

Durham County Council Fostering Service

The Annual Report of The Fostering Service 2017-18



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1. Introduction and Overview

This report summarises the activity within Durham County Council's Fostering Service during the reporting period from 1st April 2017 to 31st March 2018. The report will identify and analyse the performance of the Fostering Service, including the Fostering Panels, reflect upon the development of the service over the past 12 months and to set out the strategic priorities for the service in the coming year and beyond.

The past year has been a year of change, which has brought with it a number of challenges and opportunities for the Fostering Service. Following an Independent review of the service a formal re-structure of the fostering service was completed in January 2018. The structure can be seen at [appendix 1]. The biggest change in the structure is the newly created Integrated Placements Service which will improve, centralise and co-ordinate all aspects of children's placements and lead to improved matching and increased placement stability. It will also ensure more effective management oversight of all placement provision for Looked After Children. The Fostering Support Teams were re-configured to generic locality focussed support teams. The aim of this is to ensure the service is more consistent and the workload demands are more equitably balanced.

The Fostering Service has re-located from its longstanding office base in Langley Moor to new premises in Seaham at Spectrum 8. The relocation took place in March 2018 and whilst early days the new office facilities are much improved and suited to service needs. The Fostering Service has embraced this change and there has been no disruption to service delivery.

The numbers of Looked After Children have remained more stable than during previous years, although the number remain significantly higher than they were 2 years ago. This has continued to place a pressure on placement availability and sufficiency. To respond to this a strengthened marketing and recruitment campaign has been implemented and a rigorous approach to assessment of carers has been maintained. In line with statutory requirements CYPS has a revised Sufficiency Strategy in place to improve recruitment of foster carers and to maximise all placement capacity for Looked After Children.

The Fostering Service has continued to ensure the focus on support to foster carers is maintained. This continues to be one of the strengths of the Fostering Service and this is consistently echoed in the positive feedback from foster carers.

1.1 Legal Framework

The Legal Framework of the Fostering Service is outlined as follows:

- The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011.
- Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards 2011.
- The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 4: Fostering Services.
- The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010.
- Family and Friends Care: Statutory Guidance for Local Authorities 2010.
- The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 2: The Care Planning Placement and Case Review.
- The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review and Fostering Services (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2013 which came into force on 1 July 2013.
- The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review and Fostering Services (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2015, which came into force on 1 April 2015

2 Durham County Council Fostering Service

2.1 Context

Following the re-structure of the Fostering Service over the past year the service now has five separate teams, whose roles and responsibilities are set out below;

- **Recruitment and Assessment Team – Team Manager Florence Coulter**
The team are responsible for the recruitment and assessment of new foster carers through contributing to the marketing and advertising of the service and ensure that prospective new foster carers are suitably prepared, assessed and reports presented to the Fostering Panel for consideration and approval by the Agency Decision Maker.
- **Fostering Support Team North – Team Manager Lorraine Botcherby**
The team are responsible for the ongoing support, training and supervision of all mainstream carers and family and friends carers who reside in the north of the County. The team also support relevant carers who reside outside of the county.
- **Fostering Support Team South – Team Manager Jenny Rowan**
The team are responsible for the ongoing support, training and supervision of all mainstream carers and family and friends carers who reside in the south of the County. The team also support relevant carers who reside outside of the county.
- **Fostering Support Team East – Team Manager Alison Poulter (formerly Christine Kuate)**
The team are responsible for the ongoing support, training and supervision of all mainstream carers and family and friends carers who reside in the south of the County. The team also support relevant carers who reside outside of the county.
- **Placements Service – Team Manager Victoria McDowell**
The team is responsible for the coordination of all placements for all Looked After Children in Durham. This involves short term and long term placements, and is an integrated team which is also represented by the Commissioning Team. The Placement Service provides oversight of all placements, including those externally commissioned and any bespoke individual packages of care and support.

During the last year the Agency Decision Makers for the Fostering Service have been:

- Karen Robb, Strategic Manager, Looked After Children and Permanence
- Mark Gurney, Strategic Manager, Families First
- Chris Bell, Operations Manager, Fostering, Adoption and the Full Circle

2.2 Fostering Panels

The Fostering Service has continued to function with 3 Fostering Panels, per month. The Panels are required to be Chaired Independently and represented by highly skilled and experienced individuals from a wide ranging personal and professional backgrounds from within Children's Services and including independent representatives and elected members.

The Fostering Panels have considered:

- 78 new carer assessments
- 27 permanent matches for children
- 69 foster carer reviews

The Fostering Service continues to be extremely grateful for the ongoing dedication and commitment of all panel members.

2.3 Developments and achievements of the Fostering Service 2017-18

The progress of the Fostering Service is considered in the context of the continuing high number of Looked After Children in Durham at the current time.

- At 31 March 2018 there were 795 children being Looked After by Durham and whilst this represents a decrease since 2017 (810) it remains an overall increase of 29.82% since 2015. This puts pressure on all resources for Looked After Children and the service has sought to be dynamic and innovative in its approach to meeting these challenges to ensure sufficient carers to meet need.
- In relation to recruitment, the service successfully approved 28 new carers during the past year, which represents a year on year increase following 25 new approvals in 2016-17 and 22 new approvals in 2015-16. This equated to 54 potential placements.
- The development of the new Placements Team brought a focus on ensuring that the service matched the right children to the right carers to get the best possible placement for children and young people. A key focus was to maximise the use of in house foster carers and the work of the team resulted in an increase in use of foster care provision from 374 on 31 January 2018 to 400 on 31 March 2018.
- The service has ensured that permanent matches have been approved by panels for 27 children over the past year which gives these children the stability and certainty they need to achieve their potential as they grow and develop.
- There remains a commitment across Children's Services to support young people leaving care through supporting them to remain in their placement under Staying Put arrangements, where this is the wish of the

young person and deemed in their best interests. On 31 March 2018 there were 22 young people in placements under Staying Put arrangements, supporting them into independence.

- The Fostering Service has strong links with the development of the Supporting Solutions Service which aims to support the children on the Edge of Care, including those Looked After Children whose permanent foster placement is experiencing difficulties and requires additional support. Two fostering support workers were integrated into the Supporting Solutions Service to provide additional support to young people in foster care.
- The Fostering Service targeted Durham County Council employees who had significant experience working with children to provide emergency and respite care for the Supporting Solutions Service. A total of 5 foster carers will be approved by the end of June 2018.

Annual Foster Care Awards Evening

The Fostering Service held its annual foster carer awards evening on 22 March 2018. The awards night was a huge success, attended by many of the Council's foster carers and their families, senior managers and Elected Members.

In total the awards recognised 54 foster carers for a range of achievements, including training, special recognition awards and long service awards with one particular foster family being recognised for 30 years of being foster carers. The awards also featured a category recognising the contribution of foster carers' own sons and daughters which was extremely well received.

3 Looked After Children

3.1 Looked After Children - The context of the Fostering Service

Durham's Looked After Population

Durham County Council has seen a 29.82% increase in the number of looked after children since April 2015. This has presented many challenges for services across the Authority, particularly in relation to ensuring a sufficient number and range of placement types to meet the individual needs of children and young people.

As of 29 March 2018, Durham had a LAC rate of 79.3 per 10,000, equating to 795 looked after children and young people (in comparison to 80.8 per 100,000, 810 LAC on 31 March 2017 and 66.6 per 10,000, 668 LAC on 1 March 2016). Whilst the looked after population has stabilised in terms of overall number throughout 2017-18, the total number remains high.

The table below shows the trend of LAC numbers since 2009, and includes a breakdown of how many of the LAC were in fostering placements.

Table 1 – Number of Looked After Children and Children in foster placements

	31.03.09	31.03.10	31.03.11	31.03.12	31.03.13	31.03.14	31.03.15	31.03.16	31.03.17	31.03.18
Number Looked After	443	508	528	658	638	606	619	680	810	795
Number fostered	315	394	421	531	478	493	517	549	686	661

Chart 1 - Number of Looked After Children and Children in Foster placements

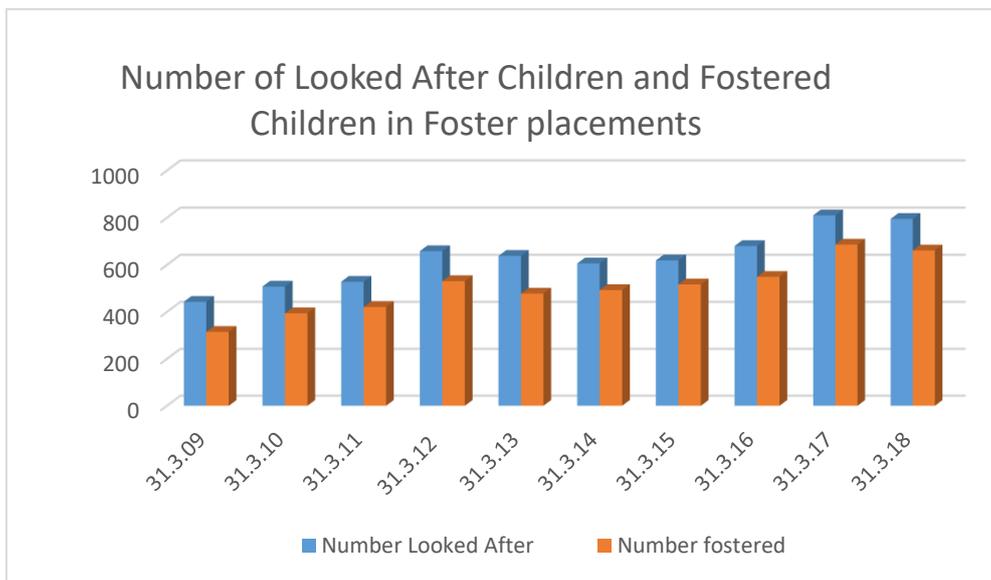
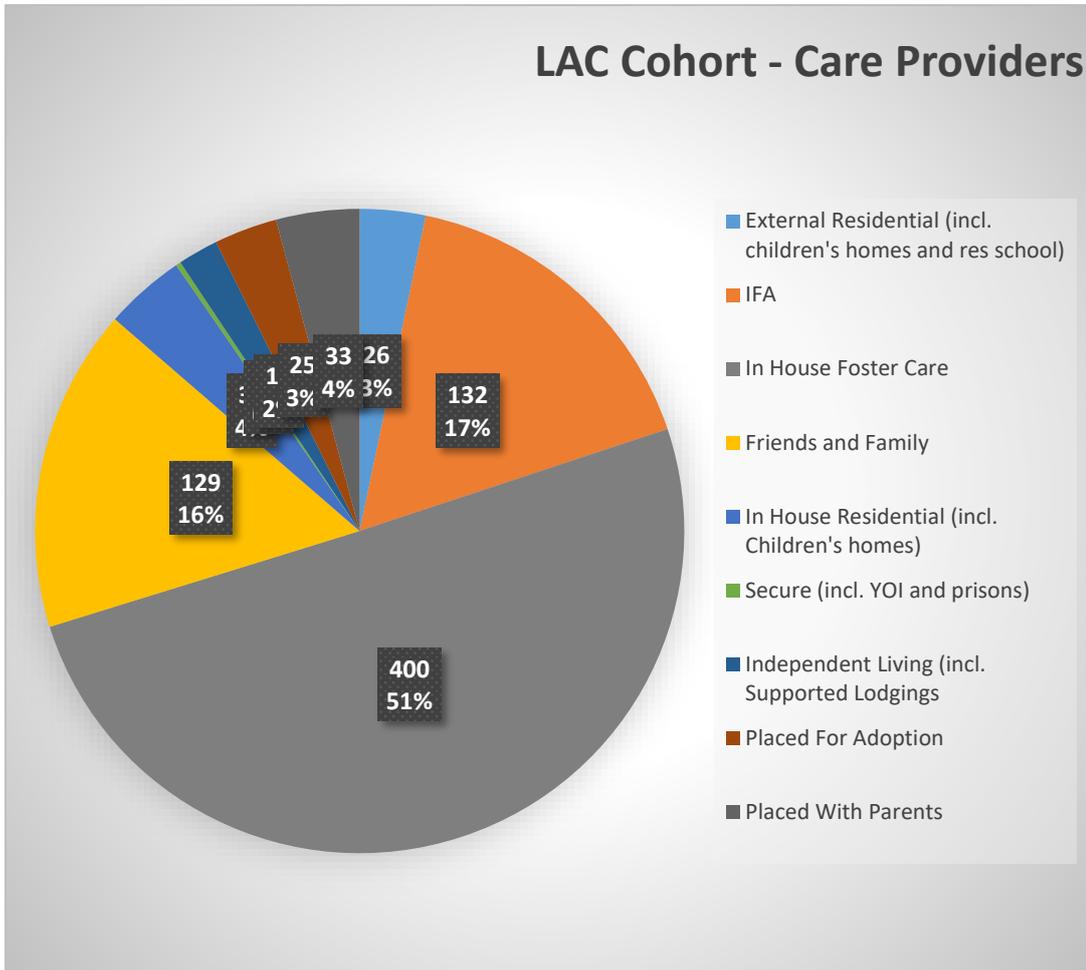


Chart 2 - Placement Mix Graph (as at 29 March 2018)



The above provides a more detailed breakdown of exactly how the 795 Looked After Children (31 March 2018) who are Looked After by Durham were placed as of 31 March 2018. The chart shows that of the LAC population, 84%, 661 children are placed in foster care. This is an excellent achievement to maintain all but the most challenging young people in a family placement where their needs can be met. This is the chosen placement of the vast majority of children who are Looked After by the Council.

17% of the Looked After Children population are in Independent Fostering Agency placements, which is an increase in numbers compared with previous years, and an increase in the percentage of the overall population. In 2015 this figure was 12.6%.

Of the children placed with Independent Fostering Providers, 55% are in permanent / long term placements, 45% in short term placements.

The rate of increase in placements with Independent Fostering Agency has not increased at the same rate as the overall LAC population which demonstrates the Service is meeting the needs of children in in house foster care despite the

high numbers. Whilst placements with Independent Fostering Agencies are made based on the needs and circumstances of children to create the best match, the strategic priority for Durham is to maximise the use of in house foster carers.

Durham's foster carers have access to Durham's holistic training and support packages and is the preferred option for children and the increasing number of IFA placements is represented in both the Council's Sufficiency Strategy and the Recruitment Strategy.

Table 2 - Usage - Independent Fostering Agencies

	Number of IFA Placements	% of LAC Cohort
March 2015	78	12.6%
March 2016	96	14.2%
March 2017	118	14.5%
March 2018	133	16.6%

4 Durham County Council Foster Carers

4.1 Foster placements

The table below provides a breakdown of the type of foster placements that Durham provides, with comparisons for previous years.

Table 3 - Type of Foster Placement

Type of Care	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017-18
Short Term Care	108	101	98	125	123
Both Short Term and Permanent Care	69	70	85	30	50
Permanent Care	42	55	51	82	71
TOTAL MAINSTREAM	219	226	234	237	244
Family & Friends Care	36	39	44	70	68
Family & Friends Temp Approved	45	32	28	56	40
TOTAL FAMILY&FRIENDS	81	71	72	126	108
TOTAL MAINSTREAM AND FAMILY & FRIENDS	304	297	306	363	352

Details of mainstream carer recruitment gains and carers lost through de-registration

Total number of mainstream carers approved	28	Total number of placements gained	54
Total number of mainstream carers de-registered	23	Total number of placements lost	42
Net gain carers	5	Net gain placements	8

Analysis

The previous Tables above highlights the year on year increase in mainstream foster carers. This takes into consideration newly approved carers and foster carer de-registrations. It also shows the significant increase in the number of Family and Friends carers that the service are assessing, training and supporting. Numbers of family and friends carers has stabilised since last year but remains significant higher than in previous years.

4.2 Recruitment and Marketing Strategy

In response to increases in numbers of Looked After Children over a 2 year period and the increasing use of Independent Fostering Agency placements, the service has focussed heavily on its marketing and recruitment strategy ensuring it is developed on an assessment of need.

In summary the marketing plan has been a multi platform approach which has utilised social media advertising and promotion, radio and print campaigns as well as outdoor visual marketing such as signage and bus advertising. A DVD is now available to maximise further opportunities outside of information sessions.

The Table below is taken from foster carers' feedback of what triggers them to enquire about becoming a foster carer.

Table 4 – Foster Carer Enquiry Triggers

Trigger	Percentage of enquiries that cited trigger
Website	41%
Word of mouth	17%
Self motivation	16%
Press	15%
Facebook	6%
Radio	3%
Bus	2%
	100%

The table highlights the website being the most important trigger, and more analysis is needed of how prospective carers arrive at the website and what prompts them to visit it.

Word of mouth also continues to be an important driver and this includes encouragement from foster carers, friends, family and social workers. Durham County Council Fostering Service appears to be positively viewed within the North East Region.

There has been a range of foster carers from Independent Agencies and Local Authorities who have made a positive choice to move to Durham because of the level of training and the support offered. The Fostering Service allowances remain competitive when looking at Regional allowances and those payable by IFA's.

In addition to the marketing strategy, the recruitment team has worked hard to engage those expressing an interest in fostering with 26 information events and many drop in sessions held throughout the year. The Service ensures that it responds quickly to any possible enquirers once they have made contact within the Service.

Table 5 - Foster Carer Recruitment Activity 2017-2018

Stages	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Total 17/18	Total 16/17
Initial Enquiry	23	40	33	32	32	22	28	33	16	28	16	26	329	341
Attend Information Session	4	15	15	15	17	5	9	7	6	21	6	11	131	130
Expression of Interest Forms	14	15	17	12	13	8	11	18	7	9	5	15	144	147
Initial Visits completed	5	7	15	6	7	7	6	2	8	1	5	7	76	59
Attend Preparation Training	-	-	11	-	-	11	-	8	0	12	-	8	50	45
Application Forms Accepted	11	1	1	6	4	4	5	4	1	9	2	3	51	32
Total Number Approved 17/18	1	1	2	1	5	3	1	2	4	1	3	4	28	25
Total Number Approved 16/17	2	1	2	2	3	3	2	1	2	1	4	2	25	
Total Number Approved 15/16	1	2	1	3	1	1	2	1	2	1	-	7	22	

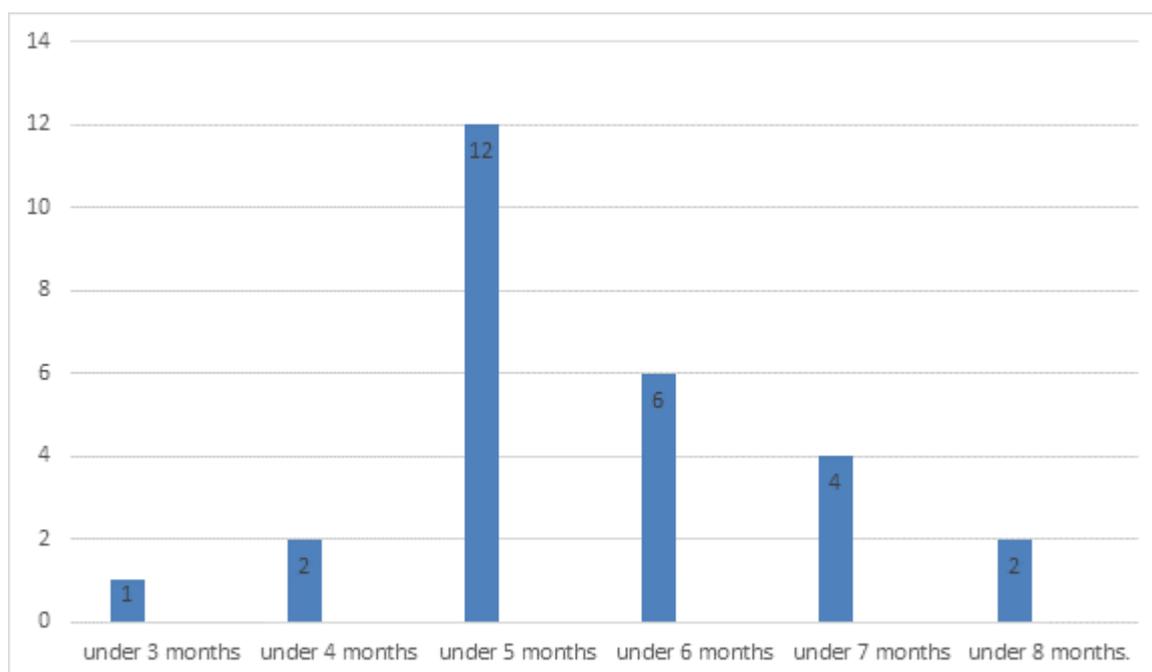
The above table shows the overall foster carer recruitment activity for the last year, with comparison data for previous years. It shows an increase in overall number of carers recruited, with 28 recruited during 2017-18 compared with 25 in 2016-17 and 22 in 2015-16. This is despite very similar rates of individuals attending information events and submitting expression of interest forms so represents an increase in the overall conversion rates.

The recruitment of foster carers is designed to be as swift as possible and avoid delay. It must also need to allow sufficient time for any prospective carers to

reflect and understand the process and challenges fully to ensure they are successful in their career as foster carers.

The Table below shows the time-scale for each foster carer application from when it was received to Panel's recommendation for approval. It demonstrates that the average duration of an assessment was 4.9 months. This is well within time-scales specified by the Fostering Standards 2011 which states assessments should be completed within 8 months.

Table 6 – Duration of an assessment from application to panel



4.3 Foster Carer De-registrations

When considering the numbers of foster carers it is important to recognise the numbers of foster carers who have been de-registered during the year:

43 Family and Friends carers have de-registered over the year. This has primarily been due to a change of plan in the best interests of the child, the making of a Special Guardianship or Child Arrangement Order to secure the child with the family permanently, or where the children returned to the care of their parents. This is a positive outcome for these children.

The Table below is a breakdown of foster carer de-registrations, for mainstream carers only, not family and friends carers. This provides details of the type of care offered as well as the number of de-registrations as a percentage of the overall foster carer population.

Table 7 - Mainstream Foster Carer De-registrations by provision type

Type	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18
Short term carers only	06	08	12	12	16
Permanent carers	08	07	05	08	09
Totals	14	15	17	20	23
% of Total Number of Foster Carers	6.3	6.6	7.2	8.4	9.4

The Table shows that the number of foster carers resigning is gradually increasing, however this needs to be considered in the context that the total population is also increasing. The percentage of population is also steadily rising and whilst it is below the national average of 10% (as cited in 'Foster Care in England 2018' by Narey and Owers), the increase is addressed in the forthcoming years recruitment plan. The reasons and circumstances of the de-registration of foster carers is detailed at Table 8.

Table 8 - Reasons for Foster Carer De-registrations

Reason for De-registration	Number
Concerns about their practice	2
Resigned following allegations	5
Retired following a long career in fostering	5
Resigned following ill health/ death of partner	2
Resigned following change in family circumstances	2
Resigned following dissatisfaction with the service	4
Resigned due to the challenges of fostering	2
Total	23

Analysis

The Table shows no significant trend but a number of smaller trends. The highest numbers (5) refer to resignations due to retirement or following allegations. In relation to retirement, 4 carers retired following long careers of over 25 years' service. In relation to allegations this has been fed into the 'Preparation for Fostering' training to ensure foster carers are prepared for this. Both of these factors are understandable and to a certain extent unpreventable. The 4 carers who were dissatisfied with the service and the 2 who resigned due to the challenges have all been encouraged to attend panel to discuss their views and these will be incorporated into future training, both for carers and workers in the service.

4.4 Support to Foster Carers

Each foster care family has an allocated Fostering Social Worker who provides regular one to one support and supervision, as well as being available to offer support and guidance throughout their career as foster carers. An important part of this role is identifying their learning needs to meet the needs of Looked After Children

All prospective foster carers are offered the 'Preparation to Foster Course, which is an introduction to fostering and helps prospective carers understand the demands and challenges of fostering, the impact on children and young people, as well as themselves and their family. The service strongly believe this helps prepare and equip carers effectively. The feedback from carers is...

"The training was in depth and there was a lot to take on board. It was the little things for example one foster carer explained a child arrived in an emergency but she had a party the next night. The carer went out and bought a selection of clothes for the child to pick what she wanted to wear. It was finer details like this she would never have thought of. She also met some children who were fostered and they were resilient and very bright. She felt the course was informative but relaxed. They enjoyed the interaction with the foster carers"

"some of the content was familiar because of my work experiences but I learnt a lot from the Safer Caring on how to keep a child myself and my children safe in my home. It was lovely to meet other people and hear their perspectives in the discussions. The training presented by the young people was excellent and gave me insight into their views and experiences. The training made me think and I learnt a lot."

"Completing the training gave me a lot more confidence. I learnt a lot from the training and enjoyed it."

The Children in Care Council provide a full session on each preparation course which gives an absolute insight and understanding of the child's perspective. Prospective carers have reported that this is excellent and very thought provoking.

A consistent element of positive feedback, both for new and experienced foster carers concerns the quality of training and support available to foster carers in Durham. All foster carers are required to complete the Training and Support Development Standards within the first year and are supported to do this through workshops, training and support groups. All foster carers have access to the Foster Carers' Training Programme, please see Appendix 2. They are required to complete mandatory training within the first 18 months, and core training within 5 years. There is also access to more specialised training according to their experience, skills and needs.

There are a range of Foster Carer support groups which meet regularly across the whole of County Durham which provide additional training and mutual support and advice. There are 4 geographically located groups as well as specific groups depending on the types of fostering, for example family and friends fostering, teenage fostering and a specific support group for new foster carers. The service is constantly looking to develop and evolve and in line with the restructure of the service,

There is also a support group for children of foster carers, which the service is extremely proud of. The M8's group allows children and young people to share their experiences and develop friendships.

Foster carers also benefit from the wide range of support Durham County Council offers. This included the Virtual School, Looked After nurses and particularly The Full Circle, an in house specialist therapeutic service which provides a range of services and support including bespoke and specialist targeted support, consultation and advice with a Consultant Psychologist, as it also provides direct therapeutic intervention and support for children and young people. Foster carers especially value the attachment training provided by the Full Circle.

4.5 Impact of Foster Carer Support and Training

The provision of good quality support and training to our foster carers is key to the retention of foster carers within the service and the placement stability that is provided to children and young people. Foster carers regularly comment on these aspects as really positive and a reason to continue to foster for Durham.

The de-registration rate of foster carers continues to be lower than the national average, 9.4% for Durham, compared with 10% nationally.

In relation to placement stability, Table 9 below demonstrates performance stability in each quarter of the past year and then comparisons of previous years.

Table 9 - Performance Indicator – Placement Stability

Performance Indicator	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18 Qtr 1 (Apr-Jun17 unless stated)	2017/18 Qtr 2 (Apr-Sep17 unless stated)	2017/18 Qtr 3 (Apr-Dec17 unless stated)	2017/18 Qtr 4 (Apr17-Mar18 unless stated)
Percentage of children looked after with 3 or more placements [number of children shown in brackets]	12.9% [78 of 606]	6.5% [40 of 619]	4.4% [30 of 678] (Prov)	6.1% [50 of 814]	7.5% [59 of 728]	7.8% [63 of 804]	6.9% [55 of 792]	8.3% [66 of 734]

The Table shows that performance has deteriorated for the last two years, which directly correlates to and placement pressures the significant increase in Looked After Children numbers.

It should be acknowledged that Durham’s performance continues to be better than the national average, statistical neighbour average and the North East average, as set out in Table 10.

Table 10 – Placement Stability – Benchmarking Information

Benchmark rate – England Average	Benchmark rate – North East Average	Benchmark rate – Statistic Neighbour	Durham’s Rate
10%	8%	9.6%	6.1%

The Fostering Service continue to have a key strategic priority and focus on placement stability, recruitment and the provision of high quality support of training of foster carers and this will be a key focus in 2018-2020. The Service is committed to improving placement stability and recruiting and approving sufficient carers, alongside providing high quality support and training is central to this and therefore these are areas the service will look to develop in the coming year.

4.6 Fostering Panels

The Role and Function of the Fostering and Permanence Panels

The Fostering Panels are required to consider :

- Each application of prospective Foster Carers for approval offering placements of a short term nature or permanent.
- Recommendations to the Fostering Service regarding the Terms of Approval for those applicants and their suitability to become Foster Carers.
- Applications made by Family and Friends Foster Carers following their temporary approval as Foster Carers under Regulation 24 of The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010 to:
 - offer permanent or short term placements; and
 - to recommend whether or not the applicants are suitable to become Foster Carers for named child/children.
- All First Annual Foster Care reviews which is a regulatory requirement.
- To consider any contentious reviews of approved Foster Carers and make recommendations regarding terms of approval and continued registration.

- Feedback to the Agency Decision Maker and Senior Managers of the Durham County Council on Fostering Service policy, procedures and practice matters.

Fostering Panel Activity

The Fostering Service requires 3 Fostering Panels per month due to the level of business, each of which meet on a monthly basis along with occasional extraordinary panels being convened. There were subsequently 40 panels held during 2017-18. The Fostering Panels are independently chaired in accordance with statutory requirements.

The Fostering Service has strived to make efficient use of the skills and expertise of the Panel and over the last year the decision has been made that Child Permanence Reports are no longer considered. This is not statutory requirement. The Panels continue to consider all permanent matches for children in the same way as the Adoption Panel to ensure high quality matching of children and preparation of foster carers. The Panels continue to consider all Form F (mainstream carer) and Form C (family and friends carer) applications, as well as all 1st year foster carer reviews in line with Fostering Regulations and the activity of the panels is shown below.

Table 11 - Summary of Panel Activity

Activity	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18
Form F Assessments	15	17	20	23	28
Form C Assessments	28	41	39	47	49
Permanent Matches of Children	43	63	32	18	27
Foster Carer Reviews	125	83	68	53	69

The Table shows the continued increase in foster carer assessments which The Fostering Panel are considering and also shows an increase in the number of children being permanently matched when compared with the previous year 2016-17.

Feedback regarding the Fostering Panel from foster carers and social workers:

“On numerous occasions we spoke about Panel attending and felt reassured by our Fostering Social Worker. We felt that everyone listened to what we had to say, and this was done in a relaxed atmosphere.”

“was nervous about attending but the experience was actually okay”

“The experience was friendly and everything was explained in full”

“Panel members were very pleasant and welcoming and made the applicants feel at ease, recognising their anxiety of panel attendance, particularly the Panel Chair and Agency Advisor”

“The panel was fair, objective and sensitive”

4.7 The Independent Review Mechanism

From April 2009 the Independent Review Mechanism (IRM) was extended to cover fostering matters having previously been only focussed on adoption issues. It provides an independent review of the suitability of fostering applications presented from potential and current Foster Carers in cases where the decision has been not to approve them as a foster carer, or to terminate or change the terms of their approval.

Within 2017-2018 one Foster Carer made representation to the IRM. Following the hearing, the IRM upheld the recommendation of the Panel and the decision from the Agency Decision Maker that she was no longer suitable to be approved as a foster carer. This was due to continued concerns in relation to her practice and standard of care provided to foster children and her inability to implement advice given to her.

5. Strategic Priorities and Key Actions for 2018-19

The contents of this annual report highlight some of the strengths and developments that the service have made over this past year in addition to some of the challenges which the service will need to respond to in future years. Looked After Children numbers continue to be high and the needs of these children increasingly complex and the Fostering Service must adapt and respond to the demand and changing challenges. The Strategic Priorities for the Fostering Service and associated actions for the coming year are outlined:

- **Recruitment of Foster Carers**

The ongoing high Looked After Children numbers and the increasing use of Independent Fostering Agency placements, requires that ongoing recruitment remains a high priority for the service to ensure we maximise placement capacity and sufficiency in house.

The Fostering Service has a target of 50 new foster care households during the coming year and an ambitious and ongoing marketing and recruitment campaign is essential to this. The service intends to build upon the achievements of the last year and to increase focus via social media and online mediums whilst also ensuring our face to face availability for carers remains present.

A key focus of work will be around the use of ‘online chats’ with prospective foster carers, recognising the importance of face to face interaction whilst simultaneously recognising the increasing online activity which prospective carers access.

- **Retention of Foster Carers**

In addition to the recruitment of new foster carers, the service remains committed to ensuring the retention of our existing carers, who have invaluable knowledge, experience and skills in caring for Looked After Children.

The Fostering Service intends to build on the support already in place by developing social workers to be more reflective and solution focussed in their supervisions with foster carers, thereby offering more targeted and focussed support and guidance.

The Fostering Service plans to review the approach to peer support and support groups with a view to improving this to further maximise the support carers receive.

- **Maintain and strengthen links with Supporting Solutions Service**

The Fostering Service intends to build upon the positive joint working already undertaken with Supporting Solutions to maximise placement stability for Looked After Children through targeted intervention and support to reduce placement difficulties and breakdowns.

With the approval of specialised respite carers it is hoped that emergency admissions to care for children and young people can be minimised thereby improving placement stability.

- **Signs of Safety Implementation**

Durham's Children and Young People's Service have committed to the implementation Signs of Safety as its underpinning theory and principles for all social work and family work with children and their families. The Fostering Service will embrace this by supporting and training the social workers in the service and in turn to adopt this approach with foster carers and young people in their placements.

- **Early Permanence Planning**

The Fostering Service intends to improve performance in permanence planning by ensuring that more young people are matched this year at the earliest point with permanent carers to ensure that the time children and young people wait to be permanently matched is reduced.

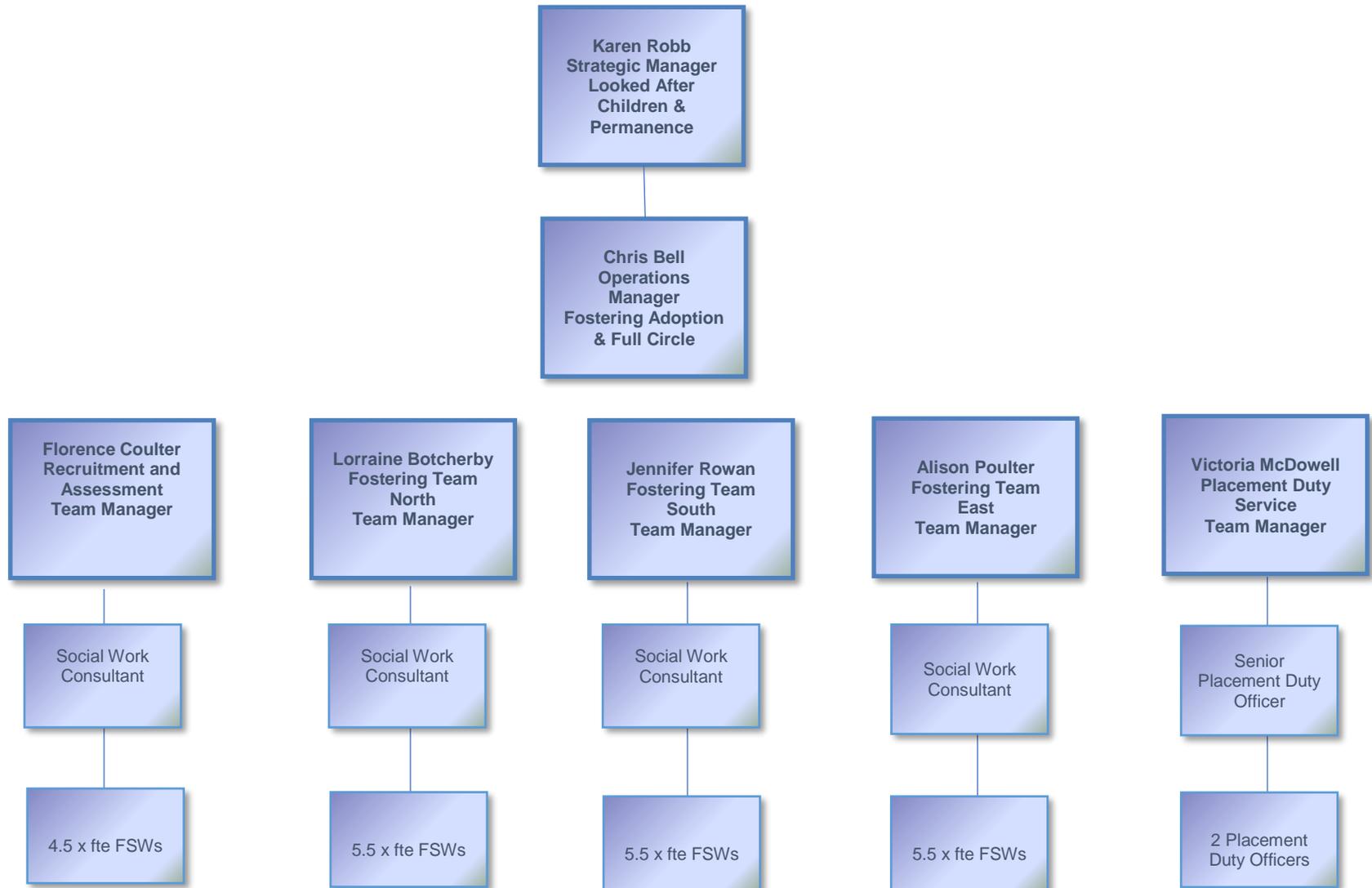
More effective links with other parts of children's services so children who require a permanent foster care are identified earlier and once these children are identified a more robust and targeted approach to family finding is further embedded.

- **Placement Stability**

Placement Stability is critical to ensuring the best outcomes for Looked After Children and is critical to a successful Fostering Service. This will be a key strategic priority in the coming year. There are a number of key actions to achieving this:

- Placement team effectively planning and matching children.
- Increased and improved targeted support for carers with a Signs of Safety Approach to Practice.
- Increased recruitment of foster carers to meet identified need leading to increased sufficiency and choice and implementation.
- The development of cross service Early Permanence Strategy and Mandatory training programme for all staff will promote placement stability.
- Debriefing meetings to be held in all placement breakdowns and unplanned endings situations to ensure effective learning takes place and informs service development
- Development of Placement Stability Strategy

Appendix 1: Fostering Services Structure Chart



Appendix 2: Training Programme

Attached as separate document