



Central Bedfordshire Council  
and Bedford Borough Council  
working together

# Fostering Agency

Annual Report

For the period  
2011/2012

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## SECTION 1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.0.1 Since Local Government reorganisation in April 2009 Central Bedfordshire has hosted the Fostering Service as a shared service on behalf of both new unitary councils. This report describes the activity of Central Bedfordshire Council and Bedford Borough Council's Fostering Agency during the period 1<sup>st</sup> April 2011 to 31<sup>st</sup> March, 2012, noting its achievements, clarifying the remit and focus of its work and identifying recommendations for the development of the service.
- 1.0.2 This report is provided as part of the monitoring of the Fostering Agency required under the Fostering Regulations 2011 and National Minimum Standards 2011. This report will be presented to the Central Bedfordshire Council Children's Overview and Scrutiny Committee and three monthly update reports will be presented to the Corporate Parenting Panel. A copy of this report is provided to Bedford Borough Council for presentation to Elected Members.

### 1.1 STAFFING/SERVICE STRUCTURE

- 1.1.1 The Fostering Service is made up of the following staff as of 31<sup>st</sup> March 2012:
- 1 x full time Team Manager
  - 1 x full time Deputy Team Manager
  - 8 x Senior Practitioners
  - 10 x Social Workers
  - 2 x Social Work Assistants
  - 1 x Duty Worker
- 1.1.2 The service is supported by 2 full time and 1 part time administrators.
- 1.1.3 The workforce is diverse and includes staff of both genders, and from other European and black and minority ethnic groups. This level of diversity is valued when considering case allocation.
- 1.1.4 All staff have access to the Council's extensive learning and development programme, and can apply to attend external courses and conferences where appropriate. The service also provides diversity training for staff in order to improve its understanding of the needs of children from black and minority ethnic communities and enable them to meet their needs more appropriately.
- 1.1.5 Most staff have a number of years post-qualifying experience, and a programme of additional support is in place for those newly-qualified or in the early years of their social work career.
- 1.1.6 The fostering agency is supported by specialist staff who work across the Fostering and Adoption service area. These staff include a Business Support Officer with responsibility for foster care payments, a Recruitment and Marketing Officer, a Training Officer and Training coordinator, and the Panel Advisor and Secretaries who support the fostering and permanence panels.

## SECTION 2 – THE PANELS

### 2.1 THE FOSTERING PANEL

- 2.1.1 The Fostering Panel meets every month of the year, with extraordinary panels as and when required.
- 2.1.2 The Fostering Panel considers applications from prospective foster carers and makes recommendations as to their approval. The panel also considers the first annual review of foster carers, as well as any change or termination of approval. The Panel is advised of any exemptions or variations to a carer's existing terms of approval. Reviews following complaints or allegations are also presented to the Panel.

### 2.2 FOSTERING PANEL MEMBERSHIP

- 2.2.1 From 1 April 2011 the new Fostering Regulations 2011 introduced greater flexibility in relation to the membership of fostering panels, allowing for the use of a 'central list' of panel members from which attendees for any particular panel could be chosen in accordance with quoracy requirements. The Regulations also allowed for the appointment of more than one vice chair to afford greater flexibility to fostering agencies when convening panels.
- 2.2.2 As at 31<sup>st</sup> March, 2012 the Fostering Panel central list was as follows:

Panel Chair	Independent
Educational Psychologist	Educational Psychologist, Central Bedfordshire Council
Social Worker (Vice Chair)	Senior Practitioner, Adoption Team, Central Bedfordshire Council
Social Worker	Deputy Team Manager, Looked After Children, Central Bedfordshire Council
Elected Member (vacancy)	Bedford Borough Council
Independent	Foster Carer – IFA
Independent	Health Visitor
Independent	Independent Social Worker
Elected Member	Central Bedfordshire Council
Independent	Foster Carer – IFA
Independent	Gypsy and Traveller Education Consultant
Independent	Independent Family Group Meeting Coordinator

- 2.2.3 In attendance but non voting members were:

Professional Adviser	Central Bedfordshire Council
Panel Secretary	Central Bedfordshire Council

- 2.2.4 A Medical Adviser to the Panel gives advice in writing in advance of Panel meetings, but may attend in person if requested.
- 2.2.5 A Legal Adviser to the Panel gives advice in writing in advance of Panel meetings and attends in person as requested.

## 2.3 FOSTERING AND JOINT PERMANENCE PANEL

- 2.3.1 The Fostering and Joint Permanence Panel's primary activity is to deal with permanent fostering work and family and friends placements.
- 2.3.2 The panel considers the plan for any child under the age of 13 for whom permanent or long-term fostering is proposed and any matches with specific carers for these children. In all but a few exceptional cases, matching decisions on children over 13 years are made by the Head of Service for Quality Assurance for Central Bedfordshire or the Head of Service for LAC & LAAC for Bedford Borough.
- 2.3.3 This panel also considers applications by foster carers to be long-term carers for a particular child and applications by those who are family and friends foster carers. The panel also considers the first annual review of permanent foster carers and family and friends foster carers, as well as any changes to their approval. The Panel is advised of any exemptions or variations to a carer's existing range of approval.
- 2.3.4 Due to the volume of cases concerning short term fostering, the Fostering and Joint Permanence Panel also considers the approval and reviews of short term foster carers from time to time.

## 2.4 FOSTERING AND JOINT PERMANENCE PANEL MEMBERSHIP

- 2.4.1 From 1 April 2011 the new Fostering Regulations 2011 introduced greater flexibility in relation to the membership of fostering panels, allowing for the use of a 'central list' of panel members from which attendees for any particular panel could be chosen in accordance with quoracy requirements. The Regulations also allowed for the appointment of more than one vice chair to afford greater flexibility to fostering agencies when convening panels.
- 2.4.2 As at 31<sup>st</sup> March, 2012 the Permanence Panel central list was as follows:

Panel Chair	Independent
Social Worker	Deputy Team Manager, Looked After Children, Central Bedfordshire Council (Vice Chair)
Social Worker	Independent Social Worker (Vice Chair)
Social Worker	Team Manager, Looked After Children, Central Bedfordshire Council
Educational Psychologist	Educational Psychologist
Independent	Adoptive Parent
Independent	Independent Social Worker
Independent	Independent Social Worker
Independent	Foster Carer – IFA
Elected Member (Vacancy)	Bedford Borough Council
Elected Member	Central Bedfordshire Council
Independent	Gypsy and Traveller Education Consultant
Independent	Family Group Meeting Team Manager

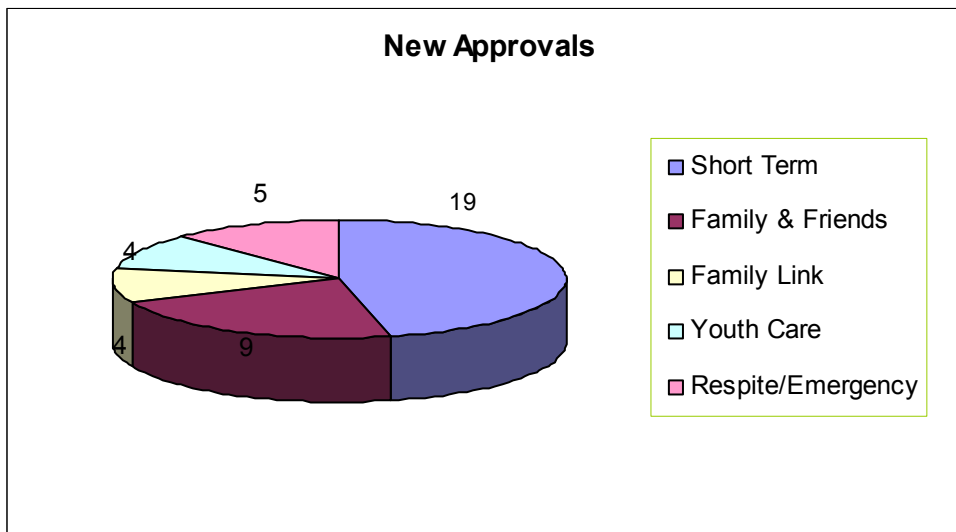
- 2.4.3 In attendance but non voting members were:

Professional Adviser	Central Bedfordshire Council
Panel Secretary	Central Bedfordshire Council

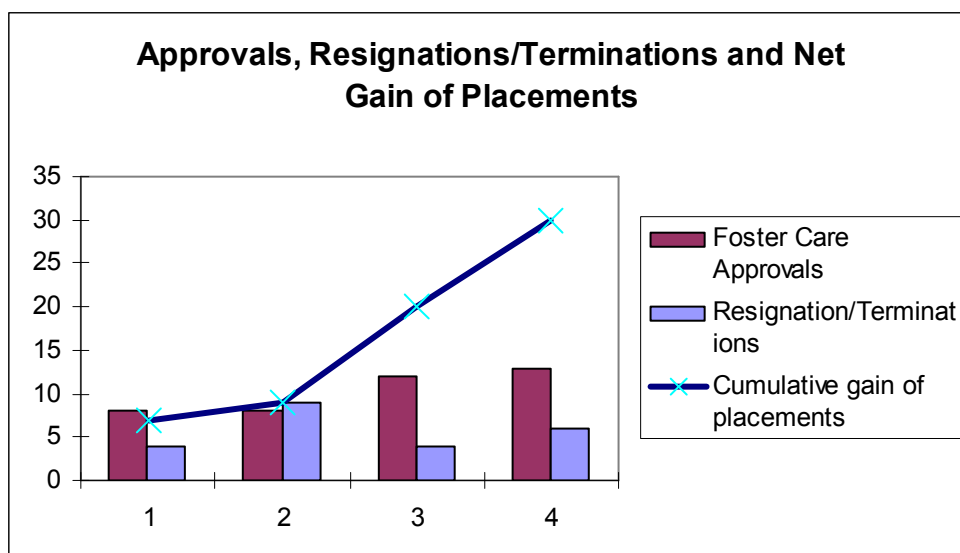
- 2.4.4 A Medical Adviser to the Panel gives advice in writing in advance of Panel meetings and may attend in person if requested.
- 2.4.5 A Legal Adviser to the Panel gives advice in writing in advance of Panel meetings and attends in person as requested.

**2.5 PANEL ACTIVITY**

- 2.5.1 In 2011/2012 the Fostering Panel met 13 times and recommended that 20 households should be approved as foster carers. This is the same number of approvals as 2010/11.
- 2.5.2 Of the 20 carers newly approved by the Fostering Panel, 4 were approved for the Family Link Scheme, 12 as short-term carers and 4 for the Youth Care Scheme.
- 2.5.3 The Fostering and Joint Permanence Panel met 17 times during the year 2011/2012. During this time, 21 households were approved as foster carers (which compares with 16 the previous year). Plans for 12 children for permanent or long-term fostering were recommended and 2 children were recommended for a match. 7 households were approved as short term foster carers, 9 as family & friends carers and 5 as emergency or respite foster carers.



- 2.5.4 The Panels considered first annual reviews for 19 households, 7 reviews following concerns or allegations, 11 requests for change of approval, 2 terminations of approval following allegations.
- 2.5.5 In total 96 fostering households attended one or other of the panels.
- 2.5.6 21 fostering households resigned at their request in 2011/12 and 2 households had their approval withdrawn by the Fostering Agency. This total was down from 31 in 2010/11. The reasons for deregistration varied, but included personal circumstances, ill health, retirement, relocation, moving to another local authority and children in placement becoming permanent family members. Balancing new approvals against resignations there was a net gain of fostering placements of 30 during the year.



## 2.6 PANEL TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

- 2.6.1 The Fostering Agency strives to ensure that there is a good level of training, appraisal and induction offered to Panel Members. This year, due to the number of cases and business on the agendas it has been a challenge to find time for the 'bite-size' training on panel days. All Panel Members had an annual appraisal where their personal training needs are discussed and considered.
- 2.6.2 A full day's training on Safeguarding and Allegations in Fostering and Pre-Adoptive Placements was held in June 2011 for Panel Members and staff of the Fostering Agency. In addition a bitesize training session on Care Proceedings was held in April 2011.

## 2.7 PANEL DIVERSITY

- 2.7.1 The agency has ensured that both panels are diverse and include members of black and minority ethnic groups. Panel members also bring particular expertise or experience, including a member experienced in working with gypsy and traveller communities, a member with personal experience of being looked after and of disruption. Both Panels have male and female panel members. During this year more male panel members have been recruited giving a more even gender balance on panels. There is also a diversity of age on both panels.

## 2.8 AGENCY DECISIONS AND INDEPENDENT REVIEW MECHANISM

- 2.8.1 If a foster carer is not satisfied with the Fostering Agency's decision about their approval or the terms of their approval, they have a right to make a request within 28 days for a review by the Independent Review Mechanism. The Independent Review Mechanism is a review process conducted by a review panel independent of the fostering service provider who hears the evidence presented to the Agency's own panel and then makes a recommendation to the Agency in respect of their decision. Whilst the Agency Decision Maker must take into account the recommendations of the IRM, the final decision remains with the Agency.

- 2.8.2 In two cases this year foster carers applied for a review by the Independent Review Mechanism (IRM) for an independent panel view about their approval.

## **SECTION 3 – SPECIALISED FOSTERING**

### **3.1 THE FAMILY LINK SCHEME**

- 3.1.1 The Family Link Scheme offers short breaks to children of all ages who have a physical or functional disability. Family Link carers are foster carers who are recruited, approved and trained in the same way as other foster carers. They receive regular support and guidance from a supervising social worker.
- 3.1.2 Family Link Workers can care for a child in their own home, the child's home or by taking the child to an activity. Periods of short breaks will be carefully planned and could be for a few hours occasionally or whole weekends on a regular basis.
- 3.1.3 Once agreement has been given for the care package from the resource panel, a careful process of matching takes place, taking into account the individual needs of the child and their family and the carer's abilities
- 3.1.4 On the 31<sup>st</sup> March 2012, there were 12 Family Link carers approved with a further 3 Family Link carers being assessed.
- 3.1.5 During 2011/12 the scheme expanded with 4 more new carers being approved and 24 children being supported. This is an increase of 3 carers and 11 children from 2010/11. The 3 fee-based Family Link carers continue to be an integral part of the scheme, having increased availability and the capacity to be linked to up to 7 young people receiving short breaks.

### **3.2 THE YOUTH CARE SCHEME**

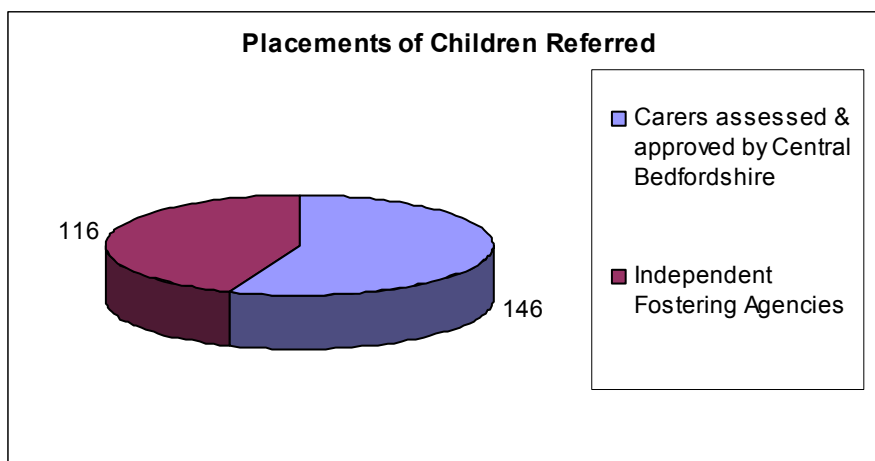
- 3.2.1 The Youth Care Scheme is a comprehensive, fee paid fostering scheme which provides specialist care to young people over the age of 10 years who have needs which are particularly challenging or complex.
- 3.2.2 As at the 31<sup>st</sup> March 2012, there were 13 approved Youth Care households. This was an increase from the 10 approved households at the beginning of the reporting year, and reflected a successful recruitment campaign during 2011 for Youth Care and Youth Care Respite carers.



## SECTION 4 – CHILDREN AND FOSTERING

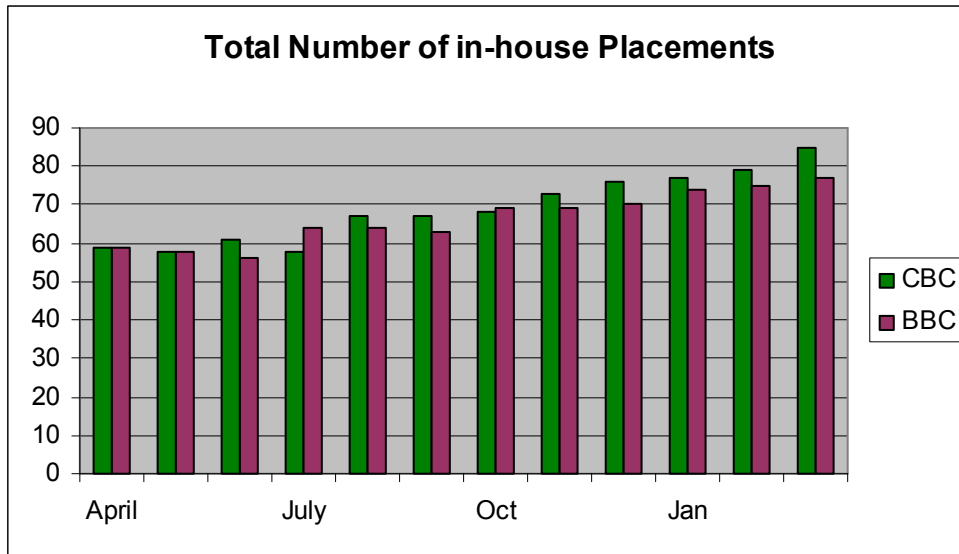
### 4.1 CHILDREN REFERRED FOR FOSTERING

- 4.1.1 During 2011/2012, the Fostering Service received a total of 375 referrals for foster placements of which 197 were for children becoming newly looked after. The remainder of referrals were for a change of placement. This is a significant increase on the total number of 159 referrals received in 2010/11 and reflects the increase in both councils of social care activity and numbers of looked after children.
- 4.1.2 Of the referrals received 198 were Central Bedfordshire children and 177 were Bedford Borough children. 146 of the referrals resulted in placements with in-house carers. 9 young people were placed in residential units. 116 children (45 Central Bedfordshire and 71 Bedford Borough children) were placed in an Independent Fostering Agency placement as a result of becoming looked after or due to a change of placement. Some children did not ultimately enter foster care, but remained at home.



- 4.1.3 The referral for the child includes the matching criteria that are essential and preferable when looking for a placement for a child, and a risk assessment is also considered. This is crucial to identifying which carers may be able to support a child. Where a placement does not meet the essential criteria or where any identified risks cannot be managed an alternative placement is sought.
- 4.1.4 Respite placements were provided on 142 occasions, with 11 children having regular respite as part of their care plan.
- 4.1.5 Of the new referrals for foster placements, 19 came through the Emergency Duty Service, an increase from 13 in 2010-11.

4.1.6 As at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2012 a total of 162 children were placed with in house foster carers, with 85 children coming from Central Bedfordshire and 77 children from Bedford Borough.



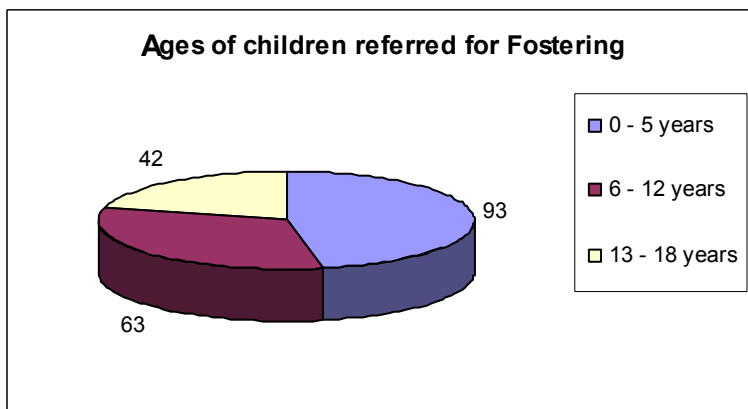
**4.2 AGE, GENDER AND ETHNICITY OF CHILDREN REFERRED FOR FOSTERING**

4.2.1 Nearly half the children referred because they were newly looked after were aged 0-5 years. From Central Bedfordshire the age distribution was as follows:

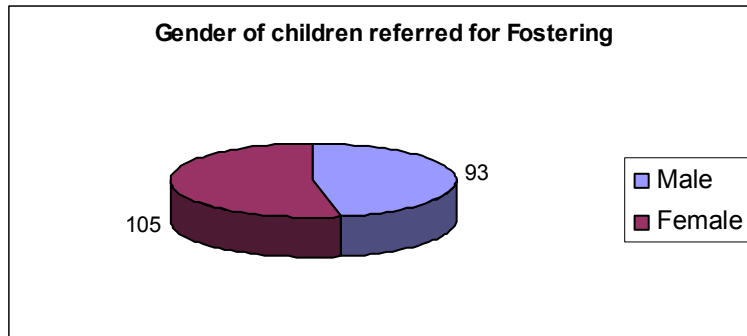
- 0-5 years      48 children
- 6-12 years    32 children
- 13-18 years   16 young people

From Bedford Borough the age distribution was:

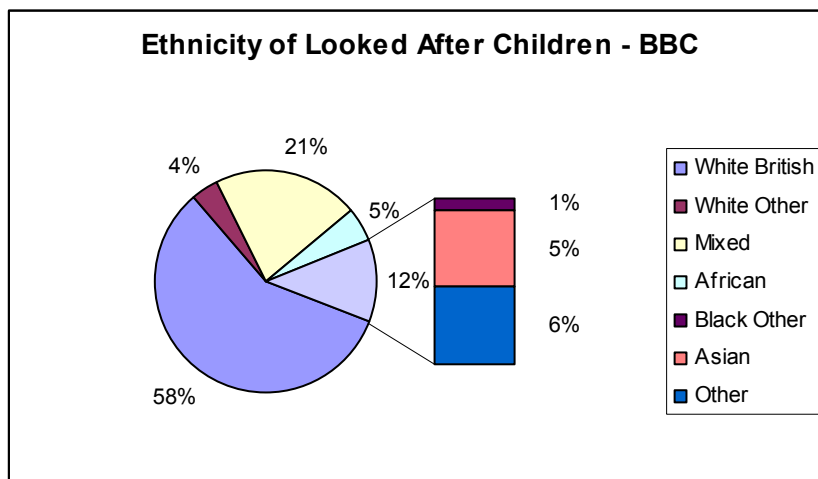
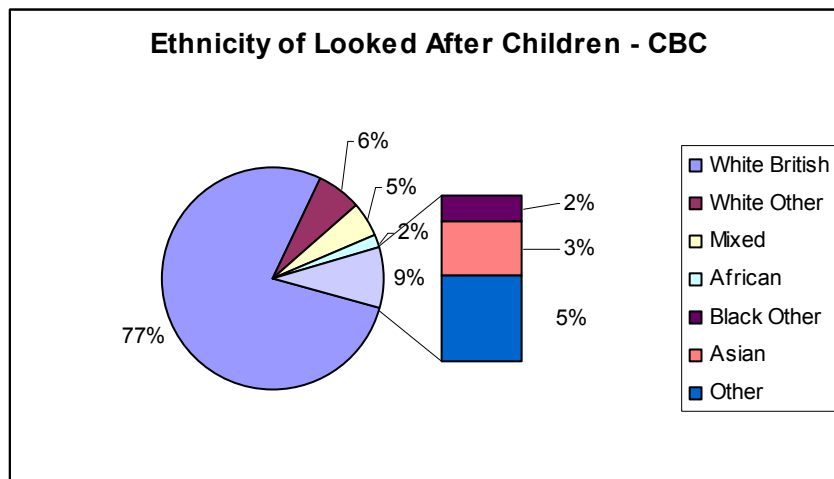
- 0-5 years      45 children
- 6-12 years    31 children
- 13-18 years   26 young people



4.2.2 Of the 96 children referred from Central Bedfordshire, 51 were female and 45 male. Of the 102 children referred from Bedford Borough 54 were female and 48 were male.



4.2.4 The agency has clear management information and monitors closely the ethnicity of Bedfordshire's looked after children.



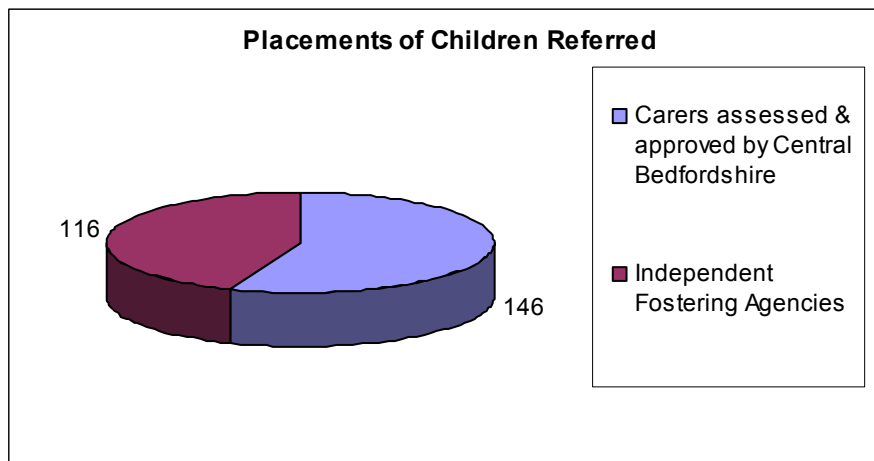
### 4.3 SIBLING GROUPS OF CHILDREN REFERRED FOR FOSTERING

4.3.1 There were 36 sibling groups within the children referred for fostering during the year. This comprised 19 sibling groups from Central Bedfordshire and 17 from Bedford Borough.

### 4.4 TYPE OF FOSTER PLACEMENT PROVIDED

4.4.1 Of the 236 children placed in foster placements this year, 146 were placed with carers assessed and approved by Central Bedfordshire Council on behalf of both Councils. The advantages of this are that the staff of the service have prior knowledge of the children and positive working relationships with the carers, thus enhancing fostering support for these placements.

4.4.2 116 of the children referred were placed externally with Independent Fostering Agencies (45 from Central Bedfordshire and 71 from Bedford Borough).



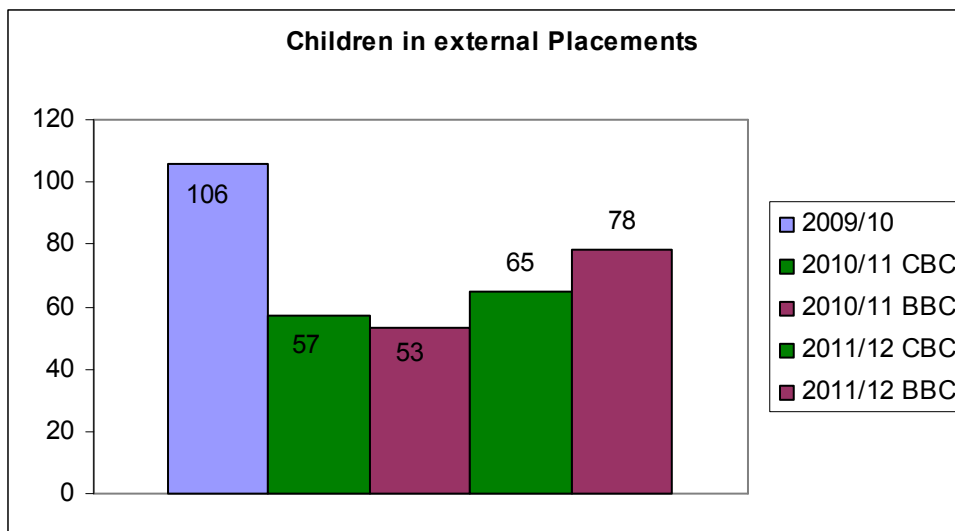
### 4.5 CHILDREN IN PLACEMENT AT 31<sup>ST</sup> MARCH 2012

4.5.1 As at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2012, there were 120 fostering households with full fostering approval, and a further 23 with temporary approval pending full assessment.

4.5.2 A total of 162 children were in these placements. Of these 85 were looked after by Central Bedfordshire Council and 77 by Bedford Borough Council

4.5.3 A total of 143 children were living in external foster placements provided by independent fostering agencies, as compared to 110 the previous year. Of these 65 children were from Central Bedfordshire Council and 78 from Bedford Borough Council.

4.5.4 In November 2011 both Councils entered into a regional Framework Agreement for the commissioning of placements in Independent Fostering Agencies. This agreement sets out quality and cost standards for placements with 19 preferred providers with the aim of reducing costs and improving quality of placements to meet need.

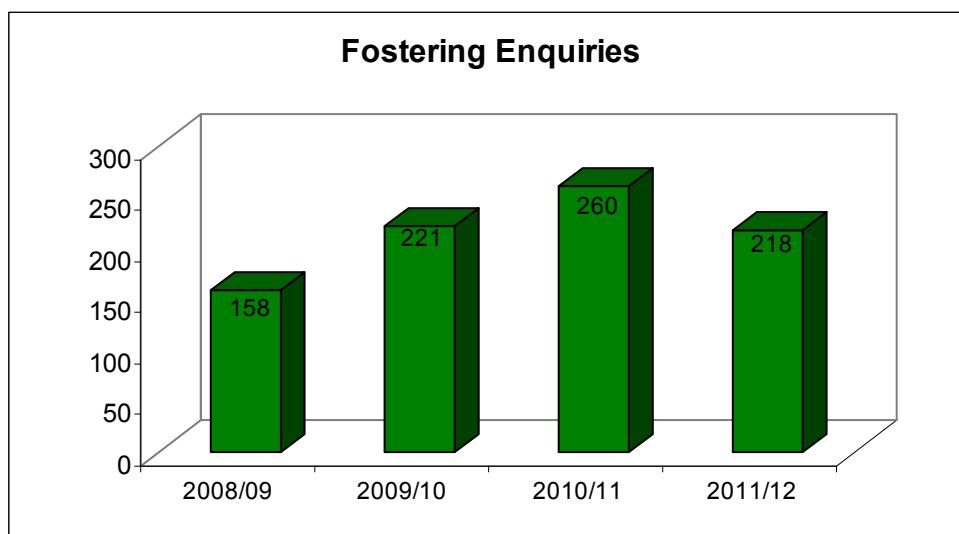


4.6.1 There has been a significant increase in the number of children in external placements as at 31 March 2012, which reflects the overall increase in numbers of looked after children.

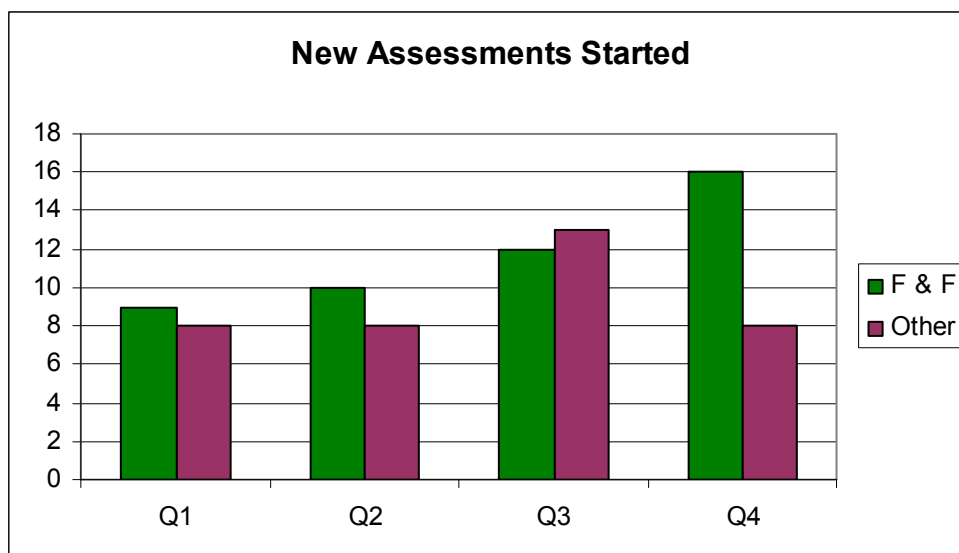
## SECTION 5 – FOSTER CARERS

### 5.1 FOSTERING ENQUIRIES

- 5.1.1 All enquirers are sent an Information Pack within 24 hours of their enquiry. A social worker from the Fostering Service will then make a follow-up telephone call to the enquirer within 2 working days and carry out an initial visit within 7 working days if requested.
- 5.1.2 After the initial visit, and a formal application from the enquirer the decision will be made whether or not to complete the assessment or to defer the assessment process until the enquirer is in a better position to proceed.
- 5.1.3 There were 218 initial fostering enquiries from members of the public during 2011/12 compared with 263 the previous year.



- 5.1.4 Application forms were received from 37 households and in addition application was made by 47 households wishing to care for a child known to them as a family member or friend. This is an increase in the number of applications and in assessments of family and friends. There were 41 new fostering households approved, up from 26 in 2010-11.



## 5.2 THE ASSESSMENT PROCESS FOR FOSTER CARERS: ENQUIRIES, ASSESSMENTS AND APPROVALS

- 5.2.1 All assessments are carried out in accordance with the National Minimum Standards and their Statutory and Practice Guidance. All prospective foster carers are required to undertake a training programme as part of the preparation and assessment process.
- 5.2.2 Implementation of new Regulations on 1<sup>st</sup> April 2011 changed the way in which family members or friends of looked after are assessed if the child needed to be placed with them prior to a full fostering assessment being completed. In this situation temporary approval may be granted under Regulation 24 of the Care Planning Regulations pending a full fostering assessment being carried out and presented to the Fostering Panel. This temporary approval lasts for 16 weeks in the first instance and can be extended for one period of 8 weeks. 23 such temporary approvals were granted in 2011-12.

## 5.3 ETHNICITY OF CARERS

- 5.3.1 At 31<sup>st</sup> March 2012, 12 out of 121 fostering households included carers from black or ethnic minority groups. At 10% this ratio broadly reflects the population in Bedfordshire, although carers from Asian backgrounds are under-represented.
- 5.3.2 Since 1<sup>st</sup> April 2011, the agency has approved 5 fostering households from black and ethnic minority backgrounds and a further household from a white eastern European background.

## **SECTION 6 – TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT FOR FOSTER CARERS**

- 6.0 All foster carers are expected to attend relevant training recommended by their supervising social worker. The service has a full and comprehensive training programme for carers, from preparation training, through induction and core training through to more complex post-approval training.

### **6.1 SKILLS TO FOSTER**

- 6.1.1 New fostering applicants have many questions prior to and during the assessment process. As an essential part of the fostering assessment, the 'Skills to Foster' course examines issues that are relevant, such as what it will be like to have children placed with them, or working in tandem with the local authority in order to reach positive outcomes for children.
- 6.1.2 Spread over several dates, this course provides an opportunity for prospective carers to reflect on their values and attitudes to caring and learn more about the skills and attributes needed to become a foster carer.
- 6.1.3 During 2011/2012, the Fostering Service ran 6 of these courses (compared with 5 the previous year) and they were attended by 58 delegates in total, (compared with 47 the previous year). For the first time this year bespoke preparation training was offered to friends and family foster carers. 3 such courses were run attended by 24 delegates in total.

### **6.2 CHILD CARE EMERGENCY FIRST AID**

- 6.2.1 As part of the application and assessment process, all applicants must complete an Emergency First Aid course. 10 courses were held during 2011/2012 and these were attended by a total of 123 delegates.

### **6.3 SONS AND DAUGHTERS**

- 6.3.1 'Sons and Daughters' is a one day programme that started in 2010 and mirrors the 'Skills to Foster' course. It is aimed at helping the children of prospective foster carers to consider their role in the process. It also helps increase their awareness of the needs of a child who has come into care.
- 6.3.2 During 2011/12, the Fostering Service ran 2 courses for children and young people aged between 8 – 16 years. In response to feedback from young people from fostering families, the service also provided a specialist training session for them on 'Moving On and Letting Go'.



## 6.4 INDUCTION

6.4.1 Following approval, foster carers enter their 12 month induction phase into the service and are required to complete the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) Training, Support and Development Standards for Foster Care. The implementation of the new standards has been supported by ongoing workshops for carers alongside group supervision for supporting social workers. Aside from having the opportunity to meet members of the service who work with looked after children, there are also opportunities to ask questions and receive essential information about the agency's policies and procedures. In addition, carers are made familiar with the comprehensive training opportunities available throughout their fostering career.

## 6.5 THE FOSTERING TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME

6.5.1 Each year, the service devises a comprehensive programme covering a wide variety of the skills and knowledge needed in order for carers to develop their careers in fostering. There were a total of 77 different courses on 36 subjects held over the year. This includes:

- Understanding the Mental Health issues for Looked After Children
- Safeguarding Children
- Introduction to Lifestory work
- Talking to Teenagers about sex and relationships
- Working with Self Harm
- Safer Caring
- Safeguarding Children Online
- Contact
- Managing Behaviour
- Helping in learning
- Attachment
- Allegations Awareness
- Understanding Diversity
- Food, Feelings and Strategies
- A Guide to Care Proceedings
- The Gypsy Roma and Travelling Communities
- Protective Behaviours
- Working with birth families
- Foetal Alcohol syndrome

6.5.2 Each carer is required to have a record of their training and development needs, although other alternatives to formal training courses are encouraged in order to meet the minimum standards. This can include home study, training, reading and also on-line training. This can be especially helpful for carers who find it hard to attend training dates. There is also the opportunity for carers to complete an NVQ level 3 in Caring for Children and Young People or BTEC in Advanced Foster Care Skills.

6.5.3 In total, 567 delegates attended training courses held over the year, a similar number to the previous year. This demonstrates the commitment that the agency has towards training foster carers and illustrates the willingness of carers to develop their own knowledge and skill base.

6.5.4 As at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2012, 59 foster carers have completed their CWDC workbooks. Workshops, surgeries and one to one appointments are facilitated for those who have still to complete their workbooks.

## SECTION 7 – SUPPORT FOR CARERS

- 7.0.1 Every foster carer from the agency receives regular supervision and support from a Fostering Social Worker. In addition, the agency provides foster carers with an Independent Advisor from the Fostering Network, a national organisation for foster carers. There are also local support groups of foster carers that meet regularly to discuss fostering issues and to enjoy occasional social events such as the annual awards presentation or a cheese and wine evening. Foster carers also have access to telephone support out of hours, and can access the Bedfordshire Foster Care Association, which is run by foster carers, for foster carers.
- 7.0.2 All new carers are also matched to a foster carer mentor who provides formal and practical guidance and support through the carer's first placement and beyond.

### 7.1 FOSTER CARERS' SUPPORT GROUPS

- 7.1.1 Foster Carers' Support Groups meet regularly in the north and south of the county. During the year, the Support Group North met 11 times and was attended by 130 delegates. During the same period, the Support Group South met 10 times and was attended by 72 delegates.
- 7.1.2 Some of the topics discussed included:- Leaving and After Care, The role of the Designated allegations Officer, and the role of the Fostering Review Officer. There were also fun activities such as craft and opportunities to socialise informally.
- 7.1.3 A men's support group meets approximately every 3 months and was attended by 20 delegates throughout the year. Guest speakers covered topics on Allegations, Autism awareness and the Foster Care Association.
- 7.1.4 The Family Link Support Group met twice during 2011/12 in the evenings. An average of 9 carers attended per meeting. One of the meetings had the Lead Nurse for Specialist Children's Services as the Guest speaker.
- 7.1.5 This year a support group specifically for family and friends foster carers was started. The group aims to meet every two months. Two groups were held, attended by 8 carers.
- 7.1.6 Towards the end of 2011 a support group for single carers was established and met monthly. The groups were attended by 12 different foster carers.
- 7.1.7 The annual Foster Carers Awards Ceremony and Social Event was held in May 2011 which was attended by 92 carers and 85 children. Staff and elected members also attended, including the Directors of Children's Services in both authorities. 11 long service awards were given out, and there was 1 award for carers who had completed their BTEC Level 3 and 4 in Advanced Skills in Foster Care.

### 7.2 THE MENTORING SCHEME

- 7.2.1 The Fostering Service offers peer mentoring to all new and existing carers. This service for carers, staffed by carers, offers encouragement, support, and opportunities for collaborative working. It also allows experienced foster carers the chance to develop professionally.

- 7.2.2 Carers who join the scheme are linked with a mentor who is an experienced foster carer themselves. Mentors are trained to support foster carers in their role. As well as offering support to new carers, sometimes mentoring can be offered to experienced carers when they are undergoing a particularly challenging time. The service currently employs 6 mentors – who have varying experiences of fostering, including age ranges and types of approval. This year 3 new mentors have been recruited to the scheme, including a mentor for friends and family foster carers.

### **7.3 THE OUT OF HOURS SERVICE**

- 7.3.1 Fostering Social Workers offer an 'out of hours' service for carers. A mobile telephone number has been dedicated to this service and all carers have access to the number. The service is available from 5.20pm – 11pm weekdays and from 9am-11pm during weekends and bank holidays. This service ensures that foster carers can readily access telephone support from an experienced fostering worker. Feedback from foster carers indicates that this service is highly valued.

### **7.4 THE FOSTER CARERS ASSOCIATION**

- 7.4.1 The Bedfordshire Foster Carers Association is run by foster carers and provides local support and social activities for foster carers. Both Councils actively encourage and support the Association and provide financial support and services in kind to assist with producing and circulating a quality newsletter.

### **7.5 BAAF AND THE FOSTERING NETWORK**

- 7.5.1 Both local authorities are full members of the British Association of Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) which is a leading national voluntary organisation working to promote best practice for children separated from their birth families. It is the leading organisation representing local authority and independent fostering agencies and provides training courses, practice guidance, research material, and a consultation and advice service to all its members.
- 7.5.2 The Fostering Service is a member of the BAAF Eastern Region, a group which meets quarterly to discuss and exchange best practice in the East Anglia region.
- 7.5.3 The Fostering Service is a member of The Fostering Network that works to promote fostering in the UK. All approved foster carers are also able to have individual membership funded by the service, as well as access to The Fostering Network Advice and Mediation Service.

## SECTION 8 - CONCLUSION

- 8.0.1 We have had another successful year, continuing to deliver a high quality service within a shared arrangement. The third year of this shared service has been positive and we continue to work in close partnership with both Bedford Borough and Central Bedfordshire to respond to the individual needs of each local council.
- 8.0.2 This year the service has faced some challenges from the significant increase in the referrals of children requiring a foster placement, due to the increase of looked after children in both councils. Whilst the overall number of children accommodated in in-house fostering placements has increased, the service has not been able to accommodate all children and the number of new placements made in Independent Fostering Agencies has significantly increased. In particular, both authorities have accommodated a number of sibling groups of three, four and five children, where we have struggled to find placements.
- 8.0.3 Our recruitment strategy continues to have a positive effect on our enquiry rate. Whilst overall the number of enquiries is slightly reduced from last year, the number of applications from prospective carers has increased once again. The increase in the number of foster care approvals and a reduction in resignations of carers demonstrates the success of our recruitment and retention programme. Throughout the whole of 2011 – 2012 we have had nearly 40 assessments ongoing at any one time (another increase from the previous year, which averaged 31 at any one time). We exceeded our recruitment target of 40 new fostering households during 2011-12.
- 8.0.4 The increase in numbers of looked after children, and the change in regulations concerning family and friends foster carers has changed significantly the numbers and types of assessment of these fostering arrangements. The number of friends and family assessments has doubled during the year, and coupled with a new statutory 16 week assessment timescale, the service has had to increase the staffing resources to meet these requirements.
- 8.0.5 This year we spent time and effort gathering information using various tools and research of our existing customers to enable us to formulate successful targeted recruitment campaigns to reach potential customers. By profiling our current foster carers and those that had previously responded to advertising were able to ascertain receptivity to certain marketing methods and advertising channels. This has led to the development of an internet and social networking based campaign for 2012-13 as well as the traditional advertising and marketing activity.
- 8.0.7 We have continued to develop our support for foster carers and two social work assistants continue to provide bespoke support to children and carers, with one worker experienced in supporting over 10 year olds and one worker specialising in under 10 year olds. This year we have expanded the specific tailored support offered to those fostering children from within their family or social network through specialist preparation training sessions and the establishment of a support group.
- 8.0.8 The Family Link and the Youth Care Schemes have both expanded this year and we aim to ensure that they run to capacity, thereby minimising the use of Independent Fostering Agencies.
- 8.0.9 The service has to be able to respond to the identified need for more children from Central Bedfordshire and Bedford Borough to be appropriately placed with in house carers. Furthermore we need to ensure we replenish the number of approved carers who will resign or retire from fostering. . We therefore aim to recruit 50 new fostering households in 2011-12.

8.0.10 In March 2012 following the annual review of the Shared Service Level Agreement it was decided to end the Shared Service Arrangement as of 31 January 2013. Key staff in both councils will therefore be meeting regularly during 2012 to plan the arrangements for February 2013 and beyond. This planning process will involve consultation with foster carers and staff to ensure that an effective fostering service that meets the needs of children can be maintained and developed.

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