
Report of the Director of Children's Services

Report to Executive Board

Date: 20 June 2012

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 National Minimum Standards 2011 that the Executive Board of the council receives a written report on the management and outcomes of the fostering service. This report provides an overview of fostering service activity from April 2011 to March 2012.
2. The fostering service was inspected by OFSTED in June 2010 and was rated as "Good".

Recommendations

3. That the Executive Board receive this report and continues to support the work of the fostering service to ensure our fostered children receive the best possible support.

1. Purpose of this report

- 1.1. 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 2011 and March 2012. The report provides the Executive Board with information on the work of the service; its compliance with the national minimum standards; the implementation and progression of children's care plans; the service 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.
- 1.2. The report also highlights national developments in fostering practice and provides information on the profile of children in care in Leeds.

2. Background information

- 2.1. As part of the ambition to become a child friendly city the council and its partners are fully committed to ensuring that wherever possible children are safely supported to live and be brought up within their family and community network. Where this is not possible and children need to become looked after by the authority this should be in a family setting or in a placement which prepares them for this. Wherever possible these placements should be provided by Leeds City Council.
- 2.2. In 2009/2010 Leeds, in common with many local authorities in the UK, experienced a significant rise in the number of looked after children. Although the number of looked after children has stabilised in the past year Leeds City Council still has a disproportionately high number of looked after children compared to its statistical neighbours. Reducing the need for children to become looked after is one of three 'obsessions' of the council and its partners.
- 2.3. The increase in the number of looked after children placed considerable pressure on the Fostering Service and, as a result Leeds has had to use Independent Fostering Agency foster placements. Independent Fostering Agency placements have significantly higher costs than in-house foster carers. In May 2012 there were 307 children placed with Independent Fostering Agency carers. In 2011 the Fostering Service appointed a Recruitment and Assessment Manager. Considerable work has already taken place and increasing recruitment and retention will be the key focus for the Fostering Service in 2012/2013 as part of the Child Friendly City initiative.

3. Main issues

- 3.1. Foster carers look after children in their own homes, often at very short notice and in circumstances that are very difficult for the children involved. Most children, with the support of the children's social work service and partners, are able to return to their birth or extended family. Where this is not possible it is the council's aim to ensure that children are able to achieve a permanent home through adoption or another legal order, such as Special Guardianship or Residence Orders. If the child's needs are very complex and ongoing social work support is required, the child may achieve stability through permanent foster care.

- 3.2. Foster care is a highly regulated area of social work practice and there have been a range of new regulations and statutory guidance issued by the Department of Education (DfE). The new regulations and National Minimum Standards took effect from 1 April 2011 and have been informed by the views of children and young people. The National Minimum Standards provide the framework against which OfSTED inspect local authority fostering services and fostering agencies. Considerable work has been undertaken in the last year within the service to develop practice and procedures to ensure compliance with the new fostering standards and regulations. The standards also profile the central importance of the child's relationship with their foster carer and the need for foster carers to be recognised as core members of the team working with the child. There is a recognition that foster carers need to be empowered to take on the day to day tasks of parenting and provide care as a 'good parent'.
- 3.3. Each local authority has been required to develop a foster carers' charter that sets out clear principles on how foster carers should be treated; it recognises their invaluable work and also profiles the expectations of carers. Within Leeds the charter has been developed with carers and has recently been presented to the Corporate Parenting Group. It will be fully launched and implemented within the next two months.
- 3.4. The new Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations 2010 also came into force in April 2011. The aim of the revised regulations and guidance is to streamline processes to increase the emphasis on more effective care planning for children in care. These regulations highlight permanence as the underpinning concept for all social work with children and families from family support through to adoption. Permanence is defined as the framework for emotional, physical and legal permanence which gives a child a sense of security, continuity, commitment and identity. Achieving permanence is the key consideration from the point the child becomes looked after.
- 3.5. Leeds foster carers come from a range of different backgrounds. Recent changes to welfare benefits may impact on some of our carers. Changes to Housing Benefit mean that where a foster family cannot count foster children as part of their entitlement. We are working with colleagues in Environments and Neighbourhoods to identify the number of Leeds foster carers who may be affected by these changes.
- 3.6. The national profile of fostering remains very high and the Leeds fostering service has been involved with the Department for Education in considering some of the issues and challenges facing fostering services nationally. The DfE have indicated they will produce a paper within the next three months which will state the government policy agenda for fostering.
- 3.7. **Fostering service**
 - 3.7.1. The fostering service in Leeds consists of five teams: two supervisory teams, a kinship care team, a specialist team for children with a disability and a recruitment and assessment team. The dedicated recruitment and assessment team was

developed following a review of the service undertaken in 2010/11 in order to support the more effective recruitment of foster carers to Leeds City Council.

- 3.7.2. In addition to the recruitment and assessment team, a kinship care team is now well established and operates on a city wide basis. This team provides an assessment and support service to family and friends' carers. The family placement team provides foster carer for children with disabilities, including short breaks for families with disabled children as well as longer term placements. There are two geographical teams covering the city providing supervision and support to foster carers. Members of the team continue to undertake a small number of foster care assessments.
- 3.7.3. A placements service has also been developed to ensure that professional social work staff and contract and commissioning staff work closely together to deliver cost-effective and high quality placements for children.

3.8. Recruitment of foster carers

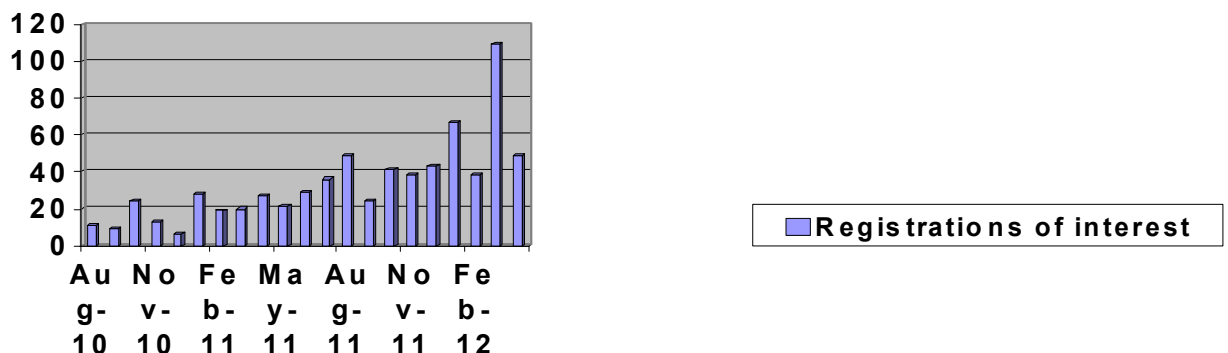
3.8.1. Foster care households at March 2012.

Mainstream Foster Care Households	Kinship Care Households	Total
461	165	626

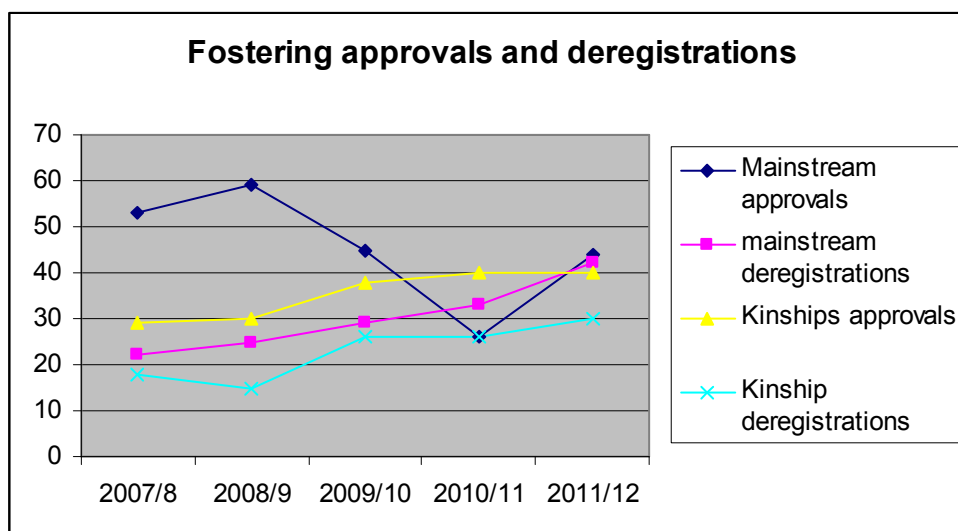
- 3.8.2. A large number of foster carers are 50 years old and above and this provides significant benefits to the service including, considerable life and parenting experience and often space and flexibility in the home as their own children have grown up and live independently. However many of these foster carers start to scale down or retire from fostering as they reach 60 years of age and as a result in recent years the service has suffered from a loss of capacity.
- 3.8.3. Consequently, the recruitment of foster carers is a high priority for the council and a dedicated recruitment and assessment team has been set up to ensure that there is a significant increase in the number of foster carers recruited to Leeds.
- 3.8.4. A comprehensive communications strategy has been implemented to attract families in Leeds to foster for the council. Developing a new web site has been a priority as research indicates that the majority of prospective foster carers seek out information about the service on-line before they make contact. The new website went live in March 2012 (<http://www.foster4leeds.co.uk/fostering/foster-for-leeds/>). It contains full information about fostering and adoption including DVD clips of foster carers talking positively about their experiences. This ensures that prospective carers are fully aware of the benefit and rewards of being a Leeds foster carer as well as the challenges.
- 3.8.5. In addition to the new website a radio advertising campaign has been undertaken and links established with local media generating positive articles in the local press and media. Fostering recruitment staff have held and taken part in a number of recruitment fairs and/or stands at other events, such as Breeze.

- 3.8.6. A further strand of work has seen the recruitment team forge links and partnerships with local business including the recent partnership with Leeds Rhinos. This agreement has led to the promotion of foster care for Leeds on their big screen at home games, space on leaflets and complimentary tickets for foster carers taking looked after children to games.
- 3.8.7. It is intended that this type of agreement is established with a number of other large business partners in the city. These agreements will seek the commitment of business to the 'child friendly city' through their support to ensure that Leeds children are cared for by Leeds carers. The commitment will vary from support with some promotional activity such as recruitment fairs within the work place to supporting the retention of carers through benefits such as concessions for foster carers.
- 3.8.8. Also planned for this year is the re-branding of the promotional material and the development of the use of social media to link with facebook and twitter pages to advertise recruitment events.
- 3.8.9. Elected members play an important role in supporting the work of the fostering service through membership of foster panels and by promoting foster care. In 2011 a local event was hosted by Gildersome ward members. 11 households attended this event. This resulted in two initial home visits being made by members of the fostering services to follow up interest. Following the visits one household is currently in assessment and due to be approved shortly.
- 3.8.10. Building on the success of this initiative a budget of £10,000 has been allocated for member led recruitment and retention events.
- 3.8.11. Foster carers can come from any background or walk of life. In February 2012 Leeds was the only authority in the region to host an event specifically aimed at gay and lesbian carers. This resulted in five expressions of interest of which one couple is currently in assessment. In addition current gay and lesbian carers have expressed their appreciation of the support they feel they receive as foster carers for Leeds.
- 3.8.12. All the promotional activity to date has resulted in a significant increase in the registrations of interest to become a foster carer.

3.9. Registrations of interest August 2010 to February 2012



- 3.9.1. In 2010/11, on average the service received 16 expressions of interest per month from potential foster carers. This has increased to an average of 48 per month in 2011/12 with a peak in March 2012 of 109.
- 3.9.2. Research by the Fostering Network suggests that there is a high drop out rate from initial interest to approval. This reflects the fact that the decision to become a foster carer is a significant one and understanding the full implications leads to a number of people withdrawing their interest. However a percentage of those that show an interest clearly go on to become foster carers and increasing the level of interest is the first step to increasing the number of foster carers in Leeds.
- 3.9.3. In the last year eighty-four foster carers were approved by the service forty of whom were kinship carers. As stated it is the intention to significantly improve on this number and the early increases in numbers of people registering an interest is promising.
- 3.9.4. Capacity within the service has recently been increased through use of social workers who undertake fostering assessments on a sessional basis. This is a cost effective and flexible means of ensuring that all expressions of interest are responded to very quickly.
- 3.9.5. Retention of foster carers is as important as recruitment and local authorities are required to maintain a register of foster carers which includes a requirement to report any carers leaving the service to a fostering panel. The panel considers the reasons and formally removes the names of carers from the register.
- 3.9.6. In 2011/12, 72 foster carers ceased fostering: 38 retired or resigned; 21 carers continue to care for a child but under a different order; six carers were deregistered, six kinship carers had children who ceased to need to be looked after and two carers moved to work for an independent fostering agency.



3.10. **Family placement service**

- 3.10.1. The family placement service is a specialist team within the fostering service providing foster care and short breaks for disabled children. The service promotes the social model of disability and the inclusion of disabled children in all aspects of family and community life. The short breaks service for children has been established for over 30 years and is one of the largest in the country. The service offers short breaks ranging from day care to regular weekends to longer periods as needed, offering new experiences and activities for children whilst giving their parents/carers a much needed break. Between March 2011 and April 2012, nine new short breaks foster carers were approved for children with disabilities.
- 3.10.2. In addition the Fostering Scheme provides fostering placements for children who have a learning, sensory or physical disability and are unable to live with their family of origin. The scheme can offer shared care, time limited or permanent placements to disabled children. Between March 2011 and April 2012, two new carers were approved as long term foster carers for children with disabilities and 21 children were matched with long term carers from 30 referrals made. The long term team currently has 55 carers looking after 78 children.

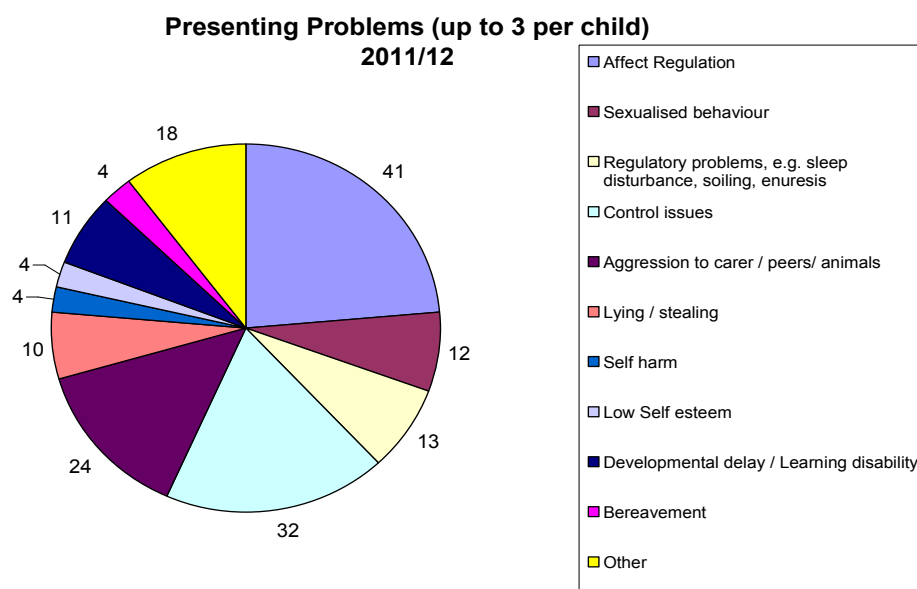
3.11. Kinship fostering team

- 3.11.1. In this period 40 kinship carer were approved, nine were not approved and one was withdrawn before approval. The new regulations in relation to kinship care do present a challenge to the service at a time of increased demand for these assessments. The use of kinship care is entirely consistent with the aim of keeping children placed within their family and community network wherever possible and as such a number of assessments are often undertaken in relation to each child placed.
- 3.11.2. The development of Family Group Conferencing as a model means that family members should be identified and encouraged to help children much earlier alleviating the need to enter into care proceedings altogether for some children. Where care proceedings are initiated the early identification of the whole family network and the relative skills and experience within the network will significantly improve the identification and approval of kinship carers for children.

3.12. Fostering support services

- 3.12.1. The provision of a range of support services from the individual work provided by the supervising fostering officer to training and support groups is a significant factor in the retention of foster carers and enables the service not only to ensure carers are well supported in line with the fostering minimum standards but also enables Leeds to compete with the better independent fostering agencies locally.
- 3.12.2. The fostering service has continued to work hard over the year to review and develop the support services provided to carers, the central component of which is the supervisory relationship. The foster carers handbook has recently been updated with an on-line version now available on the web-site. This has been well received by carers and provides information and guidance to carers about their role and responsibility in caring for children.

- 3.12.3. Foster carers expressed a high degree of satisfaction with the support they receive from their supervising fostering officers through a satisfaction survey conducted in December 2011. The survey also raised some areas for improvement and an action plan has been developed and presented to the Corporate Carers group for their approval.
- 3.12.4. The service runs a number of support groups for carers ranging from support to kinship carers to more specific ones such as support to carers of young babies from drug using parents. 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.
- 3.12.5. The service provides independent support to foster carers in circumstances where an allegation or serious complaint has been made, through an independent organisation called Foster Talk. 11 carers used the service in the last year with take up of this service increasing as staff and carers are aware of its importance and availability.
- 3.12.6. The therapeutic social work team provides support for foster placements via the Fostering Surgery which was set up in 2004. The surgeries provide consultation and advice to foster carers, enabling foster carers to discuss any issues or difficulties they are facing with a placement and offering strategies to deal with that. Over the last three years there has been a significant increase in the number of referrals to this team as a whole which can be largely attributable to the services provided for foster carers. These increases reflect the expansion of the service and also the provision of a life story clinic, providing support and advice to both foster carers and social workers undertaking life story work with children. During the period 2011/12 99 appointments were made with foster carers and 85 children discussed. The evaluations from carers would suggest that the service is highly valued and contributes to maintaining placement stability for the most vulnerable children in our city.



3.13. Training

- 3.13.1. Staff training is identified via staff appraisals and supervision. In the last year staff have had development days specifically on the new national minimum standards, the supervision of carers and good recording. The next year will see refresher training on a range of safeguarding issues and supporting carers to improve the outcomes for children and young people.
- 3.13.2. Foster carers are expected to attend training as determined through their annual reviews and also as required in the payment for skills structure, determined by the level and type of foster care provided. A wide range of training courses are available for foster carers and a large majority of foster carers have satisfactorily completed the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) induction standards.

3.14. Educational and leisure support

- 3.14.1. The educational achievements of young people in care continues to improve this year. The Stepping Stones initiative continues to support young people with their homework, social skills and raises awareness of University and the students' aspirations. There is a great deal of support in encouraging young people to move onto University with a range of initiatives in place. There are over 30 students attending higher education this year.
- 3.14.2. All looked after children of school age are given a MAX card, this allows the young person, another child and two adults free access to various venues throughout the country. Harewood House, The Castle Museum, York, Eureka are all part of the scheme and again carers feedback is incredibly positive.
- 3.14.3. The sons and daughters of foster carers play a vital role in the fostering task and the service has started to provide them with dedicated preparation whilst their parents are in assessment. Fostering is very much a family activity and research has shown that placements are more successful and less likely to break down when there is a positive framework of support in place that includes the sons and daughters of carers. This is an area the service is keen to develop.

3.15. Interface between the fostering service and foster carers

- 3.15.1. Foster carer representatives meet bi-monthly with officers and councillors to discuss areas for development, issues of concern and to ensure there is an open dialogue and communication with foster carers and the service. Topics for discussion have been wide ranging and have included financial matters, training, e-safety issues and health issues. The involvement of carers in any new developments is an established principle in the fostering service and foster carers have been actively involved in developing the fostering charter for Leeds carers.
- 3.15.2. The Leeds Foster Care Association has been in existence for many years and plays an important role in supporting foster carers. The service works closely with the Leeds Fostering Association and it has continued to support and encourage

foster carers in 2011/12. They have held social activities to bring carers and their families together and the service aims to build more partnership with the association to support carers over the coming year. The Leeds Foster Care Association have run annual play schemes for children in school holidays. They pride themselves in supporting all young people no matter what challenges they bring. The staff who support this scheme have moved on this year so the play scheme is currently under review. We are also exploring options to work in partnership with the youth service to develop a summer activity base for fostered children and development work is underway with the children's centres and clusters in providing more localised and integrated support to looked after children and foster carers and their families.

3.16. Looked after health team

3.16.1. The looked after children's health team work very closely with the fostering service. They provide training input to foster carers but also offer individual support to carers as required. The nurses for children in care also provide additional individual support and advice to foster carers as required about any health issues related to children in placement. Since 2008 there has been a national requirement to report on the emotional well being of children in care and the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire are sent to carers to complete on an annual basis with input from the young person as appropriate.

3.17. Fostering panel

3.17.1. There are currently four fostering panels which meet each month to consider foster care approvals, de-registrations and matches of carers and children. The panels include social work staff, health professionals, councillors, foster carers from other local authorities and adult care leavers. The panels are now chaired by three independent chairs to ensure compliance with the new national minimum standards and team managers from the service are the agency advisors to the panel.

3.18. Complaints and allegations

3.18.1. There were 14 complaints this year within the fostering service. The key issues related to foster care registration and financial support to carers.

3.18.2. There were 14 complaints this year within the fostering service.

- Five of these related to carers being terminated from the foster carer register. One of these was not upheld and three were partially upheld.
- Two of the complaints related to payments to carers which were upheld.
- One related to an insurance claim which is ongoing.
- Three related to a financial support and issues with payment which are upheld.
- One related to relationship difficulties with the social worker which was partially upheld.

3.18.3. Two regarding contact arrangements which were partially upheld.

3.18.4. There were 33 allegations made against foster carers resulting in a referral to the Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO). Child protection procedures were followed in all instances ensuring that children were safeguarded and appropriate action taken.

3.19. **Service planning 2012/13**

3.19.1. The key priority for the service in 2012/13 remains the recruitment and retention of foster carers to ensure that children requiring a placement can be well matched with a family in Leeds. The recruitment strategy has started to show and increase in interest from prospective carers and this will be strengthened further this year. The service is organised effectively to respond to the increased demand and assess carers within a clear timescale.

3.19.2. Kinship care remains the first placement of choice for children looked after and the development of specific support to these placement is an identified area for improvement. Supporting kinship carers to move to special guardianship will also be a significant priority as this support children to achieve permanence.

3.19.3. The service has maintained and developed the support to parent and child foster carers with two additional carers improving our capacity to expedite permanence plans for some of the most vulnerable babies in the care system. Leeds has been involved in developing a good practice guide on these placements with BAAF and our staff have been asked to speak about developing such a service at a BAAF national conference. This will continue to be an ongoing development area in the coming year.

3.19.4. The management of the panels will remain under review to ensure that they meet the regulatory requirements.

4. **Corporate considerations**

4.1. **Consultation and engagement**

4.1.1. None specifically for this report.

4.2. **Equality and diversity / cohesion and integration**

4.2.1. As in body of the report.

4.3. **Council policies and city priorities**

4.3.1. The Children and Young Peoples Plan identifies Looked after Children 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. This report is subject to Call In.

4.6. Risk management

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

5. Conclusions

5.1. There have been a number of challenges over the past year as the number of children looked after requiring foster placements continues to increase, emphasising the need for an effective and responsive recruitment and sufficiency strategy to meet the diverse needs of the children requiring a fostering placement.

6. Recommendations

6.1. That the Executive Board receive this report and continues to support the work of the fostering service to ensure our fostered children receive the best possible support.

7. Background documents¹

7.1 The Fostering Service Statement of Purpose and Function is attached to this report as an appendix.

§ Ofsted inspection of fostering services in Leeds June 2010

§ Fostering service Statement of Purpose and Function

¹ The background documents listed in this section are available for inspection on request for a period of four years following the date of the relevant meeting. Accordingly this list does not include documents containing exempt or confidential information, or any published works. Requests to inspect any background documents should be submitted to the report author.