

BRACKNELL FOREST FOSTER CARE SERVICE

ANNUAL REPORT 2013 - 2014

1. Introduction

- 1.1 This Annual report should be read in conjunction with the Foster Care Statement of Purpose 2014-2015. The Statement of Purpose sets out the legislative and regulatory context under which Bracknell Forest Council carries out the functions of the fostering service.
- 1.2 This report provides details of activity over the financial year April 2013- March 2014 and plans for the forthcoming year.

2. Foster Panel

- 2.1 The Bracknell Forest Foster Panel has had a successful second year. The Panel has met on the second Monday of the month on nine occasions during 2013-2014. The December meeting included a joint panel and training session with the Family Placement team about the changes to the assessment process following the implementation of the Fostering Services Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2013
- 2.2 The 2011 Guidance and Regulations allow panel members to remain on the panel with no maximum or minimum tenure. This enables those panel members who choose to remain on the panel the opportunity to do so. Fostering panels do not have fixed membership. Panel members are drawn from a 'central list' of people with the qualifications and experience to be a panel member. This year has seen a period of consolidation with two panel members resigning. One resignation was due to retirement and the other, the Looked After Children nurse, was later replaced with the newly appointed LAC nurse for the Bracknell Forest area. As in the previous year it has been important for panel members new to the role to gain experience and so in practice the panel has operated with most members being present. The two Assistant Team Managers for Family Placement team are also members of the central list to provide a social work role for the panel as required.
- 2.3 The Panel membership meets the requirements of the Fostering Services Regulations 2011. Several members of the previous Joint Foster Panel continued to be members of the new Panel. Their considerable experience combined with the support of the experienced Chair has made a considerable contribution to the development of the panel. Looking to the future the Panel would benefit from further development through widening the experiences of panel members for example to have a more balanced gender balance; having care experience and wider diverse experiences of life.

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3. Panel membership 2013-2014

Name	Role	Comment
Sarah Neville	Independent Panel Chair	Current
Gareth Barnard	Executive Member for CYP&L	Current
Judi Arnold	Children's Social Care (inc. Disabled Children) rep	Resigned September 2013 as retired from work
Fiona Nyquist	Looked After Children Health Nurse for Bracknell	Appointed to panel November 2013
Madalyn Cockburn	Children's Social Care Rep	Current
Hilary Mason	Independent (Education experience)	Current
Lyn Brown	Foster Carer (independent)	Current
Gill Garbut	Independent (Education experience)	Current
Lis Norris	Independent (Education experience)	Current
Kim Harris	ATM Family Placement social	Current
Karen Wood	ATM Family Placement social worker	Current
Helen Fenton	Panel Adviser	Current
Lyn Veale / Hilary Davis / Joanna Gibbons	Panel Administrators	Current

- 3.1 Feedback from applicants is positive in relation to the quality of information provided about panel; applicants feeling welcomed and the extent to which they felt important issues are considered. Applicants are also invited to make suggestions on how fostering applications are processed or how the panel process can be improved. Any concerns raised in the feedback are addressed individually with the applicant.

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4. Panel Business

4.1 Summary of Panel Recommendations (April 2013 to March 2014)

	Cases heard
New approvals	
Long term (non connected persons)	1 (NB also counted in short term so not in total)
Short term	(includes 1 re- approval) 4
Short Breaks	0
Family & Friends (Connected Persons)	4
Total	8
Applicants not approved	1
Reviews	1 st Reviews - 5 1 st Reviews and Change of Approval terms - 3 Reviews and Change of Approval terms – 8
Private Fostering arrangements	2
Long term match (non kinship)	1
Supported Lodgings	0
Safeguarding and support	2
Total number of items considered	30
Resignations	10 General Carers – 7 Connected Persons Carers - 3

4.2 Bracknell Forest Approved Carers (as at 31 March 2014)

Total of Approved Fostering Households	49
<i>(NB: several households approved for more than one group)</i>	
long term matched placements (non kinship)	7
short term placements	43
short breaks care	6
specific relatives or friends	4

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Supported Lodgings	1
Parent and Child	1
Out of the short term placements six are able to offer short breaks care Seven are approved for long term as well as short term	

4.3 Carers are often approved for one child or a sibling group of two or three children. Carers are not always used to their full approval numbers because consideration has to be given to the needs of the child already in placement when considering placing another child. Good matching of child with the carer and family reduces the risk of disruption later on.

4.4 Overall, 2013 – 2014 has seen a small reduction in the number of approved foster carers from 51 to 49 fostering households. However the number of placements has, with carers increasingly feeling able to take more than one child. An emphasis on matching children to long term placements has led to three families changing their status from foster carers to Special Guardians.

5. Fostering Reviews

5.1 The foster carer's annual review of approval addresses all relevant aspects of the National Minimum Fostering Standards and Regulations 2001. The reviews are chaired by an Assistant Team Manager of the Family Placement Team for consistency. All the completed reviews are agreed by the Head of Service for Looked After Children who is appointed as Decision Maker for this purpose.

5.2 The updated forms and review format has been embedded during 2013 – 2014 and is working well. This includes updated Personal Development Plans for foster carers. There has been steady progress with reviewing the range of consultation forms and reintroducing formal feedback for Independent Reviewing Officers. There are further plans to seek information from birth family as a part of the reviewing process.

5.3 47 reviews have been carried out within 12 months of the previous review. 8 reviews of foster households approved within the last twelve months were presented to the Foster Care Panel and 8 reviews seeking a change of approval terms. All first reviews were presented to Foster Panel within a year of the carer's approval as required by the regulations.

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6. Outcome of OFSTED inspection of the Fostering Service

- 6.1 The Fostering Service was last inspected by Ofsted in June 2011. The outcome of this inspection indicates that there is a strong and effective fostering service in Bracknell Forest. The inspection report for 2011 is published on the OFSTED website.

The Ofsted regime of inspecting Fostering Services has changed so that this is now part of a wider process of inspecting Children's Social Care. The programme of inspection began in the Autumn 2013 and, as the inspections are now unannounced there is no 'due date' as with previous fostering inspections..

7. Data about Children Looked After by Bracknell Forest

- 7.1 Number of Children Looked After by Bracknell Forest (as at 31 March 2014)

Total number of Looked after Children	113	This is a sustained increase from an average of 75-85 pre 2012
Number in fostering placements	90	This is all fostering placements including Bracknell Forest approved foster carers and connected person/kinship placements; and children placed with Independent Fostering Agencies whether in or out of Bracknell
Total number of Looked After Children placed with Bracknell Foster Carers	60	This does not include short breaks, supported lodgings, adult placements or children from other local authorities placed with Bracknell Forest carers
Males	28	
Females	32	
Percentage aged 11 and over	32/60 = 53%	
Percentage from black and minority ethnic groups	15/60 = 25%	This is all ethnicities except white British for all LAC in BF placements (out of 60)
Number in Bracknell Forest placements	65	This is all foster placements within the Borough – including In house, Connected person and IFA

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Number placed with independent fostering agency carers	22	In or out of Bracknell
Number placed with other local authority carers	0	

8. Summary of relevant National Indicators data for March 2014

- 8.1 Percentage of looked after children aged under 16 years and in care for 2.5 years or more who have been in their current placement for at least 2 years is **51.6% (16/31)** This is a reduction from 68.4 % in the previous year but reflects a number of variables including the lower average age of children becoming looked who move through to permanence and the movement of a few adolescents with complex behaviour and care needs.
- 8.2 Percentage of looked after children with three or more placement moves in the last year 14.2% (16/113) as compared to 10 % for the previous year. This outcome was following the national trend until Mach when a number of adolescents moved unexpectedly and other children within the cohort left the care system.
- 8.3 Percentage of children adopted (and Special Guardianship Orders) from the Authority in the last year is 16.9% (15/89) This is as a percentage of children who had been LAC for 6 months or more, and excluding UASC. This demonstrates a considerable improvement from 8.3 % in the previous year and reflects the changes in the team to ensure that an Assistant Team Manager takes the lead for adoption and similarly, dedicated and experienced workers focus on adoption. In addition, an extra member of staff was agreed in late 2012 which has assisted with achieving this good outcome.

9. Foster Care

- 9.1 The team received a total of 17 general fostering applications in this reporting period. Of the 17 applications received,
- * three resulted in approval;
 - * three, although completed in time for the March 2014 panel, had to be deferred due to the fact that statutory checks had not been received in time;
 - * two families have been asked to defer their application until they have addressed issues identified as part of the assessment process;

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- one assessment was completed but the applicant was not recommended for approval by the Fostering Panel;
 - four assessments are on-going;
 - the remaining families chose not to progress following attendance at the Skills to Foster training.
- 9.2 The new two stage assessment process has been in place since August 2013 with the first assessment presented to panel in November 2013. Of those assessments completed and on-going, nine have been with the 2 stage process.
- 9.3 Given the record number of applications the team feels unfortunate not to have approved more general applications. The processes around selection and recruitment are being reviewed to identify improvements to the however as stated above from some factors such as delays with DBS checks and medical reports, have been beyond the team's control.
- 9.4 2013-2014 has been a challenging year for a number of reasons. The increase in instructions from Court for connected persons, previously known as kinship assessments, has placed pressure on allocation of work. Unlike most other assessments it is not possible to predict the demand and as assessments have to be completed within the time demands of the Court this work can be very challenging to resource. The introduction of the two stage process for applications to foster has also been demanding but is now embedded in practice and the team is working hard to ensure that the required timescales are met.
- 9.5 The challenges faced in terms of achieving the target for approval this year have in part been due to issues out of the worker's control. For example Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks are taking an average of three months to be returned. This is due to particular staffing issues with Thames Valley Police. The DBS process and procedures sets out an expectation that checks will be returned within 60 days and it is not possible to chase or follow up enquires until after this time.
- 9.6 Similar issues have arisen in respect of Agency Medical Adviser reports which have also been delayed due to an overall increase across East Berkshire. These two issues resulted in a delay in three foster care applications otherwise ready to be presented to Panel in March and put back to April. .

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- 9.7 Steps are being taken to resolve these issues but in the meantime the team is doing what it can to factor in the likely delay and monitoring the progress of these checks.
- 9.8 Of the applications for fostering one family decided to change their application to adoption (and are now being assessed); another family were previously fostering for another agency and had a complex issue to be resolved before their assessment could be taken forward; a further two applicants withdrew because of unexpected events within their families.
- 9.9 There have been resignations received from ten fostering households this year. Three of these were connected persons carers who were granted Special Guardianship Orders. Of the other seven households two families were long standing carers who had not cared for a child within the previous year' one carer resigned following separation from the partner who remains a carer; one carer retired to care for her grandchildren and two families decided that fostering no longer fitted with their own family commitments.
- 9.2 There continue to be twelve fostering households approved for placement of three children. However it is not practicable to reserve these placements, so none currently have a sibling group of three placed together. Seventeen fostering households are approved for two children or one child or a sibling group of two children. Thirteen fostering households are approved for one child. Four Connected Persons (kinship) foster carers are approved for eight children who are placed with them.
- 10. Short Breaks Care**
- 10.1 The authority has six carers approved specifically for short break care for children with disabilities. Foster carers can offer short break care in addition to short or long term foster care.
- 10.2 A matching process for children and short break carers was introduced last year and monthly meetings are held between the Family Placement and Disabled Children's Manager for this purpose. Short break carers also offer day care placements to support families who have a child with a disability. The overall aim has been to improve the range of support and flexibility of the service. There have been no new referrals for short break care during the year although there have been two requests to identify an alternative carer when existing arrangements have ended due to the carer's circumstances changing.

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10.3 In addition to the short break care there continue to be two established 'shared care' arrangements for children with a disability. This is where the child spends two or more nights per week with a foster carer and the remaining time at home with parents. These arrangements allow the child to remain part of their birth family and avoid the need for full time care.

11. Recruitment

11.1 During the year a planned recruitment campaign was run by the Recruitment and Publicity Officer, focusing on signposting new enquirers to our planned informal fostering information sessions/coffee mornings. There is now established experience about publicity and recruitment and which methods are most effective which has led to a number of ongoing promotions combined with plans to recruit for particular needs such as long term fostering.

11.2 Information is provided through a range of mediums including telephone, email, website or face to face. Regular information sessions have been held regularly at various local venues, including 'pop in' sessions at Time Square where callers to the office can have an informal discussion with a recruitment worker over a cup of coffee.

11.3 Promotions included:

- advertising regularly in the local newspapers with dates of sessions;
- posters displayed in local venues (community centres, doctors, schools, etc);
- utilising a connection with the Bracknell Bee's Ice hockey team;
- advertising specifically seeking long term placements within and just outside of the borough boundaries;
- social media advertising including on publications, the Bracknell Forest website.

11.4 Analysis from this and other year's campaigns and experience of previous years show that a combination of local press coverage/ advertising and our website are the most successful methods of recruitment followed closely by published information and local events.

11.5 Enquiry Figures

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- 61 enquiries about fostering, short break and supported lodgings enquires were received during the year April 2013-March 2014.

Four fostering preparation groups were organised over the year, all arranged for weekends and evenings for the convenience of prospective foster carers.

- Of the seventeen households who attended, a total of seventeen applications were made.
- The conversion rate from numbers of enquiries made to approval as foster carers is 5 % for 2013 – 2014 which matches the national statistic (Fostering Network) of 5%. This is lower than previous years which have had the result of a considerably higher conversion rate. The reasons for this have already been explored in this report.
- The average time taken for a fostering assessment, from formal application to approval following consideration by Fostering Panel was approximately six months with one assessment being completed within four months.

11.6 Recruitment 2013 - 2014

During 2013- 2014 we aimed to recruit ten more foster placements It was our plan to target recruitment activities to encourage applications from households who may meet the needs set out below.

Targets

- three households to replace carers who are considering retirement due to their ages or change of circumstances;
- three short term foster carers – to meet the increasing demand as more children become Looked After;
- five long term foster carers – to meet the need to keep local children in local placements and close to their family and friends;
- one parent and baby foster placement – to provide a local placement for assessment and support of parents and young children;
- one long term placement for a child with physical care needs – this has been an on going target which requires housing with adaptations in addition to carer able to meet the needs of a child with physical disabilities;

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Within these numbers we were seeking to recruit two black or minority ethnic households.

- 11.7 We were unable to meet our targets in this year for fostering approvals. There was however an increased number of children placed with “connected persons” resulting in the completion of more assessments of specific applicants for specific named children. We have recruited one set of carers who are of mixed black / white British heritage.
- 11.8 Currently there are four sets of carers due for approval in May and June 2014 and a further four assessments are in process. It is anticipated that target to recruit a further 10 households in 2014 / 15. will be met.

12. Additional Information

- 12.1 The number of children requiring fostering placement has continued to rise. This significant increase puts a lot of pressure on placement availability and this puts additional pressure on current placements. In order to match the needs of children it has been necessary to place some with Independent Fostering Agencies. It is predicted that these external placements will continue to be required from time to time in the forthcoming year.
- 12.2 Since 1st April 2012 a South East Region project involving eleven local authorities, including Bracknell Forest, have commissioned a contractual framework with over 40 Independent Foster Agencies to. This arrangement has reduced the cost of some independent agency charges and ensured that quality standards are maintained.
- 12.3 An Assistant Team Manager of the Family Placement Team now has responsibility to oversee the placements of children in independent agencies in order to ensure that the quality of care remains at the standards we require. This has continued to prove an effective support for children’s social workers in dealing with issues that arise with independent fostering agency placements.
- 12.4 The Life Chances Team is a ‘virtual’ team set up in October 2011 consisting of representatives from all the professional teams and services who work with Bracknell Forest’s Looked After Children. The team meet once a month to discuss concerns relating to individual looked after children and make specific plans to address them; champion the needs of looked after children in their respective services and are developing training opportunities for the wider children’s workforce.

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- 12.5 The family worker employed to work to the Life Chances Team is managed by the Family Placement Team. She provides practical support directly for foster carers and has proved effective in her role. This practical support has enabled children with challenging behaviour to remain in their local placement. This worker also co-runs the Children in Care groups (Say it Loud Say it Proud: SILSIP) with the Children's Participation Officer which further raises her profile directly with young people. The knowledge gained about foster carers and the children/ young people they care for has allowed her to provide effective direct support in emergency or crisis situations.
- 12.6 Foster carers and young people, along with the other designated professionals involved in working with Looked after Children, participated in the development of a Life Skills Programme for Children in Care. The project ran from October 2013 until March 2014 and the programme is currently being piloted by a number of foster carers and the young people they look after. The Life Skills Programme is targeted for all young people over the age of ten years.

13. Fostering 4 Bracknell Association

- 13.1 Bracknell Foster Carers are automatically members of the Fostering Association, which was set up in 2009 as a group independent of the Council and is supported by a small grant. The purpose of the Foster Care Association is to provide support for each other and to contribute to the recruitment of new foster carers. The Association has been very active with a variety of social activities arranged throughout the year, usually including children but occasionally for carers only. Foster carers are always well represented at recruitment activities and information evenings and give a talk to prospective foster carers at preparation groups.
- 13.2 One of the most significant developments for Bracknell Forest foster carers over the past five years has been the development a "fostering community". The social activities shared by carers, their own children and those they foster has led to looked after children getting to know other carers and their families and makes the occasional "respite" arrangements from their substantive placement a more positive experience than staying with carers whom they may not have known.
- 13.3 The Family Placement Team continues to support and facilitate carer's relationships and networking links through hosting social evenings , a thank-you lunch during fostering fortnight and a bi-annual foster carers celebration evening. The service also recognises the important role that foster carers own children play in ensuring the stability of placements and positive outcomes for looked after children. This year

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has seen a re- launch of the Kids of Foster Carers group (KOFF) and a “Sons and Daughters” lunch.

- 13.4 Representatives of Fostering4Bracknell meet with the Head of Service, Looked After Children and are also invited to attend the Corporate Parenting Advisory Panel once a year to express their views on the service directly to Elected Members and the Director of Children& Young People.
- 13.5 The annual foster carer conference was held on 9th November 2013 Information was shared with carers about Adoption Activity Days. In addition there was some information shared about developments within the fostering service including a discussion about new templates. There was also a presentation from “Daisy’s Dream” helping identify the support needs for foster carers caring for children who have experienced loss and bereavement.
- 13.6 In January 2014 the bi-annual foster care award ceremony was held at Easthampstead Park Conference Centre. This event is very well attended by foster carers whose achievements are acknowledged by the Mayor, elected members and senior managers.

14. Connected Person Assessments

- 14.1 During the year 1st April 2013-31st March 2014, the steady increase in care proceedings led to a rise in the number of Connected Persons assessments that have needed to be completed within short timescales as per requirements from the court. There was total of twenty one requests for Connected Persons assessments. Of the twenty one requests seven were not required.
- 14.2 Seven applications resulted in the making of Special Guardianship Orders with a further two awaiting the outcome of court proceedings.
- 14.3 One application was assessed as not being suitable.
- 14.4 Four applications were started and almost completed but were then not required as the children returned home.

15 Development for 2014 - 2015

- 15.1 To meet the target of recruiting at least ten foster households
- 15.2 As part of the recruitment strategy encouraging community groups to promote fostering has begun with the local evangelical group of churches.

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- 15.2 The Children and Families Act 2014 has introduced a duty on the local authority to provide “staying put” arrangements for a fostered young people to continue to live with their former foster carer beyond the age of eighteen and potentially up to the age of 21 years. This is a welcome development for young people who have not developed the maturity to move into independent living. There will be implications for resources, including a loss of available foster placement and staffing and budgetary demands. A ‘Staying Put’ policy will be finalised the end of July 2014

16 Summary

- 16.1 This has been yet another busy year for the Family Placement Team. There has been an increase in the number of children requiring foster care, an increase in the number of children needing long term or permanent placements and a significant number of requests to place siblings groups of three or more children. The team has continued to work hard to keep young people in local, in-house foster placements thereby enabling them to maintain links with their families and communities.
- 16.2 Overall the work of the Family Placement Team has increased significantly and brought with it the challenge of meeting the individual demands of the various timescales in different parts of the service. In addition to recruiting and supporting foster carers, the team works with adoption, step parent adoption, post adoption support, connected persons assessments of potential permanent and foster carers, family finding for adoption and long term fostering, a short break fostering service and private fostering assessments. The team also provides a Duty Service each day to search for placements and respond to enquiries or needs of foster carers when their supervising social worker is unavailable. Social Workers in the team provide regular training for foster carers both pre and post approval. To meet the needs of the foster carers training is often held during evenings and weekends. The new two stage process for both fostering and adoption applications has resulted in changes in how the team delivers aspects of the service which has been challenging but is now becoming embedded in practice.
- 16.3 During the past year the team has completed a total of forty seven assessments across the service (fostering, adoption, private fostering, in family adoption, connected persons assessments) and conducted family finding (adoption) for nineteen children. This is in addition to supporting 49 fostering households caring for seventy one children. In real terms the work of the team continues to increase year on year.

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- 16.4 Next year will also bring challenges in terms of changes to the management team as the Team Manager is leaving in May and the Head of Service retires in June. However plans are in place for one of the current Assistant Team Managers to step up into the management role on a temporary basis to provide continuity and continue with the work and development of the service.

**Helen Fenton
Team Manager**

Sheila McKeand

Head of Service; Looked After Children

Date: May 2014