced to deal with more complex and challenging children over time.



- 3.13.3 The service has continued to improve its assessment process and has worked closely with the recruitment service. This year the disabled children's fostering service recruited 6 new foster carers. As there has been a rise in the numbers of children requiring ground floor or adapted premises (able to offer suitable accommodation for wheelchair using children) this is a positive outcome.
- 3.13.4 The service has established close ties with the housing service, to enable physically disabled children to be placed with fostering carers. This has included developing a new protocol with housing and revising the adaptation policy.
- 3.13.5 Through collaborative interagency working with housing, occupational therapy and nursing services. 1 child has been able to move from residential to a fostering placement and 2 other homes are currently being adapted for identified children with complex needs.
- 3.13.6 The service is committed to promoting permanence through SGO's and adoption for disabled children in the service with their foster carers. 6 are currently in progress. One child was adopted by their foster carer last year. As more carers take SGO's and Adoption Orders with their foster children and do not have space or resources to offer full time placements to another disabled child, a number have continued to offer a service through a match with the short breaks service.
- 3.14 Placement Service
- 3.14.1 Whilst the Placement Service is now managed within the Commissioning Service, professional responsibility for decision making and supervision regarding the case work remains with the social work service.
- 3.14.2 The department is seeking to reduce its reliance on independent fostering agencies. This includes using the existing capacity of our foster carer work force in the most efficient way. Alongside the fostering support teams a needs analysis exercise has been undertaken to address fostering vacancies.
- 3.14.3 Weekly placement meetings are held to consider the placement needs of children requiring placements and to identify potential links with available foster carers. A reduction of independent foster sector placements has been achieved from 290 to 260 in part this is attributable to a number of IFA carers (and Leeds children in placements) transferring to Leeds, as well as a more flexible approach to using currently available carers to maximise occupancy levels within approved fostering households.
- 3.14.4 The placement service in collaboration with Leeds Children's Rights Service undertook a consultation exercise with foster carers and children and young people in foster care about the use of profiles for both children and carers to ensure matching considerations are appropriately informed. All supervising social workers and foster carers have been completing foster carer profiles to inform both children requiring placement and social workers about the carers and their households.
- 3.14.5 Long term matching events have continued to identify placements options for children awaiting long term placements. These events have received positive

feedback. An in house event for Leeds foster carers was undertaken in March 2014. The aim of this was to give foster carers clear information about the children waiting for long term placements, in order to expand the ages of children they would consider and open them up to a wider range of children that they may not have considered previously. This event was extremely successful and has resulted in a number of matches being actively explored.

3.14.6 Placement service staff are panel members on the 3 area based Permanency Panels which have been established in 2013/ 2014. This enables them to identify children who may require long term placements at the four month permanency stage and enables the service to start looking at possible placement options at an early stage in order to prevent delay for children.

3.14.7 Placement staff are also engaging Independent Fostering Agencies and their carers to promote permanency via Special Guardianship Orders where long term matches have been agreed at permanency panel.

### 3.15 Support and supervision for carers

3.15.1 There are two geographical teams providing supervision and support to foster carers. All foster carers have an allocated qualified supervising social worker to offer supervision and support.

3.15.2 In addition to the individual work undertaken by the supervising social worker, the service runs a number of support groups for carers across the city. This year the service, in consultation with carers has altered the format of support groups for carers. They now range from general forums to more specific groups that are task and age related 13 plus/ under 12's/ support to carers of young babies/ toddlers within a stay and play facility and also providing support to carers who are providing care to babies who are detoxifying from drugs at birth. These groups allow an opportunity for input to the carers as well as the development of peer support from other carers with similar challenges and needs.

3.15.3 The Foster Carers Hand book has been updated with an online version now available on the website. This has been well received by carers. Safe care planning guidance has also been updated. E-Safety tools and guidance for foster carers providing advice and support about safe internet use has also been launched.

3.15.4 In July 2013 changes were made to the statutory framework (regulations and guidance) to enable the service to delegate decision making on key issues about children, to foster carers, where this was appropriate. The service developed a "delegated decision tool" to be used when a child/ young person starts a new placement and to review this regularly. Two training courses for foster carers, supervising social workers and social workers have taken place (with more planned) to promote an understanding and use of the Delegated Authority tool.

3.15.5 Moving children on to adoption is a significant part of the foster carer's role. The 'moving on forum' has been established and there have been 2 forums to date. These aim to compliment the 'moving on' training that is provided to all carers. The forum is by invite as one of its main aims is to gather together carers who

are 'currently' in the process of moving a child onto an adoptive family. The forum, which is facilitated by 2 experienced foster carers and a trainer, focuses on providing emotional support to carers. The feedback from adoptive families regarding foster carers ability to help in these transitions has been extremely positive.

- 3.15.6 The Support Care scheme is a distinctive yet city wide, community based provision. The children and young people referred to the scheme generally live at home with parents or family members. All children referred are deemed as 'children in need' and many are subject to child protection plans. Since July 2013 a pilot project working with early help services and child minders have offered day care to a number of children to help prevent family breakdown. The project has been very successful, providing effective parenting support for parents and excellent day care for the children. The evaluation of the pilot has concluded and the intention is to expand this across the city, particularly targeting those areas where most children of this age group (0-4) are received into care.
- 3.15.7 The Parent and Child scheme has benefited from greater development over the past year, with significant input from professionals from health and training to foster carers on report writing and providing evidence based assessment reports for court. The Therapeutic social work team also offers support to carers on the scheme. Birth parents are given the opportunity to demonstrate their ability to care for their child, to keep them safe and working with other people (family....and professionals) to make use of community resources to care for their child. This is a scheme that the service is keen to expanding in order to support parents with babies/children to learn how to parent safely and appropriately.
- 3.15.8 The children of foster carers play a vital role in the fostering task and the recruitment team provide them with dedicated preparation whilst their parents are in assessment. Research has shown that placements are more successful when there is a positive framework of support in place for the children of foster carers. A support group has been established by 2 fostering support workers for sons and daughters of carers (aged 7 – 17 years). Supervising social workers are also required to address support issues for birth children as part of supervision for foster carers.

### 3.16 Therapeutic support

- 3.16.1 The fostering service has a referral route to the Therapeutic social work team and the Leeds Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) who provide therapeutic support to children and young people in foster placement and consultation to carers.
- 3.16.2 The therapeutic team holds a weekly fostering surgery which carers can access directly. During the period 2013/ 2014. 144 self-referrals by carers were accepted and subsequently attended the fostering surgery. 124 children were supported via this route. Placement stability is tracked as high for carers attending the surgery and evaluations from foster carers are consistently positive.

- 3.16.3 The service offers training and support groups for foster carers using the 'Nurtured Heart' approach, and there is an ongoing weekly group for foster carers using the evidenced based KEEP programme and thereafter monthly support groups. 16 foster carers attended 'Nurtured Heart' and 26 carers have attended the KEEP programme. Both courses offer carers strategies for managing their own stress and enable carers to think about positive ways of managing complex and challenging behaviours.
- 3.16.4 4 groups of 'Nurtured Heart' training will be undertaken by supervising social workers and trained carers in the coming 12 month period, alongside the course provided by the therapeutic team. Foster carers are able to make changes in the way they approach dealing with negative behaviours, which results in the ability to promote positive relationships within the fostering placement and promotes placement stability.
- 3.17 Independent Support Service
- 3.17.1 An organisation called 'Foster Talk' continues to provide independent support to foster carers in circumstances where an allegation or serious complaint has been made about the foster carer. The service providers have attended fostering managers meetings and the Leeds Foster Carers Association meeting with foster carers to promote the service. Supervising social workers and team managers aim to ensure that carers are referred at an early stage for support. 10 carers have accessed the service this year. This service is due to be re commissioned and Foster carer representation is involved in this process.
- 3.18 Training
- 3.18.1 All prospective foster carers in assessment undertake the 3 day 'skills to foster' course. In addition, pre-approval 'taster' courses are also run. Initial training helps foster carers develop an understanding and insight into children's histories and the impact on their behaviour. These courses promote safe caring, equality and diversity and attachment and loss.
- 3.18.2 All foster carers were consulted on training provision, prior to an Outcomes Based Accountability training event which was held in December. The forum was held to inform the training plan for 2014/ 2015. Foster carers are represented at the fostering training group which meets bi-monthly to develop training provisions; this enables the service to respond quickly to new or changing requirements. An example of this is the provision of 2 training courses which will run in May and July for carers in meeting the needs of unaccompanied and trafficked children in foster care.
- 3.18.3 Staff training is identified via staff appraisals and supervision. All fostering staff have undertaken introductory training on restorative practice and there is an expectation that this approach is applied in supervising and supporting foster carers.

- 3.18.4 Alongside 2 foster carers, 4 staff have attended 'Nurtured Heart' trainers training, to increase capacity to the service in running courses and ongoing support groups to carers using the approach.
- 3.18.5 The service has provided specific development days for fostering staff. This year's topics have included 'engaging with children and young people' which was facilitated by staff from the Voice and Influence team. Training has been provided on support to foster carers where a child is at risk of sexual exploitation (CSE) and/ or at risk of being missing from care. A fostering team manager is leading as a SPOC (Single Point Of Contact) for the fostering teams to ensure children at risk of CSE and their carers are appropriately supported. A further development day has focused on a range of safe guarding issues and supporting carers to improve the outcome for children and young people.
- 3.19 Educating and leisure support
- 3.19.1 Specialist educational support is available to foster carers. There is a qualified teacher based in the service who provides training and individual support and advice to carers regarding their children's educational needs, this includes promoting personal educational planning meetings. Within educational settings young people in year 10 and 11 can access 1 to 1 tuition. There is a range of support for carers promoting aspirations for children who are looked after to attend higher education. Leeds Met University has provided a lunch and information event for foster carers to raise awareness of the support available to care leavers.
- 3.19.2 Leeds library service offers a letterbox project – promoting a range of age appropriate books for children in foster care. Carers are encouraged to attend their local libraries with the children that they care for to collect their book bags. The aim is to promote awareness of the library facilities as well as encouraging children's attainment in literacy.
- 3.19.3 Foster carer training and supervision promotes the importance of leisure provision. Looked After children are able to access the max card; giving free access to certain leisure facilities. The 'corporate offer' has been implemented, improving free access to a range of facilities including sports and leisure opportunities. Information on community play schemes, events, clubs and school holiday activities are provided to carers on a regular basis.
- 3.20 Looked After Health Teams
- 3.20.1 The looked after health team works closely with the fostering service, providing training input to foster carers and also individual support when required. Since 2008 there has been a national requirement to report on the emotional health and well-being of children in care. A strength and difficulties questionnaire (SDQ) is sent on an annual basis for carers to complete with assistance (if required) from the named children's nurse on health visitors for their foster child.

### 3.21 Fostering Panel

- 3.21.1 Leeds has 4 fostering panels with 3 independent panel chairs. Panel members come from a variety of backgrounds and provide a positive contribution to the panel process. A panel manager (who works across the fostering and adoption panels) has been appointed, alongside additional administrative support, this has enabled the panels to function more effectively, preventing delays in approving carers.
- 3.21.2 There are current plans to improve the security of panel paperwork through the introduction of electronic panel papers, using share point and the provision of tablet equipment to independent panel members.
- 3.21.3 New panel information leaflets are currently under development; these leaflets are more detailed and supportive of applicants and fit with the corporate image.

Foster carers have the opportunity to attend the independent review mechanism (IRM) when they are dissatisfied with a decision made by the department about their registration as foster carers. In this period there has been one case presented to the IRM, the IRM agreed with the agency's decision to terminate a carer's approval.

Fostering panel continues to play a very important role in the work of the agency, and whilst the role of panel has changed and developed over the last six months with the introduction of permanency panels and a change in the direction of kinship care, panel have responded to this challenge.

### 3.22 Complaints and allegations

- 3.22.1 There were 16 complaints this year within the fostering service. Complaints are evaluated to ascertain if there are themes for service improvement. 4 complaints were regarding foster carers attitude/conduct. 1 was upheld and 3 were partially upheld. These were addressed in supervision with the relevant carers. 12 complaints were made by foster carers, 3 remain ongoing- of the other 9, 1 was not upheld, 5 were partially upheld and 3 were upheld, these related to children's social workers attitude/behaviours. The learning from complaints are discussed with the fostering management group or with the relevant social work team.
- 3.22.2 There were 45 notifications to the Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO). All allegations in relation to foster carers are investigated under the procedures for investigating allegations against adults caring for children. 26 notifications were progressed to an Allegations Management Meeting to ensure that children were safeguarded and appropriate action taken. The LADO attends management meetings for the Fostering Service on a quarterly basis to discuss issues raised through the allegations process these discussions inform service development and best practice.

### 3.23 Quality Assurance Information

- 3.23.1 The Fostering Panel offers feedback to supervising social workers with regards to the quality of the reports presented to panel. The standard of reports presented are generally of a high quality. Overall, the quality of work presented to panel is good or very good in nature, with some examples of excellent practice. The role of panel in quality assurance continues to be very important, with workers appreciating the feedback and support offered by panel. The feedback in general is constructive and balanced.
- 3.23.2 During the past year the Fostering Officer Review Team has become established, and a protocol devised. There are 3 Fostering Reviewing Officers (FRO's) who are managed within the Integrated Safeguarding Unit. The FRO's undertake all foster carer reviews and identity themes which are discussed in the Management Team meetings. Most foster carers have given positive feedback about the new system and that the reviews have been helpful. A clear focus of the Fostering Review process is to ensure that the views of children who are (or have been) in placement during the review period should be sought and these views also inform service development.
- 3.23.5 Permanency Panels have now been established across the city-with representation from the placement and fostering services. Except for adoption matches, the Permanency Panels consider plans for permanency including long term foster placement matches, Special Guardianship and reunification to ensure that support to these arrangements is robust. They also consider situations where there is a significant change of care plan. The panels are newer in the West and South of the city and are still being embedded fully into practice.
- 3.23.6 The fostering Quality Assurance and Performance framework has recently been reviewed, this framework monitors the fostering service key requirements. Continuous auditing of carer case files is taking place using the Frameworki compliant auditing tool, to ensure statutory compliance and good practice standards.

### 3.24 Service Planning 2014/ 2015

- 3.24.1 The key priority of the service remains the recruitment and retention of foster carers, the Recruitment Team will continue to work with the corporate communication and marketing teams to recruit carers willing to take sibling(having at least 2 bedrooms) and teenagers.
- 3.24.2 Services for older young people will be - developed including promoting 'Staying Put' arrangements, and the development of a Supportive Lodgings service for young people who cannot continue to live in fostering households (or are leaving residential care)

- 3.24.3 The 'Support Care' service, child minding, respite fostering and day care provision is to be developed to provide targeted support in order to prevent children from entering care.
- 3.24.4 Out of hours support for carers is to be developed as part of an initiative with foster carers providing peer support, targeted residential outreach and extending the service available from the out of hours Emergency Duty Team.
- 3.24.5 Improvements on case recording of foster carers files by supervising social workers has been identified as a service development for 2014/15. This is working in close conjunction with colleagues from Core Logic to ensure that the system supports recording in the fostering service.

#### **4. Corporate Considerations**

##### **4.1 Consultation and Engagement**

- 4.1.1 Foster carers meet bi monthly with officers and councillors to discuss areas of development, issues of concern, and to ensure there is open dialogue with foster carers and the service. Foster carer representation and involvement in any new developments is an established principle of the service.
- 4.1.2 The Leeds Foster Care Association (LFCA) plays an important part in supporting foster carers in Leeds. The fostering service works closely with the LFCA to ensure carers are supported in understanding their role.

##### **4.2 Equality and Diversity/Cohesion and Integration**

As in the body of the report

##### **4.3 Council Policies and City Priorities**

- 4.3.1 The Children and young people plan identifies children who are looked after as one of the three priority 'Obsessions.'

##### **4.4 Resources and value for money**

- 4.4.1 None identified in this report

##### **4.5 Legal Implications, Access to information and Call In**

- 4.5.1 None identified in this report.

##### **4.6 Risk Management**

- 4.6.1 It is a regulatory requirement of the local authority that this report is prepared and presented to the Executive Board of the Council.



## **5 Conclusions**

- 5.1 The past year has seen the implementation of the new level of fees and allowances and development of the Core Offer to carers. The recruitment and retention of foster carers will continue to be addressed.

## **6. Recommendations**

- 6.1 That the Executive Board receives this report and continues to support the work of the fostering service and promote best outcomes for children.

## **7. Background documents<sup>1</sup>**

- 7.1 None

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<sup>1</sup> The background documents listed in this section are available to download from the Council's website, unless they contain confidential or exempt information. The list of background documents does not include published works.