



**Somerset County Council Children’s Social Care**

**Fostering Service Annual Report**

**April 2017 – March 2018**

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**Contents**

[**1.** **Summary** 3](#_Toc2678745)

[**2.** **Service Overview** 4](#_Toc2678746)

[**3.** **Ofsted Inspection and Improvement Journey**](#_Toc2678748) 8

[**4.** **Service Performance 2017/18** 9](#_Toc2678749)

[**5.** **Complaints and Allegations** 15](#_Toc2678752)

[**6.** **Independent Review Mechanism** 16](#_Toc2678753)

[**7.** **Fostering Panel** 17](#_Toc2678754)

[**8.** **Fostering Panel Chair’s Report** 18](#_Toc2678755)

[**9.** **Foster Carer Retention** 21](#_Toc2678756)

[**10.** **Foster Talk** 23](#_Toc2678757)

[**11.** **Foster Carer Participation** 23](#_Toc2678758)

[**12.** **Child’s Voice** 24](#_Toc2678759)

[**Appendix 1** 26](#_Toc2678760)

[**Appendix 2** 37](#_Toc2678761)

**SUMMARY AND SERVICE PLAN OVERVIEW**

# **Summary**

1.1 This report provides information and an overview of Somerset County Council’s Fostering Service including the achievements and challenges for the Fostering Service for the period April 2017 – March 2018 inclusive. The report also sets out the service’s improvement action plan for 2018/19. The purpose of the annual report is to inform the public, elected members, partners and staff of the progress and developments in the service during this period.

1.2 The Fostering service faces significant challenges. The number of children looked after has continued to grow, whilst the number of fostering households within Somerset and nationally has continued to decline. The deficit in our Sufficiency of Placements impacts upon our ability to match all our children well, which affects some children’s opportunity to live in a stable placement. Poor matching and difficult endings can also impact upon carers’ emotional resilience, and therefore motivation to continue to foster.

1.3 Our ability to recruit new carers remains a significant challenge within a national picture of declining numbers of foster carers, and an aging fostering population.

1.4 This deficit has been mitigated in part by a significant increase in the numbers of Temporary Connected persons within this year. We have improved our service to those who are temporarily approved by offering support and supervision proportionate to need, in addition to assessment. Some of these arrangements have gone on to successfully offer children permanence within their families or communities. The creation of a specialist kinship team in 2018 will give consistency to the assessment of potential kinship carers and will also provide them with dedicated support to promote stable and secure placements for the children they care for.

1.5 Of significant concern is the number of carers resigning or being de-registered this year. There are always a small number where this is a positive sign, as they have de-registered to offer permanent and legal stability for a child. However, our analysis of de-registrations within this financial year has demonstrated that a disproportionate number of carers de-register within the first two years of fostering. As a result, we will, in the upcoming year, realign our resources within fostering to give a more intensive support service to newly approved carers.

* 1. It is positive that the service benefits from stable, committed, conscientious and skilled managers and staff teams who have been willing and able to think creatively to implement changes and take forward practice improvements.
  2. We are as ever, incredibly fortunate to have committed, experienced and enthusiastic foster carers who continue to inspire in their capacity, capability and willingness to love and care for children, despite the many frustrations and challenges the role can bring. We thank them for their many skills and for their commitment to working as part of our team, to help children reach their potential in all areas of their lives.

1.8 Looking ahead to 2018/19, we will commission Coram/BAAF to provide an external review of the service focussing on where improvements could be made to the recruitment and retention of foster carers within the council.

* 1. The fostering service will develop our ability to support children in foster care by continuing to strengthen and develop the placement support service and the multi-agency Emotional Health and Well Being Team.

# **2.0 Service Overview**

* 1. The County Plan 2016 - 2020 and the Children and Young Persons Plan 2016 - 2019 outline the organisational values that reflect the Council's Vision and Purpose, providing a set of consistent, simple values that guide our attitudes and behaviours. These values define how we do things and are the principles by which we work together and with our customers and partners.
  2. The vision of all services working with children, young people and families, is for all children and young people in Somerset to be safe, healthy, happy, ambitious for their future and to develop skills for life. We want them to grow up in loving families and caring communities as the vast majority of our children do. Parents, families, friends, schools and wide community activity have the greatest influence and make the biggest difference to what children and young people aspire to and what they achieve (CYPP 2016 – 2019).
  3. The CYPP identifies seven improvement programmes. Programme 6 is ‘Achieving effective multi-agency support for more vulnerable children and young people and developing an excellent children’s social work service’ and the work of the Fostering Service significantly contributes to ensure sufficient, safe and well supported foster placements are available to meet the needs of children looked after.

**Role of the Fostering Service**

* 1. The Fostering Service is regulated by The Fostering Service Regulations and Standards 2011. Local Authority Fostering Services were subject to inspection under the Single Inspection Framework and will be subject to inspection as part of Childrens Social Care by the Inspection of Local Authority Children’s Services (ILACS) from 2018.
  2. Somerset’s Fostering Service is responsible for:
* The recruitment and assessment of Foster Carers including connected persons;
* The support, supervision and training of Foster Carers including family and friends’ carers (connected persons);
* The provision of safe and aspirational foster placements locally for children looked after, keeping siblings together where assessed as the right plan;
* The delivery of specialist schemes to support children into their permanent placements swiftly and successfully;
* The promotion of placement stability and consistency of care.
* The provision of specialist Short Break Care to support children with disabilities and their families and help improve resilience.
  1. Our overall priorities within the Fostering Service are to ensure that:
* All children who come into care have a safe place to live in which they can grow, thrive and reach their potential;
* We achieve early permanence for children in care and that children who cannot remain at home safely are offered a permanent family-based alternative as quickly as possible;
* We respond appropriately to the assessed needs of all children to ensure that they and their families are supported to ensure their life chances are maximised by their experience of the service.
  1. Somerset County Council’s Fostering Service provides a range of temporary and permanent placements with foster carers who have a diverse range of skills and experience. Foster carers provide family-based care ranging from short breaks and respite for birth parents and carers, preparing a child for permanence through adoption or return home or providing permanence through a longer-term placement that will support a child through to independence and beyond. As well as foster carers who provide care for children unknown to them, there are a significant and growing number of family members or friends who present for assessment as Connected Persons to look after children in their extended family or social network as kinship carers.
  2. Connected Persons carers have continued to be supervised and supported by our East and West Fostering Teams. They are afforded the same allowances, training and support as other foster carers and are critical to achieving positive outcomes for children. In this year, we have improved our service to temporary connected persons (those who have children placed under a temporary approval but are still undergoing an assessment of their suitability to foster) by providing support and supervision as appropriate in addition to the assessing social workers involvement. Successful kinship placements offer children permanency, often within their own communities and extended families.
  3. Due to the increasing numbers of Connected Persons carers, our responsibility to assess and support carers who are special guardians, and the specific support needs of these groups of carers, the decision has been made to re-align resources to create a kinship team within the Fostering service in 2018.

**Service Structure**

* 1. Somerset’s Fostering Service delivery is managed under two Operational Managers with responsibility for the service, comprising 6 teams:
  + the East and West fostering teams that support existing mainstream foster carers and those providing short breaks
  + the Therapeutic Foster Care team, that provides specialist therapeutic care to children in the age groups of 6 to 12 years.
  + the Emotional Health and Well-being team, that provides consultation, direct support and assessment to social workers, carers and children in the Looked after and Leaving care services
  + the Family assessment and support team, (known as the “FAST” team) that provides parent and child assessment foster placements
  + the Fostering and Adoption recruitment team, that undertakes the activity and assessment needed to recruit foster carers and adopters for Somerset children.

2.11 Our Therapeutic Foster Care programme (previously known as Treatment Foster Care Oregon) has undergone substantial change within this year. It remains a specialist multi-agency team which offers intensive support to foster carers to enable them to shape the behaviours of younger children who present as most vulnerable with complex behaviours. However due to changes within the national support network and local staffing and carer pressures, we have had the opportunity to re-model the team and to realign its therapeutic approach to include attachment-based perspectives. The programme continues to offer highly intensive support to carers from a multi-agency perspective to care for young children with complex behavioural needs and prepare them to live permanently and successfully within a family environment.

**Foster Carer skills Progression Scheme**

2.12 During this financial year we consulted with carers and worked together with a group of representative carers to simplify and improve our payments scheme for carers. This was an opportunity to recognise the skills of carers (for example those caring for children with significant health needs and disabilities) that had previously not been reflected within their fee. Additionally, the process removed many anomalies in payments and benefits which had developed over years of the development of specialisms

# **Ofsted Inspection and Improvement Journey**

3.1 Somerset Children’s Services was inspected by Ofsted under the Single Inspection Framework in November/ December 2017. The report was published in January 2018. Children’s Social Care was rated Requires Improvement to be Good at this inspection.

3.2 The report highlighted the following positives about the Fostering Service:

*“Fostering services are improving, and there are a range of initiatives designed to increase the in-house offer and raise the quality of the service. A range of specialist fostering schemes are available, and contribute to positive outcomes for some children, including supporting children with attachment difficulties. Foster carers benefit from a significant range of training and support activities, and they exercise delegated authority on an individual basis to help them to make day-to-day decisions for children. Foster carers’ assessments are generally of a good quality, and annual reviews clearly inform foster carers’ training and developments.”*

3.3 Whilst acknowledging the continuing service developments within the Fostering Service, there remain, as highlighted by the OFSTED inspection, significant service challenges for the Fostering Service itself, and within our role as part of the whole service to achieve a good/ outstanding service to children looked after.

3.4 Key issues identified by Ofsted were:

* The recruitment strategy for increasing the number of foster carers is not yet resulting in all children who require a fostering placement being offered a timely and suitable match.
* Placement matching when children first become looked after or need to move requires improvement.
* Children and parents are not involved in placement choice and planning and, too often, they receive little information prior to placement.
* Placement plans are not good enough.
* Long-term placement stability for children looked after in Somerset has deteriorated due to a lack of sufficiency of placements.
* Placement stability meetings identify factors that are leading to placement instability but, they do not always result in clear, action-based, outcome-focused support plans.
* Managers do not yet review any themes from children’s placements that end prematurely,
* Social workers are not proactively planning to prevent further future placement breakdowns

3.5 Actions to address these issues are set out in the Service Improvement Plan. Appendix 3.

# **Service Performance 2017/18**

The service exists to meet the needs of children Looked after in Somerset.

**Children Looked After**

* 1. The number of children looked after at the end of the reporting year, in March 2018, was 522. 227 of these children were cared for by Somerset foster carers, 149 by independent agency carers. 149 children lived in other care arrangements, such as children’s homes, residential schools or supported accommodation. The number of children in care reduced during the last four months of the year but was an increase from the beginning of the reporting year, March 2017, when the figure was 476. The number of children in care was at its highest for this year (at 526) in January 2018.

4.2 A high proportion of children looked after in Somerset are placed with in-house foster carers (refer to Table 1 below) however, Somerset still has a significant use of agency foster placements and a use of residential care that is higher than the national average.

**Sufficiency of fostering households**

4.3 Somerset County Council had a total of 240 approved foster carers at the end of the financial year. These are broken down as follows:

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **March 2017** | **March 2018** | **Change** |
| Mainstream (Long & Short Term) | 166 | 158 | -8 |
| Parent and Child (FA&ST) | 8 | 9 | +1 |
| CWD Short Break Carers | 16 | 15 | -1 |
| Home Based Care | 16 | 8 | -8 |
| MTFC | 11 | 9 | -2 |
| Connected Persons | 27 | 32 | +5 |
| Fostering For Adoption (FFA) | 5 | 9 | +4 |

4.4 These carers (excluding connected persons and FFA) offered the potential for 351 children to be placed in their care. During the 2017/18 year:

* + 170 placements were filled
  + 52 were vacant
  + 31 were held for respite
  + 98 were blocked
* Of the 98 blocked beds
  + 17 blocked due to being suitable for only a sibling of the child already in placement
  + 14 blocked by children who are over 18 but remain in placement through Staying Put regulations
  + 6 blocked as the needs of child currently in placement indicate another child could not be placed alongside them
  + 3 reserved for pending placement
  + 24 blocked due to carer(s) taking a break or pending resignation
  + 4 blocked because the carer(s) was under investigation
  + 30 blocked for other reasons specified by carer

Connected Person and FFA

* 32 Connected Person households looked after 39 children
* 9 Fostering For Adoption (FFA) households looked after 10 children

4.5 Analysis of the breakdown of foster placements undertaken in 2017-18 demonstrate little difference in the performance of in house foster carers and agency foster carers in the rate of placement breakdown, which replicates findings of the previous financial year.

**Measures in place to support placement stability**

4.6 When vulnerabilities are identified Placement Support Meeting are consistently arranged to explore and identify worries and to agree a suitable plan of action. Analysis of Placement Support meetings held during a 3-month period in this year were found to be 75% successful in preventing immediate placement breakdown.

4.7 OFSTED recognised this practice improvement however highlighted that the resulting plans didn’t always result in clear, action based, outcome focussed plans. This is an area for service improvement in 2018-19.

4.8 Additionally, fostering teams regularly RAG rate placement stability, using this to inform where additional placement supports may be needed.

4.9 We know that good pre-placement planning, and information sharing to foster carers, children and birth families positively impacts upon placement stability. If children and their families feel involved in decisions being made about them they are more able to invest in the placement. When carers have the right information and support they are better able to meet the child’s needs in their home and family. Fostering social workers have co-ordinated Placement Planning Meetings when children are matched. Fostering social workers continue to link with the children’s allocated social workers to obtain delegated authority for foster carers to ensure children have a positive family experience. In cases where placements are planned, information sharing has generally been good and there has been a clear introduction visit to help children and young people make a smooth transition.

4.10 Our capacity to offer additional support to our carers who are experiencing challenges with their placements has increased this year with the addition of 2 staff to our placement support service. This is still a small resource of 3 workers. This team co-ordinate Placement Meetings and undertake direct work with Foster carers to enable them to use additional strategies to manage behaviours and help with Carer resilience. The team delivers training to Carers and Social workers. This service to carers and Social workers has received very positive feedback. The team works alongside and complements the work of the Emotional Health and Wellbeing team which also was developed and launched in this year.

4.11 To improve placement stability through increasing carer resilience and reducing carer stress, Somerset Fostering Service continue to offer KEEP and KEEPSAFE training to our Foster Carers. KEEP is an intensive 16-week course aimed at carers who look after children aged 6-12 and KEEPSAFE a similar course for those looking after children aged 12+. The course is a behavioural model which focuses on noticing and rewarding positive behaviours and having clear boundaries and expectations through pre-teaching. Feedback from both these courses is uniformly positive and Somerset have staff to run them who have achieved national accreditation.

4.12 This year the Emotional Health and Wellbeing team have developed training delivered in a similar way to a consistent group over a period of weeks, for carers in relation to attachment and trauma.

4.13 Both of these intensive courses have received very positive feedback. The approach of running an ongoing course with the same group of carers has received very positive feedback as carers have benefitted from both the course content and from support and ongoing friendships with each other.

4.14 OFSTED highlighted in relation to placement breakdowns that we did not as a whole service learn from premature placement endings and long-term placement breakdowns. The service has developed and agreed a policy in relation to this which will be implemented and embedded in 2018-19.

**Carer Recruitment**

4.15 The Fostering and Adoption Recruitment team (FARS) recruit fostering and adoption households and assess potential fostering households. The team works closely with the Communications Team and together they develop an annual Recruitment Strategy.

4.16 In a difficult recruitment market the team has undertaken a wide approach to the recruitment of foster carers in marketing materials but has focused on specific areas of need when required, using sub campaigns, particularly on social media. These have included promoting the need for:

* Short Break Carers for disabled children
* Fostering to Adopt.
* Staying Put and Stepping Stones households for care leavers

4.17 Specific areas of improvement this year have been to:

* Promote awareness within the Somerset LGBT community
* Promote the improved offer from Somerset County Council for foster carers as well as the benefits of working for our not-for-profit organization
* Enable more interactive recruitment through social media.
* Engage with community stakeholders and partnerships to help us promote fostering.

4.18 Details of our recruitment activity for this year is set out in Appendix 1

4.19 The number of enquiries received for fostering in 2017/18 was 321 (351 in previous year) the number of approvals 22 (24 in previous year). Therefore, figures have dropped slightly again this year. The conversion rate from initial enquiry to approval has remained steady at 6.8%. This is in line with the national picture. An additional 62 households were approved as connected persons carers for children in care. In addition, 12 approved adoptive families were approved temporarily as foster carers, so that they could offer early permanence to children in care.

4.20 The rate of enquiries reduced significantly between 2015/16 and 2016/17, as did the national and neighbouring authorities rates. The numbers of enquiries to foster for Somerset has continued to decline in Somerset this year but the trajectory has slowed.

4.21 We receive a similar rate of enquires to our neighbouring local authorities and are continually consulting with them and other local authorities, carrying out focussed research with foster carers and monitoring IFAs nationally to help us to increase our fostering sufficiency.

4.22 In order to assess our performance, the team has completed the following activities and sought feedback:

* The team undertook a mutual mystery shopper activity, jointly with Gloucestershire County Council (one of our statistical neighbours). Feedback was positive and confirmed the efficacy, knowledge and sensitivity of our intake workers.

4.23 The service also took the opportunity to meet with the fostering senior manager of North Yorkshire County Council and through that identified some gaps in our marketing which will be addressed in the coming year.

4.24 The team have continued to receive consistently positive feedback from carers about information sessions and our Skills to Foster course. We have recently initiated feedback forms for newly approved carers to capture their assessment feedback. Of the five who have so far responded, four rated our service 10 (out of 10) and the other gave us a score of 8, largely because of delays in ratification of their approval to foster.

4.25 Looking to 2018/19 we aim to create a stronger, approachable ‘Fostering in Somerset’ brand to help us better compete with IFAs and better encourage potential foster carers to being their fostering career or transfer to Somerset from another fostering agency.

# **Complaints and Allegations**

**Complaints**

* 1. During the year the Fostering Service has received and responded to 10 complaints. 8 were from carers about the local authority (1 not upheld 4 partially upheld and 3 upheld). 2 were about our foster carers: 1 was from a social worker (partially upheld) and the other from an IRO (upheld). Due to the small number of complaints made there are no strong themes, and most are specific to a particular situation. However, 2 were in relation to a cumbersome de-registration process for carers who wish to resign, which will be improved in the coming year.

**Allegations**

5.2 The number of allegations made against carers this year was 10, involving 9 fostering households. Of these 7 were of physical assault, 1 of sexual risk, 1 of neglect and 1 of emotional abuse. 7 were made by children directly and 3 were from other sources.

5.3 All were investigated by the Fostering service following consultation with the LADO and child protection strategy discussions with the police.

5.4 The outcomes of the investigations were that:

* 7 allegations were considered to be unsubstantiated (where there is not enough evidence to determine one way or another whether something happened, or an individual committed an act). One carer was de-registered because although there was insufficient evidence to take formal action, the concerns and potential risks were too high within the placement for continued registration
* 3 were substantiated. 2 of those substantiated were subsequently de-registered as foster carers and one carer’s approval was changed to reduce stress within the placement.

5.5 The time taken to resolve allegations is of concern due to the additional stress it places on carers, potential delay and disruption for children in placement, and the financial cost to the department of placements not possible to use. This year we have improved the time taken to complete straightforward investigations and have updated our policy in this respect, however the more complex investigations continue to be impacted by delay in awaiting outcomes of police investigations, our ability to identify and independent worker and on occasions needing to wait for carers to be ready or available.

# **Independent Review Mechanism**

6.1 If carers or prospective carers are unhappy about recommendations made by the Fostering Panel and decisions made by the Agency Decision Maker, they are able to appeal the decision through 2 mechanisms. One is a request for another Fostering Panel to hear the issues again and another is for the case to be referred to the Independent Review Mechanism (IRM). In this financial year Somerset had 2 cases taken to the Independent Review Mechanism.

6.2 One case was a carer who had been de-registered for consistently being unable to meet the needs of children placed. The IRM upheld the decision of the local authority to de-register, and whilst there were lessons learned in relation to our re-assessment of carers who request to change from one type of fostering to another, the quality of the supervision, support and recording were praised by the IRM.

6.3 The other case involved a potential foster carer who was not approved by the Agency Decision Maker. The IRM did not on this occasion agree with the local authority and recommended that the potential carers had demonstrated skills and experience to be approved as foster carers. With the additional information presented and considered by the IRM, the Agency decision Maker did then feel able to agree their approval as foster carers.

# **Fostering Panel**

7.1 The Fostering Panel is established and acts in accordance with the regulatory framework provided by The Fostering Service Regulations 2011, Family and Friends Care: Statutory Guidance for Local Authorities 2011 and the Standards set out in the National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services 2011. The Fostering Panel takes account of the legislation set out in The Children Act 1989 and the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2015 and Guidance, volume 2.

7.2 The Fostering Panel has the responsibility for making recommendations in relation to:

* The approval of Foster Carers.
* The approval of family members or friends as "Connected Person" carers for children who are looked after by Somerset County Council and connected to the applicant as a family member or friend;
* The first annual review of all Foster Carers and Connected Persons carers;
* Reviews of carers where there have been serious issues such as Child Protection Investigations; or
* Reviews of carers where there are concerns regarding their fostering practice and their suitability.
* Proposed change to a Foster Carer’s progression level.
* Significant changes of approval.

7.3 The Fostering Panel has a role to oversee and advise on the conduct of assessments and make recommendations to Children’s Services about performance standards and quality issues. Decisions are then made by the Agency Decision Maker. (Deputy Director).

# **Fostering Panel Chair’s Report**

**Somerset Fostering Panel: Annual Report, 2017-18**

8.1 The fostering panels have continued to meet twice monthly over the last year, one on the west and one on the east side of the county. On only one occasion has there been the need for an additional west panel due to workload and one east panel was cancelled as there weren’t enough items on the agenda to warrant a panel meeting.

8.2 Both panels are chaired by Judy Watson who is ably assisted by a CSC manager/adviser, a fostering supervising social worker and four independent panel members drawn from the central pool of people on a rota basis.

8.3 There has been the need to recruit new panel members again this year after resignations and changes and, although the response to the advert was poor, two new members were appointed last autumn. They have been an excellent addition, as has Bill Revans – county councillor on the west panel – and Gemma Verdun, county councillor on the east, who is being replaced shortly by Liz Leyshon. There is still a need for care leaver representation on both panels and a foster carer from a different authority on the west.

8.4 Panel members have a wide range of skills, experiences and backgrounds, although there is no ethnic representation other than white UK. When advertising in the future, there will be an emphasis once more on recruiting care leavers and those from a different ethnic group so that representation is wider still.

8.5 Panel members are incredibly conscientious and are always open to learning, training and development. To this end, appraisals were undertaken again last December to identify individual’s strengths and training needs which then provided the framework for the training day in January.

8.6 There were three main parts to the day which included an examination of the Croydon Serious Case Review and its implications for the scrutiny of connected persons and Form F assessments by panel; a group activity considering a report by the chair of her observation of the Bristol Fostering Panel; and an exercise to consider questions encouraging greater rigour when reading assessments. As a result, panel members have a clearer understanding about what to look for in assessments and reviews and the approach to take on a range of diversity issues.

8.7 More training is being planned this year for panel members to learn to use electronic devices on which to read all the papers rather than being sent hard copies in the post. This will free up time for the panel administrator who only works three days a week and who spends one of those days fortnightly photocopying and posting packs. Members are, however, apprehensive about the change as it’s usually a day’s reading to prepare for panel and there is some nervousness about doing this on a screen. Having said this, panel members are always open to change and are determined to do their best to make it work.

8.8 Panels consider assessments of prospective foster carers (Form F), applications by those who wish to care for a specific child or young person and who are connected to them in some way (Form C), reviews after the first year of fostering, when there is a need for a change of approval, reviews after a significant incident and deregistration’s, exemptions and out of approvals.

8.9 This year 19 form Fs have been presented, 17 connected persons assessments, 25 first year reviews, 28 changes of approval, 43 deregistration’s and 30 out of approvals. The latter are only for panel to note as managers are required to authorise these if carers are out of their approval range in terms of numbers or ages of the children they are caring for.

8.10 Panel makes recommendations for approval and these are then considered by the CSC Agency Decision Maker. This is an enormous task as the decision maker must read all the paperwork and the minutes of the panel meetings and decide whether to ratify panel’s recommendations or not. Over the last year, Claire Winter, who has been the decision maker until very recently, has been extremely thorough and rigorous in her considerations and has ratified 151 of panel’s recommendations and has amended 11.

8.11 There have been 2 appeals to the IRM, (Independent Review Mechanism), since last June 1 of which has been upheld and 1 rejected. It is not usual for applicants/carers to go to the IRM as panel and CSC staff make every effort to explain the reasons why recommendations and decisions are made.

8.12 Feedback forms completed by social workers and applicants/carers after panel are positive, on the whole, and where there is criticism, panel learns from this and adapts accordingly where possible. Over the last year there has only been one very negative feedback form from a social worker whose recommendation wasn’t accepted.

8.13 Panel writes feedback for social workers which are also largely positive. The standard of assessment writing and reviews has certainly improved over the year with plenty of detailed factual information being provided as well as assertions being evidenced, and helpful analysis made. There have been staff changes in all the teams and it is hoped that this improvement is maintained through careful supervision by managers.

8.14 As a result of the 2016 training day, panels have focused very much on questioning techniques this year and this has been a successful development. Panel members are now far more aware of the need to ask questions about fostering capacity rather than asking about things which don’t actually impact on an applicant’s ability to care for a child. Similarly, when considering reviews, panels are now focusing on the carer’s ability to safeguard a child or prepare a young person for independence rather than asking questions about the child or young person which isn’t panel’s remit.

8.15 Of concern, however, are the numbers of connected persons assessments which panel is recommending for approval which are then not sustained. One of the most troubling examples of this was when panel recommended a carer for approval on the 22nd of February this year and she gave notice on the 6th of March. Connected persons assessments are notoriously challenging for social workers and for panels and decision makers, particularly when teenagers are very clear they want to live within a family of their choosing and will vote with their feet if placed elsewhere. Much has to be balanced but panel is clear that fostering minimum standards for connected persons must be met and when they aren’t, despite the child’s wishes, recommendations for approval can’t be made.

8.16 Panel is very aware of the huge commitment foster carers make to the children and young people they care for and all members have respect and admiration for the work they do. It is a privilege to meet applicants and carers when they attend panel and members are very aware of the responsibility to ensure the best possible carers care for the vulnerable children and young people in the care of the local authority.

**Judy Watson, Independent Chair, June 2018**

# **Foster Carer Training**

9.1 In order to improve our carers skills, knowledge, experience and resilience, Somerset offers a comprehensive learning and development programme for carers. Much of this training is jointly attended with social workers and others working directly with children. add link to training programme

9.2 In this financial year we have reviewed our learning and development programme to improve the service for foster carers through a Steering Group involving carers and fostering staff.

9.3 Participation of Foster carers involved with supporting the delivery of training:

9.4 We maintain a high level of courses being supported in delivery by Foster carers and encouragingly our pool of carers willing and able to deliver training has increased this year.

9.5 On our Child Protection course, several carers have agreed to being filmed to talk about specific areas; child sexual exploitation, disclosures and good practice if a child goes missing from care. These again are met with really positive feedback as it makes the training real to carers and the wider workforce as they see what carers are experiencing.

9.6 In the wider Learning & Development Team different areas are further supported by Carers, with interview panellists for Step Up, the Social Work fast track programme and Experienced Social Worker panels.

**Additional Supports**

9.7 Foster Carers and their families provide a valuable service to Somerset and Somerset’s children. Their role impacts enormously on their personal and family lives. In addition to regular supervision, support and access to training, Somerset Fostering Service offers additional supports, celebrations and opportunities to value their role and sometimes just unwind and have some fun together. These have included an annual dinner dance and awards ceremony, Christmas parties, a Fish and Chips on the beach day in the West, a Swim and Pizza evening at Street swimming pool in the East and Easter Egg hunt and fun days on both sides of the County. These were all well attended and enable Fostering Families, their own children and Children Looked After to get together and have fun.

9.8 All of the fostering teams offer regular coffee and support meetings to their carers which are increasingly being used for training and development alongside support, tea and cake. One of our SSWA’s compiles a fantastic newsletter to carers each quarter which informs them of events, some tips and advice, information from the Fostering Service and training information.

**We Care 2**

9.9 We Care 2 is a group for children in families that foster. We recognize that fostering impacts upon their childhood and experiences, may make them feel different from their friends, and the group is an opportunity for children who foster to be children together.

9.10 We provide the following;

* A ‘**We Care 2’** newsletter, we aim to send this out two or three times a year
* Regular trips and activities days out with other Children Who Foster
* Are available to visit children at home to have a chat (one to one) if they feel they need some support with fostering

9.11 The group of young people we currently have get on really well with each other and look forward to meeting up on our activity days. We generally spend a quiet time at some point during the day (usually lunchtime) where the young people are given the chance to discuss fostering with each other and are able to voice any concerns or worries at this time as well as share any happy moments or funny stories.

# **Foster Talk**

* 1. Somerset purchases Individual membership of Foster Talk for our Foster Carers. This service provides independent advice and support for our Foster Carers and their families, including free Social Work, Financial and Legal advice. Additionally, it importantly provides carers with access to free legal support and legal representation should they be in a position of being criminally investigated or charged for an issue resulting from their fostering, such as an allegation by a child.
  2. The service regularly receives positive feedback from Foster Carers.

# **Foster Carer Participation**

11.1 Somerset Foster Care Association was launched in September 2015. The purpose of the association is to enable carer’s to give collective power to the Carers Voice, in addition to Carers developing ways of supporting each other. Despite ongoing support from staff, the association has struggled to develop, there have been difficulties in establishing consistent committee members and a Chair. This year the association has continued to hold regular meetings and support groups. Somerset Fostering Workers continue to offer the association support and are working with SFCA towards greater strength and independence of the association.

11.2 The Foster Carers Consultative Group meets four times a year and is an opportunity for the Local Authority to consult with and update representative carers about changes to policy and procedure, in addition to the Carers being able to raise general issues to senior managers. We have welcomed some new members onto this group in 2017-18. The minutes from these meetings are circulated to all Foster carers and senior managers. The consultative group members have been consulted this year on issues such as the Progression scheme, school uniform, preparing children with adult skills and the process and design of forms for learning from premature placement endings.

11.3 Additionally, Foster Carers are regularly involved in interviews for fostering social workers and managers and participate regularly in the delivery of training to Social Workers and other Foster Carers, mentoring and in our recruitment campaigns for Foster Carers.

# **Child’s Voice**

12.1 The fostering review process enables children to give their views about the quality of care they receive from their foster carer. Unfortunately, the return rate of this consultation continues to be poor. Fostering social workers are also expected to seek out the child’s experience alongside the childcare social worker. Within our teams there has been an emphasis on practice improvement in recording the child’s experience of our care and audit activity would indicate improving practice in this area. With the implementation of Practice Standards for fostering social workers there is an expectation that they regularly see the child in placement with the foster carer.

12.2 We were able to consult with the SIC and SLIC group to develop the child’s feedback form for premature placement breakdowns and adapted the form to be more meaningful as a result.

12.3 The experience of Care Leavers and Children in Our Care is valuable in developing services and we have very much valued young people who have been in our care’s contribution to Fostering Panel as members and feedback on service developments in previous years. We will aim to recruit young people to sit on foster panel to contribute their opinion with the benefit of their unique experience.

# **Appendix 1**

**Fostering Service Improvement Plan 2018/19**

Overall aim: To increase by 28 the number of children we can look after in-house (by **4** in 2018-19; **10** in 2019-20 and 14 in 2020-21) through:

Improve recruitment and assessment of prospective foster carers

Improve support to foster carers to improve retention

Prepare and support carers to be more resilient to placement challenges

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Outcome** | **Current Situation** | **Service Improvement** | **Required actions** | **By who & date** | **Outcome Measure** |
| **Communications & Marketing** | | | | | |
| 1.The comms strategy is effective. | Reduced enquiries in 2018/19.  Coram i report suggests this could be improved | Communications strategy is regularly reviewed and adjusted to recruit foster carers.  Resources are used efficiently to target prospective carers and increase interest in fostering across Somerset | Review comms strategy using feedback from Coram i & People Too to:  Cost the improvement of SCC rankings for internet searches.  Review the content of on line advertising to reflect what we know is valued by foster carer;  Consider an ‘Ask Me Anything’ event with foster carers;  Review timeliness of Facebook responses. | 31st Dec 2018 | Suitable enquiries increase.  Comms performance information shows effective strategy and use of resources. |
| **Recruitment & Assessment**  **Fostering in Somerset (FIS)** | | | | | |
| 2. Prospective carers feel part of a fostering community through involvement of established foster carers in the process. | Foster Carers co-deliver training including Skills to Foster.  Foster Carers contribute to a wide range of recruitment activity. | Ask fostering plus carers to telephone potential carers for an "ask me anything" chat following initial home visit. | Produce accessible list of Fostering Plus carers for use by fostering social workers.  Prepare fostering plus workers for their role and including the provision of a ‘crib sheet.  Agree how to record this on LCS.  Fostering team to devise feedback mechanism for carers who choose not to progress following IHV.  Fostering team to develop feedback mechanism for carers 1 yr into fostering. | Whole service.  1st Jan 2019 | All Initial Home Visits have a follow up phone call by a foster carer.  Carers begin to get a good sense of the fostering task and those who progress feel more prepared and part of a fostering community.  Feedback from carers  If appropriate carers rule themselves out at this stage. |
| 3. There is an efficient & effective process for establishing carer suitability to progress. | Corami report indicates enquiries stay open too long.  Further investigation required. | Enquiries that do not progress are quickly closed. | Review IHV process.  Tracking identifies enquiries that remain open unnecessarily.  Set performance target and monitor. | TM & OM  31st January 2019. | Enquires will be progressed efficiently and unsuitable enquiries closed in a timely way. Tracking and audit |
| 4. Assessments of prospective foster carers are presented to foster panel within 6 months. | Corami report more than 52% of assessments take 8 months to present to panel. | Set target for completing the social work aspect of the assessment is 4 months.  . | Consider if Safe Care plan can be written as part of Safe Care training.  Review STF course with a view to extending the course to include more training and reduce need for assessment time spent on training tasks.  Consider how to provide SSWA support to progress timely completion of Stage 1 checks including pet q’s and household inspections.  Effective and accessible performance monitoring system is put in place. | All assessing social workers & TM.  From 1st Jan 2019 4 month assessment expectation in place.  OM  1st February 2018.  TM & OM  1st Jan 2019 | Social work aspect of assessment is completed within 4 months.  Full assessment is completed within 6 months and presented to panel.  Assessments meet 6 month target and less social work time is spent on checks.  Tracking, audit performance data. |
| 5. Improve effectiveness and performance of FIS | Links to points 2&3 above. | Set target of 8 full assessments completed annually for each wte SW (pro rata target for part time staff)  This is undertaken alongside other tasks. | Remove Kinship work from the Fostering Team. | 1st Feb 2018 | Assessment targets are met. Supervision and TM report. |
| **Fostering Support** | | | | | |
| 6. Improve transition between FIS and fostering teams. | Point of transfer is ratification of panel recommendation. Carers are often linked with SSW prior to this.    Carers are supported and supervised and child matched by SSW.  Strengths and vulnerabilities included as part of Form F summary.  Support and development needs may be missed during the transition period. | Carers are supported to make the transition to the fostering team by maintaining relationship with assessing SW for a period of 3 months.  Carers have secure professional relationships which enable them to share worries as well as successes. | SSW is identified prior to Panel and a joint transition process over 3 months to be tailored to needs of carer.  Mentoring/ buddying by existing carers will be introduced during the assessment period and support from other carers will be in place from the start of fostering placement (see action 8 below).  FIS sw and SSW will draw up a support plan which will be included in the Form F as part of the summary.  FIS sw should be included in the discussion about placing the first child.  Additional support from SSWA available when carer is approved (see action 8 below). | TM’s  December 2018  From Jan 19  From Jan 19  From Jan 19  From Mar19 | Carer feedback 1 yr in tells us there is a smooth transition from assessment to support.  Children are better matched with carers and there is improved placement stability. Performance data.  Placement support plans are SMART and meet child’s and carers needs as identified in Carer Support Plan. Improved Placement Stability. Through audit. |
| 7. Timely ADM decisions of foster panel recommendations. | ADM considers foster panel recommendations and makes decisions.  Decisions are not made within recommended standard and there can be long delays.  This reduces our ability to use all our potential fostering capacity.  Prospective foster carers feel frustrated. | ADM decision within 10 working days of Panel. | Find out the barriers to timely agency decisions.  Propose ‘back up’ ADM to cover periods of annual leave & Sickness. | ADM  Panel Advisor  OM  31st Dec 2018 | ADM decision within 10 working days of Panel.  Tracking/ performance data. |
| 8. Improve support to foster carers in their first year of fostering. | Carers in their first year have the same support as all carers. | Establish mentoring and buddying scheme for all new foster carers provided by Fostering Plus carers.  Increase capacity of SSWA’s to offer support visits to new carers. These are in addition to SSW visits and can offer additional support and a ‘listening ear’. | All Fostering Plus carers approached about the task and provided with supporting information.  List of FP carers brought together including geographical area.  Buddying and mentoring provided Information to all Fostering Plus carers about scheme  Devise training programme for mentoring.  Recruitment of 2FTE SSWA’s from existing establishment.  Meeting with SSWA’s to agree clear roles and responsibilities and offer for new carers. | TM’s & SSW’s.  BS  TM’s/Helen Rolls  TM’s  1st March 2019 | Fewer carers de-registering within first 2 years of fostering.  Positive feedback from carers after first year. |
| 9. Improve Carer Resilience and Placement Stability | Placement Stability is poor in Somerset and carers often struggle to manage the impact of challenging behaviours and the impact of the experience on themselves and their families. | Carers feel more supported and skilled in therapeutic parenting. | SSW’s and SSWA’s to receive training in DDP.  Develop therapeutic support groups for carers.  Review Attachment training  Consultation to be offered to SSW’s and SW’s about matching children as required.  Oversight of children on TFC to encompass attachment and trauma  Consider delivery of training/ information for children’s Social Workers about positive working with carers. | SSW/ SSWA. June 19  EHWT Jan 19  EHWT Jan 19  EHWT Jan 19  EHWT Jan 19  April 19 | Placement Stability data |
| 10. Increase Capacity and flexibility of existing carers | Carers preferences are reflected in their approval range and consequently some have a narrow approval.  As carers develop they often look after children outside of their approval range.  We have a high number of ‘temporary out of approvals’ request to change carers approval for time limited periods. | Carers are approved 0-18 or 5-18 with a clear preference within that range.  The preference of the carer and opinion of the SSW is respected and carers are able to take a broader range of children with appropriate support.  . | FIS social workers to present carers to Panel with wide approval and clear rationale for preference.  Advise Foster Panel of proposed action. | Panel Advisor  31st Dec 18.  FIS  For all assessments seen at Panel from April 19 | Increased capacity with  wider range of placements available. Placement data.  Fewer temporary out of approval request required. |
| 11. Improve carers experience of allegations | There is an allegations and complaints policy.  Carers experience of allegation/ complaint irrespective of the outcome is often negative and leads to some resignations.  Allegation management is at times disproportionate, mainly inconclusive, displaces children and alienates carers.  Carers have benefits of Foster Talk that include legal support, independent SW and Carefirst. | Strategy meetings consider the risks of moving a child alongside risks of child remaining as part of decision making. Thresholds are carefully considered.  Incidents are investigated in a relationship based way to encourage openness and honesty and willingness to learn and improve.  CSC role to be completed in a shorter time period.  Risks re-visited and managed where possible with child in placement. | Meet with Police and LADO to agree thresholds.  Senior manager to attend strategies for 3 months involving children in in house foster care.  Review policy  Meeting with carers who have experienced an allegation to inform policy development and support offered  Consider mechanism for peer support for carers and SSW’s when undergoing an investigation. | TM/OM  Jan 2019  OM from Nov 18  OM  Jan 18  OM/TM  Jan 18  OM/TM  Dec 18 | Decrease in the number of unwanted resignations following allegation.  Decrease in average time taken for in house investigations. |
| 12. Enable appropriate children currently in residential to live in a family environment. | A number of younger children are currently in residential homes where long term fostering is their assessed need. | Alongside commissioning, pilot an intensive sw support team to enable children to transition from residential care to family based care. | Meet with Commissioning to develop proposal/ plan.  Team recruitment from existing resources.  Scope agency sector and in house potential for carers. | Dec 18  Feb 19 | Number of (fewer) children in residential homes where fostering is the plan. |
|  | | | | | |
| **Action** | | **Who** | **Progress** | | **Deadline** |
| **Comms Planning** | | | | | |
| 1. Draft ‘Switch to Somerset and cut out the middleman’ text for our website | | Trevor Goss | Completed – Spike in interest from radio campaign – plan for campaign over Xmas | | Completed |
| 2. Liaise with Samantha Fahey/Trevor and Suzanna/Stepping Stones team re. any updates on payment/support pages/allowances and fees pages of website. | | Caroline Cook | Completed - | | Completed |
| 3. Continue work on stories focussing on realities of fostering/real profiles of traumatised children/videos of real experiences | | Caroline Cook | Amy B – leaving care completed and popular on website hits. | | Completed |
| 4. Even more direct webpage link promotion on social media – on FAQs etc. | | Caroline Cook | On-going | |  |
| 5. Continue making foster carers available at events for ‘ask us anything’ | | Caroline Cook | Foster carers attending | | Completed |
| 6. Continued focus on our ‘not for profit’ status and ‘cut out the middle man’ angle. | | Caroline Cook | Lots of positive comments – like the honesty. | | Completed |
| 7. Look into prices for Google Ad words – continued research on brand trust on paid vs organic, particularly in light of focussing on our ‘not for profit’ USP. | | Caroline Cook | Fostering page – top of organic list (some ads above us) – visual image now at top of page with link to website and fostering page | | Completed |
| 8. Chase team/foster carer association for any support event info that I can add to events section of web/Facebook etc. and promote | | Caroline Cook | Support events now promoted on website and on Facebook | | Completed |
| 9. Continued coverage of ‘getting to know you’ we care 2 events | | Caroline Cook | Caroline to chase Gwyneth Samways for updated info | | End December 2018 |
| 10. Support Suzanne and Trevor with responding to all review feedback that we’ve actioned | | Caroline Cook  Suzanne Lyus | Response rate and replies now reconfigured and more efficient. South West region considering joint video about fostering for a LA.  FAROs contacting employers re support for foster carers. Extend this to offering to attend staff group meetings to explain.  Kite mark or similar for fostering friendly organisations | | Completed  Completed  January 2019  In place by February 2018 |
| 11. To arrange for a provider, Stepping Stones worker and Brian to review the website and Brian to present suggested amendments to Caroline Cook. | | Brian Sammonds | Completed | | Completed |
| 12. Brian to meet with Jo Manning regarding Stepping Stones providers being given access to Fostering phone support and also the mentoring / buddy system. | | Brian Sammonds | Completed | | Completed |
| 13. Trish to contact Lise re use of support for Stepping Stones – in particular over 18. Same applies to Staying Put | | Trish Lyons | 3 calls to EDT since April 2018 - none requiring intervention. | | Nfa at the moment |
| 14. Identifying care leavers who could do blogs and videos about foster care as a teenager or would have liked to be fostered. | | Trish Lyons/Caroline Cook |  | | End January 2019 |
| 15. Check process for new carers and existing carers are getting access to My Staff Shop | | Suzanne Lyus |  | | End January 2019 |

# **Appendix 2**

**Team Reports**

**East Team**

1.1 The East Fostering Team consists of: 2 Part Time Team Managers supervising 10 Social Workers, 2 part-time Senior Social Work Assistants and Business Support. They supervise and support 106 fostering households. Social Workers are responsible for meeting statutory requirements, including supporting, monitoring and reviewing fostering households, ensuring that carers work in partnership to promote the needs of children in placement. The team have supported and benefited from 2 Social Work students this year.

1.2 A Full Time Supervising Social Worker currently holds between 14 -16 active carers. A Part Time Supervising Social Workers case load varies depending on their working hours, holding 8 to 14 cases. Expectations of Supervising Social Workers continue to increase to meet both the statutory duties of the Fostering Agency, and in supporting CLA and Safeguarding colleagues with improvements in the overall experience for children in our care. Supervising Social Workers have risen to these challenges but are mindful that we need to allow sufficient time for reflection with carers, to attend meetings and to complete report writing.

1.3 The East Fostering Team are currently carrying 2 Full Time Supervising Social Work Vacancies (74 hours in total). This will increase further between June and July due to staff reducing their hours and one Supervising Social Worker giving notice, accounting for an addition 25.5 hours). At the time of writing this report, we have 1 Full Time Locum Social Worker and 1 Part Time Locum due to start on 14th May 2018.

1.4 The East Team continues to operate from two offices (Yeovil and Shepton), covering a large geographical area East and South Somerset, including surrounding villages. There are a small number of carers living across local authority boarders. The 106 registered fostering households all have an allocated Supervising Social Worker, providing support and a minimum of one supervision visit a month, more where necessary. 12 of these carers provide a short break care service to children with disabilities, some are dual approved, 17 carers are approved as connected person carers at the time of writing this report, numbers continue to increase. The team have worked hard to give temporary connected persons the same level of support as fully assessed connected persons. Many of these temporary arrangements are short lived and therefore the turnaround of carers within the team has increased.

1.5 Supervising Social Workers have continued to work closely with children’s Social Workers to improve placement stability and permanence for children.

1.6 Performance has remained stable, resulting in statutory checks, supervision visits, and foster care annual reviews being maintained between 90% - 95%. There has been a dip in unannounced visits and home inspections resulting in stats being around 85%. The Team have continued to work extremely hard to meet service demand and to implement change to improve service delivery. They have similarly remained child focused during a challenging and busy period and there has been a continuing shift in thinking and culture; prioritising and promoting the needs of children in care; securing permanency; identifying potential carers and jointly matching children with carers with skills and experience identified.

1.7 Business support has been invaluable within the Fostering service and provide specialist support in the administrative tasks of the Fostering Service such as DBS, medical checks, organising carers badges and information sharing etc in addition to more general administrative tasks. They have been a vital resource in promoting carers experience of the agency.

1.8 Supervising Social Workers have continued to attend child looked after team meetings to improve working in partnership, exploring dilemmas or issues that will progress plans to promote the needs of children in placement. Additional support to carers, once identified is acted upon and includes considering learning and development to upskill carers. Training and support to staff and Foster Carers is considered good, providing a variety of training opportunities although staff would like more training in DDP to provide more support to carers managing trauma and attachment needs of children. There has been an increase in carers and staff attending training events, wanting to progress and develop further. The development and implementation of the Foster Carer’s Progression Scheme appears to have encouraged carers to take up training opportunities to evidence their ability and skills required to progress to Fostering Plus. The number of carers with a Personal Development Plan has increased too.

1.9 When children are placed, Placement Planning Meetings are consistently held to support the carer’s ability to meet the child’s needs. Supervising Social Workers continue to link with children’s allocated Social Workers to obtain delegated authority. In cases where placements are planned, information sharing has generally been good and there have been introduction visits to help children and young people make a smooth transition. Carers are therefore generally receiving, information available to us about children, at that time and prior to agreeing to the placement.

1.10 The East Fostering Team understand the need to keep children and young people at the centre of practice and there is evidence of improved recording of the child’s experiences or their observations in their written reports/records. Foster carers ability and suitability to foster are reviewed annually, consultation forms are sent out to professionals and young people to obtain their experiences in placement. Foster carers send in weekly logs re the child’s experience in placement and these are shared with the CLA Social Worker.

1.11 There has been a continued increase in the number of placement support meetings being held to support carers struggling to meet the complex needs of children in placement. Supervising Social Workers continue to co-ordinate and minute meetings in a timely manner, exploring difficulties and identifying a plan working in partnership with professionals i.e. CLA Social Workers, Foster Carers, Placement Support Team, Young People and where possible birth parents.

1.12 Life story work has been embedded into practice with Supervising Social Workers reminding and encouraging foster carers about the importance of writing logs, capturing experiences about children they care for. Safe Care Policies are now embedded into practice too, with all Supervising Social Workers monitoring this and chasing their carers to complete safe care plans for all children in placement, including respite placements.

1.13 End of Placement Letters to children who leave placements have increased considerably and this is due to Supervising Social Workers reminding carers about the need to write a letter to children after they have left placement. Letters reflect on experiences, capturing positive memories. In addition to this there has been an improvement in carers writing and sending in written logs that inform Social Workers and decision making.

1.14 Two Senior Social Work Assistants (SSWA) support birth children of Foster Carers on a one to one level, where needed. SSWA’s continue to support Supervising Social Workers with some statutory checks to ensure carers have an up to date DBS and Annual Household Inspection. In addition to this they have helped to update Foster Care Profiles and have supported some foster carers to complete their Fostering Induction Standards.

1.15 Team Action Plans have been implemented and are regularly reviewed and updated to promote on-going service delivery, aiming to achieve good practice and outcomes.

1.16 **Actions going forward 2018/2019 - linked to Team Action Plans and CYP Plan:**

* To develop SMARTER plans that identifies times scales and a review date.
* To maintain a focus on Permanence Planning:
* Continue to co-ordinate Placement Support Meetings.
* Supervising Social Workers identifying and supporting carers to offer long term placements, including staying put arrangements and SGO applications.
* Due to the number of mainstream foster carers declining and being deregistered, for various reasons. An analysis of carer deregistration reports and exit interviews will be undertaken for the year April 2017 to April 2018 to inform the service and retention.
* Increase management oversight/decision making.
* Support a smooth transition for connected person carers to kinship care team, when developed.

**West Team**

2.1 The West Fostering Team provides support and supervision to foster carers who are located in the west region of Somerset, covering Sedgemoor, Taunton Deane and West Somerset. At the time of writing this report, there are 94 approved fostering households (81 foster carer and 13 connected persons) supervised by the team. Supervising social workers provide support and supervision to temporary connected persons who have a child placed with them and are awaiting a fostering assessment and panel decision.

2.2 Between April 2017 and March 2018 the West Fostering Team consisted of 1 full time fixed term Team Manager (February 2017-February 2018) covering maternity leave, 1 part time permanent team manager (March 2018 – current), 1 full time team manager who also manages another team within the Resource service (March 2018 – current), 2 full time experienced social workers, 3 full time social workers, 3 part time social workers, 2 senior social work assistants (1 full time, 1 part time), 1 3rd year social work student and 3 business support workers (1 full time and 2 part time).

2.3 During this period, the average caseload of a full time social worker in the team was 15 fostering households. This is consistent with last year.

2.4 The team performance has been affected by changes in management responsibility this year with the permanent team manager going on maternity leave and this period being covered by a temporary team manager. After a period of stability and gradual improvement in practice that saw an increase in compliance between 2015/16, over the last 12 months there has been a deterioration in some, but not all, of the compliance aspects, namely reviews and unannounced visits being undertaken on time.

2.5 This year, the Home-Based Care team was dissolved and integrated into the ‘mainstream’ fostering team with the development of “Fostering Plus’. The team has therefore gained an experienced social worker and 10 foster carers who have skills and experience in looking after young people with more challenging behaviours and who are not always in full time education. The development of Fostering Plus has also enabled foster carers in the West Fostering Team who have the same skills and experiences as the Home-Based Carers to have their efforts acknowledged with the same financial and support benefits. 24% of foster carers in the team are currently Fostering Plus.

2.6 At the time of writing this report, 61% of foster carer reviews are up to date on SSRS. On average we make a 15% allowance for reviews that are complete but awaiting completion on LCS, making 76% completion a more accurate number. One reason for the difficulties in completion of reviews is the lack of reviewing officer availability. This role is currently shared between fostering team managers and experienced social workers; however workload pressures have added to the drift in getting review meetings held within statutory timescales.

2.7 59% of unannounced home visits are completed on LCS. This is a reduction in compliance from the previous 2 years. A possible reason for this is that there has been a lack of regular statistical feedback to the team during the course of the year, which has previously helped the team to keep on top of their compliance.

2.8 97% of DBS checks are complete – risk assessments are in place for checks pending and 94% of medicals are complete. This is consistent with previous years.

2.9 Between March 2017 and March 2018 11 foster carers have been approved and there have been 16 de-registrations. This means that the total turnover of fostering households has been 17% with a 5% net reduction due to recruitment.

2.10 Foster carer supervision records require improvement. More work is needed to get Supervising Social Workers to write up good quality, reflective supervision records which are sent to carers within a 4-week timescale.

2.11 The introduction of Fostering Plus (see Team Summary) has been a significant development within the team. Foster carers have a clear development plan and incentive to progress their skills and look after children whose needs are challenging and complex.

2.12 The support and supervision of temporary approved connected persons has also been a development. The processes around this work continue to need addressing, as at present there is no clear pathway on LCS. Communication between professionals for these cases needs improving to ensure that everyone is up to date e.g. cases where a Child Arrangement Order has been made and as such, a supervising social worker is no longer required.

2.13 The experience of children continues to be captured through consultation forms for foster carer reviews. However, the completion of these is inconsistent.

2.14 Supervising social workers have developed good relationships with the children in their foster placements and in many cases these relationships are more long standing than the child’s relationship with their own social worker. Work needs to be done to ensure that this is captured on the child’s record.

2.15 The child’s experience of placement endings is not always positive, with some placements ending with little to no planning and no introductions for the child with their next carer. The development of the Placement Support Team and Emotional Health and Wellbeing Team will hopefully, in the next year, reduce the amount of unplanned endings and therefore improve the experience of children in this area.

2.16 The experience of foster carers is recorded throughout LCS, on supervision records, consultation forms and foster carer reviews.

2.17 Foster carers have enjoyed team events such as fish and chips on the beach, Easter egg hunt and the Christmas party which all aim to provide opportunities for team building, support carers to develop support networks and to feel valued.

2.18 Due to the stability of staffing in the team, foster carers have had consistent support from their supervising social workers.

2.19 The experience of newly approved foster carers is an area for development to ensure that a higher level of support is provided.

**Family Assessment and Support Team**

3.1 FA&ST is a specialist parent and child fostering scheme that completes independent parenting assessments where cases are subject to PLO or court proceedings. This involves parent/s and their child/ren residing in a FA&ST’s foster placement for the purpose of assessment. Where possible, the FA&ST will additionally undertake community parenting assessments in a family’s own home or offer community support. The FA&ST consists of 1 fulltime team manager (cover 1.5 teams), 1 full time supervising social worker, 2 senior social work assistants (1 fulltime, 1-part time) 2 full time senior assessing social workers (1 post currently vacant), 1 fulltime business support worker (covering 2 teams). There is currently an additional senior social work assistant in the team on a temporary contract.

3.2 FA&ST currently have 9 fostering households. There have been 2 new approvals for the scheme this year and 1 fostering household left FA&ST choosing to return to mainstream fostering. (Although these carers have retained a duel approval to include FA&ST should they wish to return.)

3.3 There has continued to be an assessing social worker vacancy in the team which has limited placement and community assessment capacity. This has also resulted in the use of IASW being commissioned this year. The 2 permanent SSWA’s are currently on the sponsored social work training programme and have been supported to go on placements this year. This has been managed by the appointment of a temporary SSWA into FA&ST.

3.4 Performance is monitored through supervision and by using the SSRS. Whilst statutory visits and checks have been completed in timescales there has been a gap in the timeliness of recording foster carer visits on LCS. This could be attributed to management capacity to chair all meetings and the SSW taking on this task. This is due to changes in the manager’s role and additional tasks such as jointly managing west fostering, panel advisor role, chairing additional annual reviews.

3.5 The team have continued to promote awareness of the FA&ST and completed presentations to the IRO’s and provide a fact sheet to social workers who have not worked with FA&ST before.

3.6 Positive verbal feedback has been received in relation to the community assessment and support the team have provided to families in the community. This has been from the childcare social workers, managers and from the parents themselves. Positive feedback has also been received from a parent in placement about the assessment process in the form of a thank you card to the ASW. There have been no allegations or complaints this year in the FA&ST.

3.7 FA&ST have made 31 parent and child placements for 28 different children. 14 assessments have been undertaken by FA&ST and 8 by independent assessing social workers. 4 placements were holding placements only and 5 placements are on-going. For the 14 assessments (13 children) that FA&ST undertook 5 were recommended and returned to the community with their child; 6 moved to adopters; 1 assessment placement broke down due to the parents behaviour in placement, this parent and child was subsequently placed with her Aunt for further assessment and then moved to a residential unit, she is now in the community with her child; 1 parent and child returned to the community against the recommendation of the assessment. Of the 8 independent assessments completed none returned to the community with their parents and all went on to either have plans for adoption or SGO’s to other family members.

3.8 The team have a flexible approach to meet the needs of the childcare teams and carers are used creatively between placements or when waiting for a new placement by supporting other carers, community assessments and at times other fostering teams. FA&ST have been involved with 4 families in the community and completed 1 community assessment. This assessment recommended that the family remain in the community. 2 families were supported by a SSWA to support the social workers own assessment, 1 remains in the community. 1 family were supported by a FA&ST foster carer, involving intensive support for a 7year old with cancer, the family have remained at home.

3.9 There have been 13 referrals received by FA&ST that the team have been unable to place due to capacity, 12 of these were placed in IFA or residential placement

3.10 FA&ST foster carers continue to capture the child’s experience of being in placement or their home by completing detailed factual logs of their observations which are then filed with court. This not only informs the assessment process but provides an account of a child’s experience and supports life story work. Most children in FA&ST placements are non-verbal and documenting the care provided is key to making decisions about their future. During this year FA&ST carers have been supported to complete end of placement letters for children and these are now embedded in the foster carers practice. The carers see the importance of these, whatever the plan for a child might be, as they are able to provide invaluable information to a child about the time spent with their parent in their home.

3.11 There is a wealth of experience within the pool of the FA&ST carers with the 2 new carers bringing with them transferable skills relevant to the role. All the carers remain committed to attending the specialist support groups and training plan to expand their knowledge. The carers are supportive of each other and are willing to offer advice and support when needed with the more experienced carers in the team taking a lead on this.

3.12 During this year parents entering into FA&ST placements appear to be increasingly more complex particularly around their mental health, emotional and learning needs and as such the carers have had to be even more flexible in their approach and work with the parents in placement. This has also been the case in relation to meeting the changing demands within the court process which has resulted in lengthy holding placements and further periods of assessment. All the carers, whilst at times expressing their frustrations, have worked with the changing plans for the benefit of the children in placement. This year has also seen 2 carers taking fathers into placements who had previously been reluctant to do so therefore expanding their knowledge and skills in working with fathers and alleviating some of their anxieties. This provides more flexibility in terms of placement options.

3.13 There is a pool of sessional workers who provide additional support when required however this year their availability has been limited at times and as such additional support for the carers is being reviewed. This will be essential in ensuring that the carers are able to continue to provide the high quality and complex placements that are requested.

3.14 **Actions 2017/18 linked to Team Action Plans and CYP Plan**

* Recruit to the ASW position and increase placement and community assessment capacity
* Consider and cost PAM’s training for FA&ST assessors
* Recruit a specific FA&ST respite carer and increase 2 parent placements
* Complete a service review data analysis
* Review FA&ST fees to include OLA and IFA comparison
* Increase opportunities to capture parent feedback

**Therapeutic Foster Care (previously Treatment Foster Care Oregon)**

4.1 Therapeutic Foster Care is an intensive fostering programme with an evidenced based behavioural approach. The programme is aimed at children in our care whose behaviours have led or may lead to multiple placement breakdowns and consequently poor outcomes for those children.

4.2 TFC aims to enable the child to modify behaviours in order to be able to live permanently with their birth family, in an adoptive family or in a permanent foster placement. The team around the child within TFC includes the foster carer, who implements the programme, a clinical team lead, an educational lead, a birth family coach who works with birth families and other permanent families, skills workers to work directly with the children, a fostering social worker and business support who contact the foster carer every day in relation to the child’s behaviours.

4.3 In 2015 - 16 the service developed further in order to provide a wraparound program (WRAP) for children where a permanent placement has been identified. This enables delivery of the programme in the child’s adoptive or fostering placement avoiding an unnecessary placement move. This is an innovative use of the TFC programme and Somerset is at the forefront of this development nationally. The programme offers a minimum of 3-month aftercare for children and their families.

4.4 The programme is aimed at those aged 3-12 with complex and antisocial behaviours that often put them at risk of placement disruption. Carers learn how to implement behavioural management strategies and respond to the child’s positive and negative behaviour through consistent and non-reactive responses. The intervention is a community-based therapeutic programme that lasts between 9 and 12 months and involves a team of clinicians working intensively with children placed with specially trained foster carers. The team works across all areas of a child’s life, including; education, social, biological or extended family, and foster family to improve outcomes. Specific attention is paid to developing a young person’s skills and capacity to maintain relationships, while addressing areas of difficulty.

4.5 The team currently comprises of 7 therapeutic foster placements, including 1 respite household. Within the last 12 months 3 fostering households have left the scheme (1 transferred to mainstream provision, 1 resigned from fostering activity, 1 household deregistered, with decision upheld by the IRM following appeal)

4.6 The team has however continued to recruit to ensure on going capacity with 2 additional fostering households approved within this year.

4.7 Within this financial year 11 children have been supported via the provision. 6 children have ‘graduated’ from the scheme and moved to long term or permanent family homes. Respite carers from the scheme have also provided support on an emergency basis to 4 mainstream children. The team have supported 3 WRAP provisions over the last 12 months (2 long term foster placements, 1 adoption placement). 2 children have experienced placement breakdown within the scheme (1 moving to residential provision and 1 moving to an alternative TFC carer).

4.8 The Service formally left the National Implementation Team at the end of this financial year, and re-branded to be called Therapeutic Foster Care (TFC). The programme now includes a broader therapeutic approach for children from 3-12 years old. The programme will support no more than 10 children at any given time (to include WRAP provision).

4.9 During the last 12 months both C & P TFCO Programmes were permanently joined together under one Treatment Foster Care Programme clinically lead by 1 full time Programme Supervisor**.**

4.10 There have been significant staff and other changes that have impacted on team dynamics and performance. Despite these difficulties, the carers and staff team have continued to provide an intensive fostering experience to children in their care. Carers have been consulted about changes wherever possible and feedback from carers indicate that the additional support they receive as a group through weekly support group, more frequent supervision and a proactive on call system is very valuable to them. Carers have been extremely flexible and mutually supportive of the service.

4.11 Children have continued to experience direct work intervention from the team linked to their goals via weekly Skills Coach Sessions and the weekly Therapeutic playgroup.

4.12 **Actions 2017/18 linked to Team Action Plans and CYP Plan**

* Service re-design was completed in September 2018, with strong stable leadership and effective quality assurance mechanisms.
* Improved compliance in relation to meeting Practice Standards, to include 100 % timely reviews and unannounced visits.
* Specialist training to the foster carer workforce to include attachment based and trauma informed training.
* Developing and contributing to a concept of therapeutic parenting within the wider Fostering Service.
* Routine, quality feedback from children and families systematically contributing to service direction and development at all levels
* A stable, motivated and well-trained workforce, supported by an effective appraisal, supervision and personal development plans.
* Safe care and improved placement stability for children looked after, and measuring the effectiveness of the programmes for long term stability and permanence for young people.

**Short Break Care**

5.1 The service has 12 carers who specialise in providing short periods of respite to children who have disabilities and their families. Short break carers are matched with specific children and their families and maintain these relationships often throughout childhood and beyond, enabling children to live within their families and communities. This is a decrease from 16 carers at the end of last year.

5.2 2 potential new Short Break carers are currently being assessed pending approval.

5.3 The Short Break Care foster carers have been supervised across the County by a locum Social Worker who began this role to cover long term sickness in January 2017. We are currently recruiting to fill this role on a permanent basis.

5.6 Short break carers provided 756 nights / 816 days of support this year for 13 children and their families. 3 further packages of care matching children with a carer are currently being developed, and one short break arrangement has developed into a fulltime placement.

5.7 The implementation of the progression scheme has made payments for short break carers clearer and fairer and carers now feel valued for the care of children with complex social and medical needs. The service has developed and implemented a new electronic claim form which reduces delays in carers payments.

5.8 Performance of the service has steadily improved and as a result 100% of statutory reviews and unannounced visits have completed within date. The service has developed a support and training group specifically for Short Break Carers which has been positively received. The service has also developed with the Children with Disabilities service a policy on the use of DLA.

5.9 As a Fostering Service we have also purchased some software “Communications in Print” to assist carers in making social stories and Life Story work with and for children with communication difficulties.

5.10 Our Short Break Care service has been involved with recruitment activities in supporting a promotional video for social media involving a carer and a parent of a child who uses the service. We have started recruitment on social media for specific children with some initial interest

**Placement Support Team (Formally Placement Stability)**

6.1 As a Fostering Service we all remain committed to improving placement stability and permanence in Somerset, so that our children can develop emotional resilience, improve relationships with adults, in order to build attachments leading to positive relationships. A reduction in multiple placements moves will benefit our child in terms of long term life stability.

6.2 The introduction of Placement Stability Workers is a proactive response to stabilise placements, improving resilience of carers. Through direct work activity, consultations and training the team aims to contribute to embedding and developing a culture of restorative and therapeutic parenting. This is achieved via:

* Providing interventions to carers that address issues of secondary trauma and support the development of a therapeutic parenting approach.
* Targeted Direct work with children and young people to enhance well-being and ensure stability within the placement
* Provide interventions aimed at increasing the responsiveness of carers in order to promote secure attachments, develop self-esteem and self-awareness, the ability to regulate arousal and to increase pro-social behaviours in the children they care for.
* Provide training, including the KEEP Program and disseminate best practice to Foster Carers, colleagues and carers.
* Access to consultation advice to support the CLA and Supervising Social Worker service for high risk and complex young people including commenting on placement needs.

6.3 The team currently comprises of 3 experienced therapeutically informed practitioners (1 social Worker, 1 Senior Practitioner and 1 Support Worker). There is 1 vacancy at present.

6.4 Within the last 12 months the team has supported 51 fostering households (to include 29 children directly). Prior to September 2018 the team comprised of 1 worker, therefore capacity only increased in the later 5 months of the year.

* Total number of referrals - 64
* Number of referrals open - 51
* Placements breakdown – 9
* Signposted to other services - 9

6.5 2 KEEP Programmes have been completed and 1 KEEP Programme commenced in February 2018 that has not yet been completed. 25 Foster carers have been supported via this training.

6.6 Trauma based workshops have been attended by 75 participants, including foster carers and Social Care colleagues.

6.7 The team has increased its consultation activity, providing indirect support to placements and young people via increased attendance at Placement Support meetings and providing CPD information sessions to colleagues.

6.8 There have been some challenges following the introduction of a joint referral process with the Emotional Health and Well-being Team, This saw a decrease in direct referrals to the service, reflecting a confusion from social workers regarding the distinction between the activities of the two service areas. This has been resolved by separating the referral processes and forms

6.9 We have not formally collected feedback from young people, however engagement with young people in direct work activity has been positive with 84% of children identified for direct work engaging with the sessions and maintaining their 1:1 relationships with staff members. The collection of feedback is a service improvement area moving forward.

6.10 There remains a challenge to engage stakeholders to provide feedback routinely. Out of the 21 feedback forms completed 97% report satisfaction at the support provided by the team.

6.11 **Actions 2017/18 linked to Team Action Plans and CYP Plan**

* Expansion of the team from 1 worker to 4 workers; supporting, developing and expanding the skills of workers and care (1 vacancy remains)
* Challenges in respect of changes to Team 8 and the ‘gap’ left in providing out of hours support and intervention to CLA and foster placements.
* Refocus the work to planned rather than crisis.
* Developing the skill set and competency of team members via a consistent training and development program.

**Staying Put**

6.12 Staying Put is where the Local Authority support young people to remain living with their foster family after they are 18, until they are fully able to live 7independently. This is of great benefit to young people leaving care and enables them to transition to adulthood normally with the safety net other young people enjoy. Both locally and nationally there is an inevitable impact upon available foster placements as young people remain living within families. The arrangements can also bring different complexities to foster families who effectively have an adult living with them but are still required to meet Fostering Standards for children. There is limited statutory guidance in relation to Staying Put arrangements and as a service we are reviewing how we provide a supportive but proportionate service.

6.13 Currently we have 32 (26 in last financial year) Young People overall in Staying Put Arrangements (LA and Agency carers). This continues to improve year on year. We have 20 young people who have Staying Put arrangements with Somerset foster carers (19 in the last financial year).