



Somerset County Council

Children's Social Care

Fostering Service

Annual Report

April 2016 – March 2017

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SUMMARY AND SERVICE OVERVIEW

1. Summary and Looking Forward

1.1. The Fostering Service has continued to develop and improve practice to meet the needs of children looked after in Somerset and address the requirements of national guidance and fostering standards. It is responsible for:

- The recruitment and assessment of foster carers;
- 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 permanence planning.

1.2. The service benefits from a stable management team and committed, conscientious and skilled staff teams which consist of both social workers and senior social work assistants. Staff across the service have been willing to work to implement changes and take forward practice improvements.

1.3. We are even more fortunate to have committed, experienced and enthusiastic foster carers who are incredibly humbling in their capability and willingness to love and care for children, despite the many frustrations and challenges the role can bring. We celebrate their commitment through events held throughout the year. This includes events specifically for birth children of foster carers to value their contribution too.

1.4. Following a year of significant change, development and practice improvements in 2015-16, this year it has been important for the service to continue to embed those changes. This has been through consistent supervision and support of

social workers and foster carers and ensuring that our policies, processes and Foster Carer's Handbook were up-to-date and fit for purpose. Placement Support Meetings and End of Placement Letters were introduced last year and are now consistently used and have become "what we do". The service has worked hard with colleagues across Children's Social Care (CSC) to embed the Permanence Pathway, practice standards and improve recording, in particular the focus on the child's experience of our care. Auditing and Team Diagnostics have highlighted improvements in practice and helped us identify how we can improve and develop further.

- 1.5. In what are challenging times nationally in respect of fostering recruitment, our Fostering and Adoption Recruitment Team and the Communications Team have continued to work together to produce marketing material and recruitment activity which is fresh, modern, continually updated and compares well with other local authorities and independent agencies.
- 1.6. One area of the service which required improvement was our Short Break Care (SBC) Service and, with the benefit of additional team manager capacity, and the appointment of a full time fostering social worker dedicated to this role from January 2017, we have been able to see rapid improvement in this service and improved foster care satisfaction with a clear action plan for continued improvement and development.
- 1.7. Our challenges remain placement sufficiency and placement stability. Placement stability is impacted by availability and choice of placements and the skills of available carers, and also by the quality of assessment and care planning and the quality and consistency of support offered to carers. These are challenges which require a whole service approach and require the Fostering Service to support and influence colleagues as well as develop and improve the services directly provided.
- 1.8. Fostering social workers have led and supported child care colleagues to improve placement planning and placement support, and the service has introduced a tool for foster carers to contribute to their assessment of their

ability to offer permanence to a child. In house and external foster carers are also encouraged to attend Permanence Panel when a permanent match with a child is being considered.

1.9. Our specialist Family Assessment and Support Team (FA&ST) and Treatment Foster Care Oregon (TFCO) Programme provide good outcomes for children and Somerset has been at the forefront, sometimes nationally, of developing services and evolving them to meet the needs of our children. In the year ahead we need to review and focus our services within TFCO and work to increase our capacity within the FA&ST to offer early parenting assessments within the community and positive support to our care leavers who become parents. Both of these initiatives will have a positive impact on early permanence planning for children in our care.

1.10. Looking ahead to 2017/18 the service will be:

- Continuing with an active and energetic recruitment campaign to attract prospective foster carers to Somerset County Council (SCC).
- Improving our ability to support children in foster care by strengthening and developing the placement stability service alongside the establishment of the multi-agency Emotional Health and Wellbeing Team. The two services will work closely together to provide a service to children looked after and care leavers.
- Working more closely with commissioning colleagues and external fostering agencies to aim to achieve a more consistent service in relation to placement and permanence planning for children regardless of whether they are placed with in-house or external foster carers.
- Recruiting to the vacant family finding post and redefining a clear process to identify permanent families for children in our care. This will link to the work of the Placements Team.
- Reviewing the support offered to foster carers including the Foster Carer's Progression Scheme and the fees and allowances paid to carers. The aim of this will be to streamline, simplify, clarify and achieve improved equity for all foster carers, recognising the complex needs of some of the children they

care for, whilst also delivering an attractive package which supports recruitment and retention.

- Exploring the option of a more specialist assessment and support service to family and friends foster carers (connected persons).
- Understanding and embedding changes relevant to the Fostering Service in respect of the Children and Social Work Act 2017 when this comes into effect.

2. Service Overview

- 2.1. This report provides information about the Fostering Service and outcomes for children looked after by Somerset County Council from the period April 2016 – March 2017 inclusive. 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.
- 2.2. The County Plan 2016 - 2020 and the Children and Young People's Plan (CYPP) 2016 - 2019 outline the organisational values that reflect the Council's vision and purpose, providing a set of consistent, simple values that will 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.
- 2.3. 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 and 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 wider 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).
- 2.4. 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'. 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

- 2.5. The 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 services ranging from short breaks and respite for children and their birth parents and carers, preparing a child for permanence through adoption, return home or placement with family members, or providing permanence through a longer term placement which 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 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.
- 2.6. Connected persons carers are 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. Successful kinship placements offer children permanency, often within their own communities and extended families.
- 2.7. The Fostering Service is regulated by The Fostering Service Regulations and Standards 2011. Local Authority Fostering Services are subject to inspection under the Single Inspection Framework. Fostering has become an increasingly complex service in relation to children and young people who need to be looked after by the Local Authority. It requires a range of foster carers who are skilled and resourceful.
- 2.8. Somerset's Fostering Service is responsible for:
- The recruitment and assessment of foster carers;
 - 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.

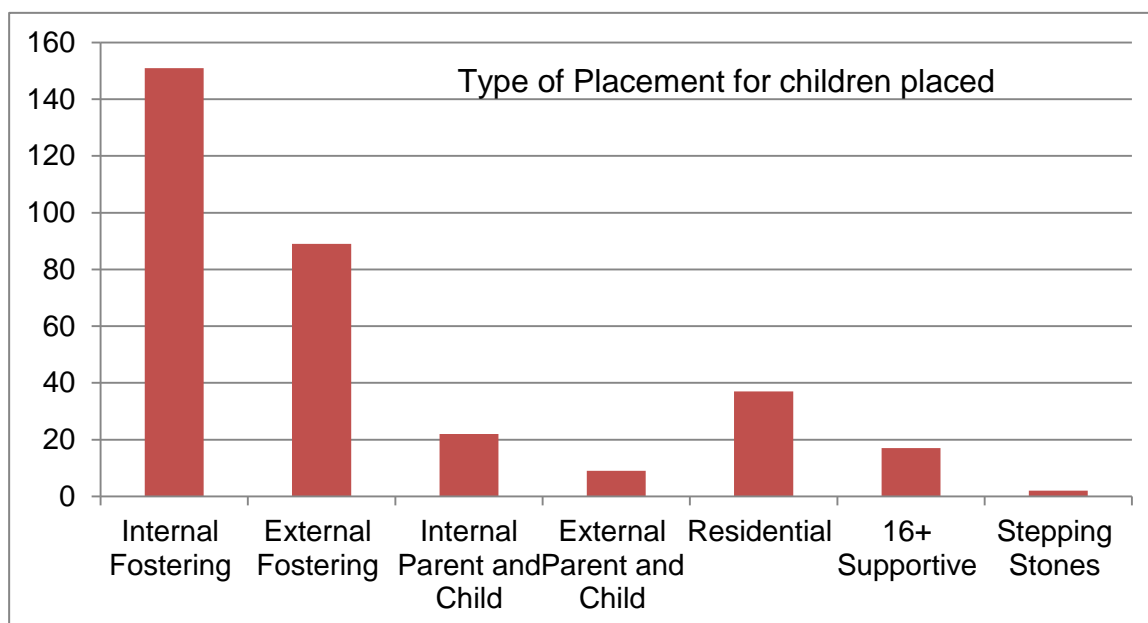
2.9. Our overall priorities within the Fostering Service are to ensure that:

- 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.

Children Looked After

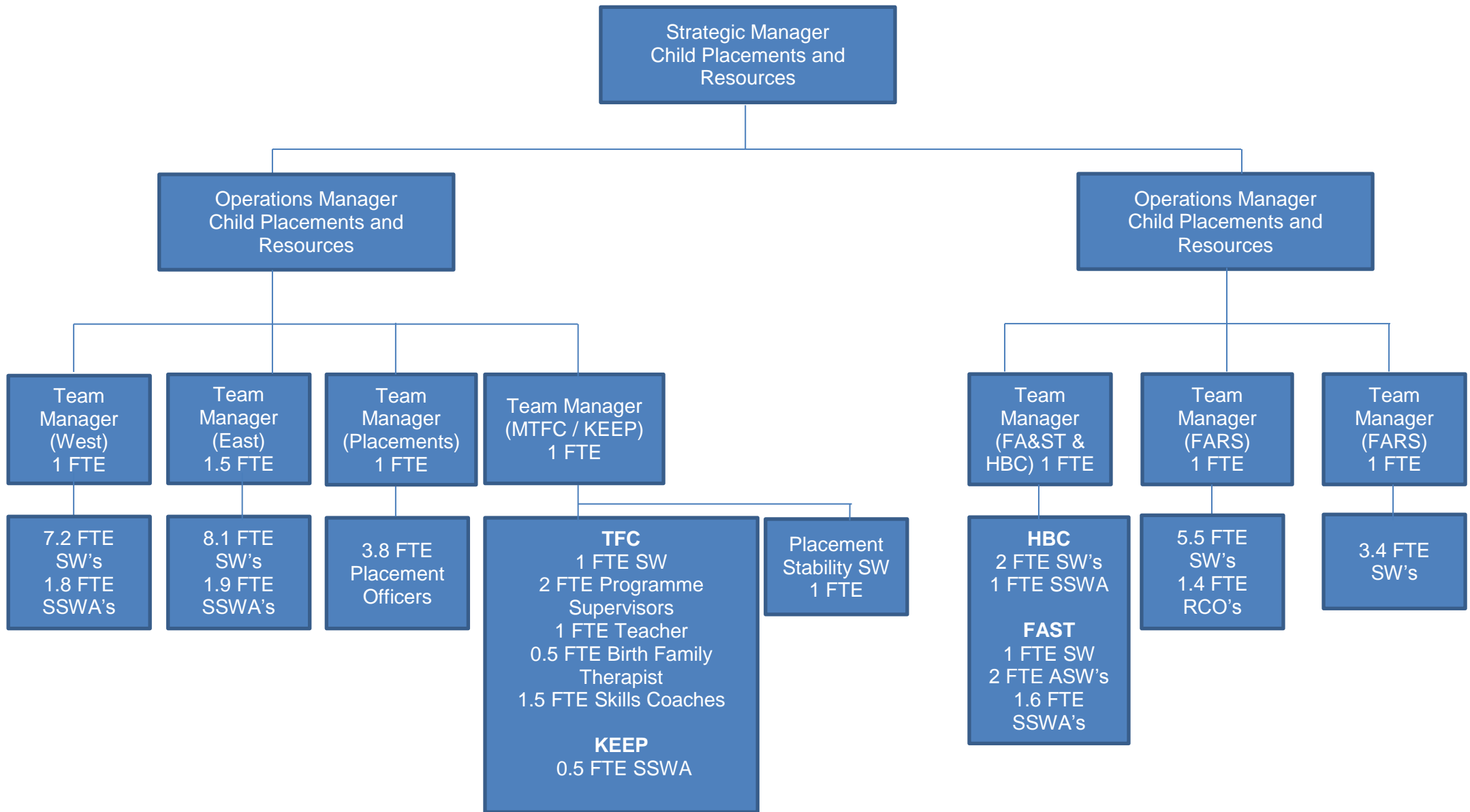
- 2.10. The number of children looked after at the end of March 2017 was 476. This figure had fallen during the last four months of the year, and was a decrease from the end of March 2016 when the figure was 501. The number peaked at 518 in August 2016.
- 2.11. The fostering teams have continued to work hard to develop a collaborative working relationship with the Children Looked After (CLA) Teams to support the progression of permanence plans for children in our care. The majority of children looked after in Somerset are placed with in-house foster carers (refer to Table 1 below) however, Somerset still has a high use of agency foster placements and a higher than average use of residential care.

Children Looked After at 31st March 2017



Service Structure

- 2.12. Somerset's Fostering Service delivery is managed under the strategic manager for Child Placements and Resources. There are two operational managers with responsibility for the service (see service structure below).



- 2.13. The majority of carers are mainstream carers and are supervised and supported through two fostering teams on the east and the west of the county. Our SBC Service is managed by specialist fostering social workers within the East Fostering Team.
- 2.14. Somerset has developed specialist schemes to offer more intense support to particular placements. We have a specialist service for parent and child placements, the FA&ST, who offer assessment placements for parents and their children. This service includes independent assessing social workers and also offers a service for families with babies or young children being assessed in the community.
- 2.15. Somerset has a long-standing specialist scheme, the Home Based Care Team (HBC), to enable highly vulnerable adolescents in our care to experience family based care. This scheme is for children aged 10 and over whose behaviours may be very complex and challenging, they are likely to have emotional and mental health difficulties, have problematic use of drugs or alcohol, they may be at risk of Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) and due to these issues their education may be affected through poor attendance or exclusion.
- 2.16. Our TFCO Programme is 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. The scheme was set up with the help of Department for Education (DfE) grant funding. The aim of the programme is to enable these children aged 7–12 to be cared for permanently in a family setting, through return to family, adoption or permanent fostering. In 2015–16 this scheme was extended to include a programme for younger children aged 3–6. Each child has a specific treatment programme set by a clinical psychologist and delivered through a multi-disciplinary team. These schemes are currently subject to review, considering whether they can be delivered more efficiently and effectively, reaching more children.

3. Ofsted Inspection and Improvement Journey

- 3.1. Somerset was inspected by Ofsted under the Single Inspection Framework in January 2015. CSC was rated Inadequate at this inspection, however the report highlighted positive messages about the Fostering Service:
- 3.2. “The Fostering Service is strong with skilled, committed carers”. Every foster carer spoken to said that they would recommend fostering for Somerset. They value both the training they receive. One carer told inspectors that they have ‘every opportunity to do any amount of training’. Another said ‘I’ve been praised and I’ve been questioned. I found this useful. It helps me reflect and become better’. Foster carer assessments and annual reviews are generally of a good quality. A range of specialised fostering schemes are able to demonstrate positive outcomes, including placing children with attachment difficulties. The local authority has demonstrated strong performance in foster to adopt work, resulting in some very young babies being placed quickly in placements that could become their long-term adoptive homes, minimising placement moves for these children.”
- 3.3. Whilst celebrating this feedback the service is not complacent and recognises its role in the need to continue to develop and support the whole service to achieve improved planning, placement choice leading to improved placement stability and ultimately permanence for all of our children looked after.
- 3.4. As already stated, Somerset’s Improvement Programme is embedded within the CYPP 2016-19. The key principles are:
- Supporting children and families to become more resilient
 - Promoting healthy outcomes and giving children the best start in life
 - Improving emotional health and wellbeing
 - Building skills for life
 - Providing help early and effectively
 - Achieving effective multi-agency support for more vulnerable children and young people and develop an excellent children’s social work service.

- Embedding a Think Family approach across the workforce.
- 3.5. The Fostering Service has a role in supporting the achievement of all the aims above. Most significantly this includes enabling children to be placed with their permanent family as quickly as possible and providing local care placements so that children in our care have access to local support, their own communities, families, friendship and social groups and can benefit from uninterrupted education enabling their potential to be met.
- 3.6. The key challenges the Fostering Service faces in relation to permanency for children are:
- Placement stability (refer to Placement Stability Analysis Report March 2017);
 - Placement Sufficiency. Ensuring there are enough foster carers to care for children within their communities in Somerset remains a challenge.

4. Service Performance 2016/17

Permanence

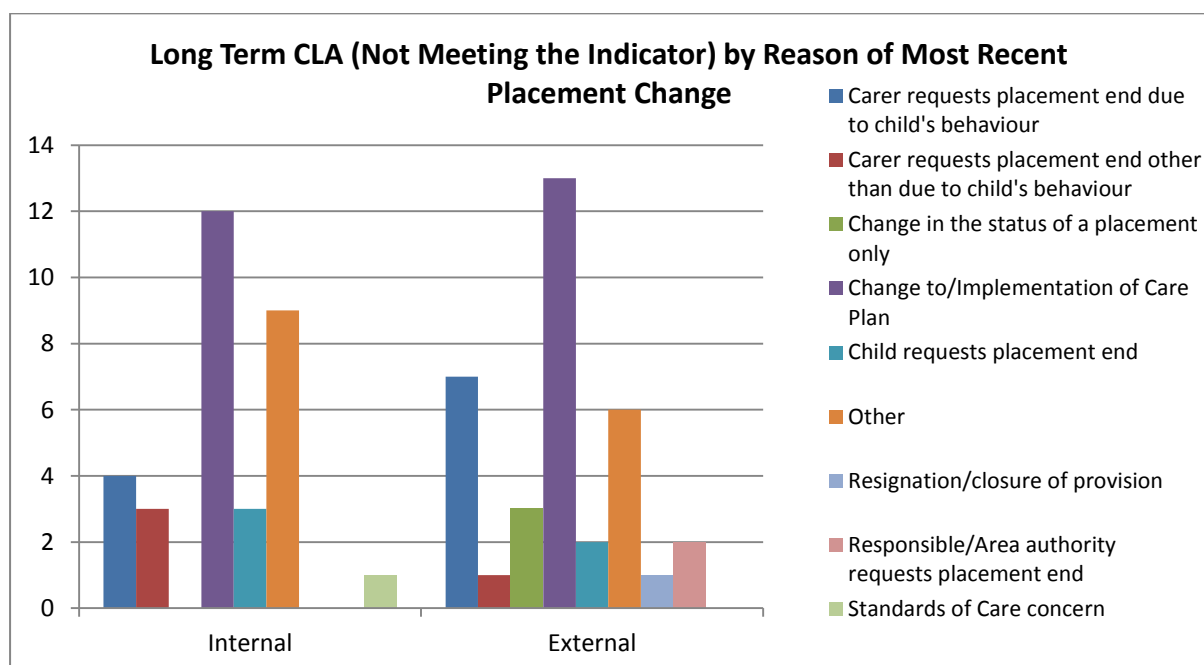
- 4.1. Somerset developed a Permanence Statement and Pathway which was launched in early 2016. This work emphasises the need to consider permanence at the very beginning of a child's involvement with CSC and sets out clear expectations, guidance and processes for social workers. 2016/17 has been a year of working to embed this practice alongside the role of Permanence Panel within CSC to facilitate the necessary and significant cultural shift.
- 4.2. Permanence Panel was set up in February 2015 to track and support the permanence planning for children. Since this time panel has received 64 requests for permanent matches and 55 of these requests have been approved by the panel. Of the 9 requests not approved 3 did then go on to be permanently matched after further work and this included a sibling group of 3.

- 4.3. From 01.04.16 – 31.03.17 29 permanent matches (49 children) were presented to Permanence Panel. Of the 49 children, 20 were in the following sibling groups:
- 2 x sibling groups of 2
 - 3 x sibling groups of 3
 - 1 x sibling group of 4
 - 1 x sibling group of 6
- 4.4. Of all of the permanently matched placements, 6 have since ended. 2 of these placements ended due to the foster carers either separating or starting a new relationship. One of these scenarios was predicted as a likely vulnerability at the point of matching. The other 4 were due to increasingly difficult behaviours presented by the child in placement which included physical and verbal aggression and emotional and mental health issues. Refer to Placement Stability Analysis Report March 2017 for more detailed information.

Placement Stability

- 4.5. Placement stability continues to be a critical factor in offering an effective Fostering Service and is crucial to ensuring that we deliver good outcomes for every child in our care. Placement stability is measured by 2 national indicators, Placement 1 (previously called NI62) relating to children who experience 3 placement moves within a 12 month period and Placement 2 (previously called NI63) which relates to children looked after for 2.5 years who have been in the same placement for 2 years.
- 4.6. In 2014/15 12.6% of children experienced three or more placements, compared with 11% nationally and the end of year figure for 2015/16 was 13.3% (67 children out of a total of 501 children in care). In 2016/17 Somerset met its target of 11% with 10.5% of children experiencing 3 placements or more. This decrease is an improvement on the previous 2 years and is against a reduced total number of children care.

- 4.7. Our performance in relation to placement stability for children who have been in our care longer term (Placement 2) had deteriorated over the last 4 years. In 2014/15 62.6% 'passed' this indicator compared to 67% nationally and at the end of 2015/16 it was 57.9% (88 children). At the end of 2016/17 this figure had improved to 60.8%.
- 4.8. The actual number of children who 'pass' this indicator has remained fairly static overall in the last 12 months. Of the children who qualify for this indicator, in March 2016 it was 87 children out of 148 and in March 2017 it was 86 out of 152.
- 4.9. Analysis of long term placement stability undertaken in March 2017 showed that there is little difference between in house foster carers and agency carers in their ability to provide long term stability.
- 4.10. Analysis was undertaken to understand reasons for placement breakdown for children who have been looked after by Somerset long term (2.5 years +) by looking at the reasons recorded for placement change (see below).



- 4.11. There is a note of caution to be applied as the categorisation of placement end reason in the table is open to individual interpretation.

4.12. 20% (7/35) of external placements ended due to the 'carer requests placement end due to child's behaviour' compared to 12% (4/32) of internal placements.

4.13. Further analysis of the reasons has informed us that:

- In the 'change to care plan' category where children did not meet the indicator, 2 were placed in fostering for adoption placements and are now adopted. Of the other children in this category, 9 moved to placements which can offer permanence and in one case this was a child joining 2 full siblings, 3 returned home, 2 were foster placement breakdowns, 6 children moved to residential placements due to their complex needs and following a number of foster placement breakdowns and 1 moved to live with family.
- The 'other' category includes 2 children who returned to family, 2 who were moved due to concerns about the foster carers, 2 who moved to permanent foster placements, 2 who returned to care following unsuccessful placement with family and 3 who had to move from their foster placements due to a combination of complex behaviours and impact on the family and other siblings.
- In the 'carer requests placement ends due to child's behaviour' the main issues were physical and verbal aggression, loss of carer empathy, sexualised behaviour, risk taking behaviours including CSE, impact of behaviour on other children in the household,
- 5 out of the 67 children did not meet the indicator due to being placed back with their parents.
- 3 children (1 sibling group) fail this indicator due to a 'change in the status of a placement only'. Further investigation showed that in this case the carer had a change of status from agency carer to Somerset County Council following transfer.

4.14. An improved understanding of placement endings reasons will be used to help us improve our practice in relation to robust assessment and supervision of foster carers, identification of future vulnerabilities, and pro-active, pre-emptive support for children and their foster carers in the future.

- 4.15. The Fostering Service has worked jointly with other professionals and carers to support placements and to progress children and young people's care plans. Placement stability remains a key priority going forwards into 2017/18.
- 4.16. When vulnerabilities are identified a Placement Support Meeting is now arranged to explore and identify worries and to agree a suitable plan of action. Where necessary staff escalate concerns and will continue to do this to improve outcomes for children.
- 4.17. Placement Support meetings have been found to be successful in 75% of cases in terms of preventing immediate placement breakdown and either supporting the placement to continue on an ongoing basis or supporting the placement until a suitable alternative can be identified and a planned move facilitated.
- 4.18. Fostering social workers have co-ordinated Placement Planning Meetings when children are matched, with the majority being held within five days of the placement commencing. Fostering social workers continue to link with children's allocated social workers to obtain delegated authority for foster carers to ensure children have a positive family experience and arrangements are understood by all at the start of the placement. 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.
- 4.19. The placement planning form has been updated to include an agreement about how any risks of CSE will be managed including use of the internet and social media.
- 4.20. The Fostering Service has also created a placement stability post to offer intensive support to foster placements which are vulnerable. Recruitment to this post has been successful this year. The placement stability social worker has co-ordinated Placement Support Meetings and undertaken direct work with foster carers to enable them to use additional strategies and support carer

resilience. Additionally the social worker has delivered training to foster carers and social workers. This service has received very positive feedback. In 2017/18 we have plans to further expand this service alongside the Emotional Health and Wellbeing Team.

- 4.21. A foster carer's support line was set up and went live in July 2016. This has been well received and utilised. Refer to Section 11 for details.
- 4.22. To improve placement stability through increasing carer resilience and reducing carer stress, the service offers KEEP training to our foster carers which 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 of these courses is uniformly positive and the staff who facilitate them have achieved accreditation from the National Team.

Children Missing Episodes

- 4.23. 24 children were recorded as Missing during the year, on a total of 49 occasions. 28 had return interviews recorded. The following table shows the total amount of time those 24 children were missing during the year (cumulatively).

Code	Duration (total of all episodes per child)	Number of CLA
MT1	Less than 24 hours	0
MT2	Between 1 and 6 days	19
MT3	Between 1 week and 28 days	4
MT4	More than 28 days	1

- 4.24. The vast majority of these children were missing from placement in order to see family and friends as can be seen in the reason missing table below.

Code	Reason	Number of CLA
MR1	Bullying	0
MR2	Involvement in offending behaviour	0

MR3	Substance Misuse	0
MR4	Contact with family and friends	20
MR5	Alleged abuse within foster home	0
MR6	Asylum seeker, including those refused leave to remain	1
MR7	Suspected to be at risk of CSE	1
MR8	Any other know reason	1
MR9	Reason unknown	1

Risk of Child Sexual Exploitation

- 4.25. Children who are Looked After are more vulnerable to abuse from others and exploitation by others. All of the staff and Foster Carers within fostering are expected to complete Child Sexual Exploitation training and address this issue in supervision and placement planning where relevant. During this year 9 children identified “At Risk of CSE” were placed with Somerset CC Foster Carers. Of these 2 children were considered as being “Subject to CSE”.

5. Recruitment and Assessment

Numbers of Foster carers

- 5.1. Within the service is the Fostering and Adoption Recruitment Service (FARS) whose role is to recruit fostering and adoption households and assess appropriate fostering households. The team works closely with the Communications Team and together they develop an annual Recruitment Strategy.
- 5.2. Fostering recruitment activity in 2016-17 was targeted at:
- The recruitment of foster carers who can provide placements for older children (over the age of 10) and teenagers in Somerset. This included the Single Placement Scheme for challenging young people with complex needs who may be on the edge of a residential placement.
 - Short Break Carers for disabled children;
 - Foster carers for sibling groups;

- Fostering for Adoption.

5.3. Due to low recruitment numbers a review of the recruitment strategy took place in November 2016 and identified a number of reasons why expressions of interest and recruitment figures may be low compared to previous years:

- **Targeting** – this may mean some people rule themselves out before making an enquiry.
- **Regional reduction** – contact with neighbouring authorities confirmed that this was a regional issue which also extended nationally.
- **Website** – Somerset's website contains a vast amount of good information and has everything people need to make a decision about whether they want to foster or adopt without making an enquiry by phone.
- **Changing economic climate and culture** – economic necessity may mean all adults in a family need to work; adult children remain at home longer; families may have less physical space and these, and other issues, together with the change in fostering regulations specifying that every child should have their own bedroom, all have an impact on the capacity of families to foster.

5.4. The review also identified a reduction in the number of targeted carers coming through for approval; an increasing shortage of foster carers for all age groups and the need to ensure we have sufficient placements for Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children who were being dispersed across the country. In view of this a revised recruitment campaign was been developed.

5.5. Immediate plans were put in place to refresh recruitment and advertising activity and move to a wider marketing message for the next 6 months. The aim of this being to prevent prospective foster carers from ruling themselves out before making an enquiry to ensure that a full exploration of any potential can take place. The message focussed on the qualities people need to be a foster carers rather than the needs of the children whilst maintaining clarity about our priority areas. Refer to Fostering Recruitment Report to Scrutiny December 2016.

- 5.6. Throughout the year we have sought to raise awareness specifically in Somerset's LGBT community and generally promote the benefits of fostering for Somerset as a not-for-profit organisation both for prospective applicants and current foster carers wishing to transfer agency. To achieve this we enabled more interactive recruitment through the website and engaging with the foster care community in publicity. Many of our foster carers have promoted Somerset through participating in marketing strategies, appearing in videos for the website and social media and attending recruitment events alongside staff.

Foster Care Fortnight 2016

- 5.7. In May 2016 National Foster Care Fortnight was our vehicle to focus SCC's search for foster carers for older children aged 10 and upwards. To encourage current and prospective carers to consider fostering this age group, we raised awareness of older children in need of a foster family with a 'Dreams and Aspirations' theme.

- 5.8. Activity has included:

- Heart FM 'text-back' radio campaign launched for six weeks on Monday 2 May;
- Three-week 'Dreams and Aspirations' exhibition at The Brewhouse Theatre, then moved to various Somerset Libraries;
- Coverage on BBC Spotlight;
- BBC Somerset interview with three siblings living in foster care;
- Fostering Fridays on social media held during National Foster Care Fortnight;
- Press releases issued on Somerset's Foster Care Fortnight and the FARS team's trek up Snowdon for the Somerset Foster Care Association;
- Articles in Our Somerset;
- Leaflet campaign.

#FosteringFriday and blogs

- 5.9. Work has been undertaken with foster carers to write or film and promote their personal accounts of fostering. These blogs have given a real-world insight into the role of a foster carer, the experience of people fostering and key demographics of children for whom more carers are needed. These accounts were well received in traditional media and on social media – YouTube, Twitter and Facebook. Somerset's Fostering and Adoption website www.fosteradoptsomerset.org.uk has had excellent feedback and includes video clips of our foster carers giving an insight into the experience of fostering.
- 5.10. Once a month, **Fostering Friday** has gone live on Facebook and Twitter. This involves scheduling between 10 and 20 tweets to go out, with the hashtag #FosteringFriday throughout the day. Each of these tweets includes a positive message about Somerset fostering and a call to action to encourage others to come forward. These social media events have helped boost the profile of Somerset fostering and engaged many members of the public and community representatives.

Information events

- 5.11. The recruitment team has held monthly information sessions in different venues across Somerset, with extra events held during prominent campaign periods such as Foster Care Fortnight. We have engaged Costa Coffee in supporting the search for more foster carers by seeking their agreement to host information events in its different branches, offering everyone who attends a free coffee and cake and providing premises and staff free of charge to the service. The feedback from FARS and from prospective carers is that these events are popular due to their informality and have helped attract potential applicants.

Adverts in regional and local print media and on social media

- 5.12. Adverts have been placed regularly in publications such as Somerset County Gazette, Bridgwater Mercury, Mid Somerset and Western Gazette series to promote fostering events/areas of need. A Facebook advert campaign also ran

during June.

PR activity

- 5.13. Several specific awareness raising activities were carried out across the year including a flash mob choir in Taunton Town Centre and a match ball sponsorship at Yeovil Town Football Club, combined with a PA from our fostering mascot 'Sparky' and leafleting. These were well received in print media and on social media.

Recruitment Performance

- 5.14. The number of enquiries received for fostering in 2016/17 was the lowest for 5 years (351). The number of approvals in 2016/17 was also lower than in previous years (24) although this increases to 31 if connected persons are included. In addition to this there have also been 33 temporary approvals. The majority of these arrangements end when Special Guardianship or Child Arrangement Orders are made and 7 were Fostering for Adoption placements.
- 5.15. Performance in relation to conversion rate of enquiries to approvals has declined, at 1 approval for every 15 enquiries (excluding connected persons) and this improves to 1 in 11 if connected persons are included.

Fostering	Enquiries	Approvals	Conversion
2009-10	345	29	1 in 12
2010-11	386	25	1 in 15
2011-12	545	27	1 in 20
2012-13	626	37	1 in 17
2013-14	749	42	1 in 18
2014-15	514	58	1 in 9
2015-16 (1 April 15 to 31 March 2016)	449	40 (excludes Connected Persons)	1 in 8

2016-17	351	24 (excludes Connected Persons)	1 in 15
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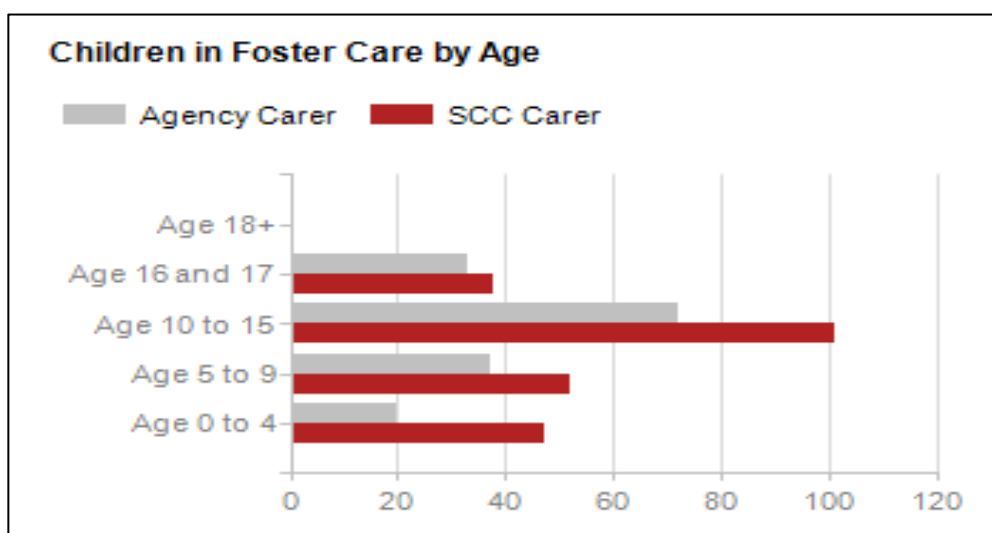
De-registrations

- 5.16. During 2016-17, 83 households including connected persons and FFA ceased fostering. This is compared to 71 in 2015-16. The reasons are given below:

Reason	2015-16	2016-17	+/- change
Change in family circumstances	28	19	-9
Permanence for children in placement	6	3	-3
Connected Persons	11	39	+28
Retired	5	4	-1
Carers no longer considered suitable	9	-	n/a
Safeguarding Concerns	-	1	+1
Not meeting National Minimum Standards	-	1	
Moving out of area	3	-	n/a
Transfer to another Fostering Agency	-	1	
Dissatisfaction with Fostering Agency	3	2	
Dissatisfaction with CSC	6	-	n/a
Foster Carer Resigned	-	4	
FFA placement became Adoptive placement	-	9	

- 5.17. Whilst there have been a greater number of de-registrations in this financial year compared to previous years, 39 of these were temporary connected persons where the majority have de-registered in order to offer permanence through Special Guardianship or a Child Arrangement Order which is a positive outcome. In 2016/17 66 Special Guardianship Orders (SGO) were granted and of these 29 were made to previous foster carers. This is compared to 48 SGOs being granted in 2015/16 and of these 13 were granted to previous foster carers.

- 5.18. The other main reason for de-registration is changes in the foster families circumstances. Only 3 carers highlight dissatisfaction with the Fostering Service as a reason for de-registration (6 with CSC). No carers have left the service to move to another fostering agency.
- 5.19. Despite a net loss of in-house carers in 2016/17 the service has been able to not only maintain but increase the number of in-house placements made since 1st April 2016 and more children from our target group have been placed in-house (see below). On 31st March 2017 the numbers of children placed with agency foster carers was 138 and the number placed with in-house carers was 220. This can be seen in terms of age range and percentage on the graph and table below:



Agency Foster Placements			
Percentage 2014/15	Percentage 2015/16	Percentage 2016/17	Average of CIPFA Authorities
42.42%	40.13%	36.12%	29%
In house foster placements			
Percentage 2014/15	Percentage 2015/16	Percentage 2016/17	Average of CIPFA Authorities
57.58%	59.87%	63.88%	71%

- 5.20. This demonstrates that despite a high number of de-registrations, foster carers with the most to offer have been recruited, supported and retained from our target groups. The service works hard to deliver quality and quantity and maintain a focus on the risks this can present in the face of the sufficiency challenge.

Numbers of foster carers

- 5.21. As at the end of March 2017, Somerset had 249 foster carer approved households (including 5 Fostering for Adoption carers) across the service (see table below). The numerical decline in mainstream foster carers is exaggerated by carers who were previously coded as dual approved, now being coded by the predominant service they offer. This change also positively skews the changes in SBC as that figure now includes some carers who were previously coded as Mainstream. We have had 4 new SBC fostering households transfer from Barnardos when Barnardos dissolved their fostering scheme in Somerset in March 2017.

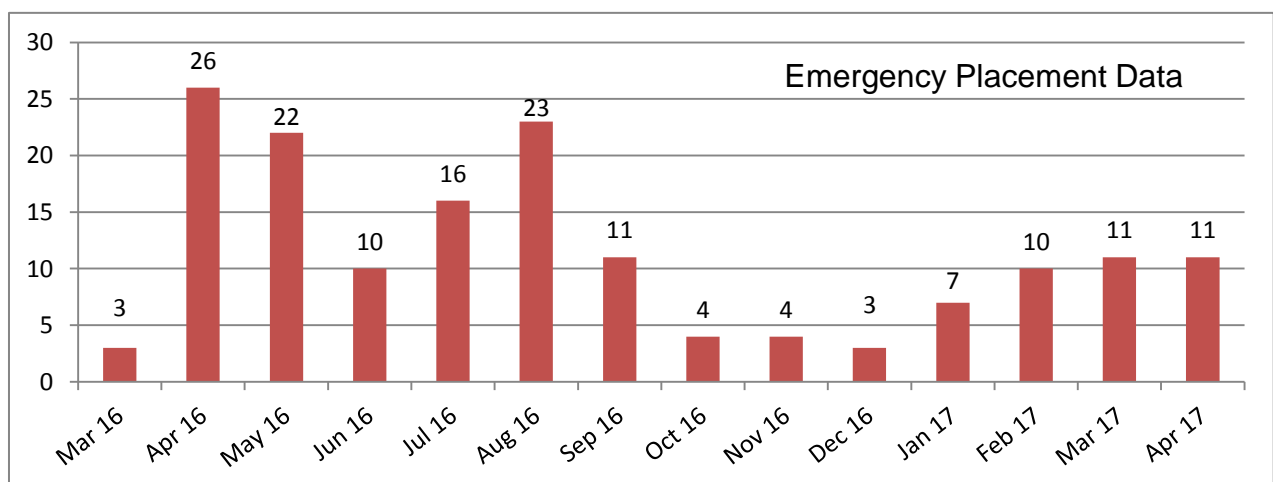
	March 2016	March 2017	Change
Mainstream	181	166	-15
Parent and Child (FA&ST)	7	8	+1
CWD Short Break Carers	6	16	+10
Home Based Care (HBC)	17	16	-1
Treatment Foster Care	10	11	+1
Connected Persons	33	27	-6
Fostering For Adoption (FFA)	-	5	n/a
Remand	0	0	0

- 5.22. Appendices 1 and 2 contain details of where our foster carers are in the county and where children in care are placed. In addition to the information on the map there are 5 foster families in West Sussex, Winchester, Dorset, Warminster and Derbyshire. The foster carer map clearly identifies a gap in provision in the Frome and Shepton Mallet areas and comparison with the map of where

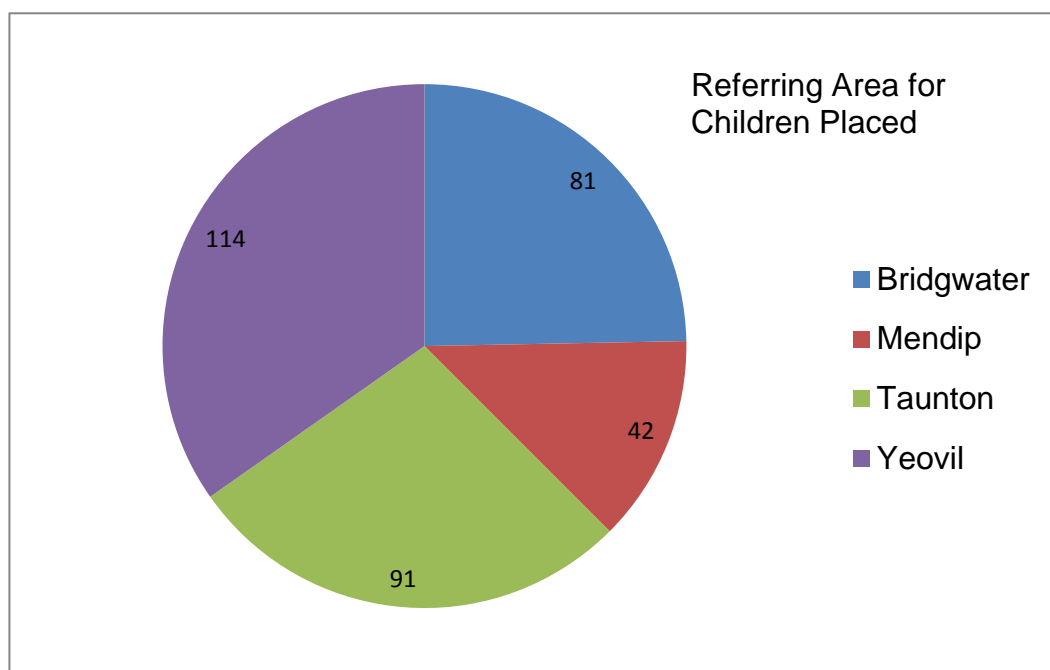
children are placed would identify a need for more placements in all of the towns across the county.

Placement Activity/Placements Team

- 5.23. The Placements Team has worked with fostering and childcare colleagues to maximise the use of our in-house placements this year, in addition to developing improved relationships with independent providers in Somerset.
- 5.24. There has been a whole service approach to the slowing down of placement decisions and actions in order to maximise opportunities for better matching, information sharing, planning and therefore placement stability. This has been achieved through the introduction and embedding of decision making panels and senior management scrutiny of key decisions. Decisions for a child to come into our care are made through At Risk of Care Panel and Legal Gateway Panel. Planning to achieve permanence for children and any decision to change a child's placement is overseen by Permanence Panel. These panels include input from the Virtual School, Placements Team, the Independent Reviewing Service, Legal Team and Team 8 (edge of care/placement stability) as appropriate.
- 5.25. The numbers of emergency referrals are detailed in the chart below and show a wide variation with an overall reduction through 2016, but then a steady rise in 2017. This may be linked to rising caseloads however needs further scrutiny and monitoring.



5.26. The chart below shows the placements made by area referrals and corresponds with the proportion of children looked after from each area.



6. Fostering Support and Supervision

- 6.1. The Fostering Service has continued to make and embed improvements in the quality of report writing, supervision and foster carer reviews to evidence carer's ability and skills to meet children's needs. Foster carers who have not met required standards following support and training have been de-registered.
- 6.2. Improvements in practice introduced last year including Placement Stability meetings and End of Placement Letters (letters/ cards written by foster carers to children when they move on as part of their life story work) are now embedded in the culture of the service and have become "what we do".
- 6.3. Performance data is now reliably available and teams have continued to embed good performance following a noticeable and extremely positive improvement across all teams over the previous year. There is a sustained positive trajectory in improving performance.
- 6.4. 92% of active cases had their annual reviews completed on time, 73% of

fostering households had received an unannounced visit within the year which was an improvement on the previous year but lower at year end than at other points throughout the year. Efforts to sustain improved performance have shown us the need to focus on one performance area per month which is learning we will carry forward.

- 6.5. Our performance for supervision of carers within each month was 63%. We have identified some data and recording issues with this performance indicator which are being dealt with. Auditing cases showed us that carers were generally receiving regular supervision, although some was taking place just outside the timescale by 1 – 2 days, or that fostering social workers had undertaken supervision but had not finished recording it. Holiday periods also always have an impact on this for foster carers.
- 6.6. All of the Fostering Teams have benefitted from a Team Diagnostic in this year, in addition to auditing by managers and experienced social workers. Team managers have used these tools with teams to develop Team Action Plans. Areas of strength included management knowledge of the service and committed, experienced and enthusiastic staff. Recording on files seen was observed to be of good quality with improved records of the child's experience within the family. This was positive as it has been an area of focus for the service.
- 6.7. The teams have worked to continue to improve working relationships with the CLA and CWD Teams.
- 6.8. As previously mentioned the Fostering Service continues to lead on the instigation of placement planning, delegated authority and placement support for children placed with in house carers and the service has worked hard to embed practice improvements and developments of the previous year.
- 6.9. The Fostering Handbook has been re-written and is now available to foster carer's on-line. This has received positive feedback from foster carers.

East and West Fostering Teams

- 6.10. The majority of our foster carers (approximately 200) are supported by the East and West Fostering Teams. This includes foster carers approved as connected persons.
- 6.11. Full time fostering social workers in the East and West Teams currently hold between 14 - 18 active fostering households which compares well nationally. The service benefits from a stable and experienced workforce.
- 6.12. The East Team is split across 2 offices covering a large geographical area; Mendip, South Somerset and the surrounding villages. There are a small number of Somerset foster carers living outside Somerset in Devon, Dorset, Derbyshire and Wiltshire. The team currently supervise and support 110 fostering households, of which 16 are SBC.
- 6.13. The East Fostering Team has benefited from additional management capacity in the latter part of this year, to increase capacity within the wider team and to enable the SBC service to be developed.
- 6.14. The West Fostering Team has, in the main, experienced a settled year in relation to social work staff. The team currently has a temporary team manager due to maternity leave.
- 6.15. The West Team are all based together and also cover a large geographical area including the towns of Bridgwater, Minehead and Taunton. The team supervise and support 87 fostering households.
- 6.16. The East and West Teams have responded to the increase in the numbers of carers temporarily approved as connected persons. We have ensured each carer who is temporarily approved has an allocated fostering social worker in addition to the assessing social worker, with a tailored support package which meets the temporary carer's specific needs.

- 6.17. Auditing has identified a need to improve the completion of foster carer case summaries, profiles and chronologies. These areas all form part of the team action plans.
- 6.18. Whilst we have experienced a net loss of carers within the East and West teams, we have increased the numbers of placements within these groups of carers, often with increasing complexity of need. These factors increase the pressures on carers and therefore they require more intensive support from the staff supporting them. Increasing the use of available capacity within the service is positive because we can provide a better joined up service with colleagues in childcare teams. It also reduces Somerset's reliance upon often more expensive external providers. However, there is a fine balance to be maintained and there is the potential that carers become overloaded if we expect them to care for children who they do not have the skills to care for, or if we have children placed together who are not well matched with each other. The risk is increased carer stress, placement breakdown and potentially carers leaving the service.
- 6.19. This year both the East and West fostering teams embraced the opportunity to partake in a Team Diagnostic to further improve their development and practice. Overall both teams were judged 'good'.
- 6.20. The East team's diagnostic identified that the managers knew the service well and the team manager had a very good grasp of issues. It also identified that the team were skilled and experienced and the senior social work assistants were used positively to improve the experiences of children in care and children of families who foster.
- 6.21. The diagnostic found good evidence that social workers had a very good understanding of the children who were cared for by their foster carers and found evidence of challenge by fostering social workers to help carers prioritise the needs of children in care. The team were observed to be outward-looking in relation to partnership working and solution focussed.

- 6.22. In relation to development, the team's performance at that time was impacted by the difficulties already noted in relation to the SBC Service.
- 6.23. Developmentally the team learned that supervision and management oversight could be further improved through improved compliance with timescales and evidence of reflection.
- 6.24. The West team's diagnostic identified that workloads were manageable, records showed good evidence of how carers were supported and risks managed and there was good evidence of an understanding of the child's experience with a child centred approach. The diagnostic noted managers knew the team well, and the team manager was highly regarded and respected by the team. The team were positive about placement support meetings and the Foster Carer Support Line in relation to supporting placement stability.
- 6.25. The diagnostic highlighted that placement support should be progressed to be implemented pro-actively to support placements through specific transitions, for example, planning support for transition to senior school. It also recommended that the team find a mechanism to capture and learn from themes about what is working well and what is not working well in Placement Support Meetings. The team needed to improve on the consistency of disruption meetings, which is a whole service need. Additionally consistency in the prompt recording and sharing of carer's supervision notes required improvement.
- 6.26. As identified in audits, a common area for development across both teams and across the service is the need to improve the consistent quality of case summaries.
- 6.27. Further improvements identified within the service looking forward include:
- Ensuring all carers have a Personal Development Plan;
 - Improved regular recording by foster carers;
 - Further improving our ability to understand the child's experience and the carer's skills through the completion of feedback forms.

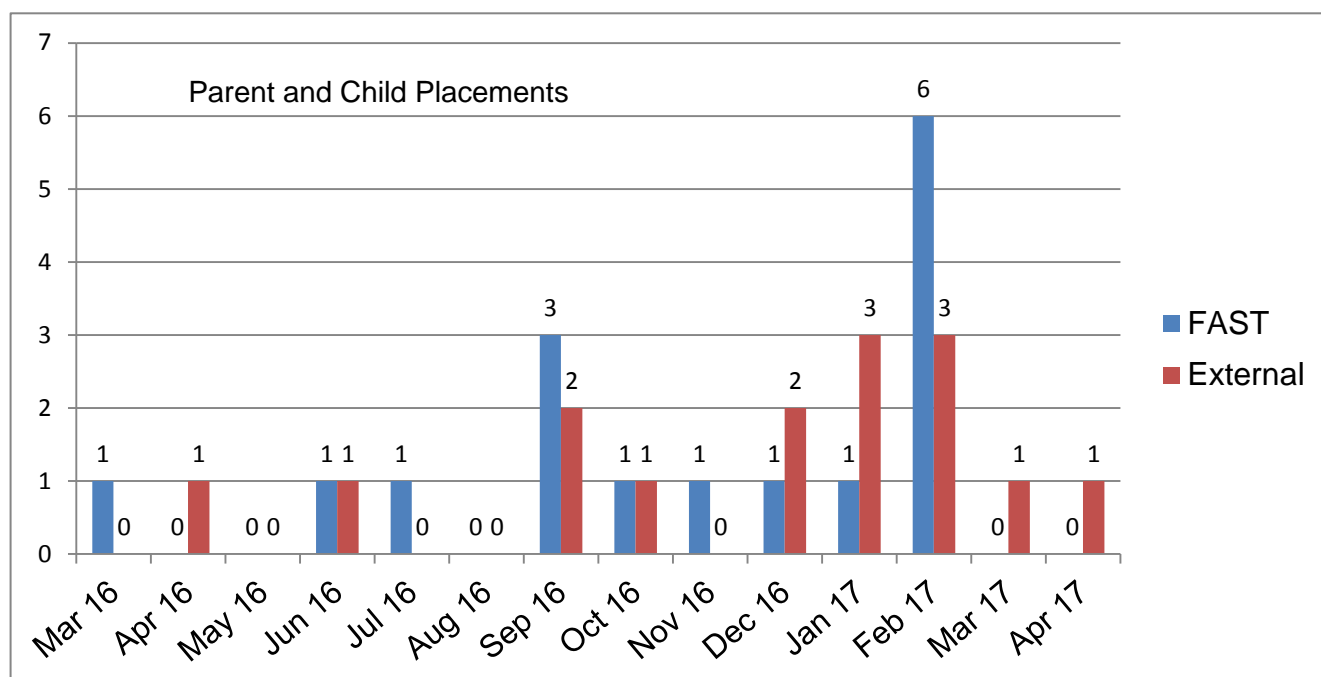
- Further improve carers understanding of CSE.

Family Finding

- 6.28. We have a full time post in the Fostering Service to seek permanent families for children in our care. During this year the post became vacant and we have been unable to recruit. There are a number of children awaiting permanent foster homes and recruitment to this post and the development of it is a priority for the service.

FA&ST

- 6.29. 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 one of FA&ST's foster placements for the purpose of assessment, although where possible FA&ST will undertake community parenting assessments in a family's own home. The FA&ST consists of 1 full time team manager (covering 2 teams), 1 full time supervising social worker, 2 senior social work assistants (1 full time, 1 part time) and 2 full time senior assessing social workers (1 post currently vacant).
- 6.30. FA&ST currently have 9 fostering households following 3 new approvals for the scheme this year.
- 6.31. The following graph shows the numbers of new parent and child placements made this year, comparing our in house placements to external placements.



6.32. Whilst the full time assessing social worker post was appointed to this year, FA&ST's assessment capacity has been significantly impacted by the resignation of the 2 part time assessing social workers in November 2016. This, alongside an unsuccessful recruitment drive to the post, has resulted in limited capacity to undertake community assessments and left a gap in capacity to undertake placement assessments. Despite this, court deadlines have continued to be adhered to, commissioning an independent social worker where required.

6.33. Performance is monitored through supervision and by using the performance reports. All chronologies, reviews and unannounced visits have been kept up-to-date and statutory visits are completed in timescales.

6.34. A team diagnostic was undertaken in January 2017 which gave an overall 'good' for FA&ST. The diagnostic reported a 'good team morale' and case notes that were scrutinised were 'good' with 'detailed supervision visit forms' and 'good management oversight'.

6.35. The team have completed presentations about FA&ST around the County to increase childcare social workers and team manager's knowledge of FA&ST. The aim has been to support social workers planning for children to prevent

unnecessary referrals being made and for those parents entering a placement being better prepared by the social worker about the expectations of them. The team have also made links with Cafcass.

- 6.36. Carers have been 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 carers have been flexible in their approach, understanding the changing needs and demands of the service. FA&ST have also supported children to remain in placement following separation/parents leaving placement to reduce the placement moves for those children so that they can move straight to either foster to adopt placements (3 this year) or alternative family members (2 this year).
- 6.37. FA&ST have made 22 parent and child placements and have provided 1 short term non-parent and child placement this year. 2 placements were “holding” placements where separation was not agreed as per the plan once the baby was born, 1 moved to a residential placement for assessment and 1 remains in placement pending the final hearing following an assessment being carried out independently from FA&ST. 1 assessment placement broke down due to the parents behaviour in placement, this parent subsequently was placed with another FA&ST carer where an assessment was completed. 5 assessments are ongoing.
- 6.38. From the 14 completed assessments 6 parents have returned to the community with their child. 2 parents were separated from their child and those children moved onto a fostering for adoption placement from FA&ST. 4 assessments ended early when the parents chose to leave placement, from these, 2 children went to live with grandparents under SGO, 1 moved to a fostering for adoption placement and 1 remains in placement pending the final hearing. 1 family moved to an independent parent and child placement for further assessment and then subsequently moved to the community and 1 moved to an independent placement for a 2 parent placement assessment.
- 6.39. FA&ST have also completed 6 community assessments. In 2 families the

children have remained in their foster placements with alternative permanence plans being made, in 2 families the children were placed with their grandparents under an SGO, 1 child was placed with their father and 1 remains with their family with support from early help services. For each of the 6 families a community assessment prevented the children coming unnecessarily into a placement and provided the children involved with stability whilst an assessment was undertaken reducing moves for those children.

- 6.40. The foster carers capture the child's experience of being in placement or their home by completing detailed factual logs of their observations. 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. FA&ST carers have also started to complete end of placement letters for children; these go on their file and give significant insight from the carer's perspective for that child to have when they are older. This is invaluable for those children who move onto adoptive placements.
- 6.41. FA&ST carers remain committed to attending the specialist support groups and training plan expanding their knowledge on a variety of topics. More established carers on the scheme have supported and offered informal mentoring to the new carers. The carers are supported by other carers, the team and sessional workers to ensure that they spend quality time with their own families when required which is essential for retaining carers. FA&ST has seen a shortening of assessment timescales which has impacted on the carers in terms of how much they feel they can do with the parents in a shorter period of time but they have adapted their approach, being flexible and working with the changes in court timescales. Carer's skills have been expanded this year particularly around working with fathers, 2 carers who previously did not feel able to support fathers, agreed with support to involve them in the assessment process in their home preventing unnecessary moves for the children already placed with them.
- 6.42. For the forthcoming year we plan to develop community assessment work to

prevent unnecessary placements and improve our assessment capacity through recruiting to the ASW position and considering PAM's training for FA&ST workers.

- 6.43. We intend to complete a full service review by July 2017 to inform future work. The team needs to embed further the drive to increase consultation from feedback from parents and childcare social workers, and consistent completion of end of placement letters.

Home Based Care Scheme

- 6.44. HBC is a specialist fostering scheme providing placements for children over 10 years old who have complex needs and require at least 1 carer to be home based. HBC consists of 1 full time team manager (covering 2 teams), 2 full time supervising social workers and 1 full time senior social work assistant.
- 6.45. HBC have 16 fostering households currently approved for 27 placements, however, due to carer's circumstances there is only capacity to provide 19 full time placements. 1 carer has resigned this year where there were concerns about their fostering practice. No carers have been recruited to the singleton placement scheme, however 1 carer is awaiting approval for the scheme in April 2017.
- 6.46. Performance is monitored through supervision and by using the performance information system. This year there has been a significant improvement in compliance in terms of annual reviews, unannounced visit and statutory visits being completed on time. Late annual reviews have occurred but with specific, valid reasons.
- 6.47. Improvements still need to be made in terms of ensuring all young people have child specific safe care policy's at the time of placement and delegated authority, ensure that all foster carers chronologies, case summaries are completed and updated and that carers records reflect the work undertaken.

- 6.48. A team diagnostic was undertaken in January 2017 which gave an overall 'good' for HBC. It highlighted that there needs to be better working relationship between CLA and fostering.
- 6.49. HBC have made 39 placements this year, 18 have been sustained or have come to their agreed ending where the plan has not been for that child to remain with the HBC carer, for example emergency placements or short term placements while permanent plans are made. HBC has experienced 21 unplanned breakdowns. 12 of these young people were in placements where the carers had an approval for 3 young people, highlighting the difficulties for carers to manage the complex and competing needs of 3 young people at the same time. All of these carer's approvals have been subsequently reduced either through their own decision or the recommendation of the service.
- 6.50. 5 young people have remained in HBC placements in a Staying Put arrangement, from these 3 remain in placement and 2 have moved onto independent living.
- 6.51. Placement support meetings have been implemented from July 2016 and placements in need of additional support or that are at risk of breakdown are highlighted at the weekly team meeting and through supervision with carers. Fostering social workers have been proactive in arranging meetings, liaising with the childcare social worker. Since July HBC has held 29 placement support meetings for 13 different young people. For 9 young people placements have been supported and maintained with regular reviews taking place to monitor the situation and ensure that the support is effective. 4 placements have come to a planned ending and 1 placement disrupted.
- 6.52. Since the start of 2017 HBC have evidenced improved placement matching with pre-placement matching meetings taking place. By slowing the matching process down to prevent emergency placements being made it is hoped that young people's needs will be better matched with a carer's skills and ability resulting in stability and improved outcomes for young people.

- 6.53. A standardised respite form is being used to support and improve the care provided to young people going for respite and carers have fed back this has been helpful in terms of meeting their needs.
- 6.54. The foster carers weekly recordings have been further developed this year and all carers are completing this on a weekly basis although the quality varies. There is still a concern that some carers only record negative events rather than capturing the child's full experience of being in placement or that some carers do not report concerns until the placement is in crisis. Fostering social worker's aim to ensure that they see and speak to the children in placement at least every 3 months and support young people to complete consultation forms for foster carer's annual reviews when their own social worker has not been able to.
- 6.55. There have been more placement breakdowns than sustained placements this year and for some young people they have had to move placements at short notice without any planning. Placement moves have a detrimental impact to young people's emotional well-being and sense of belonging. The implementation of the placement support meetings and better matching pre-placement this year will hopefully reduce the number of breakdowns in the future increasing stability and consistency of care for more young people.
- 6.56. A specialist support and training plan has been implemented this year for HBC however some carers have not shown a consistent commitment to attending these. Some carers have also been resistant to completing logs and end of placement letters and this is an area for further development.
- 6.57. Carers have raised a number of complaints about children's social work practice or service procedures and these have been escalated appropriately.
- 6.58. HBC has a number of children at risk of CSE placed with them. This is monitored and discussed in supervision with carers and managed through a robust safe care policy agreed by all involved. All HBC Carers have completed the mandatory CSE training and additional support has been provided where required.

- 6.59. In the forthcoming year we plan review the HBC scheme and finances to provide equity across the fostering teams as well as further embedding practice improvements within the service. We will continue to work with Communications and FARS to recruit skilled carers who are able to look after older children who present with challenging behaviours and vulnerabilities.

Treatment Foster Care Oregon

- 6.60. TFCO (formally known as MTFC) 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.
- 6.61. 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.
- 6.62. 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 TFCO 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.
- 6.63. TFCO, WRAP, KEEP and the Placement Stability Worker are now managed under one umbrella and are being developed to improve placement stability and improve permanence for our children in care. The programme is run in partnership with the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) and

is supported by the National Implementation Team of Evidenced Based Practice and TFCO.

- 6.64. Due to staff sickness and staff and foster carer recruitment issues, Somerset has temporarily amalgamated its two TFCO programmes into one programme; supporting children between the ages of 3-12 years. A review of how the service will be managed in the future is currently taking place.
- 6.65. TFCO currently has 7 foster carer households, and 2 WRAP foster placements. We have recruited 1 new foster carer household and currently have 1 carer undergoing an updated assessment to join the scheme.
- 6.66. TFCO currently has the capacity to support up to 10 fostering households (including 2 respite placements) which could support 8 children.
- 6.67. During the last year the P programme has supported 5 placements within TFCO and a further 2 children in WRAP placements. The C programme has supported 6 placements within TFCO and a further 3 children in WRAP placements.
- 6.68. For children on the P programme, 3 children achieved permanence via long term foster care. For the children on the C programme, 2 achieved permanence. This was through fostering with in house carers.
- 6.69. There is 1 child for whom TFCO provision ended earlier than 12 months due to the foster carer resigning.

Short Break Care

- 6.70. Somerset has 16 short break carers, providing a regular respite service to children with 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. Previously, children requiring short breaks who were eligible

for Continuing Health Care Funding were placed with Barnardos carers, a commissioned provision. Following the local closure of Barnardos fostering provision 4 carers transferred to Somerset.

- 6.71. The East Fostering team diagnostic supported the development of a specific action plan for SBC. As a result there is now a temporary consistent payment structure in place, significantly improved performance within a short space of time, positive feedback from carers and plans to develop a specialist training and support group. We have also begun to identify children who could benefit from family based respite placement rather than provision through residential.
- 6.72. The SBC service will be moving into 2017/18 with improved working relationships with the CWD Teams and active plans to understand unmet need and improve the service for children with disabilities and their families in accordance with this.

Staying Put

- 6.73. 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 independently. 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.
- 6.74. Currently we have 19 young people who have Staying Put arrangements with Somerset foster carers and 26 young people overall in Staying Put arrangements (in-house and agency carers). This is an improvement on previous years (on 31/3/16 there were 17 young people Staying Put).

7. Complaints and Allegations

- 7.1. During the year the Fostering Service has received and responded to 6 complaints. 5 were from carers (1 not upheld) and 1 was from a child (not upheld). Due to the small number of complaints made there are no themes and they are each specific to a particular situation.

Allegations

- 7.2. The total number of allegations made was 8. 4 of these were made by children in foster care and 4 from other sources. The allegations included physical abuse, neglect and emotional abuse. In 5 cases the concerns were resolved and the situation monitored. 3 cases were returned to Fostering Panel for review of approval.
- 7.3. All of the investigations took above 21 working days. Analysis of this found that this is due to a variety of factors:
- Delay in awaiting police decision regarding their involvement or awaiting police investigation to take place.
 - Difficulty in identifying an independent social worker to undertake investigations.
 - Foster carer resistance/ availability.
- 7.4. Being subject to an allegation and subsequent investigation is enormously stressful and distressing for foster carers. For some carers it may threaten or impact upon their family life and career in addition to their role as a foster carer. The fostering social worker supports them through supervision and provides them with information about the progress and process of the investigation. Somerset also provides additional independent support for carers in this position through provision of an independent social worker for them, spot purchased through Foster Talk. Foster carers are also paid 25% of the child's allowance plus their fee if the decision is made to temporarily remove a child whilst the investigation is undertaken.

- 7.5. 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 unavailable. A goal of the service this year is to work with managers and the LADO to work to reduce the elements of delay which is within our control or influence.

8. Independent Review Mechanism

- 8.1. 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 two 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 no cases taken to the Independent Review Mechanism.

9. Fostering Panel

- 9.1. 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.
- 9.2. 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 persons 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;

- 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.

- 9.3. 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).

10. Fostering Panel Chair's Report

Fostering Panel Annual Report: April 2016 – March 2017

- 10.1. Two fostering panels have continued to meet each month over the last year, one in the west and one in the east of the county. Very occasionally there has been the need for an extra panel when the work demands it. This was true, for example, last March when Barnardos stopped offering a fostering service for children with disabilities and some of their carers transferred to SCC. However, the usual agendas of Form F assessments of prospective carers, reviews of existing carers after their first year of fostering or a significant incident, and requests for changes of approval and deregistrations have been covered in the twice monthly meetings.
- 10.2. There have been changes to panel membership in recent months with the retirement or resignation of some very experienced independent members and the appointment of three new people last October. There was a poor response to the advertising for the role, but our new members are of good quality with relevant experience and skills and are working well. However, there are still vacancies and another recruitment exercise is imminent. A Care Leaver is needed for the east panel and a foster carer from another authority for the west. Additionally, there are vacancies for independent members and it is hoped to welcome two county councillors.

- 10.3. In order to further develop and improve the work of the panel in the widest possible sense, annual appraisals of all members took place in December; feedback forms are written by panel for social workers and by social workers for panel; applicants and carers attending panel are encouraged to complete feedback forms about their experience; and the chair and fostering managers meet every three months to discuss issues. The chair is also observing a Bristol panel in September to learn more about how other authorities tackle complex diversity issues.
- 10.4. In addition to this, the annual training day took place in January which directly addressed the training needs identified during appraisal meetings.
- 10.5. The day included a session on acronyms, work on a case study of carers who had been approved but deregistered very quickly and a session looking at the threshold for connected persons approval. When children and young people are being cared for by family members, friends or families known to them, the criteria are slightly different and this can present panel with some difficult decisions.
- 10.6. Information was also given about the new single placement scheme for 10 - 18 year olds which dovetails with the TFCO scheme for 3 - 12 year olds. The provision being made for asylum seeking young people was also explained. Over the year panel has only considered one recommendation for the single placement scheme and none for carers who wish to specifically look after asylum seeking young people. This said, several reviews of existing carers have included the care being given to this group of young people and panel members have learned a huge amount about the particular challenges and needs which they present.
- 10.7. In all these ways panel continues to learn and improve and it is hoped that social workers are able to act on the feedback given so that paperwork provided by them will be of the highest possible quality. Indeed, the last year has not been without its challenges in this regard. The majority of assessments and reviews provided to panel are good but there is still a need for staff to

question more rigorously, evidence assertions fully and explore issues in more detail. It is still the case that panel has to question applicants/carers more closely than should be necessary sometimes because of the quality of the paperwork.

- 10.8. Having said this, panel is aware that questioning needs to be focused, open and relevant and has worked hard this year to refine questioning techniques. It is important that all those attending panel feel that it is a positive experience even when there is a need for a difficult conversation.
- 10.9. In this, panel has been ably supported by the advisors this year. Due to the change of some management roles, the advisor role has been shared among five managers all of whom have been very helpful, supportive, well informed and professional.
- 10.10. One of panel's greatest strengths is its ability to be open and transparent with applicants and carers. There was some initial concern three years ago when they were invited to attend panel with their social workers and all questions were put to them instead of the social worker on her/his own. Even the most sensitive of issues are now put to the applicants/carers and feedback forms indicate that this is viewed positively. On the rare occasions when attendees do not feel that their experience is a positive one, it is usually because an assessment has not provided enough information on which to make a decision and the case is deferred for more work to be done by the social worker. There are also times when carers or applicants do not agree with the panel's recommendation – in the case of a contested deregistration for instance – but even then panel is careful to give clear reasons for its decision.
- 10.11. Foster carers work hard to provide care, compassion, nurture and stability to children and young people who are in the care of the local authority. Panel is ever mindful of the huge responsibility it has to ensure that the children and young people are offered the best possible care by the best possible carers.

Judy Watson, Chair

11. Carer Retention

Additional Supports

- 11.1. 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, the 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, Fish and Chips on the beach day on the west, a Swim and Pizza evening at Street swimming pool on the east and Easter Egg hunt fun days on both sides of the County. These were all well attended and enabled fostering families, their own children and children looked after to get together and have fun.
- 11.2. 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.
- 11.3. Led by a senior social work assistant, a newsletter goes to carers each quarter which informs them of events, some tips and advice, information from the Fostering Service and training information.

We Care 2

- 11.4. We Care 2 is a group for children in families that foster. We recognise 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. The group is organised by our team of senior social work assistants. During this year the following activities have been arranged for children.
- @Bristol on the 6th of April 2016
 - Canoeing at Blackrock outdoor pursuits on 22nd August 2016
 - Fun day on 25th October 2016

- Cinema to see Sing on 15th Feb 2017

Out of Hours Support Line

- 11.5. The Foster Care Support Line went live across the County to all in-house foster carers in July 2016, following a successful pilot in West Fostering. This service has been increasingly used by carers to gain support out of hours from a fostering social worker. Since July 2016 47 calls have been made to the out of hours support line.
- 11.6. 50% of calls were general queries or for advice, 25% were concerns about the welfare of a child, 25% were foster carers in need of emotional support relating to the care of the child. The outcomes from the intervention were that in 90% of the cases reassurance and guidance was provided and 5% of the cases were escalated to the Emergency Duty Team, police and/or senior management. West foster carers have used the service most, potentially due to increased awareness and reassurance during the pilot period.
- 11.7. The majority of calls (95%) are successful in reducing anxiety and instability within placements.

Foster Talk

- 11.8. 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.
- 11.9. The service regularly receives positive feedback from foster carers about this service.

12. Foster Carer Participation

- 12.1. Somerset Foster Care Association (SFCA) 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 is not yet fully established and there have been difficulties in establishing consistent committee members and a Chair. This year the association has re-written its constitution and has continued to hold regular meetings and support groups. Fostering social workers continue to offer the association support and are working with SFCA towards greater strength and independence of the association.
- 12.2. The Foster Carer's 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 2016/17 and have altered as a group our terms of reference to reflect the focus and purpose of the group. The minutes from these meetings are circulated to all foster carers and senior managers. The consultative group members have been consulted on issues such as the Foster Carer's Handbook, clothing, transport and changes to PEP arrangements in Somerset.
- 12.3. Additionally foster carers have been involved in Task and Finish groups on our improvement journey, 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.

13. Child's Voice

- 13.1. 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 has been poor and whilst any individual issues raised are pursued, there is no statistical data produced from these documents. We are currently exploring how we can use this valuable information better in relation to return rates and how the information is collated, to improve service delivery and hope to use MOMO to improve our understanding of a child's experience. Fostering social workers are now 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.

- 13.2. The experience of care leavers and children in our care is valuable in developing services and we very much value young people who have been in our care's ongoing contribution to Fostering Panel as members.

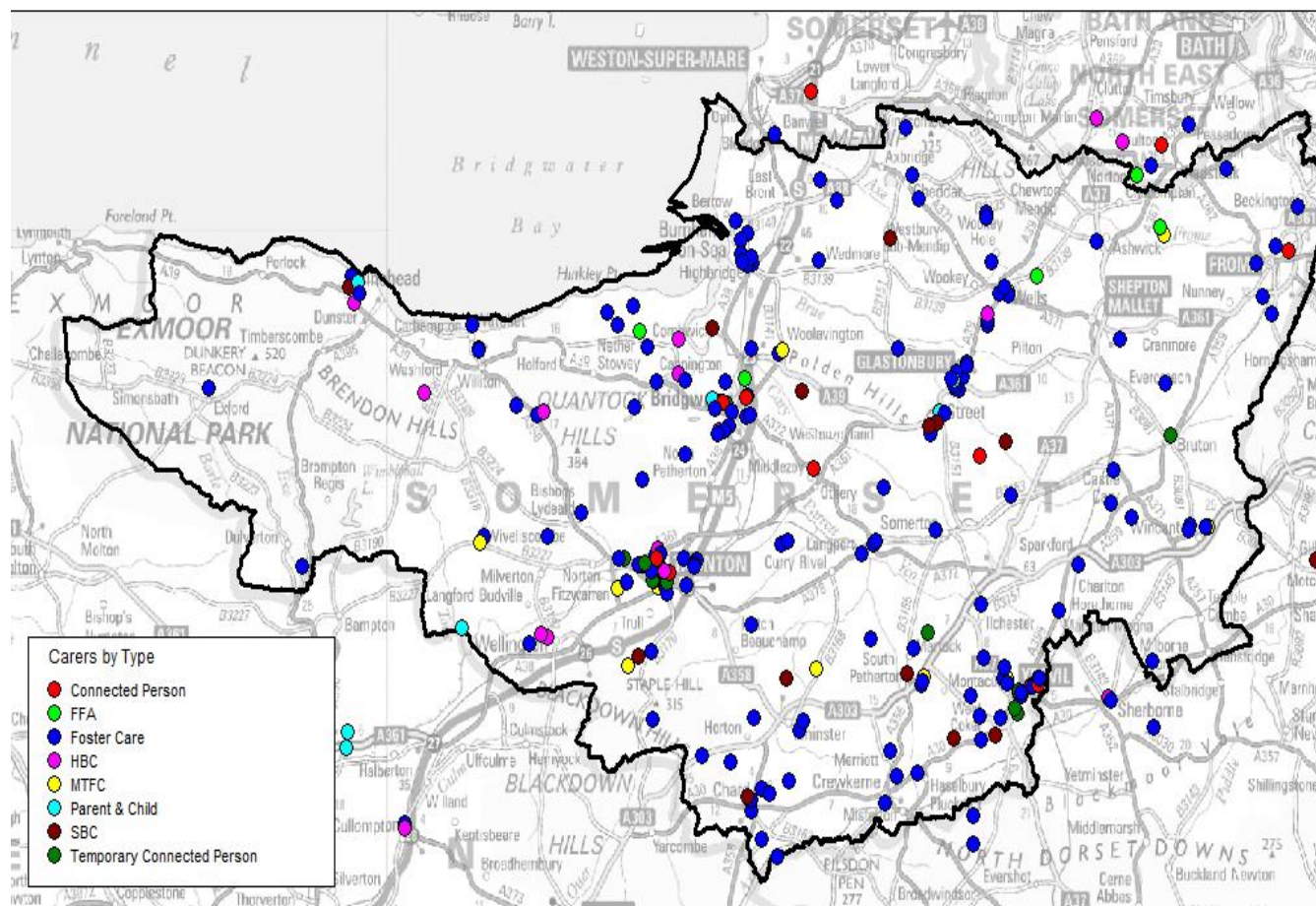
14. Supplementary Reports

- 14.1. Placement Stability Analysis Report March 2017
14.2. Fostering Recruitment Report to Scrutiny December 2016

15. Appendices

Appendix 1

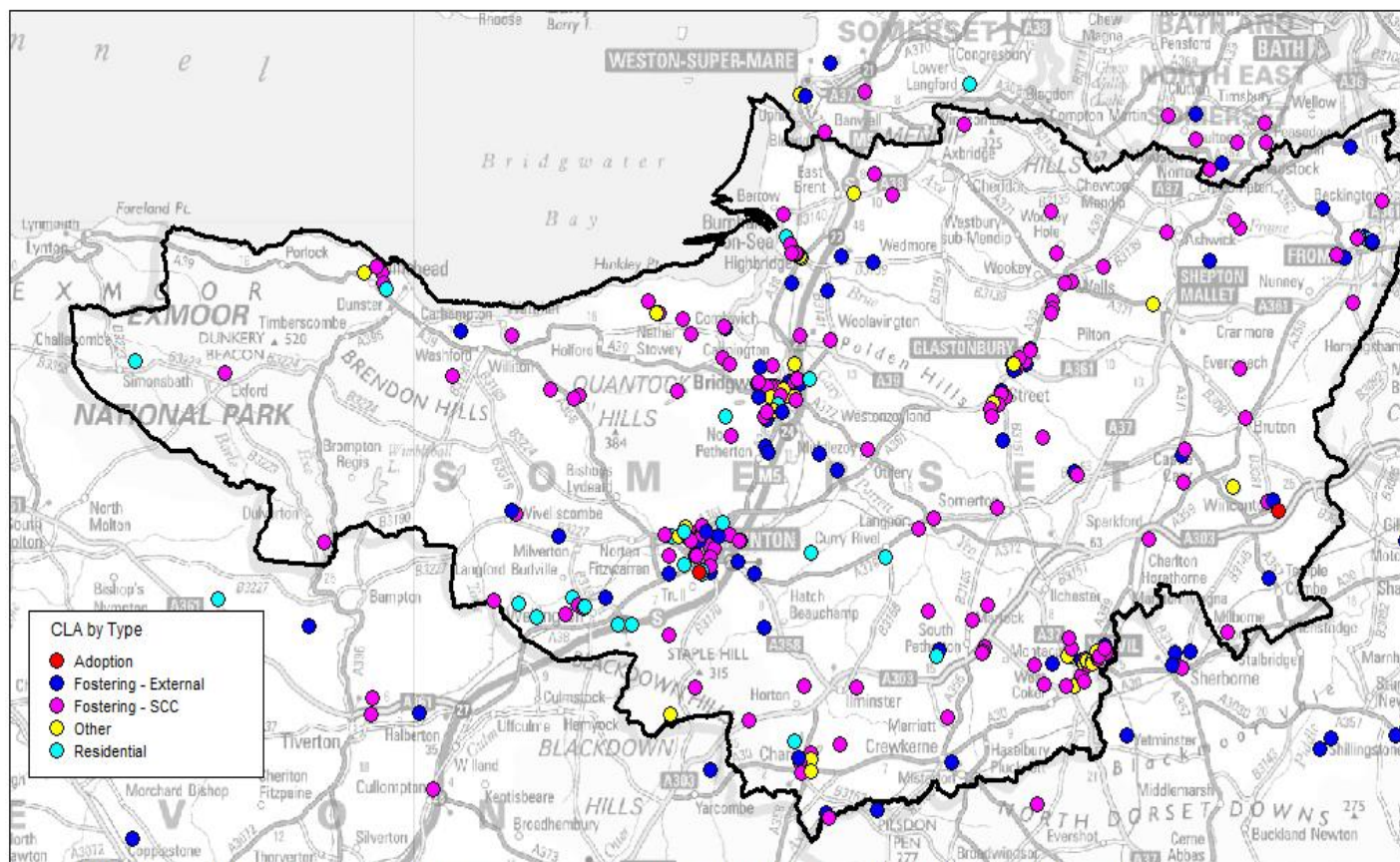
SCC Foster Carers at 31st March 2017



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Appendix 2

SCC CLA at 31st March 2017



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