

Appendix B

# **Fostering Agency**

**Annual Report**

**For the period  
2013/2014**



## CONTENTS

	<b>SECTION 1 - INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>3</b>
1.0	Introduction	3
1.1	Staffing/Service Structure	3
	<b>SECTION 2 – THE PANELS</b>	<b>4</b>
2.1	Report from Fostering Panel Chair – see Appendix 1 for full report	4
	<b>SECTION 3 – SPECIALISED FOSTERING</b>	<b>4</b>
3.1	The Family Link Scheme	4
3.2	The Youth Care Scheme	4
	<b>SECTION 4 – CHILDREN AND FOSTERING</b>	<b>4</b>
4.1	Children Referred for Fostering	4
4.2	Age, Gender and Ethnicity of Children Referred for Fostering	5
4.3	Sibling Groups of Children Referred for Fostering	6
4.4	Type of Fostering Placement Provided	6
4.5	Children in Placements at 31/3/14	6
	<b>SECTION 5 – FOSTER CARERS</b>	<b>6</b>
5.1	Fostering Enquiries	6
5.2	The Assessment Process of Foster Carers Enquiries, Assessments and Approvals	7
5.3	Ethnicity of Carers	7
	<b>SECTION 6 – TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT FOR FOSTER CARERS</b>	<b>8</b>
6.0	Training and Development for Foster Carers	8
6.1	Skills to Foster	8
6.2	Sons and Daughters	8
6.3	Induction	8
6.4	The Fostering Training and Development Programme	9
	<b>SECTION 7 – SUPPORT FOR CARERS</b>	<b>9</b>
7.0	Support for Carers	9
7.1	Foster Carers Support Groups	9
7.2	The Mentoring Scheme	10
7.3	The Out of Hours Service	10
7.4	The Foster Carers Association	10
7.5	B.A.A.F.	11
7.6	Ofsted	11
	<b>SECTION 8 – CONCLUSION</b>	<b>11</b>
8.0	Conclusion	11
	<b>APPENDICES 1 – REPORT FROM FOSTERING PANEL CHAIR</b>	<b>14</b>
9.1	Introduction	14
9.2	Panel Membership	14
9.3	Panel Support	16
9.4	Panel Roles / Tasks	16
9.5	Appraisals	17
9.6	Panel Training	17
9.7	Transparency and Openness	17
9.8	Quality Assurance Role	18
9.9	Objectives for 2014/2015	19
	<b>APPENDICES 2 – Panel Activity Statistics</b>	<b>21</b>

## SECTION 1 – INTRODUCTION

- 1.0.1 Following a local government re-organisation in April 2009 Central Bedfordshire Council hosted the Fostering Service as a shared one on behalf of Central Bedfordshire Council and Bedford Borough Council. This report describes the activities of both Councils' Fostering Agencies, up to the end of December 2013. Thereafter it reports on the sole activities of Central Bedfordshire's Fostering Agency.
- 1.0.2 The report will note the Fostering Agencies' achievements, clarifying the remit and focus of its work and identify recommendations for the development of the service. Attached to the report is the Fostering Panel Chair's report.

### 1.1 STAFFING/SERVICE STRUCTURE

- 1.1.1 The Fostering Service was made up of the following full-time equivalent staff as of 31<sup>st</sup> March 2014:
- 1 x full time Team Manager
  - 1 x full time Deputy Team Manager
  - 2 x Senior Practitioners
  - 13 x Social Workers
  - 1 x Social Work Assistant
  - 1 x Senior Social Work Assistant
  - 1 x Duty Worker
  - 1 x Training Co-ordinator
  - 1 x Recruitment and Marketing Manager
- 1.1.2 The service is supported by 2 full time administrators.
- 1.1.3 The workforce is diverse and includes staff of both genders, and from different European and black and minority ethnic groups.
- 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 ensure they understand and address issues of diversity when working with foster carers and children in care. Staff are encouraged to embrace and celebrate the rich dimensions of diversity contained within each individual.
- 1.1.5 Most staff have extensive post-qualifying experience, and a programme of induction and 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 Manager, Training coordinator, and the Panel Advisors and Secretaries who support the fostering and permanence panels.

## **SECTION 2 – THE PANELS**

### **2.1 REPORT FROM FOSTERING PANEL CHAIR**

- 2.1.1 The attached Fostering Panel Chair's Report (Appendix 1), includes valuable information and feedback on the function of panel business. Statistical information regarding panel business is attached (Appendix 2).

## **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 Foster carers 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 2014, there were 7 Family Link carers approved. These carers were supporting 19 children by providing regular short breaks. There was also 1 salaried family link fee-based carer who was linked to 6 children who had complex medical needs.

### **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 of 31<sup>st</sup> March 2014, there were 6 approved Youth Care households, caring for 4 children.

## **SECTION 4 – CHILDREN AND FOSTERING**

### **4.1 CHILDREN REFERRED FOR FOSTERING**

- 4.1.1 Between 1<sup>st</sup> April 2013 and 31<sup>st</sup> March 2014, the Fostering Service received a total of 449 referrals for foster placements of which 323 were for children becoming newly looked after. The remainder of referrals were for a change of placement.

- 4.1.2 Of the 449 referrals received, 219 were Central Bedfordshire children and 230 were Bedford Borough children. 115 of the referrals were for newly looked after children and were placed in house, 4 young people were placed in residential units and 59 children (33 Central Bedfordshire and 26 Bedford Borough children) were placed in an Independent Fostering Agency placement as a result of becoming looked after. 145 of the referrals did not result in a placement. This would have been for various reasons, for example, Section 20 was not agreed on or the Interim Care Order was not granted.
- 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 124 occasions, with 15 children having regular respite as part of their care plan.
- 4.1.5 Of the new referrals for foster placements, 16 came through the Emergency Duty Service, an increase of 5 from 2012/13.
- 4.1.6 As at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2014 there were a total of 85 children living with in-house foster carers and 109 living in Independent Fostering Agency provision. This represents 56% children placed with IFA carers and 44% with in house carers.

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

- 4.2.1 Over 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   | 43 children     |
| 6-12 years  | 19 children     |
| 13-18 years | 19 young people |

From Bedford Borough the age distribution was:

0-5 years	19 children
6-12 years	6 children
13-18 years	9 young people

The age profile of referrals has changed with more children now being referred in the 0-5 age group than in previous years.

- 4.2.2 Of the 81 children referred from Central Bedfordshire, 49 were female and 32 male. Of the 34 children referred from Bedford Borough 20 were female and 14 were male.
- 4.2.3 In terms of ethnicity of the 81 children referred from Central Bedfordshire, 55 were white/British, 7 were white/English, 5 were white/other, 1 was white/Irish, 8 were mixed white/black Caribbean, 1 was Asian, 1 was Chinese, 1 was black British and 2 were recorded as white/traveller. Of the 34 children referred from Bedford Borough, 20 were white/British, 5 were white/English, 1 was mixed white/black Caribbean, 4 were mixed white/Asian, 1 was mixed other, 2 were black African and 1 was black/British.

### **4.3 SIBLING GROUPS OF CHILDREN REFERRED FOR FOSTERING**

4.3.1 There were 30 sibling groups within the children referred for fostering during the year. This comprised 22 sibling groups from Central Bedfordshire and 8 from Bedford Borough. One of the significant criteria for matching children with carers is enabling them to be placed with siblings wherever possible. 4 of the sibling groups comprised 3 or more children. Large sibling groups are more difficult to match with suitable foster placements, particularly when seeking to place them together, which is the aim wherever possible.

### **4.4 TYPE OF FOSTER PLACEMENT PROVIDED**

4.4.1 Of the 174 children placed in foster placements this year, 115 were placed with carers assessed and approved by Central Bedfordshire Council on behalf of both Councils. The advantage of this is that staff in the service had prior knowledge of the children and positive working relationships with the carers, thus enhancing fostering support for these placements.

### **4.5 CHILDREN IN PLACEMENT AT 31<sup>ST</sup> MARCH 2014**

4.5.1 As at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2014, there were 85 fostering households with full fostering approval, and a further 12 with temporary Regulation 24 approval pending a full Family and Friends assessment.

4.5.2 A total of 85 children were in these placements, while 109 were in IFA placements.

4.5.3 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 18 preferred providers. After the first year of this arrangement there was evidence that the average costs of placements had reduced and there were clearer expectations in respect of quality and outcome for children.

4.5.5 The number of children in external placements has significantly increased over the past few years. A new fees scheme has been introduced (effective from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2014) in Central Bedfordshire. It is envisioned that this and the revised recruitment activities will help change this trend.

## **SECTION 5 – FOSTER CARERS**

### **5.1 FOSTERING ENQUIRIES**

5.1.1 In 2013 -14, there were 164 enquiries by people who were interested in becoming Foster Carers compared with 213 in 2012 -13. This is a year on year (YOY) decrease of -29%.

5.1.2 The best 3 months for enquiries were August 2013 with 30, July with 18, then October with 15. The worst month was during the build up to the disaggregation in December, when only 1 enquiry came through.

- 5.1.3 Numbers remained low during January and February 2014 during the transition period and then picked up again in March 2014, with 13. This is only 2 enquiries less YOY than when it was a joint service and should be recognised as an achievement.
- 5.1.4 From April to December 2013, 53 enquiries were from Central Bedfordshire residents, 53 enquiries were from Bedford Borough residents and 11 were from outside of both areas. In January, February and March, 16 enquiries were from Central Bedfordshire residents, 9 enquiries were thought to be from Bedford Borough residents, but they were recorded as unknown, and 4 were from outside of both areas.

## **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 In July 2013 amendments to the Children Act 1989 brought changes to the assessment process for general foster carers. There is now a 2 stage assessment process and an expectation that the full assessment is presented to fostering panel and a recommendation made about approval within an 8-month timescale. The Fostering Service generally completes all such assessments within a 6 month timescale.

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.

In terms of assessments started between April 1<sup>st</sup> 2013 and March 31<sup>st</sup> 2014 there were 103. These assessments would have been a mixture of Regulation 24 assessments, full Family and Friends assessments, assessments on prospective foster carers wanting to provide general fostering or Special Guardianship assessments. During the year there were 58 requests to agree temporary approval of a connected person as a foster carer to allow an immediate placement (Regulation 24 of Care Planning, Placements and Care Review (England) Regulation 2010). 21 of these carers were given temporary approval and went on to be fully assessed as Family and Friend carers. 37 of these Regulation 24 placements were not agreed.

## **5.3 ETHNICITY OF CARERS**

- 5.3.1 At 31<sup>st</sup> March 2014, 13 out of 85 fostering households included carers from black or ethnic minority groups. At 13.7% this ratio broadly reflects the population in Bedfordshire.
- 5.3.2 Between 1<sup>st</sup> April 2013 and 31<sup>st</sup> March 2014, the agency approved 27 fostering households. 23 of these were White British, 3 were Asian and 1 was from a Turkish 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 2013/2014, the Fostering Service ran 5 of these courses and they were attended by 29 delegates (16 households) in total. In addition, bespoke preparation training was offered to friends and family foster carers. 5 such courses were organised and were attended by 26 delegates (16 households).

6.1.4 As part of the application and assessment process, all applicants must complete an Emergency First Aid course. 7 courses were held during 2013/2014 and these were attended by a total of 123 delegates.

### **6.2 SONS AND DAUGHTERS**

6.2.1 During 2013/14, the Fostering Service ran holiday activities for sons and daughters of foster carers which were activity based and aimed to support them with the impact of fostering in their family. This included attendance at an outdoor activity centre (20 attendees) and horse riding (12 children). 35 children also attended a Christmas party in December 2013.

6.2.2 A joint workshop for sons and daughters of foster carers and looked after children was also held which included drama and cooking workshops, as well as first aid. 15 children attended this workshop and the feedback was very positive.

### **6.3 INDUCTION**

6.3.1 Following approval, foster carers enter their 12 month induction phase into the service and are required to complete Training, Support and Development (TSD) Standards. The implementation of the 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.



## **6.4 THE FOSTERING TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME**

- 6.4.1 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 38 subjects held over the year.
- 6.4.2 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.
- 6.4.3 In total, 587 delegates attended training courses held over the year, which is an increase on 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.
- 6.4.4 A total of 58 households have now completed their TSD standards. 15 are still in the process of completing in the required timescale.

## **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, additional support groups were provided for men, single carers and Family Link carers. A total of 24 support groups ran with 170 delegates. Additional and regular support groups were also provided for Youth Carers. Many of these support groups had speakers on relevant subjects. Although educational, foster carers were also able to enjoy socialising with other foster carers in an informal setting.
- 7.1.2 A support group specifically for Family and Friends carers continued in 2013/2014. The group meets quarterly and is open to foster carers, and those looking after related children subject to Residence Orders and Special Guardianship Orders.
- 7.1.3 Foster Carers Talk Time is organised every 3 months (previously known as the foster carers forum). These meetings give foster carers the opportunity to meet with managers and senior

managers to discuss fostering issues. It also allows the Corporate Parenting Service to update foster carers on developments within the service. Following the Talk Time meeting a newsletter is sent out to all foster carers updating them of areas discussed at Talk Time as well as providing information on a whole host of other topics relevant to fostering.

- 7.1.4 The annual Foster Carers Awards Ceremony and Social Event was held in May 2013 which was well attended by foster carers, their children and children in care. Staff and elected members also attended, including the Directors of Children's Services from Bedford Borough and Central Bedfordshire. 11 long service awards were given out on the evening for those achieving 5, 10,15 and 20 years of service.
- 7.1.5 One set of foster carers also received MBEs in the Queen's New Years Honours.

## **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 has 3 mentors who have varying experiences of fostering, including age ranges and types of approval. 6 more mentors will be recruited in the forthcoming year.

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

- 7.3.1 Fostering managers and 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. Outside these hours foster carers can contact the Emergency Duty Team.

## **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. With the disaggregation of Central Bedfordshire and Bedford Borough's Fostering Service, Bedfordshire Foster Carers Association still continues and has widened its remit. As well as supporting carers from the 2 Local Authorities they now work closely with carers from I.F.A.'s in the local area too.

## 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.

## 7.6 OFSTED

- 7.6.1 Ofsted last inspected the Fostering Service in December 2012 when the service was judged to be good overall.
- 7.6.2 At that time Ofsted made 8 recommendations, an action plan to address the recommendations was drawn up and action completed in respect of all recommendations by 31<sup>st</sup> March 2013.

## SECTION 8 – CONCLUSION

- 8.0.1 We have had another successful year, continuing to deliver a high quality service both as a shared arrangement and as a single agency since January 2014. Although the two authorities have now disaggregated we will continue to work in partnership with Bedford Borough, for example, joint training initiatives. Due to the disaggregation some Central Bedfordshire Council children continue to be in placement with Bedford Borough's foster carers and vice versa. Both authorities continue to work together regarding these placements to ensure children's needs are met and their care is not affected by the ending of the shared service.
- 8.0.2 This year the service has continued to face the challenge 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 large sibling groups where we have struggled to find placements. With the introduction of a fee scheme as of 1<sup>st</sup> April 2014 it is hoped the pool of in-house carers will increase and we will become less reliant on the use of IFA placements.
- 8.0.3 The increase in numbers of looked after children, and the change in regulations in 2011 concerning Family and Friends foster carers has continued to mean significantly more placements with relatives are subject to fostering regulations. The number of family and friends assessments continues to increase and coupled with changes to the Family Justice system, particularly in relation to timescales have created challenges in completing complex assessments in very tight timescales. Many of these Family and Friends assessments

progress into SGO placements which have provided positive outcomes for those children. There has been a sharp increase in the number of SGOs granted this year compared to previous years. During 2013-14 there were 20 SGOs granted compared to 12 in 2012-13 and 12 in 2011-12.

- 8.0.5 We again reviewed our advertising and marketing campaign to ensure maximum value for money and effectiveness. Since becoming a single agency Fostering Service, we have revised the Marketing and Recruitment Strategy, aiming to increase its presence in the community and promote CBC as the Fostering Service of choice.
- 8.0.6 The service has to be able to respond to the identified needs of children from Central Bedfordshire so that they are appropriately placed with foster 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 20 new fostering households (net gain) in 2014-15 including assessment of Family and Friends carers for children who otherwise would be placed outside their family network.
- 8.0.8 In January 2014 the Shared Service Arrangement between Central Bedfordshire Council and Bedford Borough Council came to an end. This process was completed successfully with minimal disruption to staff, foster carers and the children placed. The Fostering Service successfully moved offices on 17<sup>th</sup> March 2014. They are now co-located with the Looked After Children colleagues and come under the umbrella of the newly created Corporate Parenting Service. This has already had a positive impact on the service provided to children in care and foster carers. The LAC and fostering service are now working much more closely together in order to ensure the needs of children in care are met in the most effective way.

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## APPENDICES 1 – REPORT FROM FOSTERING PANEL CHAIR

### 9.1 INTRODUCTION

9.1.1 From April 2009 to December 2013 Central Bedfordshire hosted the Fostering Services as a shared service for Central Bedfordshire and Bedford Borough. From January 2014 the two services separated and each Authority became responsible for its own fostering provision. The Panels also reflected this pattern. This Report is considering the period from April 2013 to March 2014. So, during that time two different systems operated. From April 2013 to December 2013 there were two Panels dealing with fostering work – the Fostering Panel and the Fostering and Permanence Panel. Each of these Panels met at least once a month (often more frequently) and each was Chaired by one of two Independent Chairs who liaised closely to ensure that there was consistency and co-ordination. From January 2014 each Authority set up its own Fostering and Permanence Panel. It is still very early days for the new Panels but the current picture seems to indicate that each Panel is likely to need to meet about 18 times a year. This Report will refer only to the Fostering and Permanence Panel for Central Bedfordshire for the time period January to March 2014.

### 9.2 PANEL MEMBERSHIP

9.2.1 I (Kathy Bird) have chaired the Fostering Panel for Central Beds and Bedford Borough since October 2005. My background is as a qualified child care social worker and Manager since 1976 and I have worked mainly in the areas of Fostering, Adoption, Child Protection, Children with Disabilities and Residential Care. My colleague, Marion Hundleby, Chaired the Fostering and Permanence Panel, also since 2005. Marion is also a very experienced child care social worker and Manager who has specialised in Fostering, Permanence and Adoption work. Both Marion and I have worked as Independent Consultants for over 10 years and have worked with a wide range of local authorities and voluntary organisations. We are both independent of the two Authorities – a requirement of the Fostering Regulations 2011.

9.2.2 From April 2013 to December 2013 there was a Central list of Panel members that each Panel could call upon to be quorate. Panel membership was drawn from the following members:

Social Worker	Senior Practitioner (Adoption) CBC – Vice Chair
Social Worker	Deputy Manager (Adoption) CBC – Vice Chair
Social Worker	Independent – Vice Chair,
Educational Psychologist	CBC
Social Worker	Deputy Manager (LAC) – CBC
Social Worker	Family Group Meetings – Team Manager
Elected Member	BBC
Elected Member	CBC
Foster Care	IFA
Foster Carer	IFA
Health Visitor	BBC
Adoptive Parent	Independent
Gypsy and Traveller Educational Consultant	Independent
Family Group Meeting Co-Ordinator	Independent
Social Worker	Independent

- 9.2.3 All Panel members have shown a very high commitment to attending panels and it is obvious from their contributions that they put a great deal of time, thought and dedication into their roles on Panel. There has never been a problem in getting Panels together that are quorate (minimum of 5 members with Independent Chair and at least one social worker), even when calling additional and extended Panels.
- 9.2.4 Panel members receive their papers 7 working days in advance of Panel. Reading the papers supplied in preparation for discussion is a considerable undertaking as the papers may involve up to five hours of close reading. All members devote a great deal of time and personal commitment to the work of the panel and invariably come well prepared.
- 9.2.5 **Transition to Single Panel**  
In October 2013 the formal process began to split into two Panels – one for BBC, one for CBC.
- 9.2.6 I agreed with my colleague Chair and Managers that I would take on the CBC Fostering and Permanence Panel. We then circulated a document to all Panel members to help them decide which Panel they wanted to sit on in the future and where they were needed. Some Panel members such as Elected members and direct employees had no choice as to which Panel they sat on in the future. For the more Independent Panel members the process, in the end, ran very smoothly and most Panel members were able to sit on the Panel of their choice. A number of Panel members have opted to sit on both CBC and BBC Fostering and Permanence Panels.
- 9.2.7 In CBC we now have 11 Panel members on the Central list to call on for each Panel as well as two very experienced and competent Vice Chairs (one CBC Senior Practitioner, one Independent Social Worker).
- 9.2.8 **Areas for improvement**  
*Getting the balance of Panel members right on any Panel is a constant process of review as Panel Membership changes. It would be useful to recruit some new Panel members who are not involved with other Panels as this will help with availability on extra dates. It would also be useful if any new members had not done direct work in CBC before as this would help with the cases where Panel members are not allowed to sit due to conflicts of interest.*
- 9.2.9 **Diversity**  
Across the two Panels, and now in CBC, there has been a wide range of background, ethnicity and culture. Panel members are white British, black British, South African, Nigerian, Italian and American. Age ranges go from 33 years to 66 years of age. There are people who are currently fostering and people who have adopted. Some Panel members have very young families of their own, one Panel member was looked after outside their family as a young child, and many Panel members have experience of adoption and fostering in their immediate family. One Panel member is a wheelchair user and many Panel members have experience of disability in their immediate family.
- 9.2.10 **Areas for improvement**  
*It has always been a difficult issue to recruit enough males to get a balance at Panel and also to get people who are at the younger end of the age spectrum. On occasions Panels have had to go ahead with no males present and on two occasions this has been questioned by the Carers attending Panel. Getting a better balance of age and gender on Panel should be a high priority for the Panel Adviser to assist the Chair with in the year 2014 / 15.*

## 9.3 PANEL SUPPORT

### 9.3.1 Panel Support

Panel work is supported throughout the whole process by the Panel Adviser. From March 2013 to December 2013 Panel had a very experienced and positive Panel Adviser who worked tirelessly to help us get Panel work as on track as possible. Fortunately for the Team (but unfortunately for the Panel!) that Manager then took over as CBC Team Manager for Fostering where her skills will be well used.

9.3.2 Within CBC presently, the role of Adviser to the Fostering Panel is still not filled permanently and we have so far had two Agency workers in this role. Both Agency workers have worked very hard to do their best to make things work but being new to the role, not knowing the Area or the staff and trying to do this at a time of such change has meant that consistency and follow through of some aspects of Panel work has not been as thorough as we have been used to.

9.3.3 Throughout the whole year Panel has been supported by two excellent Panel Administrators. These two workers have been working for CBC and BBC for many years and have now transferred across to CBC. I cannot speak highly enough of their effort, efficiency, organisational skills and good humour throughout difficult times. CBC is indeed fortunate to have two such dedicated workers and as Panel Chair I value their contribution very highly.

9.3.4 A Medical Adviser to the Panel gives advice in writing in advance of Panel Meetings and on occasions over this year the Medical Adviser has been asked to provide further detail on specific cases or conditions to better inform Panel's decision making.

9.3.5 A Legal Adviser to the Panel gives advice in writing to Panel Meetings, this advice is usually available on the day of Panel.

### 9.3.6 Areas for improvement

*It is imperative that the role of Panel Adviser is permanently recruited to as soon as possible. It is this role which provides the glue which ensures that the work of the Panel is carried through into Management, the teams and into everyday work.*

## 9.4 PANEL ROLES / TASKS

9.4.1 The Panel task includes addressing work presented as follows:

- Applications from prospective foster carers for a range of tasks
- Applications relating to Family and Friends (Connected Persons) carers for children already or about to be placed with them
- Taking a view in Connected Persons cases where an additional 8 week extension to temporary approval is proposed in order for assessments to be completed
- First Annual Reviews of foster carers and other Reviews which discuss continuation of approval, extension of approval or Standards of Care
- Matching of children to long term foster carers
- De-Registration of carers
- Quality Assurance of work presented



- 9.4.2 Panel makes a recommendation on whether to approve prospective carers or re-approve approved carers to the Agency Decision Maker who then either ratifies or rejects the recommendation. Applicants have the right of review through the Independent Review Mechanism (IRM) or a return to Panel for the case to be re-heard.

## 9.5 APPRAISALS

- 9.5.1 The appraisal of all members takes place annually. All involved value this opportunity to consider Panel functioning, outside the day to day work of panel. The Appraisals, conducted by the Panel Chair and the Panel Adviser, reflect on the Panel member's contribution for the year, any comments they have on improving processes and any training they wish to undertake over the next year.

## 9.6 PANEL TRAINING

- 9.6.1 There have been two full days training offered to all Panel members in the last year.
- 9.6.2 In July 2013 a Training Day was held for Fostering and Permanence Panel Members together with members of the Fostering Team. This day focussed on the child's journey through placement and covered specific sessions on Family Group Conferences, Family and Friends Assessments and Support, Duty and Matching, Resilience and Transitions, Delegated Authority and Internet Safety. It was a very positive and varied day and the day is one of the few opportunities that Panel members and Team members get to meet and talk together in a less formal setting.
- 9.6.3 In November 2013, Fostering and Permanence Panel members were given the opportunity (which a number of members took up) to attend the Adoption Panel Training Day which was looking at the Adoption Reforms 2013. As these reforms include new provisions for fostering to adopt there was a lively and positive exchange of views and everyone learned a great deal and had the chance to work alongside Adoption Panel members and Adoption Team members.
- 9.6.4 As well as these two days both Panels use any time that is left on agenda time whenever suitable to have short sessions of "Bite Size" training. Over the last year this has covered the areas of – The Role of the Health Visitor and The Role of the Educational Psychologist, with particular reference to Looked After Children.

## 9.7 TRANSPARENCY AND OPENNESS

### 9.7.1 Carers attending Panel

It is now the usually accepted process for Carers to attend for most of the time their case is heard at Panel. The main exception to this is the time that Panel reaches its recommendation but also a time for any third party information which needs to be discussed. Although Carers are often daunted at the prospect of coming to Panel, many of them find the time much less daunting than they feared and feel included in the process as part of the wider Fostering Team right from the start. Carers always have a social worker with them, and some (often single carers) have chosen to bring a friend with them for support. One or two have even gone as far as to say they enjoyed it! (See section on Feedback below).

### 9.7.2 Observers

Student social workers, members of staff on induction, members of Senior Management and prospective panel members, have all joined panel to observe over the last year and there are few Panels without one observer. Panel welcomes observing at meetings. It is an excellent way to see how Panel works and helps to demystify the process, particularly for those who will, in the future, present cases to Panel for the first time.

### 9.7.3 Panel Feedback

Applicants and social workers attending panel are asked to complete and return an evaluation form - this information is fed back to the next Panel and helps to shape panel direction moving forward. Honest feedback is encouraged and has had a significant effect on how Panels are run.

9.7.4 The most common feedback has been how daunting Carers find it to walk into a room with so many people present. So, over the last year we have tried to cut down Panel membership from the ten previously stipulated to an average of 6 or 7 Panel Members. This gives us a small safety margin to meet the statutory Quoracy of 5 Panel members in case at the last minute anyone is unexpectedly unable to attend or has to declare an interest in a particular case.

9.7.5 Two specific issues have occurred in feedback that Panel have had to think about and make changes:

- One case of foster carers who adopted and then wanted to foster again. The Carers were unhappy that Panel did not agree that they could continue fostering without a break. In this case the Panel Chair and the Team Manager for Fostering met with the Carers, answered their specific concerns and Panel have now asked CBC to draw up guidelines on the issue of foster carers who adopt and then wish to continue fostering.
- Another area of feedback was from a child care worker who was not given a copy of the fostering report before Panel and felt that her views were therefore not represented on paper or fully heard in Panel. This matter is subject to on-going work between child care and fostering and the Panel is looking at wider learning outcomes from this case.

9.7.6 However, comments from most people attending Panel have been largely positive:

- *"Very friendly, welcoming and appreciative",*
- *"The Panel were open and honest to us. They allowed us time to talk and they listened to what we were saying. It was a very good experience."*
- *"Constructive and friendly, a positive experience".*
- *"We left feeling positive and pleased that the Panel were appreciative of our work with fostered children".*
- *"We both felt very pleased that the Panel approved us as Long Term Carers. When we met A from school the first thing he asked was "Am I staying with you until I am 18?". We said yes and he was very happy. One very happy little boy and two very happy Carers!"*

## 9.8 QUALITY ASSURANCE ROLE

9.8.1 Panel covers its Quality Assurance roles at a number of levels:

### 9.8.2 Individual Issues

If there are matters which relate to a specific case these are picked up at the time and fed back to the child care and fostering teams by the Panel Adviser.

### 9.8.3 Practice Issues

At every Panel the Panel considers whether matters have cropped up which may be affecting more than one Carer / worker which need to be followed through. These issues are taken back by the Panel Adviser to the relevant Team Manager and then the Panel Adviser will feed back to Panel any outcomes. Over the last year examples of matters which have arisen in this category include:

- First Reviews coming to Panel with considerable delay,
- Assessments not providing enough analysis,
- Carers having such a high turnover of child care workers that they have felt unsupported,
- Foster Carers helping looked after children to complete their feedback forms about the placement rather than this being independently supported,
- Foster Carers being asked to do complex tasks without adequate support e.g. returning a baby back to birth parents, visiting a baby in hospital where a potentially violent parent was also present.

### 9.8.4 Assessments and Reports

Panel will often comment directly to workers and Carers if they have been presented with well written reports. Panel also comment in the feedback section of Panel when Reports received have been particularly good or have been lacking in some way. These matters are taken back to the Team Managers by the Panel Adviser so that staff receive both compliments and requests for improvement via their Team Manager.

9.8.5 Overall, in the year from April 2013 to March 2014 the standard of Report writing has been very good. The weakest area in Reports has on some occasions been “telling the story” of what has happened to Carers or children without providing analysis of this.

### 9.8.6 Panel Chairs Meetings

Throughout the year the Panel Chairs have met on approximately a 3 monthly basis with the Panel Advisers, the Head of Service and the Agency Decision Makers. This has been of particular importance during the disaggregation of the Fostering service to BBC and CBC. *It remains to be seen what frequency and nature of Panel Chairs meetings will need to be held in 2014 / 15.*

### 9.8.7 Eastern Region Panel Chairs Meetings

As Panel Chair I have attended all of the quarterly Meetings of the Eastern Regional Fostering Panel Chairs, along with one of the Vice Chairs. These meetings take place in Cambridge and Ipswich and are a time for Panel Chairs to meet together to consider the wider national picture for fostering and to improve practice. All meetings are attended by and supported by BAAF and Fostering Network. These meetings have been extremely useful and a number of matters from these meetings have been fed back into CBC.

## 9.9 OBJECTIVES FOR 2014/2015

- Firmly establish the new CBC Fostering and Permanence Panel into a strong working team.
- Continue to lobby for the Panel Adviser's role to be recruited to on a permanent basis in order to provide continuity and consistency throughout the whole Panel process.
- Review and extend the diversity of panel membership.
- Work on the liaison between the Panel and the Fostering and Child Care teams to assist with joint working.

- Monitor the Fostering Team's new goals to get all first Reviews to Panel in a timely manner and to monitor Fostering Assessments to ensure the right level of analysis is provided.
- Establish a new pattern within CBC of Panel Chairs meetings with Head of Service and Agency Decision Makers.

Kathy J Bird  
Panel Chair – CBC Fostering and Permanence  
April 2014

## APPENDICES 2 – PANEL ACTIVITY

- 10.1.1 Between 1<sup>st</sup> April 2013 – 31<sup>st</sup> December 2013 the Fostering Panel met 9 times and recommended that 13 households should be approved as foster carers.
- 10.1.2 Of the 13 carers newly approved by the Fostering Panel, 3 were approved for the Family Link Scheme, 3 Family & Friends and 12 mainstream carers (one of which was also approved as a Youth Carer).
- 10.1.3 Between 1<sup>st</sup> April 2013 – 31<sup>st</sup> December 2013 the Fostering and Joint Permanence Panel met 10 times and recommended that 15 households should be approved as foster carers.
- 10.1.4 Of the 15 carers newly approved by the Fostering and Joint Permanence Panel, 12 were approved for Family & Friends and 3 mainstream carers.
- 10.1.5 From 1<sup>st</sup> January 2014 – 31<sup>st</sup> March 2014 the Fostering and Permanence Panel met 5 times and recommended that 2 households should be approved as foster carers. Both of which are Family & Friends.
- 10.1.6 During the year 1<sup>st</sup> April 2013 – 31<sup>st</sup> March 2014 30 households were approved as foster carers (which compares with 29 the previous year).
- 10.1.7 Between 1<sup>st</sup> April 2013 – 31<sup>st</sup> December 2013 the Fostering and Joint Permanence Panel recommended a Plan for 1 child for permanent / long-term fostering.
- 10.1.8 Between 1<sup>st</sup> April 2013 – 31<sup>st</sup> December 2013 13 children were recommended for a match with foster carers at the Fostering and Joint Permanence Panel.
- 10.1.9 Between 1<sup>st</sup> January 2014 – 31<sup>st</sup> March 2014 6 children were recommended for a match with foster carers at the Fostering and Permanence Panel.
- 10.1.10 Between 1<sup>st</sup> April 2013 – 31<sup>st</sup> December 2013 the Fostering Panel considered first annual reviews for 12 households, 7 of which required changes of approval and 5 of which required no change of approval. In addition there were 7 requests for change of approval and 1 review following allegations/complaint.
- 10.1.11 Between 1<sup>st</sup> April 2013 – 31<sup>st</sup> December 2013 the Fostering and Joint Permanence Panel considered first annual reviews for 6 households, 3 of which required changes of approval and 3 required no change of approval. In addition there were 5 requests for change of approval.
- 10.1.12 Between 1<sup>st</sup> January 2014 – 31<sup>st</sup> March 2014 the Fostering and Permanence Panel considered first annual reviews for 7 households, 6 of which required changes of approval and 1 required no change of approval. In addition there were 2 requests for change of approval, 1 following an allegation/complaint and 1 review not recommended by Panel.
- 10.1.13 In total 1<sup>st</sup> April 2013 – 31<sup>st</sup> March 2014 88 fostering households attended one or other of the panels, this compares with 97 in 2012/2013.

10.1.14 22 fostering households resigned at their request in 2012/13 and 1 household had their approval withdrawn by the Fostering Agency. This total was similar to the 21 in 2011/12. 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 52 during the year, a significant increase on the 30 net gain of placements in 2011/12.