Fostering in Sandwell

DRAFT

Report of the Children & Young People Scrutiny Panel

Prepared by Improvement and Efficiency
May 2012
Chair’s foreword

To be inserted at panel

Councillor Maria Crompton
Chair of the Children & Young People Scrutiny Panel
Glossary

Advocacy
Advocacy supports people to say what they want and need.

British Association of Adoption and Fostering (BAAF)
BAAF are an adoption and fostering membership association, which promotes the highest standards of practice in adoption, fostering and childcare services in social work, health, legal and other professional bodies on behalf of children separated from their birth families. They work to increase public understanding of the issues and to act as an independent voice for children, informing and influencing policy-makers, all those responsible for children and young people and public opinion.

Cabinet Member
Councillors who are appointed to make the council’s decisions.

Categories of foster care:

- **Emergency**
  When children need somewhere safe to stay for a few nights

- **Short-term**
  When carers look after children for a few weeks or months, while plans are made for the child's future

- **Short breaks**
  When disabled children, children with special needs or children with behavioural difficulties regularly stay for a short time with a family, so that their parents or usual foster carers can have a break

- **Remand**
  When young people are remanded by a court to the care of a specially trained foster carer

- **Long-term**
  Not all children who need to permanently live away from their birth family want to be adopted, so instead they go into long-term foster care until they are adults

- **'Family and friends' or 'connected person'**
  A child who is the responsibility of the local authority goes to live with someone they already know, which usually means family members such as grandparents, aunts and uncles or their brother or sister
Specialist therapeutic
For children and young people with very complex needs and/or challenging behaviour

Commissioning
Commissioning is essentially a structured way of deciding how and on whom public money should be spent. Commissioning is a cycle that involves:

- Assessment (or reassessment) of need identifying resources
- Planning how to use the resources
- Arranging service delivery through a procurement process
- Monitoring and reviewing service delivery

Foster Carer Network
A network within Sandwell Council of foster carers which meets together to be given information and to raise any questions or concerns they may have.

Family Placement Team
The part of Sandwell Council which deals with fostering and adoption placements.

Fostering Panel
A group of professionals and lay people who meet to make a recommendation as whether a person or couple should become foster carers.

Independent Foster Agency (IFA)
IFAs are private organisations that offer placements in fostering families registered to them. IFAs work closely with local authorities to deliver these placements. IFAs do not have legal responsibility for looked after children they manage placements for, this remains with the local authority.

Looked After Children (LAC)
Looked after children and young people are children in the care of the Council, through a Care Order made by a court or voluntary agreement with their parent(s) to accommodate them. They are looked after by the local authority in a children's home, by foster carers, or other family members. All unaccompanied asylum seeking children are also looked after children.
**LAC Board** (Also known as the Children in Care Council)
This is a group of looked after children who can have their say on issues that matter to them, and can make sure that they are heard by the people who make decisions.

**Primary Care Trust (PCT)**
PCTs are NHS organisations which have been set up throughout the country to provide, plan and fund health services for their local people. Primary Care includes all those health services we normally go to first when we need help – the family doctor (GP), optician, dentist or local pharmacist. Once the PCT has assessed the health needs of their local population, and following consultation, it specifies what services are required to meet those needs. Then PCTs commission (fund) agreements with Hospitals & NHS Trusts and others to deliver those services, within the resources available to the PCT as well as providing some services itself.

**Special Guardianship Order**
A Special Guardianship Order is made by the court and places a child or a young person to live with someone permanently. It gives legal status for non parents who are or wish to care for that child or young person in a long term secure placement.
Context

National Context
There is a national shortage of foster cares and there is a varied approach to how foster carers are recruited. Local authorities recruit but so do independent foster agencies who sell placements to local authorities. Often, but not always, independent foster agencies offer more specialist foster placements.

Fostering services are covered by the National Minimum Standards and the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011. Together these form the basis of the regulatory framework under the Care Standards Act 2000 for the conduct of fostering services. Local authorities are currently implementing these new regulations.

Fostering services are inspected by OFSTED.

Many areas of good practice guidance are taken from the British Association of Adoption and Fostering (BAAF).

Local Context
In May 2010 the fostering service at Sandwell was subject to an OfSTED inspection. At this inspection Sandwell received a judgement of inadequate. Since then an action plan for improvement has been implemented.

In Sandwell there is a Family Placement Team which is responsible for fostering and adoption. Under a recent restructure the teams were split into two, to have specific roles in recruitment and assessment and fostering support. Another recent development has been changes to the foster care fees and weekly allowances which is based on a skill level of 1-6 which is linked to a criteria to reflect the skills and experiences of carers and a multi treatment foster care payment.

To improve the speed at which the Fostering Panel can make recommendations a second panel has been established in Sandwell.

The Sandwell Scorecard includes a target regarding new placements.

A Special Guardianship Order(SGO) improves the stability for the looked after children or young person. Sandwell has one of the highest rate of SGOs in the West Midlands.
Findings

Foster Carer Network
At a meeting of the foster carer network to speak to foster carers about this review and gain their insight through workshops into their thoughts of the council’s fostering service. The foster carers raised a series of points. The headlines to this include:

- Communication between the family placements team and foster carers need to be improved, in particular foster carers felt that last minute communication should stop and events such as contact sessions needed to be adequately prepared for.
- There was a lack of clarity and perceived inconsistency around the rules of being a foster carer. The network wanted one, consistent message.
- Foster carers felt they were sometimes punished by not being given further placements for not accepting a previous placement, for asking for respite during a placement or for complaining. The network expressed a fear by foster carers to speak out.
- Foster carers wanted to be treated as professionals by social workers.
- A need for clarity over what is considered a long term placement and a short term placement.
- Social workers need to return calls when foster carers have made contact within a stipulated timeframe.
- That the relationship between foster carers and social workers needed to be one of partnership and currently this was not the case, from the foster carers perspective.
- There is poor communication regarding training resulting in foster carers being unclear as to when training is taking place and whether they have been placed on a course. Also, foster carers were turning up to training events which were not happening.

Throughout the session foster carers reiterated that the reason they did this work was for the children and there was a genuine feeling that foster carers loved what they did. They did however want more respect from social workers and for the administrative system to work better.

Another key outcome of this session was that foster carers valued being consulted in this manner, confidentially away from social workers and the family placements team. Consideration should be given to the family placement team holding similar events every six months with an independent facilitator. This would enable the views of foster carers to be
gathered so they can be taken in to consideration in future planning, changes and development of the service. Each meeting of the foster carer network should have a list of action points from each meeting which the family placements team then report back on at the following meeting.

**Independent Foster Agencies**

The independent foster agencies (listed in appendix 3) expressed the need for improved communication between Sandwell Council and the independent foster agencies in relation to events and support for looked after children. Examples given around this was that independent foster agencies did not know about the looked after children (LAC) board or the looked after children drop in session. More regular updates being given to independent foster agencies and would ensure that all of our looked after children, regardless of whether they are fostered through the council or independent foster agencies have access to the same support networks.

Also, many of the independent foster agencies were signed up to the foster care charter which can be found at:

http://media.education.gov.uk/assets/files/pdf/t/the%20foster%20carers%20charter.pdf

This is a good standard to strive towards and it also has associated resources about how to implement it. As part of Sandwell’s ambition to improve its fostering service it has signed up to the Foster Carers Charter and has agreed a joint charter with foster carers and social workers.

Many independent foster agencies (IFA) are also now able to provide parent and child placements. This is where both parent and child are placed in a foster carers home and both are supported so that both can return to independent living, avoiding long term foster placements or adoption. It is also used by the courts to help assess the parent in a situation which is not as artificial as a room with CCTV. The council does not currently operate this scheme and so is dependent upon purchasing this from independent foster agencies. Whilst this is a specialist service this is an area which the council should explore as to whether it can recruit foster carers to be part of an in house scheme, therefore saving the council money.
Different foster agencies offer different approaches and practices and in the best interest of the child. During this review the IFAs spoken to said they appreciated the opportunity to give their views and talk about their experiences. It would be worthwhile for the council to regularly meet with independent foster agencies to share best practice, ideas for future work and progress partnership working. IFAs felt that sometimes social workers did not understand what an independent foster agency was and struggled to interact with them. Therefore, meeting with the IFAs would help resolve some of these uncertainties. Also, part of this partnership work could include developing very specialist services within independent foster agencies which are needed but would not be cost efficient for the council to run themselves such as services around supporting looked after children who have been victims of sexual exploitation or young people exhibiting dangerous sexual behaviour.

The IFAs also felt that where foster carers were exploring the possibility of entering into a special guardianship order they were excluded from this discussion and that they could make a valuable contribution to this process. Therefore, work should be done around appropriately including independent foster agencies in these discussions.

Independent foster agencies also felt that there was inconsistency around getting information from the child’s social worker on the young person they were finding a placement for. Therefore the council should develop and advertise a standard for the amount of time they will get information about the looked after child to an independent foster agency. The reason for this is that without up to date information a robust and appropriate placement can be difficult to find and the placement can be difficult to manage, possibly resulting in the breakdown of that placement.

**Feedback from Looked After Children**
There were a number of issues which looked after children raised during this review and whilst some of these may be historical concerns it is still worth checking that robust remedies are in place to prevent these occurring in the future. These issues include:

- Unplanned changes in placement. One young person gave the example that they were met at school by their social worker and moved placement then.
- That they were sometimes treated differently to the birth family. Young people wanted to be listened to when they raised this as an
issue and placed where they were treated the same as other family members.
• Care plans needed to be explained in plain English to looked after children.
• That they were not always listened to by social workers or the reason behind not being able to do something was not explained to them.
• Foster carers do not always know what they can or can not do for a looked after child, such as signing forms for school trips etc.
• Wanting an exit interview which was then acted upon once they leave a placement and then again when they leave the care system.

Welfare Rights
A number of foster carers complimented the support they had received from welfare rights at the Council. In light of this information about welfare rights should be included in foster carer packs.

Allegations
Unfortunately there are times when foster carers have allegations made against them. In a significant number of these the allegations prove to be unfounded. However, during the investigation process many foster carers who had been in this situation felt unsupported. We are aware that new local guidance for social workers has been developed by foster carers who have previously had unfounded allegations made against them and that there is now a support group for foster carers who have an allegation made against them. Both of these initiatives should be continually reviewed to ensure they are fit for purpose.

Sometimes the reasons behind the slowness of dealing with an allegation is due to the police investigation and it is important that continued discussions with the police take place to speed up the process when a foster carers has an allegation made against them. The issue can then be resolved and where the allegation is unfounded the foster carer can return to caring.

Foster Panel
The council has a foster panel which meets with prospective foster carers and recommends whether they should be accepted as a foster carers as well as whether they should be a short term foster carer or a long term foster carer. The panel also decides whether a young person needs a long term placement. Throughout this review and other pieces of work there has been criticism that the paperwork prepared by social
workers for the council’s fostering panel is not always of an adequate standard. This delays the process since the paperwork has to be sent back and revised which can then result in prospective foster carers deciding to go elsewhere. In order for this to improve, managers should not sign off paperwork to go before the panel unless it is of a suitable standard. Where there are exemplars of good practice work, these should be shared amongst social workers to raise the standard. The fostering panel is currently considering whether to introduce a merit system whereby it reports back saying whether the paperwork is of a high or poor standard and the reasons why. Where paperwork was of a poor quality it would have to list the mitigations put in place to remedy this. This would be a useful step forward in showing the importance of the quality of paperwork and driving up standards.

Currently, from the point of expression of interest to getting a potential foster carer to the fostering panel is taking 16 weeks. The goal is to get reduce this to 12 weeks and this review fully supports achieving this goal within the next year.

**Marketing**

Effective marketing is key to get people interested in becoming foster carers. The family placement team currently have a dedicated marketing officer with a marketing plan in place. However, further work needs to be done across the council so that when the council is running events then the family placement team has a presence at them.

A key problem for Sandwell is in relation to its housing stock. Sandwell does not have many large houses with more than four bedrooms. This can then cause problems in relation to fostering large family groups or for people wishing to foster who already have children of their own. A key aspect of the marketing strategy should be to try and target some marketing activity more widely across the Black Country where there are larger houses to try and encourage more people from outside of Sandwell come forward to foster with Sandwell. This will need to be carefully managed to ensure placements are not being inappropriately made outside of the borough.

Recently Sandwell Homes have offered loft conversions to households which are overcrowded. This could be also offered to people wanting to become foster carers but do not have enough room.

As part of the marketing strategy there needs to be a continued emphasis on the reputation of Sandwell Council as a good place to foster
for. Therefore, we must ensure that we achieve what we say we will because word of mouth is still one of the strongest methods of passing on a good or bad reputation. We also agree with the recruitment incentive of £250 when a foster carer recruits a new foster carer.

Currently, people interested in becoming a foster carer can attend an informal session to find out more and currently these are held at Crystal House. Feedback from foster carers is that this is not an appropriate venue to hold such an important event. Therefore better consideration needs to be given as to how these events are held and advertised, that they are held in an easily accessible venue, a venue which is welcoming and that there is adequate parking available.

Another area which needs to be strengthened is around marketing who can foster. There needs to be more information that disabled people, single people, couples not married and, gay and lesbian people and gay and lesbian couples can foster. Without this clear message we could be losing potential excellent foster carers.

During the review members asked that information on fostering be put into members surgery leaflets and this action has been completed.

**Residential Care**
Sometimes fostering is not appropriate for a young person. In these situations residential care can offer a solution. Currently, the council only owns one residential home in Sandwell and has a contract with St Christopher’s who manage two smaller residents homes in the borough. Due to the costs involved in external residential care an evaluation should be undertaken as to whether it would be cost effective to build an additional council owned and run residential home in Sandwell.

**Court**
As part of the wider work of the scrutiny panel the chair visited Wolverhampton Combined Court. During this visit it was found that some social workers do not full understand the court procedures and can sometimes be intimidated by the court setting. Therefore, Judge Hughes at the court offered to run training sessions with social workers on the court procedure, in the court itself. This opportunity should be taken up and promoted to social workers.

**External Placements**
Before April 2011 external placements were picked on a spot purchase basis which did not offer value for money. Therefore, along with other
local authority partners (Staffordshire CC, Walsall MBC, Dudley MBC, Wolverhampton CC and Telford and Wrekin Council), Sandwell entered into an agreement which went out to tender in order to achieve better value for money. Once a list of approved independent agencies had been agreed then placements are made to one of them. Since May 2011 searching for external placements is now done by the commissioning team and not the family placements team. This should continue into the future because of the knowledge and expertise within this team to undertake this function.

The outcomes of this process is that there is more scope and increased potential for improved value for money and would want more local authorities to be encouraged to join when the current contract ends in two years time. By extending the consortium even lower costs could be realised.

**Exit Interviews**
When a foster carer concludes working for Sandwell every attempt should be made to undertake an exit interview with them. This could be done by someone independent of the family placement team. The outcomes of this discussion should then be used to improve services for future foster cares and looked after children.

**Birth Children**
Both Sandwell Council and independent foster agencies undertake work with birth children of foster carers. This is to provide social and support opportunities. The work is valuable, both in terms of ensuring a successful placement but also to hear the voice, concerns and needs of birth children. In Sandwell the feedback from this group is collated and acted on. This should continue on an ongoing basis in the future and be used alongside feedback from the Foster Carer Network, exit interviews from looked after children and exit interviews from foster carers to continually evaluate the services we offer and continually improve. Creating a positive culture of gathering views and experiences responding to the feedback and using it to learn is of utmost importance to the ongoing development of fostering in Sandwell.

**Regional Working**
Recruiting foster carers is a problem all over the country with local authorities not only being in competition with independent foster agencies but also with each other. Therefore an exploratory exercise should be undertaken with our Black Country neighbours to look at whether we can operate one foster care service with one single set of
fees and procedures. This would create economies of scale and remove competition with our neighbouring local authorities as well as bringing other advantages.
**Recommendations**

Based on the evidence received, the Children & Young People Scrutiny Panel makes the following recommendations, which are not presented in any order of priority. Timescales are illustrative and therefore open to discussion.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ref</th>
<th>Recommendation</th>
<th>Lead agency</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Intended outcome</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Recommendations to be discussed and agreed at panel</td>
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<td></td>
<td>That all of the findings of this review are given careful consideration and taken into account when making decisions in relation to young carers in Sandwell</td>
<td>Cabinet Member for Children and Families</td>
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<td>A detailed action plan be created outlining how the recommendations and findings of this review are to be taken forward by the relevant partner(s). And that progress against this action plan is reported to relevant Cabinet Member(s), officer(s), partner(s) and scrutiny every six months until such time as the recommendations and findings have been addressed.</td>
<td>Legal and Governance Services</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
References

Bedfordshire County Council; disruption meeting procedure
Cheshire East Council; fostering services review
Department for Education; foster carers’ charter
Department for Education; fostering services national minimum standards
FCA; Long term fostering
FCA; marketing information
FCA; Parent and child placements
Foster talk; marketing information
Hertfordshire County Council; an investigation into the effectiveness of Hertfordshire County Council’s fostering service
Nexus fostering; children’s guide
Nexus fostering; looked after review consultation
Nexus fostering; my looked after review
OfSTED; children’s experience of private fostering
Sandwell MBC; fostering brings out the best in everyone
Sandwell MBC; foster carer payment information pack
Sandwell MBC; foster panel draft terms of reference
Sandwell MBC; fostering policy
Sandwell MBC; welcome pack for newly arrived kinship carers
Sandwell MBC; welcome pack to Spon Lane Residential Home
Walsall MBC; foster care handbook
Wolverhampton Foster Care Centre; a brief history and introduction
## Appendix 1

### Scope of the review

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Review title</th>
<th>Fostering in Sandwell</th>
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| What issue did this review address? | The process of becoming a foster carer  
Emergency placements  
Possible learning from independent foster agencies  
The experience of fostering by looked after children  
The voice of the child in foster placements  
The role of advocacy  
Concerns of foster carers  
How fostering is marketed  
Improvements made since the 2010 OfSTED inspection  
The contract monitoring of independent foster arrangements |
| Lead members | Children & Young People Scrutiny Panel  
Councillor Maria Crompton (chair)  
Councillor Malcolm Bridges (vice-chair) |
| Officer group | Adam Hadley – Scrutiny Unit  
Rachael Gillott – Family Placement Service |
| Aim and scope of the review | To consider the improvements made in the Fostering Service, their long term sustainability and to consider whether further improvements can be made. |
| Specific outcomes required | A set of recommendations which will further enhance the performance of the Fostering Service. |
| Independent Advisors | Foster carers and looked after children in Sandwell |
The terms of reference for the Children & Young People Scrutiny Panel state:

‘… the Children and Young People Scrutiny Panel shall:

(1) under the direction of the Scrutiny Management Board, undertake reviews which include matters which fall within the terms of reference of this Panel and any other scrutiny panel;

(2) as set out in the scrutiny procedure rules, scrutinise recommendations, consider referrals under the Petition, Call for Action and the Pre-Decision Scrutiny (Call in) processes and review and advise on the Council’s policies and practices in respect of, and upon such terms as are set out below:-

- services for children and young people;
- the Children’s Trust and any other trust which involves the care of children and young people;
- local safeguarding arrangements for children and young people;
- corporate parenting’

Principles

The review was undertaken in line with the following principles within which scrutiny strives to operate:

- inclusive
- non adversarial
- evidence based as opposed to anecdotal
- factual and unbiased
- open and transparent

Membership

Elected members:

Cllr Maria Crompton (Chair)
Cllr Malcolm Bridges (Vice-Chair)
Cllr Pete Allen
Cllr Elaine Giles
Cllr Paul Moore
Cllr Les Pawlowski
Cllr Julie Webb
Appendix 3

Methodology

In undertaking this review the panel was supported by Improvement and Efficiency at Sandwell Council, foster carers and looked after children.

The following presentations and reports were received and considered by panel members:

- action plan relating to the 2010 OfSTED inspection
- action plan relating to implementing new legislation and guidance
- family placement team update
- the process of fostering
- the fostering marketing plan
- emergency placements
- Black Country Advocacy Service
- special guardianship orders
- connected person placement
- contract monitoring arrangements for foster placements
- performance information on foster placement stability

The views of stakeholders were gathered by:

- an event held at the Public with the Foster Carers Networks
- a meeting with Judge Hughes, Wolverhampton Combined Court Centre
- a meeting with the Sandwell Looked After Children Board
- a meeting with Owen Pearson, Chair of the Sandwell Fostering Panel
- a visit to Spon Lane Residential Centre
- visits to independent foster carers agencies:
  - Foster Care Associates, Dudley
  - The Sandcastle Project, Sandwell
  - Pathway Care, Bromsgrove
  - Nexus Fostering, Harborne
  - Wolverhampton Foster Carer Centre
  - Foster Solutions, Stafford