

BRACKNELL FOREST FOSTER CARE SERVICE

ANNUAL REPORT – 2019 - 2020

1. Introduction

- 1.1 This Annual report should be read in conjunction with the Foster Care Statement of Purpose 2020-2021. 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 2019 to March 2020 and plans for the forthcoming year.

2. Foster Panel

- 2.1 Bracknell Forest Foster Panel has had a successful year as a single agency panel. The Panel has met on 12 occasions during the year usually on the third Thursday of the month. The current foster panel chair has been in post since March 2015 and brings considerable experience and a legal background to the panel.
- 2.2 The Fostering Services 2011 national minimum standards 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. The panel continues to include our Children and Young People's Participation Officer who offers panel a perspective that focuses on the voice of the child throughout assessments and matches although now only for 50% of the panels due to her work load. A care experienced young adult has also been successfully recruited to sit on foster panel and he has observed panel and will be in place by September 2020. The independent pool of members has gained in experience and made a valuable contribution. There are sufficient members for some to alternate panel attendance which enhances the diversity and scrutiny of panel, whilst also making some financial savings. There are various operational managers on the central list who provide social work representation for the panel as required. We would like to increase diversity on the central list and this is set out in plans.
- 2.3 The Panel membership meets the requirements of the Fostering Services Regulations 2011. The Panel includes a foster carer from another local authority, and members with education and health expertise.

BRACKNELL FOREST FOSTER CARE SERVICE

ANNUAL REPORT – 2019 - 2020

- 2.4 The challenge of not having a permanent panel advisor on panel since the resignation of the Family Placement Team Manager in September 2018 has continued. This role was shared between the two Assistant Team Managers, but this has led to challenges in respect of some conflicts of interests with some matters being presented. This is an area that required further exploration and was raised by the Chair during her appraisal. Agreement has been given to recruit for a permanent panel advisor and this will be in place by August 2020 to ensure that there is consistency on all panels. This role will also be reviewing the end to end panel process to ensure quality.

3. Panel Central List 2019-2020

Name	Role	Comment
Frances Thompson	Independent Panel Chair	Chair
Andrew Ellery	Social Worker	Current
Gareth Barnard	Executive Member for CYP&L	Current
Gill Harbut	Independent (Education experience)	Current
Fiona Nyquist	Looked After Children Health Nurse for Bracknell	Current
Hilary Mason	Independent (Educational Psychology experience)	Current and also vice chair
Judith Swindle	Independent (Foster carer experience)	Current
Maeve Coupe	Independent (social worker)	Current
Libby Weedon	Independent (Education experience)	Current
Louise MacLennan	Participation Officer (views of young people)	Current
Eszter Kovacs	Social worker / Panel Advisor	Current
Sam Howard	Social Worker / Panel Advisor	Current
Anne Styles	Independent Social worker	Current
Alan Guest	Social Worker (Team Manager FSM at BFC)	Current
Luke Meyers	Independent (Care Experienced adult)	Pending start date in September 2020
Elizabeth Ferreira / Zahiye Ndungu	Panel Administrators	Current

BRACKNELL FOREST FOSTER CARE SERVICE

ANNUAL REPORT – 2019 - 2020

- 3.1 Feedback from applicants has been positive in relation to the quality of information provided about panel; applicants felt welcomed and satisfied with the extent to which important issues were 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.

4. Panel Business

Summary of Panel Recommendations (April 2019 to March 2020)

	Cases heard
New approvals	
Long term (non connected persons)	1
Short term	4
Short Breaks (one short term carer also approved for short breaks)	2
Family & Friends (Connected Persons)	5
Temporary approvals (Connected Persons)	6
Total	18
Reviews	19
Private Fostering arrangements	1
Long term fostering best interests	3
Long term match (non kinship)	5
Supported Lodgings	0
Resignations (households)	10
Applicants not approved	2
Consultations	0
Reflective Case Discussion	4
Total number of items considered	62
Approved Carers as of 31 Mar 2020	
Total of Approved Fostering Households	51
<i>(NB: some households approved for more than one group)</i>	
For specific long term placements (non kinship)	13
For short term placements	36
For short breaks care	3
For short and long term	16
Connected persons	9
Supported Lodgings	2

BRACKNELL FOREST FOSTER CARE SERVICE

ANNUAL REPORT – 2019 - 2020

Parent and Child	1
------------------	---

- 4.1 Carers are often approved for one or a sibling group of two or three children. Where the carers are not used to their full approval this is usually due to the matching the needs of the child with any other children already receiving foster care from the same carer. Good matching of child with the carer and family reduces the risk of the placement ending in an unplanned way which impacts negatively upon children.
- 4.2 Family and friends' cases are heard at Panel during assessment as temporary approval as foster carers. These numbers have remained high over the last 2 years due to an increase in care proceedings and assessments directed by the courts. Some did not go on to full approval as the carers were granted Special Guardianship Orders or children reunified with parents at the conclusion of care proceedings; this means the children are no longer looked after under Fostering Regulations.
- 4.3 Of the 2 fostering households that were not approved, 1 of them referred the decision to the Independent Review Mechanism (IRM) as they were not in agreement with the recommendation or decision made. The decision made by the ADM at Bracknell Forest Council was upheld by the IRM. There was some learning for Bracknell Forest within the outcome of the IRM decision and these are being incorporated into the planning for the coming year.

Recruitment of Foster Carers

- 4.3 In 2019 – 2020 the number of approved foster carers in the year was 11 which was above the target of 10 for the service. There were however 10 resignations which means a net increase of 1 fostering household. Of that 11, 5 connected person foster carers were approved during this period and while they offer specific placements to young people, they are enabling young people to remain in the local area and be supported fully by Bracknell Forest Council. Recruitment of new foster carers is managed by the Recruitment and Publicity Officer, supported by the Family Placement Team. It is hoped that overall numbers of mainstream foster carers will increase during 2020-2021, although it is acknowledged that this is a difficult task due to the national shortage of foster carers and the high level of competition for new carers in the Berkshire area.
- 4.4 The recruitment of foster carers is a key priority within the service to meet the corporate parenting demand to place as many of our children looked after in local foster placements to enable them to have stability in terms of home, school and community services.

BRACKNELL FOREST FOSTER CARE SERVICE

ANNUAL REPORT – 2019 - 2020

4.5 A review of the recruitment process has been undertaken which shows high performance regarding initial enquiries but there is a larger number than ideal which do not proceed to full approval. This has been discussed as a team and there is now a monthly recruitment meeting chaired by the Life Chances Team Manager to review all enquiries and ensure timely actions. The aim of this is to look at people's individual skills and ensure that applicants are given every opportunity to succeed with their application.

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 2011. The reviews have all been chaired by an Independent Social Worker throughout this year. All completed reviews that are not presented to panel, are agreed by the Head of Service, Life Chances, who is appointed as Agency Decision Maker for this purpose.

5.2 19 reviews of fostering households were presented to the Foster Care Panel, 9 of these were seeking a change of approval and 10 were first reviews. First reviews were presented to Foster Panel within a year of the carer's approval as required by the regulations.

6. Data about Children Looked After by Bracknell Forest

6.1. The Family Placement Team is a support service with a role in identifying in house foster placements, where appropriate, for the children looked after of Bracknell Forest. As a result, it is important to consider the number of Children Looked After by Bracknell Forest. The table below provides a breakdown of Children Looked After as at 31 March 2020.

Total number of Looked After Children placed with Bracknell Foster Carers, including connected persons carers.	65	This does not include short breaks, supported lodgings, adult placements or children placed from another local authority using our placements.
Males	80	Out of the 142 CLA
Females	62	Out of the 142 CLA
Percentage from black and minority ethnic groups	26%	This is all ethnicities except white British for all CLA

BRACKNELL FOREST FOSTER CARE SERVICE

ANNUAL REPORT – 2019 - 2020

Number in Bracknell Forest placements	65	This is all foster placements in Bracknell Forest – including In house, connected person and adopters or parents
Number placed with independent fostering agency carers	29	In or out of Bracknell
Total number in fostering placements	94	This is all fostering placements including connected person/kinship placements, placements with our own foster carers and placements with IFAs, whether in or out of Bracknell

- 6.2. The above information shows a 15.5% decrease from the number of children looked after at the same time the previous year. There continues to be a higher number of males than females although both have decreased by the same amount. There has been a decrease in the number of CLA placed with Bracknell Forest foster carers in the last year, March 2020 45.77% while in March 2019 this was 53.16%. The use of IFA placements has remained the same as last year despite the decrease in total number of children looked after.
- 6.3. There are a total of 65 children looked after receiving foster care placements from 47 households.

7. Summary of relevant National Indicators data for end of March 2019

- 7.1 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 51.2% this is below the target of 60%. This is a decrease in the last year. This reflects a decreased number of children who have been in care for a long period who are provided with stability in terms of placement, network and school. Some of the reasons for children not remaining in the same placement is through placing children for adoption or special guardianship, changing status to long term foster care and children stepping down from residential homes to live with foster carers in a family environment.
- 7.2 One area that is being reviewed is the percentage of children looked after who have has three or more placements in the last year. As of March 2020 this was 14.8%, which is above the target of 10%, however is lower that than at this time last year when this percentage was 19.6%. For the majority of the children who have had three or more placements, the reason is related to poor mental health, complex needs, substance misuse because of early experiences of abuse or

BRACKNELL FOREST FOSTER CARE SERVICE

ANNUAL REPORT – 2019 - 2020

neglect and these are all adolescent children. The decrease in placement moves does evidence the work that has been put in place to provide additional support and resources to foster carers and CLA. However, this does remain a key area for us to review and is the focus on the planned transformation that Family Placement Team will be involved in. There are now monthly meetings where we review all placements and identify which may require additional support and we seek to put the appropriate support in place. In parallel to this as part of the transformation programme there is a review of the therapeutic options for children and foster carers which would support placement stability.

8 Foster Care

- 8.1 The 2019-20 period has continued to offer challenges due to the balance that needed to be sought in terms of requests for Special Guardianship Assessments (35 assessments). The timescales of which are set out in regulations as 12 weeks but courts often insist these are completed within a 6-8 week timescale. This has an impact upon the resources of the team to complete these and this work often is required to be prioritised. The team continues to undertake joint viability assessments with the child's allocated social worker.
- 8.2 There are 11 fostering households approved for the placement of three children. It is not practicable to reserve these placements for one sibling group, however, two households have had a sibling group of three placed together.
- 8.3 The team received a total of 95 initial enquiries to become foster carers, of those there were 9 applications to become foster carers, however not all of those applications progressed to full assessment.
- 8.4 The Fostering Recruitment and Publicity Officer has developed a recruitment strategy that includes more joint working with other local authorities and increased involvement from existing fostering households. It is anticipated that successful applications will increase in the next year. Please refer to the 'Fostering Recruitment Strategy 2017-2020'.

9. Short Breaks Care

- 9.1 The authority has three carers approved for short break care to children with disabilities. This is in addition to their short-term approval. One child is currently linked for short breaks. The need for this service continues to reduce due to Direct Payments, which parents or carers can use to pay for day or respite care.

BRACKNELL FOREST FOSTER CARE SERVICE

ANNUAL REPORT – 2019 - 2020

10. Connected Person Assessments

10.1 Connected persons is an 'umbrella' term and can refer to assessments of family and friends who seek to care for children either as temporary foster carers, seeking full approval, or pursuing permanence in the form of Special Guardianship. The numbers of children subject of care proceedings has remained high which in turn has led to a high number of requests for connected person's assessment requests. These often need completing within short timescales as per requirements from the court. There were a total of 35 requests for Connected Persons assessments.

11. Recruitment

11.1 The Recruitment and Publicity officer has developed a robust recruitment strategy for the next 3 years, based on her research and understanding of the market. The key aims and objectives of this strategy are:

- To improve local placement choice and stability for children and young people in Bracknell Forest, particularly for teenagers and children requiring short break care
- To increase the number of in-house placements and reduce the usage of independent fostering agencies and residential care

11.2 Information sessions ran regularly at various local venues, and at different times of the day and evening. These were advertised on the Bracknell Forest website and Facebook and Twitter pages. Some of our foster carers joined these sessions, to offer insights into the day to day life of a foster carer.

11.3 Recruitment activity included:

- Digital advertising – including a refresh of the fostering pages on the Bracknell Forest website and new content as well as pay per click advertising on Google.
- Social media advertising – regular posts on Facebook and Twitter including event posts and also sponsored Facebook posts to provide a larger reach.
- A number of promotional events including The Summer of Fun events, The Lexicon, Sainsbury's Bracknell, Co-op Crowthorne, Tesco Warfield, The Look Out, Coral Reef, Frimley Park Hospital amongst others.
- Editorial news features in local community publications such as Town & Country and Bracknell News.
- Posters displayed in local venues (community centres, doctors, schools, etc).
- Leaflets sent out to parents via schools.

BRACKNELL FOREST FOSTER CARE SERVICE

ANNUAL REPORT – 2019 - 2020

- Bus rear advertising and Bus stop posters.
- A Foster Care Fortnight roadshow and events..

11.4 Enquiry Figures

- The average time taken for a fostering assessment, from formal application to approval following consideration by Fostering Panel was approximately eight months. This is higher than we would like and is an area we will be tracking over the next 12 months and introducing increased monitoring processes to look at this area.

12. Additional Information

- 12.1 The number of children in care has decreased as mentioned above. The largest group remains 10-15 years old males, followed by females in the same age group. The overall rise in numbers and complex needs of many of the older children puts pressure on placement availability and on current placements. The increase in connected person carers has helped to maintain 16 children within their families and reduce the number needing foster care. Although we have endeavoured to recruit more carers, there is a need to use Independent Fostering Agencies to meet the demand for placements and to provide the opportunity for an appropriate match to meet the child's needs. It is envisaged that this will continue to be the case in the forthcoming year, but alongside this a robust recruitment strategy is in place to steadily increase the number of foster carers.
- 12.2 The Life Chances Panel is a 'virtual' team which consists of representatives from all of the professional teams and services who work with Bracknell Forest's Children Looked After. The team meets once a month to discuss concerns relating to individual children and make specific plans to address them; champion the needs of looked after children in their respective services and develop training opportunities for the wider children's workforce.
- 12.3 An Assistant Team Manager from the Family Placement Team attends the Life Chances Panel and ensures children and carers are identified for discussion. Actions are then shared with the supervising social worker or with the Family workers to provide practical support directly to foster carers, which has enabled children with challenging behaviour to remain in their local placement. Both family workers have developed relationships with many foster carers through completing a range of practical tasks with them. They are also involved in the Children in Care groups (Say it Loud Say it Proud: SILSIP) with the Children's

BRACKNELL FOREST FOSTER CARE SERVICE

ANNUAL REPORT – 2019 - 2020

Participation Officer which further raises their profile directly with young people. The knowledge gained about foster carers and the children/ young people they care for has allowed them to provide effective direct support in emergency or crisis situations.

- 12.4 Foster carers and young people, along with the other designated professionals involved in working with and supporting Children Looked After were involved in the development of a Life Skills Programme for Children in Care. This is being implemented by a number of foster carers and the young people they look after. The Life Skills Programme is targeted at all young people aged 11 years plus and is being lead by the family workers on Family Placement Team.

13. Fostering Support

- 13.1 Bracknell Foster Carers are automatically members of the Fostering Network, a national organisation, and more locally the Bracknell Foster Carers Association. 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 committee has met monthly with the Head of Service and Assistant Team Manager of the Family Placement Team. 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 Bracknell Forest foster carers have developed a 'fostering community' through social activities including coffee mornings and through social media. 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 this makes the occasional respite from their substantive placement a more positive experience than staying with strangers.
- 13.3 The Family Placement Team continues to support and facilitate carers to develop on-going relationships and links through the hosting of a Cheese and Wine evening, a thank you celebration during fostering fortnight, an annual conference 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, and celebrated this through a 'sons and daughters' activity. The Family Placement Team also arranges a 'Foster carers' café' on a bi-monthly basis. This is an informal lunchtime get-together between foster carers and team members, with the purpose of promoting communication and working relationships through informal discussion.
- 13.4 This year two Family Workers have set up monthly support and training workshops, held both in the daytime and evening. Foster carers are

BRACKNELL FOREST FOSTER CARE SERVICE

ANNUAL REPORT – 2019 - 2020

consulted on topics they would like covered, and attendance has been good, with a minimum of 10 foster carers in attendance at each session. In addition to the workshops, individual support is also offered to any carer who may need emotional or practical support. Feedback from carers in relation to this has been positive and this supports the retention of carers.

- 13.5 Delegated authority for foster carers has been developed and embedded within the team and Children's Social Care. This has provided a framework to ensure carers are provided with the responsibility to carry out key tasks and decisions for children in their care.
- 13.6 Family Placement Team will be working with the Transformation Team to review the support that is offered to foster carers and ensure that this is robust process.
- 13.7 Staying Put is a national initiative which allows young people to remain living with their foster carers up to the age of 21 years. Foster carers who support this become 'Staying Put' carers and work with the young person and their personal advisor from the Leaving Care Team to ensure young people remain living with them and they develop the appropriate life skills before moving to independence. The policy and procedure provides guidance as to how this should be implemented and there is a leaflet for young people. At the end of March 2020 four young people were in Staying Put arrangements.
- 13.8 The Family Placement team is staffed with permanent employees, apart from one locum covering maternity leave. It is of note, however that several social workers with substantial amount of experience in the fostering area left the team this year, meaning that although permanent, there has been many changes in staff in a short period of time. All of our carers are supervised and supported by having their own supervising social worker. The team continue to enjoy close working relationships with the other childcare teams with the aim of ensuring the children remain the focus of our work.

14. Complaints, Allegations and Compliments

- 14.1 There were no formal complaints made about foster carers and 3 allegations made in relation to foster carers in this period. There were no formal complaints made regarding the fostering service. There were a number of compliments regarding the care provided by foster carers, and the support, training and communication provided by the fostering service.

15. Summary

BRACKNELL FOREST FOSTER CARE SERVICE

ANNUAL REPORT – 2019 - 2020

- 15.1 Overall the work of the Family Placement Team has continued to increase. There continues to be a high demand for assessments of connected persons and special guardianship assessments, as well as the complexities of supporting these arrangements. They have continued to recruit, train and support fostering households as well family finding for long term fostering, private fostering assessments and post Special Guardianship Order support.
- 15.2 The team continue to provide a duty service each day to identify any placement required across Children's Social Care and cover for those on leave. The team have been able to focus on the in-house placements and ensuring that foster carers are able to access support when their own social worker has been on leave as all external searches are now being undertaken by Commissioning. This has had a positive impact on the work that the team is doing.
- 15.3 The Family Placement Team continue to work outside of standard working hours, 9-5pm to ensure that training and support is offered to the foster carers at the times that they need it. The team also provides an out of hours telephone service on a rota basis to ensure that foster carers have access to support and guidance until 11pm every evening and over the weekends.
- 15.4 It has been a challenging year in terms of staffing as experienced social workers with substantial knowledge about fostering and the functions of the Family Placement Team have moved on. It has been challenging to recruit to some roles in the team which has led to period of time where posts have been vacant and additional tasks have been required of staff.
- 15.5 Next year will continue to require a high level of recruitment activity in order to meet the demand for in house foster carers, who can provide local, stable, family care for some of our most complex young people, and we will continue to develop the additional support services and training needed for these foster placements. This is already having a positive impact and this can be seen in the number of foster carers that are currently completing their assessments.

Actions for 2020/21

- **Recruit 10 or more foster care households**
- **Review of the support available to all foster carers to improve placement stability**

BRACKNELL FOREST FOSTER CARE SERVICE

ANNUAL REPORT – 2019 - 2020

- **Targeting advertising for specific types of fostering (Parent and child; children with disabilities)**
- **Review of foster carer payment structure**
- **Recruitment of panel advisor post to support with panel and end to end process for panel business**
- **Reconfiguration of the team**